Doubt, Defiance, and Desire

Jeff Gundy

Explanatory Note

As I finished drafting an essay on "creative doubt" in contemporary poetry and writing in summer 2014, I was flattered by nearly simultaneous invitations to present the S.A. Yoder Lecture at Goshen College and the Bechtel Lectures at Conrad Grebel University College, both in Fall 2014.[1] Since this piece was not yet in print, and my summer travels and fall schedule would make writing another substantial new one very difficult, I asked if I might present adapted versions of this essay at both colleges. At Grebel I also gave a second lecture and poetry reading under the title "Circling Defiance." What follows, then, is in three parts: a brief overview of "creative doubt" and particular Mennonite versions of it; a much-condensed, revised version of the second night's reading and commentary; and related speculations on desire.

On Creative Doubt and Mennonite Writing

My recent book *Songs from an Empty Cage: Poetry, Mystery, Anabaptism, and Peace,* contains essays on "theopoetics," attempting to engage theological issues and questions using the techniques and approaches of poetry. In "Poetry, the Sleeping King, and Creative Doubt" I continue with this endeavor, trying to demonstrate that the right varieties of doubt are generative and even crucial for many writers. The right, creative sort of doubt is not "enervating cynicism, mere disbelief, easy scorn, mindless relativism," I write there, but a flexible and open-minded skepticism, a persistent curiosity, a sense that revelation is not complete and that God always has more to say.

In developing this argument I turned to some usual suspects—William Blake, John Keats, Walt Whitman, T. S. Eliot—though I made

[1] The essay, "Poetry, the Sleeping King, and Creative Doubt," is in *CrossCurrents* 64, no. 4 (December 2014): 466-88. Special thanks to Lester Bechtel and the Bechtel family for their support of the Bechtel Lectures, and to Marlene Epp, Hildi Froese Tiessen, Paul Tiessen, Trevor Bechtel, Troy Osborne, and Rob Zacharias at Conrad Grebel University College. Many thanks also to the family of S.A. Yoder and Ann Hostetler at Goshen College.

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uneasy bedfellows of them, and also discussed poets who take up religious issues, such as Mary Szybist and Fanny Howe. I engaged some poets with Anabaptist connections, especially Julia Spicher Kasdorf and William Stafford, but mainly I examined how the practice of creative doubt ran through contemporary poetry, rather than focusing on Anabaptist and Mennonite authors and texts. In adapting the essay for presentation, I had some new thoughts. Perhaps the most intriguing one was that the category of creative doubt might apply meaningfully to a great deal of what we now call Mennonite/s writing. Creative doubt as a category might be a skeleton key to much of the work produced in both Canada and the United States during the Mennonite literary renaissance. Sometimes this doubt concerns God, but more often it takes the form of variously expressed and focused doubt about the people, ideologies, and human structures occupying the spaces between God and individual human beings.

I could only sketch this idea hastily during the Grebel lecture, and even now must limit myself to quickly exploring some key authors and texts. My search yielded rich results, however, as I found some variety of creative doubt almost everywhere I looked—and repeatedly had to resist the desire to trace the further twists and turns that these generative doubts took throughout the author's body of work. In what follows I overlook many subtleties and distinctions for the sake of economy, but I hope this brief list will suggest that creative doubt is indeed pervasive in the rich body of Mennonite writing of the last half-century.

In Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many,* the inevitable starting point for discussions of contemporary Mennonite writing, the young protagonist, Thom Wiens, shares a name with Doubting Thomas.[2] Very early in the novel, as military planes fly over and remind him that World War II is raging, Thom remembers a sermon and the pastor's insistence that the members of his Mennonite village church "do not have pride," but "by God's grace we understand what others do not. . . . [W]e, his followers, conquer only by spiritual love and not by physical force." The narrator immediately reports Thom's struggle to take these idealistic claims at face value: "Thom could not doubt such sermons. He had grown up hearing these statements. . . . And truth necessitated following." But Thom is too smart and introspective to follow

[2] Thanks to Paul Tiessen for pointing this out to me.

unquestioningly: "Lying there, he felt doubts settle in his mind like mud in the hollows of the spring-soaked land."[3] He will learn that his doubts are all too legitimate, and that pride and violence have not in fact been banished from his church or his village.

Dallas Wiebe's 1969 novel *Skyblue the Badass*,[4] a semi-autobiographical *Bildungsroman* about a young man who leaves his Kansas Mennonite upbringing for a series of worldly adventures in graduate school, is at least as skeptical about his Mennonite community, though this author's later work would tack back in rather amazing ways toward reclaiming Mennonite identity and faith. *Skyblue* was reviewed in *The Atlantic* and *The New York Times Book Review,* but its prose was evidently too eccentric to win many readers, either Mennonite or English.

Patrick Friesen's many books of poems, including titles like *The Shunning* and *You Don't Get to Be a Saint,* are shot through with vivid and fertile doubts about his relations to the world and the divine. *Blasphemer's Wheel: Selected and New Poems* begins with the brief "Waiting for the Gods," reprinted here in its entirety:

> at night dripping mares stand on the beach
> white and honey manes
> not a muscle in motion
> they look out to sea
> a step
> and ghostly splash
>
> in the morning water swims over the moon-prints
> this must be the place where I wait for nothing[5]

As we might expect, there is no divine revelation here; the wait is "for nothing," if we expect God to descend with trumpets blaring. Yet there is a hint of other-than-human majesty in those dripping horses with their "white

[3] Rudy Wiebe, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1962), 12-13.
[4] Dallas Wiebe, *Skyblue the Badass* (New York: Doubleday, 1969).
[5] Patrick Friesen, "Waiting for the Gods," *Blasphemer's Wheel: Selected and New Poems* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1994), 3. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

and honey manes" and the "ghostly splash" of their departure. This spiritual questing and questioning, and the search for metaphysical presence in the physical world, will be at the heart of all Friesen's work.

In the foreword of Di Brandt's *Questions I Asked my Mother*[6]—the first words of the first book of her distinguished career—Brandt defines the speaker of her poems as "the good Mennonite daughter I tried so / unsuccessfully to become," "the one who asked too / many questions who argued with the father & with / God who always took things always went too far / who questioned every thing" (n.p.). The book's main project, surely, is to find language for the questions and doubts that fill a smart young woman with a strict, religious father in a patriarchal village. Again, this rigorous inquiry into the costs, griefs, and available joys of a patriarchal, violent, capitalist culture will persist through many variations and developments in Brandt's work.

Julia Spicher Kasdorf's *Sleeping Preacher,* written mostly from an urban vantage point, doubts rural and Anabaptist prejudices about the city, Catholics, and "the world." In the opening poem, "Green Market, New York," the speaker, a young Menno gone off to the city, meets an Amish woman from her home valley, selling pies at a farmer's market:

> "Do you live in the city?" she asks, "do you like it?"
> I say no. And that was no lie, Emma Peachey.
> I don't like New York, but sometimes these streets
> hold me as hard as we're held by rich earth.
> I have not forgotten that Bible verse:
> Whoever puts his hand to the plow and looks back
> is not fit for the kingdom of God.[7]

Kasdorf remarked years later in an essay that she didn't understand the last lines for a long time, but likes Ken Nafziger's view of them as a "denunciation of guilt"[8] ("Mourning"). I agree that makes sense, but I think

[6] Di Brandt, *Questions I Asked my Mother* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1987), xx.
[7] Julia Kasdorf, *Sleeping Preacher* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1992), 3.
[8] Julia Kasdorf, "Mourning, Melancholy and the Mennonites," Brethren and Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Interests, October

they also are a refusal of one kind of doubt—the sort that might send a young poet back to the farm from the city—and a claim of another, more creative doubt—the kind that sends the poet to the city in the first place, searching for a different life, and for a voice that those like Emma Peachey would not dare to claim.

The list might be extended past first books, of course. In the multitude of texts tracing the Mennonite experience in Ukraine and its aftermath, idyllic visions of "forever summer" mingle with others that raise doubts about the *Selbstschutz,* the oppression of Russian peasants, choices made during and after the diaspora, and much more. Sandra Birdsell's *The Russländer*[9] opens with a description of the young Katya's myopia: "Being near-sighted was not a hindrance. She learned this from early on, through inference and the attitudes of people around her. What went on beyond the borders of her Russian Mennonite oasis was not worth noticing. Because she was born female she could expect to dwell safely within the circumference of her privileged world." Of course, both Katya's privilege and her safety within the "Mennonite oasis" will prove entirely illusory.

South of the border one finds Keith Ratzlaff's book of poems *Dubious Angels*,[10] written in conversation with Paul Klee's late drawings of angels. The opening poem, "Forgetful Angel," doubts even memory, among its multiple uncertainties: "Here I lose / my own hands / even in my own lap." Near the end comes a surprisingly bold claim: "God is a chair / to sit in / and the act of sitting," but the poem closes on two less confident similes: "Like a ring once on my finger / Like a road / disappearing in the trees."[11]

I must cease multiplying examples, but surely this theme continues. Miriam Toews's *A Complicated Kindness*[12] doubts and complicates once more all the categories of good and bad, worthy and wasteful, life-giving and life-denying. Her new book, *All My Puny Sorrows,* seems shot through with a sad and brilliant creative doubt. Again, the narrator, Yolandi, has

2004, www.bmclgbt.org/kasdorf.shtml, accessed December 16, 2014.

[9] Sandra Birdsell, *The Russländer* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2001), 5-6.

[10] Keith Ratzlaff, *Dubious Angels: Poems after Paul Klee* (Tallahassee, FL: Anhinga, 2005), 3, 5.

[11] Though I hesitate to place it in this august company, my first book of poems was titled *Inquiries*, and many of the poems are constructed in a question/answer format. (I wanted to call it *Inquiries into the Technology of Hell*, but was dissuaded by a wise editor.)

[12] Miriam Toews, *A Complicated Kindness* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2007).

her doubts about God: "I willed my hands to stop trembling and ruffled my hair a bit and prayed to a God I only half believed in. Why are we always told that God will answer our prayers if we believe in Him? Why can't he ever make the first move?" But this is only the mildest level of her doubts; her questions about human institutions are much more stringent. She not only questions but deeply mistrusts the Mennonite elders of East Village: "Shortly after that . . . the bishop (the alpha Mennonite) came to our house for what he liked to call a visit. Sometimes he referred to himself as a cowboy and these encounters as 'mending fences.' But in reality it was more of a raid. He showed up on a Saturday in a convoy with his usual posse of elders. . . ."

The village as a whole does not escape Yolandi's harsh, witty judgments of its hostility toward girls, women, and psychic dissidents: "When she graduated [my mother] turned the spare bedroom into an office and a steady stream of sad and angry Mennonites came to our house, usually in secret because therapy was seen as lower even than bestiality because at least bestiality is somewhat understandable in isolated farming communities."[13] In fact, Yolandi's scorn for the whole "Menno cosmology" as she encounters it is both boundless and (strangely) bracing:

> We have Rich Cousins who are extremely rich because they are the sons of the sons (our uncles, all dead) who inherited the lucrative family business from our grandfather. . . . In the Menno cosmology that's how it goes down. The sons inherit the wealth and pass it on to their sons and to their sons and to their sons and the daughters get sweet fuck all. We Poor Cousins don't care at all though, except for when we're on welfare, broke, starving. . . . But whatever, we descendants of the Girl Line may not have wealth and proper windows in our drafty homes but at least we have rage and we will build *empires* with that, gentlemen.[14]

Further exploration and finer-grained analysis of the many varieties and gradations of creative doubt in Mennonite/s writing must await another

[13] Miriam Toews, *All My Puny Sorrows* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2014), 70-71, 16, 131.
[14] Ibid., 224.

occasion. But it does not seem accidental or trivial that skeptical attention to master narratives, and the creation of alternative narratives, should turn up everywhere in this vital and continually expanding body of literature. Not only among those known as dissidents can the various flowers and figures of doubt, sometimes sad and sometimes lovely and sometimes both, be found. I end by echoing a key claim of Jennifer Hecht's major study *Doubt: A History*: "Doubt . . . gets a lot done."[15]

Defiance, or Something Near It

For many years I have been an insider in the Mennonite literary community—a tenured faculty member at a Mennonite college, involved in planning several Mennonite/s Writing conferences and on programs as poet and critic, frequently invited to read and speak at Mennonite colleges. My poem "How to Write the New Mennonite Poem," among others, is frequently cited in these circles as a sort of manifesto, although its rather fussy and (I thought) comic instructions have been taken more seriously by critics than by other Mennonite poets (I stand with the poets on that).

Despite this status and the privilege that accompanies it, I have persistently tried to avoid making dogmatic statements about what Mennonite writers ought to do or not do, and have warned against taking any particular text or author as "the" definitive Mennonite one, given the enormous range of experience and ideologies within the category of "Mennonite," even in North America. In a chapter of my recent *Songs from an Empty Cage,* titled "Declining to Be in Charge," I wrote, "There is no *Ordnung* for poets, at least none that I recognize, and certainly not one that I have any desire to create or enforce."[16] Even earlier, for the 1997 Mennonite/s Writing conference I wrote a little essay in praise of lurkers, internal exiles, those never quite at home, despite everything—a situation that describes my own sense of location pretty well.[17]

This position of being both within a particular community (religious,

[15] Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 486.
[16] Jeff Gundy, *Songs from an Empty Cage: Poetry, Mystery, Anabaptism, and Peace* (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2013), 45.
[17] Jeff Gundy, "In Praise of the Lurkers (Who Come Out to Speak)," in *Walker in the Fog: On Mennonite Writing* (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2005), 133-41.

local, national, or otherwise) and incompletely assimilated into it, preserving a certain interior and sometimes exterior resistance, is the one that my recent book of poems names as "Somewhere Near Defiance." It is virtually a necessity for poets, writers, and artists, although some find it more difficult than others. In my particular circumstances, it has led to both warm, supportive relationships with many Mennonite writers and critics and a fair measure of creative doubt about the Mennonite sphere I inhabit—and similarly mixed feelings about the larger culture I inhabit. Really, how can any writer, any alert human being, exist in entirely comfortable harmony with his or her immediate community and the world as it is? The many defects of this world cry out for our attention, just as its many beauties cry out for our praise. Surely defiance and its dark brother, despair, are the wellsprings of much poetry and most fiction. To reckon and contend with all this, to reckon things as they are and might be as rightly as we can, is to practice defiance.

Somewhere Near Defiance,[18] as the title suggests, is situated in this rather muddled middle. Defiance is a real town, not far from me in northwest Ohio, once the site of Fort Defiance (established by the stalwart Indian-fighter and general "Mad" Anthony Wayne), and before that a Native American settlement. Living comfortably ensconced near so much largely forgotten history, in the midst of a declining but still mighty empire, what sort of life is possible, what kind of resistance is necessary?

Many of the poems find their beginnings quite simply, in immediate circumstances, and then become entangled and complicated by larger themes, ideas, and images that enter through memory and association. Lurkers may seem like loners, but we often carry all sorts of conversation partners around with us. Some are adversaries, others allies, as feminist theologian Grace Jantzen has become for me. This poem broods on her scorching critique of the Yahweh of the first books of the Old Testament.

[18] Jeff Gundy, *Somewhere Near Defiance* (Tallahassee, FL: Anhinga, 2014). All poems from this collection are reprinted with permission of the publisher.

Meditation with Muddy Woods and Swinging Bridge

[The covenant] is structured in violence and steeped in blood,
from the blood of circumcision and endless animal slaughter to
brutal extermination of the 'people of the land.'
— Grace Jantzen, *Violence to Eternity*[19]

Hot wind from the west. Trail still soft after a whole week's drying.

Deer tracks, coon, one stubborn mud-hiker's deep scours, each like a little boat or long wet nest.

Wood piled everywhere—neat rows for woodstoves, heaps of trash and branches.

We were in Salzburg when a great storm scattered the old trees on the Kapuzinerberg like pickup sticks.

Today I brought nothing but pens, keys, comb, notebook, bicycle, lock, wallet and credit cards.

And knees a big black fly seems to like, and shorts with a pocket ripped two summers ago, still not fixed.

Morning reading: What kind of God would drown every living thing that wouldn't fit on some puny ark? Would slaughter the people of Canaan for the sake of one hungry band of nomads?

Many good gravel paths lead from the subdivision into the woods, but only the animals use them.

Somebody's cutting something hard in a dry swimming pool.

Who discovered we could cast our anger at the sky and get it back named God?

[19] Grace M. Jantzen, *Violence to Eternity* (London: Routledge, 2009).

In my old house the bathroom sink plugs up every four months but I know exactly how to swear and clear it.

Small white blooms all over the multiflora rose, bushes twice my size.

Seed pods float in the pond like mothers determined to tan whether or not their children get lost in the bushes.

On a day this hot and green it seems crazy to think that God picks sides.

One plank of the swinging bridge is missing, one bowed and soft, and a big lost branch is wedged high between the end posts, but I walk across it anyway.[20]

Jantzen defies the narrative of tribalism and conquest, as she defies the image of a vengeful, jealous, patriarchal, tribal deity who demands blood sacrifice and slaughters "enemies" wholesale. In the poem, I find myself sharing much of her viewpoint, but in the context of contemporary Midwestern rural serenity and order, with the ruthless enterprises which ensure that order distant and nearly invisible.

The middle section of *Somewhere Near Defiance* contains seven short "Contemplations," poems written during a canoe trip on Minnesota's Boundary Waters. In this sprawling setting of lakes, trees, and rocky islands, all motorized vehicles are forbidden, and the five of us took off our watches and shut off our cell phones. There was no chance of leaving civilization *entirely* behind, of course, but as we paddled and portaged through open spaces we did find some distance from much of the usual clutter of culture and daily demands and expectations.

Contemplation on Rules and Lines

One law for lion and ox is oppression, but of which one?

The ghost of William Blake, gnarled and smiling in the hollow between tree and stone, refuses to say.

[20] Gundy, *Somewhere Near Defiance*, 26-27.

> One law for water and rock is precision. Whenever they meet, water does all the talking.
>
> Another law is rubbing. Another can be spoken clearly only in loon. Another takes 300 Earth years to state in full.
>
> A lost fishline dangles like a strand of the golden thread, left behind by a traveler who went back home with nothing but bug bites and a solid case of jock itch.
>
> I'm not so careful myself but I wish I were, and I tell myself that counts for something.
>
> The wind's law is this: be yourself, and I will show you what that is.
>
> The water's law is this: Tell me anything. Only my face will answer. I will hold the little ones in their little boats, I will let them go where they choose if they have the strength.
>
> I will tell them what they must know, even if it breaks their backs or their hearts.
>
> I will tell them what they want to know only if they ask very softly, and more than once.[21]

The poet desires to listen and see deeply, to pay the sort of "spontaneous, sober attention" that German romantic poet-philosopher Novalis recommended we devote to the world—but really not a great deal is revealed. Since Wordsworth, at least, some of us have hoped to gain wisdom and instruction from the natural world, but it proves generally to be an austere and taciturn teacher. It is good to doubt if not defy the more sentimental messages we may be tempted to think we have received.

[21] Gundy, *Somewhere Near Defiance*, 52.

Contemplation on Rain and Religion

I've decided that I'm religious but not spiritual.
—Gregory Wolfe

I always feel more religious in the sunshine,
especially if it's not hot and the place is pretty

and most people can't afford to get there or just
don't bother. Morning has broken and all that.

And so the rattle of rain on the tarp doesn't really
make me count my blessings, the stray drops

beading my borrowed rain pants don't bring
me bliss, the fact of fewer mosquitoes

than yesterday does not make my heart leap up.
But I know this: one day I must learn

to give up for good on getting dry,
to love the hiss of water falling into water,

the gray lake meeting the gray rain,
so little between them, our slender place

between the great sky and the stones.
Hold tight, I tell my heart, here we go.[22]

Here the epigraph from Gregory Wolfe—spoken partly but not entirely in jest—is a gesture in defiance of the many who identify themselves as "spiritual but not religious." (Wolfe is the editor of the influential journal *Image: A Journal of the Arts and Religion*, and conservative but not rigid himself.) Some defenders of the "religious" like Lillian Daniel have gone

[22] Gundy, *Somewhere Near Defiance*, 54.

further, mocking the merely spiritual for "finding God in sunsets" while they sleep in or go hiking instead of dutifully trudging to church.[23] I find myself wishing to defy both categories; like a good Mennonite (at least of the rebel sort) I want to be neither "religious" nor "spiritual," neither Catholic nor Protestant. I'm not even sure I want to be a good Mennonite, some days.

So the poem is one more effort at working out what I might want to be through metaphor. But the process was not rational nor even particularly introspective. As I wrote the images in my notebook, they seemed not the work of my "imagination," nor the product of my ego defining its identity one more time. They were particular things present in the place and time where the poem came into being (I almost wrote "simply," but that isn't right). It had been a damp, tiring day out on the water, but as I wrote, the canoes had been safely secured, the tents set up on our island campsite, we scattered for a brief time to quiet ourselves and scribble in our damp notebooks before it came time to think about food and rest. What might it signify to be mostly dry and nearly warm among so much water, above and below and on all sides, held up for now by the rough rocks and fallen trunks on which we sat? Could this moment hold some emblem for the larger realities of our lives, so small and frail among the trees and rocks and lakes of this world, the low and damp sky above? The poem reaches toward some kind of abandonment, some kind of release, but to write such words at the end of a page, and to trust them as the end of the poem, is not to have a clear sense of what they might "mean" in prose, except that both "religious" and "spiritual" seem inadequate terms in those moments when we find ourselves most deeply contemplating what our place in the world might actually be.

One crucial form of defiance for theopoets is resistance to spurious clarity, to "explanations" that reduce mystery to something lesser, something solvable through ingenuity and effort, a jigsaw puzzle or a crossword. In this vein, Mary Szybist's beautiful book of poems *Incarnadine*[24] takes its epigraph from Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace*:[25] "The mysteries of faith are degraded if they are made into an object of affirmation and negation, when in reality

[23] See Lillian Daniel, "Spiritual but Not Religious? Please Stop Boring Me," www.huffington post.com, September 13, 2011, accessed December 14, 2014.
[24] Mary Szybist, *Incarnadine: Poems* (Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2013).
[25] Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (Lincoln, NE: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1952).

they should be an object of contemplation." This maxim can be fruitfully applied in many circumstances, and to many sorts of mysteries.

Years ago I developed the habit of writing in meetings of a certain sort: readings crowded enough that I can scrawl and not be inconspicuous, somewhat boring lectures, and of course faculty meetings, which seem designed to inflict maximum psychic stress upon those with short attention spans and little tolerance for earnest academic discourse. Measures such as this poem, which I hope and trust runs its details through a fine enough sieve to avoid horrifying my good colleagues too much, sometimes seem the only way to preserve my psychic equilibrium and my role as quirky but tolerated member of the community.

Notes from the Faculty Meeting

After eight years of bounty, the cow has dried up.

Behind the great man the shield icon pulsed, patient as a heart.

Like seeds, some ideas appear whole and undamaged
but will never sprout.

Any form of motion draws the eye.

So far, every page of this yellow pad has torn ragged.

This troubles me more than it should.

I vowed to hold my breath until I heard a concrete noun.

Does "things" count? "Students?" "Projections?"

My attempt at narrative, jumbled already, was interrupted
by the need to applaud.

The phrase "difficult challenge" was not followed

by showers of gold.

"Forming a task force" did not lead to "pursue the Great One."

Most students believe they're more honest than most students.

After a national search, we hired Randy's brother.[26]

In the title poem "Somewhere Near Defiance," I tried to address the broader world, and the ongoing, often distant violence of American culture. What does it mean for a middle-class white guy in a small, quiet, safe town to attempt to live with some measure of resistance? What use might words and poems be? What else do we have?

Somewhere Near Defiance

It's late but everything comes next
—Naomi Shihab Nye, "Jerusalem"

1.
I live near Defiance, a white name pressed on an old place.
Mad Anthony Wayne's soldiers broke down the orchards

when the battle was theirs, and built a fort
where the Auglaize and Maumee Rivers meet.

Water will answer anything, the moon, the wind,
the mud. The rivers mingle and move on.

2.
Once I drove my little car right into the heart of the empire,
huddled with my friends to plot and complain. All over town

the poets and other malcontents were hiding in the open,
vowing to split the rocks and terrify the despots.

[26] Gundy, *Somewhere Near Defiance*, 76.

In the coffeehouse we tallied our losses and wondered how
to subvert the lyric *I* until the hot waitress grabbed the mike

to say that racism wasn't over yet. We clapped for her,
then wandered toward the Capitol, launched some ragged

words to each other and the wind. All right, you can
have *shock,* we told the adversary, but *awe* belongs to us.

3.
Walt Whitman thought his poems might stop the war.
When they did not he moved to Washington, took a day job

so he could go to the field hospitals, read to the wounded,
write letters for men with no arms or eyes. *I have been hurt*

but am mending well. Do not weep, I will find you one day.
I walked around for days, found no field hospitals,

lots of monuments. I passed the suited and booted,
shaggy and lame, proud and weary, and it seemed

that each of us carried a wound we were trying to hide.

4.
Meanwhile the drone pilots turn their Hellfires loose
from dark rooms in the suburbs, buy a 6-pack on the way home.

1200 veterans of the last good war die each day,
and the stools at the VFW stand like puzzled mushrooms.

5.
These days I wake up grateful that my heavy dreams are gone.
I snag the zipper of my coat, pull it free, and walk off

puzzling over slides and words and stratagems. Then I step
into a room and see a row of faces, hopeful and new

as yellow apples hanging in the orchards of Defiance.

6.
The morning came brilliant to my quiet town,
sun in the junipers, a robin on the wire.

Nothing that I do matters to the earth or the sky.

But I've stalled around too long—it's time for declarations,
time for floods. Time to put down the *Toledo Blade*

and take a very long walk. Time to say peace on terror,
peace on drugs, peace on Defiance.

Peace on Mad Anthony and his soldiers—gone so quiet now—
and the warriors they fought, and the fruit trees they tore.

The Auglaize and the Maumee join and drift on,
exchanging sticks and soil and bits of news.

We are in the earth already, and the earth in us.

Even from Defiance, nothing's more than half a world away.[27]

Desire

As Robert Hass puts it in his lovely "Meditation at Lagunitas," "Longing, we say, because desire is full / of endless distances."[28] Desire wells up from the sense of incompleteness, separation, distance from the Beloved. We are like reed flutes, Rumi says, plucked from the reed-bed of primal presence, pulled away to live our separate lives, pierced and polished so that at least we can

[27] Gundy, *Somewhere Near Defiance*, 3-5.
[28] Robert Hass, *Praise* (New York: Ecco, 1979), 4.

sing.[29] Music seems especially closely connected to desire, of all sorts. We have plenty of church songs about that longing, about crossing the river, marching to Zion, flying away. But there many other, worldly songs speak of other longings, secular, sexual, and yet somehow perhaps not entirely different in their longing for transformation.

One such is "The Song of Wandering Aengus," William Butler Yeats's version of an Irish folktale.

I went out to the hazel wood,
Because a fire was in my head,
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
And hooked a berry to a thread;
And when white moths were on the wing,
And moth-like stars were flickering out,
I dropped the berry in a stream
And caught a little silver trout.

When I had laid it on the floor
I went to blow the fire a-flame,
But something rustled on the floor,
And someone called me by my name:
It had become a glimmering girl
With apple blossom in her hair
Who called me by my name and ran
And faded through the brightening air.

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done,

[29] *The Essential Rumi: New Expanded Edition*, trans. Coleman Barks (New York: HarperOne, 2004), 17-18.

The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.[30]

I first read this poem forty-some years ago, in a red *Selected Poems* that is still on my shelf, the spine faded to pink now. I was a second-year student at Goshen College, just back from a self-assigned winter sabbatical in Hawaii, and we read a lot of Yeats in that summer class, taught by the poet and brilliant crank Nick Lindsay. I found much to admire in Yeats, but while his later poems are undoubtedly more substantial and "serious," the early poems like this one, misty and sentimental as they seem next to his harder-edged late work, have something all their own. What are we to think about old Aengus, who spends his life chasing the glimmering girl he saw only once? Who is this magical girl, who changed from a little silver trout when his back was turned, called him by his name, then "faded in the brightening air" as if to teach him a permanent lesson about attempting to catch and hold beauty? He was a fool, of course, pursuing the illusion of perfect love in the form of a woman, a spirit, a creature from another realm. What a waste of his time and energy and spirit, any good Mennonite would say, when he could have been following Jesus instead, cleaning up after floods and spreading the Gospel.

And yet some stubborn, disobedient part of me believes that he spent his life exactly rightly, that love and beauty are the only things worth pursuing and that only in women and in sexual delight are these things fully embodied, incarnated, made present. It almost doesn't matter that he will never find her. No—it's *necessary* that he never find her, never woo and win and wed her. Happily ever after is for hymns and fairy tales, not this sort of tale, which for all its fantastical trappings is unsparing when it comes to human realities. Sooner or later, desire always leads back to beauty. I don't just mean the girl's beauty, which we can assume but is more implied than described, except in her "glimmering." The beauty of the poem is equally important, its rhythms and images and music, the way they dazzle and entrance and ensnare. Those last lines still nearly melt me down.

It finally occurred to me recently to look for musical settings of Yeats's poem. Everything is on the web these days, and I quickly found several.

[30] William Butler Yeats, *Selected Poems and Two Plays*, ed. M. L. Rosenthal (New York: Collier, 1962), 22.

My favorite is Donovan's, recorded in the early 1970s—about the time I was discovering the poem—as part of a children's album called "H.M.S. Donovan," released only in England. What a song about erotic obsession is doing on a children's album I can't say. But I found some workable chords, and I've been playing the song on my 12-string every chance I get. Often I sing through the last, most luscious stanza, with those immeasurably resonant lines about the silver apples, the golden apples, and then sing them again . . . and then, before I finish, decide I haven't done it quite right, or at least that it's not time to let it be over, and go right back to the start and play it again. It's no real joy to arrive at the end, anyway. The pleasure is in the middle, in the music, in the longing. And Aengus is always in that magical space himself, old but still kicking, still certain that he'll find his beloved and then his life will be transformed by the accomplishment of his desire.

Longing, we say. Distances.

Mennonites pursue the Beloved Community and follow Jesus to quench that desire, to convince ourselves that our beautiful tradition will provide what we need. And yet. . . . When I visited Grebel I spoke at a noontime forum, and we got into an impassioned discussion of hymns and singing—how sometimes we are carried away by the beauty of the group sound, the communal harmony, and other times harmony does not suffice and we're left alienated and disaffected, perhaps by patriarchal language, perhaps by frighteningly bloody atonement theology. When even the community does not satisfy, what then?

What might a theopoet offer? Not a solution, not an answer, not a resolution. Desire, as Weil says of the other mysteries, is not to be solved but to be contemplated. Some years back, at a workshop in the Catskills, I wrote a little night poem:

Small Night Song from Oneonta

It's good that the world has more beauty
than it needs. It's good to walk into
the smooth Catskill night and discover

that the night has no edges, no sympathy,
no grievance against me, that any place I step
will hold me firm, not like a lover,

not like a child. It's good to be a child,
and then for years to be something else,
and then something else. It's a hard world

but the rain is persistent, the deer
are quiet and discreet, and for ages now
the trees have known how to dream their way up.

A man with a pack on his shoulder
saunters down the path below me, knowing
the lights he sees ahead are burning for him [31]

Much later I decided to try to write a sung version of this poem. I kept almost all the images, but did a fair amount of rearranging and repeating to make it more singable. The ending changed the most, as I felt my way toward a kind of chantlike repetition and variation. The idea of the lights burning for the man at the end of the poem (who was walking toward a reception, though the poem does not say so directly) expanded to suggest more directly that somehow the world is fitted to us, as the light of the sun is fitted to the trees, that the world is both a hard place and a sustaining, even good one. The sung version floats off into this ending:

It's good to be a child in this hard world
and the trees they know
that the lights we see
are burning for you
and they're burning for me
burning for you and for me
burning for you and maybe for me . . .

[31] Jeff Gundy, *Deerflies* (Cincinnati: WordTech Editions, 2004), 133. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

it's a hard world but it's good
it's a hard world . . . [32]

I tinkered with the last sequence for a long while, trying to get it just right. (You have to imagine a descending but confident progression through A minor, G, and F, repeating from "trees they know" through "'they're burning for me," then something more tentative and uncertain in the last lines.) I suppose that I felt desire, defiance, and doubt all tugging at me. So there's "and *maybe* for me" the second time through that line. I never know for sure whether the song really ends on "it's a hard world but it's good" or just "it's a hard world." It depends on the day.

Still, here is a new song, even perhaps a beautiful song, born from both the communal embrace and the solitary ramble. Not old wine in new wineskins, but new wine. That is what sustains me: not just one more poem but many, from many voices, speaking in many tongues and from many scattered places, within the circle and without. My song, yes, but not only mine, offered to you and yours as well, not for always, not the last song, just one more to be added to the songs that carry our hope, our fear, our dreams, our terrors on into the darkness and the light that may come.

No Path

for Gordon Kaufman

Kayak on the quarry: will you hug the shore, push straight across,
waver or dawdle? No paths on the water. Almost November,

and the poison ivy is still green. The soft trap of sky closes
all around. An artful little spray of leaves near the shore,

as though Martha Stewart were sitting in for God.
Give up all that Father stuff, said Gordon, *look where it's got us.*

And the Warrior — even worse. The kayakers lift and dip
their paddles, orange signals: this way for us. So much is offered,

[32] Available online at https://soundcloud.com/gundyj/8-little-night-song.

so much goes begging, and still what we need evades us, or hides
in plain sight. On the water, every way might be the right way.

God might be the Father and the Warrior and the lost leaves,
the water and the bleached trunk, motion and stone,

lush twists of cloud and barking dog and wind,
star upon star alert and invisible in every direction,

low moan in the blood, circle and drift in the bright cells,
shadowy hum and whir of electrons, fizz and buzz and shush

too small to name. No end, no opening, no tribe, no answer.
Only this: kayak and paddlers, lift and dip,

breath and muscle above the chill water, below the soft sky.[33]

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[33] Gundy, *Somewhere Near Defiance*, 20.