Refraction

On Dwelling: Shelters in Place and Time

Sofia Samatar

Abstract

This Refraction is a mediation on "dwelling" and the possibilities and prospects for deep immersion in place and time—to be truly "earthly"—in today's digitized world. The author weaves together comments on Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, acute observations on nature and place by 19th-century Mennonite bishop L. J. Heatwole, an account of accompanying her mother on an Amtrak trip and encounters with "people who cannot dwell," engagement with Julia Spicher Kasdorf and Steve Rubin's recent *Shale Play* (on fracking in Pennsylvania), as well as a revelatory visit to a former Mennonite colony in Uzbekistan, where local Muslims preserve its memory in a museum, "a shelter in time."

Staying Is Nowhere

January 2, 2022. The tree still up, the lights on the porch. Tomorrow we expect the first snow of this springlike winter. Mom was up at five, coughing, but is quiet now in the bedroom behind the closed door. I comfort myself with the thought that her temperature was normal last night. Tomorrow, in the predicted snow, will we still be able to get tested at the park? Must remember to add flour to the grocery list. Remember to put the tree at the curb on Wednesday. I am reading a biography of Rilke, who wrote, "I cannot dwell."[1] The poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) was a famously restless figure, spending years moving between hotels and the houses of friends, born in Prague but circling around Paris, Berlin, and Munich, with sojourns in Italy, Spain, Russia, and Egypt. *Denn Bleiben ist nirgends*, he wrote in

[1] Quoted in Tomas Espedal, *Tramp: Or, the Art of Living a Wild and Poetic Life*, trans. James Anderson (Kolkata, India: Seagull Books, 2006), 90.

The Conrad Grebel Review 39, no. 3 (Fall 2021): 265-281.

his first Duino Elegy.[2] I've encountered three translations of this line: "For staying is nowhere."[3] "For to stay is to be nowhere at all."[4] "For there is no place where we can remain."[5]

If staying is nowhere, then I have lived nowhere for almost two years. Then my mom is nowhere, shut up in the bedroom I enter wearing a mask, bringing her soup, tea, cough lozenges, books. As she grows stronger, I think how bored she must be, though she never complains. Sometimes I find her upright, leaning on her cane, taking a slow walk in the narrow corridor between the bed and the dresser, a walk that seems to replicate the last two years in miniature, in the light that ghosts in through the window, blanched by the deep snow.

This morning my friend Kate sends me the words of the writer Lydia Davis, who has decided to give up air travel for good. "Our emergency responses to the COVID virus," Davis writes, "should, really, be the prologue or the dress rehearsal for a more extended action to counter climate disaster—since we still have a little time to avoid the very worst of it. Some of the limitations we are accepting now should, probably, become part of our way of life."[6]

Settled Sings of Rain

To think about dwelling, I turned recently to the life of Lewis James Heatwole, a Mennonite bishop who once lived near my home in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. Born in 1852, just over two decades before Rilke, Heatwole was the eldest of eleven children. With the exception of a three-year period during which he served as a bishop in Missouri, he lived his entire life in Dale Enterprise, Virginia, an unincorporated community four miles from my

[2] Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 152.

[3] Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Duino Elegies*, trans. A. S. Kline, https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/German/Rilke.php, accessed April 17, 2022.

[4] Quoted in Lee Siegel, "To Work is to Live Without Dying," *The Atlantic Monthly* 277, no. 4 (April 1996): 112-18, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1996/04/to-work-is-to-live-without-dying/376572/, accessed April 17, 2022.

[5] Rilke, *Selected Poetry*, 153.

[6] Lydia Davis, "Lydia Davis on Making the Decision Not to Fly," *Literary Hub*, July 20, 2020, https://lithub.com/lydia-davis-on-making-the-decision-not-to-fly/, accessed April 17, 2022.

house. In 1888, he established the Dale Enterprise weather station, the oldest operating weather station in Virginia and the third oldest in the nation.[7]

I became fascinated by Heatwole, who, according to local lore, used to walk for miles around the county in pursuit of his duties and passions. He was a person of remarkable energy and drive. A teacher by profession, he advocated tirelessly for education in the valley, founding the Rockingham Teacher's Institute, helping to create Eastern Mennonite School, and supporting the movement for the State Normal School in Harrisonburg, which eventually became James Madison University, where I now teach.[8] But Heatwole was more than a church leader and educator. He was wild about the weather. He calculated almanacs, composed treatises on astronomy, kept up a column in the local paper that included weather reports as well as details of local news, patented a calendar system he proposed to the League of Nations, and, as an official observer for the US Weather Bureau, maintained records of temperature and rainfall for fifty-two years.

The word *dwell* has a complex history. Etymologists trace it to a Proto-Indo-European root meaning dust, cloud, smoke, or vapor.[9] During the Middle Ages, its connotations of a fairly passive process—*to linger, remain, or stay*—expanded to include the more active and intentional *to make a home*. There's something weighty, almost material, about the word. The verb *to live* gives us the expression *to make a living*, an abstract economic operation; by contrast, a dwelling is a physical structure, a house. Since the late 14th century, the word has also included a sense of interior concentration or brooding, as in *to dwell upon*.

Lewis J. Heatwole dwelt in this valley. He remained here, he made a home here, and he gave this place his undivided attention, immersing himself in the seasons, the day-to-day changes in temperature, moisture, and light, which were for him a source of inexhaustible interest. He began recording the weather as a teenager. In the Menno Simons Historical Library at Eastern Mennonite University, where Heatwole's papers are held, I once

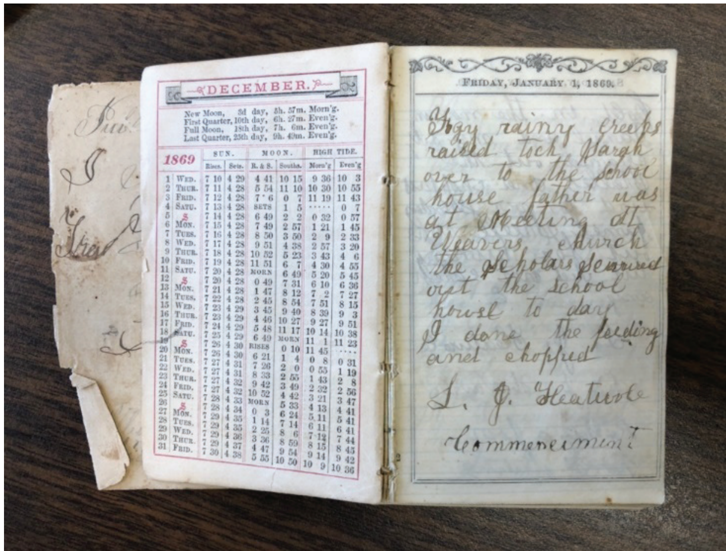
---

[7] Heather Bowser, "Weather's in Their Blood," *Staunton [VA]Mennonite Church*, May 14, 2009, http://www.mennochurch.net/weatherman.htm, accessed April 17, 2022.

[8] Evan K. Knappenberger, *To Shake the Whole World from Error's Chain: An Alternative History of the Founding of Eastern Mennonite* (MA Thesis, Eastern Mennonite University, 2018), 5-6.

[9] "Dwell," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, https://www.etymonline.com/word/dwell, accessed April 17, 2022.

spent a delightful afternoon reviewing his diaries, his weather accounts, and the massive scrapbooks in which he pasted cuttings of his newspaper column. The oldest diary I encountered dates from 1869. He was sixteen years old.



L. J. Heatwole Diary, 1869, Courtesy Virginia Mennonite Conference Archives

Friday, January 1, 1869
Fogy rainy creeks raised. Took Sarah over to the school house father was at Meeting at Weavers Church. The Scholars [cleared? scoured? cleaned?] out the school house to day.
I done the feeding and chopped.
L. J. Heatwole
Commencement

I wonder if Heatwole received this diary as a Christmas present. I can only imagine the excitement of this boy, who would become such a meticulous observer of time, as he held in his hands this handsome book containing a page for each day of the year, with charts of the phases of the moon and

the motion of the tide. This diary launched Heatwole as a writer, and as a particular kind of writer: one who dwelt. Every entry begins with the weather and ends with his signature. He maintains this practice even when there is very little space for each day on the page, perhaps only five or six lines. The weather is never the same, and it's important to him to record the slightest shift. And within this flickering world, he is always L. J. Heatwole.

My favorite entry is January 1, 1872, which opens with *Settled sings of rain*. I love this accidental poetry. Heatwole means *signs*, not *sings*. In the entry for January 2 he writes, *Moderate sings of snow*. Later in the same year, he corrects his spelling and begins writing *signs*. Part of the pleasure of reading these diaries is watching writing style emerge, witnessing an education that included science courses at Bridgewater Normal Institute but also a great deal of independent study. Tucked into the journal for 1879, there's a clipping of a weather report. I wonder why Heatwole kept this piece of paper so carefully: was it for the list of terms he could add to his own weather writing? Was it for the word *meteorologist*—had he just realized that his quirky hobby was both a science and a job?

The Heatwole archive contains books from his almanac collection, meteorological documents ordered by mail, and the *Instructions for Voluntary Observers of the Signal Service*, which he must have studied thoroughly to achieve his goal of becoming an official weather observer. These papers demonstrate a simultaneous process of opening out and delving in. Heatwole wanted to learn about the weather, a global phenomenon, and he pursued that aim with tremendous effort—the archives include meteorological data from different parts of the world and notes in Spanish. But for him, the large found its most powerful meaning in relation to the small, to where he was standing. His newspaper column, *Dale Enterprise Dottings*, preserved in his scrapbooks, presents a detailed portrait of rural life, always anchored in the quotidian marvel of place. In the *Dottings* for May 13, 1884, we learn, among other things, that Reverend J. S. Coffman of Elkhart, Indiana preached during the weekend, that Amos Shank has given his dwelling house a coat of whitewash—"a good example for his neighbors"—and that four out of five Merino sheep on the farm of A. D. Weaver have died. Heatwole's greatest attention goes, as always, to the more-than-human world. "In no department of nature," he writes, "is the creative hand of God more visible to the finite

mind than that which is at present seen in the vegetable kingdom. Nothing is more astonishing than the unbounded varieties of trees, herbs and grasses that like a living carpet cover and adorn the landscape. Every season of the year seems to have its own peculiar charms, but in the month of May when all vegetation is teeming with new life, man can more readily trace upon every unfolding leaf and spear the wisdom and excellence of his Maker."[10]

This was an observer, a writer, who traced every unfolding leaf and spear. Heatwole hardly went anywhere, but no one who glances into these archives would call his a small life. In dwelling on the space around him, giving it his full attention, he unlocked a vast, luxurious dwelling, a world that gave him more than he could ever write. He was settled and he sang of rain. For him, staying was everywhere.

I Can't Sit Here

January 7. Mom is well and our quarantine is over. It's time for her to go home to Indiana. She'll go as she came, on the train, and I'll accompany her, as I did when she came to Virginia a few days before Christmas. This means two nights back-to-back on the train for me, riding to and fro between the stations in Martinsburg, West Virginia and Elkhart, Indiana, a route that serves a number of Amish and Old Order Mennonite people, as well as a large, random selection of the American public. Maybe some passengers take the train because they've given up air travel for environmental reasons. I bought the tickets before I began to consider this question seriously, so my decision was based on other factors: Mom likes the train, she's most comfortable when she can take short, frequent walks, and I don't want her to travel alone, so I go with her. We arrive at the train station in Martinsburg an hour early and sit down with our bags on the smooth wooden benches. This elegant little station, dominated by a magnificent model train in a glass case, houses the Washington Heritage Trail National Scenic Byways Welcome Center and Bookshop, but there's no one to welcome visitors, and the miniature bookshop is closed. The taxi driver who dropped us off told us there's been no station agent here for years, not since long before the pandemic. The place is deserted, a ghost depot. The local police open it before the train comes and lock it up afterward.

[10] L. J. Heatwole, "Dale Enterprise Dottings," *Rockingham [VA] Register*, May 13, 1884.

We'll depart at 5:45 p.m. and arrive in Elkhart at 7:30 tomorrow morning. I'm hoping for a quiet night. Three weeks ago, when I rode the train to pick Mom up, my sleep was shattered at three a.m. by the woman in the seat behind me. "I'm coming out of my skin!" she shouted. "I can't sit here! I'm hot! I have to get out!" The passengers had been promised a fifteen-minute cigarette break—the only one, the woman repeated in tones of increasing agitation, that she would get during her sixteen-hour trip. The only one. And the train was late. The break had been delayed. "I haven't smoked in more than eight hours," she sobbed. And then the announcement came: because the train was running behind schedule, they were going to skip the cigarette break. She would have to do without.

I remember the train rocking, the black windows on lightless fields, my eyes closing and opening as I huddled under my coat, the woman's shrieks and curses until at last, at a station somewhere in Ohio, she grabbed her suitcase and fled the train. She was halfway to her destination. She left behind her elderly aunt and her teenage daughter, who were traveling with her. I heard the daughter crying into her cell phone. Near dawn, she fell asleep, and so did I.

I can't sit here. I'm coming out of my skin. At the station in Martinsburg, I open the book I've brought along on the trip, *Shale Play: Poems and Photographs from the Fracking Fields*, a collaborative work by the poet Julia Spicher Kasdorf and the photographer Steven Rubin.[11] Their book grew from the time the artists spent talking to people on the Pennsylvania portion of the Marcellus Shale, the largest natural gas field in the US, which runs from New York to eastern Ohio. I know Julia Spicher Kasdorf; we've been friends for many years. Like me, she has roots in Pennsylvania's Kishacoquillas Valley, a place named for a Shawnee chief and now commonly known as Big Valley. For Julia, who still lives in Pennsylvania, the poems in *Shale Play* represent a process of intense and deliberate dwelling.

I page slowly through the book, in which pen and camera trace every unfolding leaf and spear, the towering rigs, the trucks, the tankers, the lengths of pipe, the protests and counterprotests, the public hearings in small towns, and the enduring and fragile beauty of the landscape. *To dwell*,

[11] Julia Spicher Kasdorf and Steven Rubin, *Shale Play: Poems and Photographs from the Fracking Fields* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 2018).

with its embedded meanings of home-making and sustained attention, means to open the senses, to be actively in a place. "Not until I undertook a documentary project that took me out to listen to people," Julia wrote recently, "did I come to see how deeply I care about this place and to recognize what a rare privilege it is to live, even in the middle of nowhere, if your people have resided there for a long time."[12]

This recognition of rare privilege takes me back to L. J. Heatwole's "settled sings of rain," and the many meanings of the word *to settle*: to place so as to stay, to establish in residence, to make quiet or orderly, to colonize, to clarify by causing dregs or impurities to sink. Any serious attempt to think about dwelling must consider those who cannot dwell, who would gladly remain in place if they could, even in the middle of nowhere, and who have been driven out of the places where their people have resided for a long time.

As I turn a page, a shadow falls over the book. I look up to see the only passenger in the station other than Mom and me, a man in a Yankees baseball cap. For the purposes of this story, I'll call him Mr. Yu, which is close to his real name. Mr. Yu needs help to buy a ticket to Chicago; he can't get the automated kiosk to work. I go to the kiosk with him. I type in his name, his birth date, his debit card number, and his home address, but the kiosk refuses to dispense a ticket. The name on his debit card, I notice, is "Valued Customer." As it turns out, Mr. Yu purchased it down the road at the 7-11 because the automated kiosk doesn't take cash. There's money on the card: one hundred dollars. A ticket to Chicago costs eighty-nine. He's done everything right, but he can't get a ticket, because it's the wrong kind of card.

He takes his glasses off and rubs his eyes. I've just entered his birth date, so I know we're the same age, though to me Mr. Yu looks much older. His English is weak. He types Chinese characters into his phone and shows me Google's English translation: "Can I buy a replacement ticket on the bus?" Replacement ticket? Bus? He gives up on Google translate. He shows me a crumpled ticket from Washington, DC to Chicago, dated the previous day. Will they let him board the train with this ticket? No. Can he buy a ticket on the train? No. I know this much about Amtrak. Mr. Yu is no longer concealing his tears. He has to get to Chicago. It is a mystery to me how he

[12] Julia Spicher Kasdorf, "God and Land: Remembering Dreams of the Commonwealth," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 39, no. 1 (Winter 2021): 17.

wound up in Martinsburg, West Virginia. He shows me a handful of cash. Will I buy him a ticket? Let me skip forward in time and reveal that the answer is yes.

Yes—but not before a twinge of uncertainty, an effect of the vulnerability that can suddenly charge a meeting between two strangers. Is this a trick? I wonder briefly. Is Mr. Yu trying to take advantage of me in some way, maybe steal my credit card number? But in fact it's Mr. Yu who is vulnerable here. In addition to his birth date, I know his home address, his email address, his cell phone number, his driver's license number, and his legal name, which, after the kiosk fails us, I attempt to spell on the phone for Julie, Amtrak's automated assistant. Julie is the robot who answers Amtrak's telephone, because the company's human agents are so busy it often takes more than an hour to get through to them.

Unfortunately, Julie's an idiot. Repeating the letters of Mr. Yu's name over and over, with all the clarity I can muster, while Julie says cheerfully "I think you said" and chants back to me an impossible string of letters that bears almost no resemblance to what I said, as the train, the only train to come through this station in twenty-four hours, draws inexorably closer, as Mr. Yu wipes his eyes or shuffles outside to smoke a cigarette, I think of all those who are summoned to my consciousness by his predicament: immigrants, refugees, poor people, people without debit cards, without cell phone data, people whose knowledge is locked in a language their neighbors can't understand, manual laborers in American towns who work jobs that give them little exposure to English and no time to study, people with the wrong names, people in places abandoned by human beings, in empty train stations, who can only address themselves to broken or uncomprehending machines, people who wind up stranded, who have to put themselves at the mercy of strangers and of chance, people who cannot dwell and can barely move.

The pressures, the pressures. The forces that drive a body onward or suddenly make it stop, compel it to swerve in a different direction. Vast swells of history, economic power, and geopolitics manifesting as a tinny voice on the phone or the gloom of a railway yard. I think of the voices Julia Spicher Kasdorf records in *Shale Play*, voices of settlers, most of them, who often speak of the pressure to move. "Since the mines shut down and the

mills closed," a pastor tells her, "people here have to travel for work."[13] A man from Nebraska, who drives around the country laying pipe for hydraulic fracturing in Michigan, in West Virginia, in Pennsylvania, tells her, "I wish there was some other way."[14] Those who have stayed in place find that the land has transformed around them, familiar roads blocked, dirt trails widened with gravel, giant pipes coming out of the earth, so that now, one man says, to find his way around the mountains he knew and loved as a boy, he'd have to use a GPS.[15] What does it mean to dwell in a changing world, in a country addicted to fossil fuels? A woman says of her meadow, tainted by sludge from the frack pits, "I can't dig or plant a post there."[16] A man who has had a tumor removed from his forehead says, "If I'd have known what was coming, I never would have built my log home."[17]

On board the train, in the middle of the night, somewhere in Ohio, I'm awakened by voices around me. Someone was caught smoking in the bathroom, they say. Someone's getting thrown off the train. Mom has woken up too. "I hope it's not Mr. Yu," I whisper to her, and we giggle at the thought of such an absurd coincidence. Then, in the square of light at the end of the carriage, the window that shows us a section of the corridor where the restrooms are, I glimpse a familiar Yankees cap. It *is* Mr. Yu. I see him gesturing weakly at the conductor. She shakes her head. The train pulls into a small Ohio station. Ohio again, the witching hour again, I think, remembering my last trip, and the woman's desperate cry, *I can't sit here*. Suddenly I understand how Mr. Yu wound up in Martinsburg, holding a ticket from Washington, DC that was dated the previous day. I believe he smoked on that train, too, and was put off in West Virginia. Now I watch him disembark with his suitcase onto the icy platform. He lights a cigarette. The conductor gestures toward a row of streetlamps, dimly green through the blowing snow. That is where he must go.

---

[13] Spicher Kasdorf and Rubin, *Shale Play: Poems and Photographs from the Fracking Fields,* 25.
[14] Ibid., 70.
[15] Ibid., 63.
[16] Ibid., 18.
[17] Ibid., 66.

To Have Been *Earthly*

January 9. Train to Virginia. I left Mom safe and well, and I'm going home. Last night I had my first real night of sleep in all these travels. I was lucky enough to get two seats to myself, and the carriage was quiet: only the low sound of coughing, muffled by masks, could be heard through the rush of the train. Now, going through the snowy, reluctantly bluing countryside, I watch for day. The landscape looks as if it's been treated with an indigo wash. Hills pass by like a strip of film, but I know I am inside them. The rain that blurs the ridges lashes the windowpane, almost against my face.

"*[T]ruly* being here is so much," wrote Rilke, in the beautiful translation of Stephen Mitchell, "because everything here apparently needs us, this fleeting world, which in some strange way keeps calling to us. Us, the most fleeting of all."[18] The lines are from the ninth poem in *The Duino Elegies*, written not at Duino Castle in Italy, where Rilke began the poem cycle in 1912, but at the Château de Muzot in Switzerland's Rhone Valley, where, after a ten-year writer's block, he finished the elegies in 1922. This is a famous story among writers, evidence that even when language seems lost forever, it can suddenly return. Presence can return: the capacity to perceive and to express. "Everything was inside me," wrote Rilke in a letter describing the experience, "thread, webbing, framework, it all cracked and bent."[19] He was inhabited by the fleeting world. "*Once* for each thing," he wrote in the *Ninth Elegy*.

> Just once; no more. And we too,
> just once. And never again. But to have been
> this once, completely, even if only once:
> to have been at one with the earth, seems beyond undoing.[20]

To have been at one with the earth. In Rilke's words, "Irdisch *gewesen zu sein*." To have been *earthly*. In the emphasis on that word, an intensity of presence. After finishing the poems, he later told friends, he went outside to caress the wall of the Château de Muzot in the moonlight, as if it had been a large old animal.

---

[18] Rilke, *Selected Poetry*, 199.

[19] Quoted in Ralph Freedman, *Life of a Poet: Rainer Maria Rilke* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1996), 493.

[20] Rilke, *Selected Poetry*, 199.

Only the presence Rilke writes of, the kind of deep immersion in place practiced by L. J. Heatwole, can produce a work of art like *Shale Play*. This is an *earthly* book. Through its earthliness, it bears witness: it carries the impact of a physical experience into the reader's hands. I am concerned by the multiplication and spread of technologies that reduce the full presence of human beings together in their environment—a phenomenon already entrenched before the COVID-19 pandemic, but wildly accelerated by the need for isolation and distance. Technologically assisted distance has a tendency to creep, to infiltrate every aspect of life, to become a habit. It may be necessary, for a time, to order groceries by phone, but is it necessary for me to text my teenage son in his room upstairs? Is texting him just as good as calling him from the foot of the stairs, or walking up the stairs to knock at his door? Does the reduction of sensory details such as tone, vibration, and echo constitute a meaningful loss?

What bothers me most is the way the rapid escalation of technologically assisted distance tends to elide these questions, to make them appear silly or simply unaskable, when what is really at stake is something enormous, something I'm thinking of, on this train, as the difference between Julia and Julie. It's the difference between a poet of witness and a customer service robot, between an earthly being and a software application. Laughably huge, yet more and more acceptable. I've just agreed to give a virtual talk, in which I won't see my audience's faces, only their names on a screen. In such conditions, I cannot feel the presence of a listener. There is no *you*. I cannot hear you talk or shuffle in your seat. There is no murmur, no sense of atmosphere, of walls, floor, or ceiling, no resonance, no shared enclosure, no shelter. Good accidents are not possible here: the dropped pen, retrieved, that leads to a warm exchange of glances, or the slip as I climb the steps to the podium, which makes the audience catch their breath and, as I recover, laugh softly in relief, enfolding me in their sympathy. Here there are only bad accidents: the malfunctioning microphone, the screen that won't load—annoyances that interfere with our staged encounter. In the sensory deprivation chamber of the virtual meeting, where most forms of feeling are banished and sight and sound are tightly controlled, being here is so little. I become unearthly, a shadow. I am in mourning for your presence and my

own.[21]

In the preface to *Shale Play*, photographer Steven Rubin expresses his concerns about the autonomous nature of photographs, how easily they circulate far from their origins. He writes, "If my images from this project were to be shown outside of a journalistic context, or devoid of any kind of meaningful writing, they would remain free-floating aesthetic objects, untethered from the vital but invisible details lying beyond the lens' vista."[22] For him, it was important to work with Julia, a poet, in order to counter this tendency toward detachment, an aspect of photography exploited by digital media, which feed on the high-speed circulation of visual information. Rubin reminds us that *truly* being here involves all the senses, and that communicating an experience requires narration, which integrates perception with history. "While a single photograph can only ever capture a momentary, discontinuous slice of life," he writes, "language offers the possibility of expanding the moment and unfolding larger, more involved stories over time."[23]

I have some experience with the distance between a photograph and a story. In the summer of 2016 I traveled to Uzbekistan to research a small group of Mennonites who migrated from southern Russia, later Ukraine, to Central Asia in the 1880s. My trip was inspired by a photograph of the church in the Mennonite village taken by a Swiss traveler in 1932. I was amazed at the thought of this Mennonite community in the middle of Muslim Central Asia, which by all accounts existed in peace for fifty years, and was only dissolved when the Mennonites were deported by the Bolshevik government in 1935. I spent three years researching this history before I joined a Mennonite Heritage Tour following the path of those migrants from Tashkent to the village where they once lived, called Ak Metchet, which means the White Mosque.

[21] When I gave the virtual lecture on which this article is based at Conrad Grebel University College in March 2022, Professor Marlene Epp helpfully noted that "technologically assisted distance" could also be called "technologically assisted closeness," as technology had brought us together for the lecture. Her remark has prompted me to think more deeply about how virtual interactions produce their own spatial relations, making us closer to what is far away and farther from what is near.

[22] Spicher Kasdorf and Rubin, *Shale Play*, xxv.

[23] Ibid., xxv.

I already knew a great deal about this story, much of it gathered from photographs. But nothing could have prepared me for the reception my own group received, as we visited a rural mosque where the Mennonite travelers had sheltered one hundred and thirty years earlier, and were welcomed by a descendant of the imam who had given them refuge on their journey, who now invited us home for tea. In Khiva, the capital of the region where the Mennonites once lived, we visited the Mennonite museum, where a team of archivists showed us a model of the Mennonite village, of which almost no physical traces remain today, and clothing handmade by the women of the team, accurate down to the smallest pleat, which they reconstructed by studying old photographs. In the book I eventually wrote about my trip, I noted that the word *curator* is related to *care*.[24] Though the Mennonites were ultimately driven out of Ak Metchet, their story is still being cared for, still lovingly and anxiously preserved, in the museum, a shelter in time.

To have been *earthly* is to have been present in the flesh. My book on the Mennonites of Ak Metchet is an attempt to give language to a photograph, to fill in the sensory details of a place: the fragrance of rice, the humidity of the air, the sound of conversation. It's a project close to my heart, one that I hope will draw attention to peaceful and life-sustaining links across religious and ethnic borders, one in which I tried, as Rilke adjures us, to "Speak and bear witness,"[25] one that required a journey by plane.

The Cloud

On the night of January 12, 1879, L. J. Heatwole recorded, "a dense fog settled down over the country: the night being very cold, the result was that on the morning of the thirteenth every visible object out of doors was encased in thousands of glittering spears of hoar frost. This was the most beautiful sight I beheld in the bosom of nature during the year."[26]

The roots of the word *dwell* are steeped in fog. How strange that this word, associated today with earthliness and solidity, can be traced to such insubstantial things: smoke, steam, and clouds. Many of the older meanings of the word are negative: to hinder, to lead astray, to perplex or stun. *Dwell*

[24] Sofia Samatar, *The White Mosque* (New York: Catapult Books, 2022).

[25] Rilke, *Selected Poetry*, 201.

[26] L. J. Heatwole, "Weather Record of 1879," *Bridgewater [VA] Journal*, December 31, 1879.

is related to words for error, heresy, stupor, trance, and the poisonous deadly nightshade. I like this complex history. It reminds me that a dwelling can easily become a source of error, belching toxic smog, concealing harm in a haze of complacency, obscuring its own violent origins. It reminds me, too, that all of us dwell in clouds, in the milky atmosphere that surrounds our planet and makes life possible. Our dwelling is cloud. Cloud shelters us: this fleeting world, incredibly delicate, not solid but shimmering in the depths of space.

Walking through the train to the café car for a cup of coffee, I press my hands briefly against the backs of the seats where people are sleeping. I do this to keep my balance, but in the dimness, among these lax, defenseless bodies, the gesture feels strangely potent, as if I am gathering a blessing with every touch. I am a person with the rare privilege of choice. It's possible for me to go for weeks without getting into my car, and I can certainly reduce my air travel as well, I can think before I fly, I can weigh factors such as the length of time I'll spend at my destination, I can bundle activities together so as to accomplish several things in one trip instead of taking multiple flights, I can talk about what I'm thinking, I can push against the culture of frequent flyer miles that reckons only the personal, economic cost of air travel, not the broader ecological toll, and against the academic conference culture of my profession, according to which it's perfectly normal to fly somewhere for a weekend. I can try to reconcile myself to that other cloud: to the internet. I can agree to meet you there.

In the café car with a steaming cup, I search my phone for information on Julie, Amtrak's automated assistant. I want to know what she's made of, where she came from, and exactly what type of threat to civilization she represents, but what I find is Julie Stinneford Seitter, the professional voice actor who gave the robot her voice and name. I learn that when Seitter wants to sound friendly, she smiles as she speaks. When she records a list of diseases for Blue Cross Blue Shield, her expression saddens. It fascinates me to think about the intricate facial muscles whose movement lingers, still perceptible in the disembodied sound. There's something uncanny and wonderful about it, like one of those fairy tales in which a voice is stolen or transformed into diamonds or toads, especially when I read of how Seitter, making a call to

her credit card company, encountered her own voice on the telephone.[27]

Julie has history. Julie once had a body. Could this be a way for me to dwell in the cloud of the virtual: to seek out its buried good accidents, the compression of sound induced by a smile, the traces of a fuller, more chaotic world caught without intent or purpose? It's the feeling of control I can't stand, the sense that everything has been staged, that even accidents have been packaged to circulate as funny videos. Could attention to the history of digital objects unlock their veiled disorder, an unruliness that would give some sign of life?

"Perhaps we are *here*," wrote Rilke,

> in order to say: house,
> bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit-tree, window—
> at most: column, tower . . . But to *say* them, you must understand,
> oh to say them *more* intensely than the Things themselves
> ever dreamed of existing.[28]

To say something in this way requires sustained absorption. It takes time. Rilke, who claimed he could not dwell, took ten years to find his way back into his *Duino Elegies*, returning to them as if from exile. He found a way to dwell there again, not in the place where he had begun to write, but in poetry itself, in a "hurricane of the spirit" as he put it, the world he had glimpsed and lost in 1912. "Miracle," he called it. "Grace."[29] All dwelling is durational. To be present, physically or virtually, is to build a shelter in time. Say it: *d-w-e-l-l*. It's a word that can't be rushed.

My, but this country is gorgeous. Still so dark under the misty sky, but limned with luminous blue snow. Forests. Ravines. We are following a river. The rain continues; water drips down between the train cars, splashing me as I return to my seat. Passing through a carriage occupied almost entirely by a large Amish family who boarded with me in Indiana, I notice that one of them is awake: a woman in the last row. She's pushed back the window blind; a dim radiance touches her face. What I see next seems to me like a scene in a dream. Perhaps I'm imagining it, but I think she opens a small suitcase

[27] Amy Sutherland, "Answering the Call," *Boston College Magazine*, Summer 2009, https://bcm.bc.edu/index.html%3Fp=471.html, accessed April 17, 2022.
[28] Rilke, *Selected Poetry*, 199-201.
[29] Freedman, *Life of a Poet*, 493.

on the tray table in front of her, and withdraws from it an old-fashioned telephone receiver on a spiral cord. She puts it to her ear and listens.[30]

Sofia Samatar, an Associate Professor in the Department of English at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, is the author most recently of Monster Portraits*, a collaboration with her brother, artist Del Samatar. Her memoir* The White Mosque *is forthcoming in October 2022.*

[30] The author's 2022 Bechtel Lecture in Anabaptist-Mennonite Studies, on which this article is based, included numerous photographs and other graphic items. To view the video recording of the lecture, go to https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/events/lecture-series/bechtel-lectures.—*Editor*