



The Conrad Grebel Review

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Foreword

The editors are pleased to continue CGR's thirtieth anniversary celebration with this issue devoted to Mennonite writers and Mennonite writing, an ever-fresh theme that the journal has featured several times in recent years. We heartily thank Hildi Froese Tiessen, now professor emerita of Conrad Grebel University College and formerly CGR's Literary Editor, for serving as guest editor of this issue. We must also express our thanks, for their invaluable assistance, to the publishers of work by the authors whose lectures and articles grace this issue.

At the end of the issue are notices of several calls for papers. Two of the calls seek submissions to this journal on "Revisiting Mennonite Peace Theology" and on "Economics in Anabaptist Perspective." We remind readers that we welcome at any time submissions of articles or reflections on "spirituality, ethics, theology, and culture from a broadly-based Mennonite perspective." We also seek brief responses to previously published articles.

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The Fall 2013 issue will include articles on "Mennonite Systematic Theology in Retrospect and Prospect" and on "Christian Pacifism After Hauerwas." Soon to follow will be the latest Bechtel Lectures ("Violence, Victimhood, and Recovery: Insights from the Parables of Jesus" by Chris Marshall) and the most recent Eby lecture ("How Can I Keep from Singing?" by Leonard Enns). Publication of these lectures maintains another longstanding CGR tradition.

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We congratulate Royden Loewen and all those associated with producing the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, which is also marking its thirtieth anniversary this year. May JMS, CGR, and the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, as well as *Direction and Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* all find ways to flourish in these challenging times for academic publications.

Jeremy M. Bergen
Editor

Stephen A. Jones
Managing Editor

Mennonite/s Writing: Poetics and Theopoetics—An Introduction

Hildi Froese Tiessen

This issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* contains one more installment in the rich saga of Mennonite/s Writing in North America. As I write this introduction, the organizing committee for the seventh international “Mennonite/s Writing” conference—a committee including scholars and writers from Fresno, California to Waterloo, Ontario, and coast to coast, across the United States—is deliberating on dates for their first planning meeting. (This seventh conference in the series is to take place at Fresno Pacific University in 2015.) At the end of May 2013 a dozen scholars of Mennonite literature met at Penn State University for a three-day symposium focused on “Mennonite/s Writing: After Identity”; the proceedings (edited by Rob Zacharias¹) are under contract with Penn State University Press. Last year *Rhubarb* magazine (edited in Winnipeg by Victor Enns) and the journal of the Center for Mennonite Writing (the *CMW Journal*, edited in Goshen by Ann Hostetler and Ervin Beck) continued to publish a robust range of stories, poems, and essays by writers who identify as Mennonite. Plans are underway for a special session on Mennonite/s Writing at the 2014 annual national Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario. The field of Mennonite/s writing—including both the creative writers and the scholars who give particular attention to their work—remains extraordinarily vigorous.

During the winter of 2012 I convened and hosted a reading/lecture series at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, featuring well-attended performances by writers Rudy Wiebe, David Waltner-Toews, Patrick Friesen, Julia Kasdorf, David Bergen, Darcie Friesen Hossack, and Carrie Snyder, and presentations by scholars Magdalene Redekop, Rob Zacharias, and Paul Tiessen. Last spring Eastern Mennonite University in Virginia

¹ See Robert Zacharias’s forthcoming book, *Rewriting the Break Event: Tracing the Russian Mennonite Migration through Canadian Literature* (Winnipeg: Univ. of Manitoba Press, 2013).

hosted the sixth conference on Mennonite/s Writing (convened by Kirsten Beachy), and the 2012 Symposium on Manitoba Writing of the Manitoba Writers Guild in Winnipeg included a panel on Mennonite literature (organized by Victor Enns). This issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* features some of the work profiled at some of these events. The Grebel readings and lectures are available online in a complete series of videos.² *Rhubarb* magazine,³ the *CMW Journal*,⁴ and the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*⁵ have published other proceedings from these various gatherings.

Like other conferences on Mennonite/s Writing—which featured panels on the emergence of Canadian Mennonite/s Writing in Manitoba, for example, or celebrated the publication of the first collection of Mennonite writing from the west coast—the gathering in Virginia included focused panels such as the one re-presented at the beginning of this issue, which deals with “theopoetics”: the field of inquiry that weaves together matters of concern to some poets and theologians, or to theological poets or poetic theologians. Well, you need to read the four pieces (which, in their initial public iteration in Virginia, ignited the most animated discussion of the conference) to see what I mean. Following the essays comprising the theopoetics panel is the Sunday morning meditation Rudy Wiebe delivered on the last day of the Virginia event. Like the pieces that precede it, Wiebe’s reflection on silence reveals how comfortably fine language and theo-concerns can exist side-by-side in Mennonite writing.

Following the theopoetics pieces are edited transcriptions of some of the writers’ performances in the truly compelling Mennonite/s Writing sessions that took place in the Grebel chapel in the winter of 2012. If the first items making up this issue address—however obliquely—the religious heritage of Mennonites, the items completing it more nearly address the cultural and literary heritage. Patrick Friesen, Darcie Friesen Hossack, and David Waltner-Toews in their contributions are responding directly to my request that they “walk us through their careers as writers.” (My interest in literary communities—which goes back over three decades now—lies at the

² <https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/events/celebrating-mennonite-literature>.

³ See the special number on Manitoba Mennonite Writing, Issue 30 (Summer 2012).

⁴ <http://www.mennonitewriting.org/journal/>.

⁵ Volume 87, no. 1 (January 2013).

root of that request.) Their responses, along with those of Rudy Wiebe, Julia Kasdorf, and David Bergen—which are available in video form online—offer fascinating insights into the lives of writers and the ways that the diverse worlds they occupy infect and inflect their experiences, their thinking, and their work.

* * * * *

While I was preparing my paper for the recent symposium at Penn State, I was drawn to read some pieces in the field of American Jewish writing. Benjamin Schreier, a Penn State scholar who is also the editor of *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (and who graced us with his presence at one of the “Mennolit” sessions at Penn State), observes in a compelling article that Philip Roth—a Jewish writer with whose work Jewish readers have not consistently been pleased—created conflicted characters Schreier describes as struggling with how to describe themselves as Jews. It seems to me, as I review the entire raft of papers included in this CGR issue, that the writing in it consists, perhaps as much as anything else, of a similar sort of struggle. Taken together, these pieces create a complexly constructed portrait of Mennonites for whom the questions that drive their creative thinking and writing include these: How do we Mennonites—how shall we—draw a reasonably coherent portrait of the people we are, the things we do, the heritage we knew, and the future we imagine? The writers in this issue demonstrate that these are questions that are well worth our consideration, questions that can productively both trouble and inspire us.

Hildi Froese Tiessen, Professor Emerita of English and of Peace and Conflict Studies at Conrad Grebel University College, is the Guest Editor of this issue of The Conrad Grebel Review and the former Literary Editor of the journal.

Theology is a Kind of Reading

Peter Dula

In an age of shrinking English departments and decimated humanities programs, it seems to me that we humanists (by which I mean nothing more than students of the humanities) should stick together. It is in this spirit that I offer the following all-too-brief reflections on the relationship between theology and poetry. It may also mean that this essay is not really about “theopoetics.” Except for a few notable recent exceptions,¹ theopoetics, one discovers, isn’t a discourse about theology and poetry. It is a school of theology impatient with what it understands to be conventional or traditional theology. For better or worse, I am a professional theologian, and although that implies I am perhaps excessively interested in internal quarrels among theologians, I am wary of this one. So rather than contribute to theopoetics by joining that quarrel or to theo-logos by defending it, I hope to join those redirecting it towards a serious engagement with poetry, and then to make some remarks about how that might complicate the too easy dualism of theo-poetics and theo-logos.

Poetry

I will make two claims about poetry here, both indebted to a fine essay by John Gibson called “The Question of Poetic Meaning.”² I realize this is a dangerous thing for a theologian to attempt before an audience of writers, many of whom are poets, so I welcome correction.

First, poetry opens up “a gap between understanding the language of a poem and understanding the poem itself.” That is, it is characteristic of a poem that you can immediately recognize and understand the language yet be baffled as to what it means. Everyone knows what April is and what

¹ *CrossCurrents* 60, no. 1 (2010), an issue devoted to theopoetics, has a couple of essays that suggest a turn in this direction.

² Both drawn from John Gibson, “The Question of Poetic Meaning,” <http://nonsite.org/article/the-question-of-poetic-meaning>. Accessed March 10, 2012.

cruelty is, but it can be very difficult to say how a month, especially the most beautiful month of spring, can be cruel. It is characteristic of poetry that it forces a pause between the immediate understanding of the five words in “April is the cruelest month” and the understanding of what it might mean (a slap at the romantics and an allusion to Good Friday, among other things). Examples are endless, but here are two more. When Adrienne Rich writes, “What kind of beast would turn its life into words,” that sounds like a simple, straightforward question.³ No gap here. A poet is doubting her vocation and asking herself why she does what she does. But look closer, and it is the poet inverting another question, “What kind of God would turn word into flesh?” Gibson’s own example is Charles Simic’s “who put canned laughter/into my crucifixion scene?” Again, we all know what a sitcom’s laugh track sounds like and what a crucifixion is, but put them together and modify crucifixion with “my” and you have a problem. As Gibson puts it, “the meaning of a poem is standardly experienced as a kind of problem.”

Second (and this is not so much a general claim about poetry as about one tactic or mode of some poetry, perhaps especially modernist poetry), a poem tends to follow a path of what Gibson calls “semantic descent.” Semantic *ascent* was a term introduced by philosopher Willard van Orman Quine to describe the move from claims about objects to claims about the claims about objects;⁴ for example, from “this panel is thrilling” to “the claim ‘this panel is thrilling’ is false.” Or from “Harrisonburg is a city in the Shenandoah Valley” to “‘Harrisonburg’ is a name given to a town in the Shenandoah Valley.” Each step in such an ascent moves further above the world of objects and above language about the objects toward language about the language. Semantic *descent*, then, is the exact opposite mode of explanation. It tries to direct us below the claim to the objects themselves. To cite one of Rich’s most famous poems—“I came to explore the wreck. . . /the wreck and not the story of the wreck/the thing itself and not the myth.”⁵ Or Julia Kasdorf’s “When I think I can’t bear to trace one more sorrow back to its source I think of . . .” and then a series of remarkably

³ “Love Poem VII” in “Twenty-One Love Poems,” in *The Fact of a Doorframe* (New York: Norton, 1984), 239.

⁴ Willard van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), 277f.

⁵ “Diving into the Wreck,” in *The Fact of a Doorframe*, 162-64.

vivid images: Lois climbing the windmill at sunset, Julie leaping from the moving swing, Mom flinging off clothes as she dances for flowerbeds.⁶

Theology

Now I realize that the above leaves out a great deal. Most important, I haven't said anything about the *sound* of poetry. But taking this as just a place to start, how shall we place theology in relationship to it? The most obvious answer, and the answer of the theopoets, is simply to say that theology does "semantic ascent" and let that be the end of the matter. To help start us down the path toward a more considered answer, I want to quickly but closely, with the help of some solidly representative and "conventional" theologians (the Archbishop of Canterbury and Pope Benedict), read a short passage of scripture. I want to read it as poetry in precisely the sense I have just laid out, as a kind of problem (the gap between language and meaning) and as an example of (something like a theological analogy to) semantic descent. I want to read it as a problem in order to notice the semantic descent.⁷

My example is from a passage many people may be reading in church on Easter morning: "But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet" (John 20:11-12). By a process roughly analogous to semantic descent, an imaginative space is being invoked here. But a descent to what? As Rowan Williams and a few other commentators point out, the space is that of Exodus 25:17-22.⁸ "Then you shall make a mercy-seat of pure gold. You shall make two cherubim of gold . . . at the two ends of the mercy-seat. Make one cherub at one end, and one cherub at the other. . . . There I will meet you, and from

⁶ Julia Spicher Kasdorf, "Thinking of Certain Mennonite Women," in *Eve's Striptease* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1998).

⁷ Such an approach is full of potential landmines. Texts create lots of problems, and great texts, like the many gathered in the Christian Bible, demand and create forms of criticism appropriate to the particular problems they raise. They need not be shoehorned into external theories. That is, one doesn't need an account of poetic meaning, even one as finely done as Gibson's, to read scripture well. (What I will here somewhat willfully describe as "semantic descent" has long been known as "typology.")

⁸ See Rowan Williams, "Between the Cherubim," in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 183-196.

above the mercy-seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the covenant, I will deliver to you all my commands for the Israelites.”

To say that the evangelist knows exactly what he is doing here is to say that the fourth gospel demands to be read as poetry. But then what do we make of the imaginative space to which he directs us, the empty space between the cherubim? What kind of descent goes beyond the descent to objects to an image of absence and then places that absence at the very heart of its message? (Williams might say: If you think the resurrection means now you have Jesus returned to you as your possession, think again. This is the incarnation of *God*, not just the *incarnation* of God.)

Does it help to add that there are two descents at work here? The other is the end of the third chapter of Genesis—“at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.” While the careful crafting of imagery in John 20: 12 clearly suggests the mercy seat of Exodus 25, the context suggests Genesis 3. No other gospel says anything about a garden. Where Matthew and Mark say that Jesus went to “a place called Gethsemane,” John says he went to “a place where there was a garden” (18:1). Where the synoptics don’t specify a location of the tomb, John says it twice in one sentence: “Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified and in the garden there was a new tomb” (19:41). And when Mary first sees the risen Lord, she supposes him to be the gardener (20:15). So now we have to ask not just about what it means to juxtapose the empty tomb and the mercy seat but also the Garden of Eden, as both swim before the eyes of weeping Mary. At one moment at the end of John’s gospel Jesus is an empty space, the inaccessibility of which is guarded by the cherubim. A moment later, looking not like an angel in shimmering white but a gardener in muddy overalls, he addresses Mary directly and calls her by name.⁹

We don’t have to choose between these two paths of descent. In fact, we dare not choose. Theology oscillates between presence and absence,

⁹ Not only is Jesus-as-gardener a clear identification with Adam, Jesus’s response to Mary is a clear contrast. Recall that Adam’s first words (“This at last is bone of my bones...”), while prompted by the creation of Eve, never address her. He speaks of her entirely in the third person. Moreover, Adam’s speech is one of ownership, identification, and sameness; Jesus’ is of separation (“Do not hold on to me.... But go...”). See Leon Kass’s remarkable reading of Genesis 2:23 in *The Beginning of Wisdom* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003), 77-80, 102.

proximity and remoteness, immanence and transcendence. It has done so from the very beginning. Moses said to the burning bush (Exodus 3), “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’” Verse 13 is everybody’s question. Verse 14 is the bewildering philosophical answer—‘Being’—that convinced the church fathers that Plato had been reading the Old Testament. And verse 15 is the semantic descent: I am the one who has been with you all this time. But then, finally, watch those verses and the dichotomy between them start to collapse into each other, not so much presence and absence as present absence and absent presence. The accessible present God of those stories is, well, the God of those stories. And the abstract God who is simply Being is not so as a concept but as a name, not a *what* but a *who*, one who is nameable, addressable, therefore part of a conversation.¹⁰

Conclusions

To think of theology as theopoetics in this sense is to do little more than insist on the theologian’s role as literary critic, cultivating a readiness to read theology’s texts, and especially scripture, as a kind of problem, poetry’s kind of problem. I am aware that such an approach has its issues: most obviously, John 20 and Exodus 3 are not poetry at all.¹¹ Nevertheless, the kinds of close reading practiced by great theologians often work because they choose to make the text a problem in ways helpfully illuminated by Gibson’s reflections on poetry. That in turn may serve as a reminder, in the face of theopoetics’ dismissal of “theology,” of just how imaginatively theologians have managed to perform their task.

I hope to have shown at least that the theologian reading closely

¹⁰ I am deeply indebted to Joseph Ratzinger’s reading of this passage. See his *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1990), 116–36.

¹¹ And biblical poetry is not modernist poetry. See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

generates readings (and therefore theology) that are artful, creative, and imaginative as well as logical, rational, and propositional. This might serve to cast suspicion on theopoetics' foundational dualism. Theopoetics, according to its theorists, is "reflection on *poiesis*, a formal thinking about the nature of the making of meaning, which subverts the *-ology*, the nature of the logic, of theology."¹² Such claims pervade the discourse in one form or other.¹³ Theo-poetics is doing theology in a way that recognizes the imaginative and constructive work of theologizing, as opposed to theologizing that views its task as logical systematizing of inherited doctrine or of theologians who fail to realize their work is "an inventive, intuitive, and imaginative act of composition performed by authors."¹⁴

It is hard to know what it might mean to write theo-logic (or anything) devoid of any and all invention, intuition, or imagination. One can go for dozens of pages in the theopoetics literature and not find a single citation of, let alone serious engagement with, a theologian which would demonstrate what theopoets mean or any awareness that these dualisms might be precarious. Take a fairly representative line from Scott Holland: "Theology in our postmodern condition might be best understood as a poetics, not a metaphysics, for in the rhythms of creation aesthetics precedes ethics."¹⁵ Leaving aside the question of what could be more "metaphysical" than "the rhythms of *creation*,"¹⁶ the rhetorical move in this one-sentence summary of

¹² David Miller, "Theopoetry or Theopoetics," *CrossCurrents* 60, no. 1 (2010): 8.

¹³ Jeff Gundy usually contrasts theology and poetry, not theology and theopoetics, but the dogmatism of his version of the dualism is still breathtaking. For example: poetry "is open to psychological and existential depths and mysteries, while standard theology is fixated on logic and reason" (26); "theology seeks closure and clarity. Poetry resists them" (28); "Theologians and church authorities—especially since the Reformation—have often sought to keep imagination and desire out of the church because their church is built on Reason and authority, neither of which can survive imagination and desire" (31). "Notes toward the Heretical Sublime," *CrossCurrents* 60, no. 1 (2010): 24-44.

¹⁴ Scott Holland, "Editorial," *CrossCurrents* 60, no. 1 (2010): 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ "Metaphysics" is a notoriously slippery term. In a comment posted to the Running Heads blog (www.runningheads.net) on December 19, 2012, Kevin Hector identified at least four different meanings: "(1) a set of claims about the fundamental nature of reality (metaphysics as ontology); (2) a set of claims about that which transcends the physical realm (metaphysics as supernaturalism); (3) a set of claims commonly associated with 'classical' or Greek metaphysicians (metaphysics as *substance* metaphysics); or (4) an assumption or mindset

theopoetics is to take some variously and complexly related and overlapping discourses—poetics, metaphysics, aesthetics, and ethics—and present them as simple binaries.

But they aren't binaries at all, and it isn't clear that they ever have been. The *Bhagavad Gita* is a profound ethical treatise, dependent upon a metaphysics only fully (if mysteriously) revealed with the extraordinary (aesthetic) theophany of Book XI. Plato's *Republic* begins as a discussion of the nature of individual goodness, but it turns out this requires an account of politics that in turn demands a metaphysics presented simultaneously as an aesthetic vision. The first part of Hans Urs von Balthasar's great trilogy is subtitled "A Theological Aesthetics" and the last is called *Theo-Logic*. In between is the *Theo-Drama*. In each of these cases, whether ancient or modern, Eastern or Western, the good, the true, and the beautiful are treated in a complex, restless, and difficult unity. Those of us committed to reading such texts with care and affection can only experience the discourse of "theopoetics" with bemusement.

The wiser course, I think, is to drop the dualism between theology and theopoetics. There is a lot to worry about in the texts of Pope Benedict,¹⁷ but none of that has anything to do with a lack of imagination or artfulness. There is much to recommend in Catherine Keller's *The Face of the Deep*, but none of that has anything to do with a lack of logic, rationality, or metaphysics. Kevin Hector's *Theology without Metaphysics* is so meticulous it could be a textbook in a logic class. If anyone writing today deserves the name "theo-poet" it is Marilynne Robinson, a defender of Barth and Calvin, two thinkers well off the reading list of theopoetics. Most theology is both metaphysical and poetic, and some great poetry is metaphysical. Some theology privileges

according to which the fundamental reality of objects corresponds to our predetermined ideas about them (metaphysics as 'correspondentism')." I would add a fifth use, which means something like "all philosophy before me." So Heidegger (Hector's #4) could trace the metaphysical from Plato to Descartes to Nietzsche. So Kant, in ruling out rational psychology, cosmology, and theology (what he understood as the topics of metaphysics) in the first *Critique's* Transcendental Dialectic, had in view the entire history of philosophy. The relevant point here is not that theopoets should be more precise but that none of these definitions of metaphysics is helpfully or coherently placed in opposition to poetics.

¹⁷ The text I rely on here, *Introduction to Christianity*, is from 1968, when Ratzinger was mentioned in the same breath as Küng as one of the younger reforming scholars.

logic over mystery, but just as often it uses logic to preserve and deepen mystery.¹⁸ Why, when we have inherited so many models of ways to hold these things together, do the theopoets demand that we drive them apart?

What the theopoets really resent is not theology at all. They resent doctrine. So the easiest way to get what theopoetics is all about is to realize that here “poetics” functions the same way that “ethics” did for 19th-century Protestant liberals or the way “spirituality” occasionally functions for pietists—as an excuse to shrug off any theology that seems too beholden to creedal or doctrinal orthodoxy. There doesn’t have to be anything wrong with that. It is part of the inheritance of theology that orthodoxy often threatens to overwhelm orthopraxis, that theology can get in the way of an intimate relationship with God, that doctrine is continually threatening to overwhelm story and sometimes succeeds in doing so. But it is also true that doctrine can often help us understand why we should imitate *this* first-century Jew, or why *this* God is capable of or interested in relationship with us, or why *this* story deserves to be privileged. Negotiating the tension here, finding the appropriate balance for a particular time and audience, is what it means to do theology.

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¹⁸ Think of the account of God in the opening questions of Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*.

Theopoetics is the Rage

Scott Holland

*Before the message, the vision,
Before the sermon, the hymn;
Before the prose, the poem.*

*The discursive categories of theology
as well as the traditional images
of sermon and prayer require a theopoetic.*

So declares Amos Niven Wilder in his *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination*, published in 1976.¹ Amos Wilder (1895-1993) spent much of his career as a biblical scholar at Harvard Divinity School. His brother Thornton Wilder (1897-1975) was a famed playwright and novelist. The two brothers discussed and debated the genres of theology. They noted that the ancient texts and traditions of the Christian faith were filled with poetry, liturgy, parable, parable, story, hymn, and song. They also observed that modern theologies can be propositional, doctrinal, systematic, and even dogmatic. Thus the longing for a “theopoetics.”

In the 1960s a circle of religious scholars, along with some poet professors, were meeting in a salon on the Upper East Side of New York City. They called their collective “ARC”—Art, Religion, Culture. This group included Amos Wilder, Paul Tillich, Rollo May, W.H. Auden, Joseph Campbell, Stanley Hopper, and David L. Miller. This creative circle explored together the artistic, religious, and cultural movement from theology to mythopoetics and theopoetics. In this salon, Wilder, Hopper, and Miller made the most explicit use of the category and genre of theopoetics in their writing lives. Take a look, for instance, at Wilder’s *Theopoetic*, Hopper’s *The Way of Transfiguration: Religious Imagination as Theopoesis*, and Miller’s

¹ Amos N. Wilder, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 2.

Hells and Holy Ghosts: A Theopoetics of Christian Belief.² (Miller, by the way, was born and baptized into the Church of the Brethren.) Their writings were widely read and well-reviewed. However, the term “theopoetic” didn’t move far in theological discourse beyond the Wilder, Hopper, Miller hermeneutical circle at Harvard, Drew, and Syracuse. But, today, simply Google “theopoetics” and you will get scores and scores of live hits from Wikipedia to Facebook postings to Amazon.com to Theopoetics.net, my former student’s web site.³

Theopoetics is the rage! Emergent Church/postmodern philosopher Peter Rollins, author of *Insurrection* (2011), *The Orthodox Heretic* (2009), and *How (Not) to Speak of God* (2006) among other works, is calling us from a theo-logos to a theo-poesis. Catherine Keller at Drew University is doing an erotic and ecological theopoetics. Process theologian Roland Faber, a professor at Claremont School of Theology, is reminding us that God is the poet of the world. Jack Caputo, an emeritus professor of religion at Syracuse University, is writing about the politics of Jesus as a theopoetics, and I am publishing special editions of *CrossCurrents* journal on theopoetics.⁴ In these days of the twilight of the church and the twilight of conventional theologies, more religious writers and spiritual intellectuals are discovering that the Creator God of Genesis is not a moralist but a poet and a potter. God, with a creative word, spoke the universe into existence, and fashioned and formed humanity out of the clay of the earth.

For many working in the genre of theopoetics, the old gods of morality and the gods of metaphysics have died. For us, theology cannot be the search for a new metaphysics at the benediction of God’s funeral. Theology is not a *metaphysics* but a *poetics*, for it seems that in the rhythms of creation

² Amos Wilder, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination*; Stanley Hopper, *The Way of Transfiguration: Religious Imagination as Theopoesis*, eds. R. Melvin Keiser and Tony Stoneburner (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992); David Miller, *Hells and Holy Ghosts: A Theopoetics of Christian Belief* (New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2004).

³ Callid Keefe-Perry is the webmaster of a very useful sites: <http://theopoetics.net>. Also see his introductory article on theopoetics, “Theopoetic Process and Perspective,” in *Christianity and Literature* 58, no. 4 (2009): 579-601. He provides a genealogy of the term “theopoetics” in that article.

⁴ I have edited a special edition on theopoetics—*CrossCurrents* 60, no.1 (2010)—and I am collecting new articles and essays on the same theme for another issue of the journal.

and creativity, aesthetics precedes ethics. Another way to understand this movement away from traditional metaphysics is to state that the theopoet is suspicious of metanarratives or comprehensive theological systems in which all must find their plots and places in a story which is not their own. To assert that the style and substance of the theopoet's work is guided by a poetics, not a metaphysics, is only to affirm that all theology is composition, a kind of writing, an act of imaginative construction.

This is not to suggest that all contemporary theology must be written in poetic verse, although this would be lovely indeed. It is, however, to make the theopoetic claim that *theology is a kind of writing*. What kind of writing is it? Theopoetics contends that whether theology is inscribed in the genre of poetry, in the form of story, or in a thicker, more theoretical style of prose, it remains a *poiesis*: an inventive, intuitive, and imaginative act of composition performed by authors. It is a kind of writing that invites more writing. Its narratives call forth other narratives, its metaphors inspire new metaphors, and its conversations encourage more conversations.⁵

If I understand Peter Dula's concern in "Theology is a Kind of Reading," (see pages 113-120 of this issue), he is suggesting that the argument most theopoets have with theology is a quarrel with doctrine, not with the great tradition of theology. Theology, he argues, is imaginative. Thus, he urges us to abandon what he sees as a dualism between theology and theopoetics. To accent his point, he writes, "There is a lot to worry about in the texts of Pope Benedict, but none of that has anything to do with a lack of imagination or artfulness." I think my old professor, Hans Küng, would take issue with Dula's claim. In 1979, Joseph Ratzinger, when he was the Vatican's chief enforcer of theology, launched a formal inquisition on the thought of Küng, a Tübingen theology professor. Soon, Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict XVI, revoked Küng's license to teach Catholic theology, leading to his dismissal from the theology faculty and exile in 1980-81 to the University of Chicago Divinity School. In his class on "Ecumenical Theology for a New Century," Küng distinguished between theologies working freely and imaginatively with texts, traditions, and human experiences and theologies more bound

⁵ For a more complete treatment of theology as a kind of writing marked by a poetics rather than a metaphysics, see Scott Holland, "Theology is a Kind of Writing: The Emergence of Theopoetics," *CrossCurrents* 47, no. 1 (2007): 317-31.

to the memetics of churchly authority enforced by bishops, popes, and inquisitors. Some theology is imaginative. Some theology is flatly memetic. Peter Dula's theology, unlike the former pope's, is wonderfully inventive, imaginative, and poetic.

In communion with Romantics, Pietists, Pragmatists, and Postmodernists alike, theopoetics, unlike memetic theology, reminds us that reason can only follow paths first broken open by the imagination. No new words, then no new ways of reasoning; no imagination inviting linguistic innovation or improvisation, then no new words—and thus no new ways of naming ourselves and rendering God's name in history.

Theopoetics as a kind of writing has now found its way to the American Academy of Religion (AAR). At the 2011 AAR meeting in San Francisco, we added a working session on theopoetics. We met again this year when the AAR convened in Chicago. I have been teaching a theopoetics class for a few years now at Bethany Theological Seminary and Earlham School of Religion. Mayra Rivera will be teaching a theopoetics course at Harvard Divinity School, and other seminaries are planning to add elective courses in the subject.

Since my seminaries are in the orbit of the Historic Peace Churches—Anabaptist and Quaker—let me briefly address three questions our students ask most often about this genre of theological writing and reflection: (1) Concerning solos and harmonies, since poets are solitary singers, does a theopoetics concern itself at all with community-building? (2) Since we are committed to seeking cultures of peace in a blessed, broken world, does the heavy aesthetic accent of theopoetics contribute to the ethics of peacebuilding? (3) Is theopoetics merely a way to poeticize conventional or classical Christianity, or can it be an invitation to polydoxy and artful heresy?

Theopoetics, Solos, Harmonies, Community

Since one of the classical definitions of *religio*, the Latin root of our word "religion," is "to bind," some ask if theopoetics can bind, build, and hold a community of faith and practice together. Another way to address this concern is to ask, Do we have a ritual to read to each another? We do. This has become a favorite poem of our program:

A RITUAL TO READ TO EACH OTHER
William Stafford

If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood
storming out to play through a broken dyke.

And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail,
but if one wanders the circus won't find the park,
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk:
though we could fool each other, we should consider –
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,
Or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep:
the signals we give—yes or no or maybe –
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.⁶

Bill Stafford was a conscientious objector to the great “just war” of the 20th century, World War Two. He was baptized into the Church of the Brethren. However, as a strong poet, he was not much of a joiner. One of my former students, Travis Poling, is at work on a book about him. Poling

⁶ This Stafford poem has been widely anthologized in recent years. See www.williamstafford.org and William Stafford, *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 1999), 75.

has learned that sometimes Stafford attended the Church of the Brethren, sometimes he went to Quaker meeting, sometimes he read Rumi with Coleman Barks on Sunday morning. Other times, the Stafford family would attend the Presbyterian church in their Portland neighborhood. Dorothy Stafford reports that when they went to the Presbyterian church, Bill always carried a book by Emerson along, “just in case.”

If, like Bill Stafford, we agree that the church is in the world *for* the world, then this ritual we read to each other does lead to the building of the beloved community which includes, but is much larger than, any church, synagogue, mosque, temple, or pagoda.

Poetry and Peace, Aesthetics and Ethics

One of our favorite theopoets is Rubem Alves, who is recognized in his native Brazil as a liberation theologian, psychotherapist, poet, and theopoet. I would highly recommend his beautiful and satisfying theopoetics book, *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet*.⁷ Consider his words on an embodied poetics and peace:

DO YOU KNOW THAT THE BODY IS A TEMPLE?

We thought of finding God where the body ends,
And we made the body suffer and we turned it into a heavy load,
And obedient entity,
A machine of work,
Into an enemy to be silenced and
In that way we persecuted the body to the point of death.
As if God prefers the smell of sepulchers to the delights of paradise....

And we became cruel, violent, allowing exploitation and war.

For if God can only be found beyond the body, then everything can be done to the body.⁸

⁷ Rubem Alves, *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet* (Philadelphia: SCM Press, 1990).

⁸ Rubem Alves, *I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), 8-9.

For Alves, as for many working in the genre of theopoetics, the linguistic turn of late modern and postmodern philosophy and literary theory must also become a turn to the body, and this has profound implications for a poetics of peace. Indeed, when the Theopoetics Working Group convened again at the 2012 AAR meeting in Chicago, the topic was “Theopoetics and the Body.”⁹

On the related question of aesthetics and aesthetics Alves declares that “Outside of beauty there is no salvation!” *Extra ecclesia nulla salis*? No. Outside of *beauty* there is no salvation.¹⁰

Theopoetics and Classical Christianity

Must theopoetics poeticize classical Christianity as a kind of orthodox theopoetry? Can it work instead as an artful polydoxy? I vote for polydoxy. Let me conclude this brief introduction to theopoetics with one of my students’ favorite polydox poems. It is helpful to provide some background first. The Anabaptist father of the Social Gospel movement, Walter Rauschenbusch, had a daughter named Winifred, who would love and marry the New York City poet James Rorty. In 1926 Rorty published his collection *Children of the Sun*. The central character of the book’s signature poem is Lilith. In Jewish legend Lilith was Adam’s first wife before Eve. What happened? According to the saga, Lilith demanded democratic equality with Adam in every way, and thus she was exiled east of Eden and called a witch.

CHILDREN OF THE SUN

James Rorty

At length and after many days and much folly,
After eating the sour crusts of obedience, and
drinking deep draughts of bitter virtue guttered
from the roofs of the hovels men live in
because they are afraid to face the sun –

⁹ We had a productive meeting at the November 2012 AAR and made plans for future meetings and consultations. The meeting was chaired by Callid Keefe-Perry, who will soon publish his book on the great variety of theopoetics, *Bridge to Water: A Theopoetics Primer*.

¹⁰ Rubem Alves, *Transparencies of Eternity* (Miami: Convivium, 2010), 115.

At length after many days of strutting in the tall hat of piety and the shiny broadcloth of goodness and the white gloves of service and the stiff shirt of denial, until the pitting gods, perplexed, moaned and were faint with the sight of so much solemn-frantic miming on the earth –

At length I went to live with Lilith the witch and together we put away childish things.

(Her hair is darker than the sweet night that bloomed after the seventh day when the lord rested and the scent of the honeysuckle went up over the earth, and her breasts are swelling and fragrant like apples of the September harvest, and from the red bow of her lips my soul is loosed, a shaft flying forever, and by the strong clasp of her loins I am anchored deep in the earth where the feet of the joyous god are planted.)

Yes, Lilith and I sat together on the curbstone of the world, and we laughed because Eden had blossomed for us again, and we were clean like the happy beasts that roll where the grass is thick in the sunshine.

And I said to Lilith, “The church bells are ringing: whom shall we worship? The terrified people go darkly to worship a Fear they have fashioned.” Said Lilith, “We worship the sun.”

So, we worshipped the sun that is careless and
kind to the cow in the pasture, the bird in the
tree; Lilith and I, sitting on the curbstone of
the spinning world, laughing and kissing,
without respect, impudent in the wide smile
of the Lord.¹¹

This poem is for all of us who practice a poetic spirituality somewhat east of the sanctuary doors, not only “after Christendom” but also after Anabaptism. Although the current movement in theopoetics is diverse, with theopoetic writers representing a variety of theological perspectives including classical, orthodox, Evangelical, liberal, and postmodern, there remains a common creative quest for new vocabularies and new forms for naming God, world, self, and others.

Those of us from dissenting theological traditions such as Anabaptism have the spiritual and intellectual freedom to experiment with polydoxy, since we have learned in the theater of martyrs that orthodoxy can be violent and deadly. Sometimes the order of salvation does follow a conventional poetics of Repentance, Obedience, and Redemption. However, more often the theopoet practices a more artful ritual of Transgression, Excess, and Gift.

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¹¹ James Rorty, *Children of the Sun and Other Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), 18-19.

Notes in Lieu of a Manifesto on Anabaptist Theopoetics

Jeff Gundy

For years now I have found myself pursuing, as humbly as my wild ambitions will allow, large questions about God and human beings and the cosmos in and through poems and essays written from a poet's perspective. I have been guided by many fellow travelers and experts in this pursuit, some poets, some theologians, some not readily categorized. One of them, Scott Holland, taught me to use the term "theopoetics" for this endeavor. It is a useful term, I think, though like many useful words in the hands of intellectuals, it is subject to much pulling and hauling regarding its precise definition. But as a theopoet, I desire to resist careful, rigorous, abstract definitions and their tedious, artificial clarity anyway. So, for now I might say simply that theopoetics happens where poetry and theology cross paths, especially when poetic methods of exploration are brought to theological questions.

Unlike the great theopoets Dante and Milton, and the great Mennonite theonovelist Rudy Wiebe, I am not good at grand narratives, so I will not try to offer one of those here. Like Walt Whitman, I contain multitudes and my contradictions are many. Like William Blake, I am ready to accept, however uneasily, that without contraries there is no progression—and the conversation on this subject is bound to include many such contraries. We must keep trying to explain, but theopoetics is suspicious of orderly, logical argument, and thus I will offer not an argument nor even, as I once envisioned, a manifesto. I do love manifestos but mistrust them as well; they are generally both too large and too small to contain their own discourse. They creak and crack, and whatever is in them spills off into the sand. Still, if the water lies deep and a leaky bucket is all we have, it is worth dropping it into the well, just to see if we can bring up something.

Notes on Theopoetics

1 One origin of theopoetics is in the suspicion that our God-talk is mostly really human talk, that the Great One may not be obsessed with the creation of orderly institutions and systematic belief systems, that revelation

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is continual and ongoing. Or so I claim, knowing that such generalities must themselves be cast under suspicion the moment they are uttered. “To generalize is to be an Idiot,” William Blake beautifully (if paradoxically) said.

2 As theopoet I am skeptical of overarching truth-frames and master narratives, even the narrative of skepticism. Theopoetry kneels at no altar except its own necessity, which is born of intuition and craft, attention and introspection, memory and learning, restlessness and desire.

3 So I listen for voices, not those of everyday existence yet ones that speak of ultimate things, and for the moments when they take on an authority irresistible though not susceptible to proof.

4 The vast and orderly systems so beloved of the systematizers and rationalizers, their elaborate and sensible explanations of the darkest mysteries, seem then mere efforts to build little houses and proclaim them the world, to paint the ceilings blue and call them the sky, to drink grape juice and call it wine.

5 Even community, discipleship, peace, those worthy and essential aims, take on a new aspect under the spell of the voice. They do not vanish, but the poem will not be bound to them; it insists on its freedom to say anything, to imagine anything, to question anything, if only for the sake of testing, tasting, discovering.

6 I am happy enough on many days to sit in the balcony if the singing is good, to bring a cheese-laden casserole, and to stay for the potluck. But just when the rest are settling in to discuss their grandkids and the weather, I feel a great urge to take the wrong coat from the rack and disappear into the winter sunshine.

7 As theopoet I am not missional. I make no claims on those who find all this odd if not ridiculous, or those content with their lot, or those at ease with the turn of the lectionary and the comforting buzz of the familiar assurances. God bless and keep them. I speak only for myself and for some

others, those whose brows also sometimes furrow even during the sweetest hymns, those who have spoken the creeds and the verses and found their thirst still not entirely quenched.

8 I know—quite possibly all this yearning is merely the result of too much leisure, liberal education, assimilation, and insufficient persecution, of just the sort Thieleman van Braght and his current enthusiasts warn us against. If I really want to be faithful, I can hear him sternly instructing me that I ought to forget all this frivolity and figure out how to get myself martyred, or at least how to trust in the mission as it has been explained by those duly trained and certified to do so.

9 But could it be that even the beautiful, true stories we have do not include everything it would be good to know? That new stories and new songs and new readings of the old are still necessary?

10 Could it be that we should also praise the non-martyrs, the ones who shinnied down their ropes and high-tailed it back to Moravia, the ones who let the authorities baptize their babies but kept sneaking off to the cave anyway? These, after all, are our literal ancestors.

11 Could it be that outside the Ordnung there might be other orders as true-hearted as our own? Could it be that despite Thieleman van Braght the church is both visible and hidden, that none of us can say what the true path for our neighbor might be, except that we do our best to love each other?

12 Could it even be that the human order, and all our fussy conversations about God, are just one minor node of the great and vast creation, one we might profitably regard from a broader perspective? The Brethren theopoet William Stafford heard these words “On a Church Lawn”:

Dandelion cavalry, light little saviors,
baffle the wind, they ride so light.
They surround a church and outside the window
utter their deaf little cry: “If you listen

well, music won't have to happen."
After service they depart singly
to mention in the world their dandelion faith:
"God is not big; He is right."¹

13 In a more prosaic voice, the ecologist/philosopher David Abram laments our long inattention to the vast realm of life and being outside the human:

How monotonous our speaking becomes when we speak only to ourselves! And how *insulting* to the other beings—the foraging black bears and twisted old cypresses—that no longer sense us talking to them, but only about them, as though they were not present in our world.²

14 The theopoet returns to the old words and finds new secrets hidden in them, ways of experiencing the earth and the skies and the ten thousand things not as mere matter devoid of "soul," but as creation, whole and entire and scorned, dismissed, or ignored only at our peril. Listen to these words from long ago, enshrined in Proverbs, now dusted and revealed to shine by a fresh translation:

The Secret One through the ecstatic mother founded the earth,
through consciousness he made the skies go around,
by secret knowledge the oceans broke open,
and the clouds let the dew down.³

15 The theopoet attempts, with mixed but occasional success, to resist dwelling either in the dead past or the unreachable future. "God himself culminates in the present moment," said Thoreau, burrowing with his head into the mysteries of things and language, fishing in the stream of the

¹ William Stafford, "On a Church Lawn" in *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems* (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf, 1998), 55.

² David Abram, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon, 2010), 175.

³ Proverbs 3: 19-20, tr. Aaron Blon, in Robert Bly, ed., *The Soul Is Here for Its Own Joy: Sacred Poems from Many Cultures* (New York: Ecco, 1999), 128.

moment, sounding Walden Pond and keeping careful records of both the interior and exterior weather.

16 Thoreau's neighbors thought him odd. He *was* odd, as true poets are; the well-adjusted and compliant satisfy themselves with the ordinary gruel of community and convention, or (as Thoreau suspected) endure their quiet desperations, perhaps consoled by dreams of pie in the sky, perhaps not. Poets have their own desperations, certainly, but they tend to be of a different sort. Kabir said this:

The idea that the soul will rejoin with the ecstatic
just because the body is rotten—
that is all fantasy.
What is found now is found then.
If you find nothing now,
you will simply end up with an apartment in the City of Death.

If you make love with the divine now, in the next
life you will have the face of satisfied desire.⁴

17 Often, the theopoet is a lone walker who hears memory and desire shouting and stirring, who hears the whispers and cries of wind and birds, who dwells in the lovely, rich, perilous welter out of which new things made of words are born. The Mennonite theopoet Jean Janzen describes this quest well:

But most intense of all is the longing to know how to live this life,
and to find what is secret and hidden, which pulls us to the deep
and watery places. This is the life of the writer, to continue that
restless inquiry, and to find, if not the secrets, the connections
which make life more whole.⁵

⁴ Robert Bly, *The Kabir Book: Forty-four of the Ecstatic Poems of Kabir* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1977), 24.

⁵ Jean Janzen, *Elements of Faithful Writing* (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 2004), 23.

18 Alone, with crowds of the dead and the living babbling and bubbling up inside, the theopoets do their part. For the work of the tribe is not only what happens in committee rooms and church kitchens and sanctuaries, not only in letter-writing and demonstrations, visiting the sick and clearing the wreckage after the tornado, necessary and good as all these are. The work of the tribe also happens on the edges, in wandering away, in dreaming, says Rubem Alves, in a passage that uncannily echoes the ur-Mennonite story of Dirk Willems on the thin ice of the pond:

Truth appears as we stumble, when the frozen surface of the lake cracks and we hear its voice: dreaming . . .
We are saved by the power of dreaming. Dreaming is the power which resurrects the dead. [. . .]
So the eucharist: an empty, silent space for our dreaming, before the Absent One—like the dead man of the sea.

Theology wants to be science, a discourse without interstices . . .
It wants to have its birds in cages . . .
empty cages,
words which are uttered out of and before the void.⁶

19 “There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star,” said that old pagan Thoreau. When will we wake up? When will we shake ourselves free of the mud and dust of tradition, leave our noisy overheated rooms, head out to encounter for ourselves the Great One who is both Father and Mother? She has spoken before, though for centuries the words here survived only hidden in a clay jar, and even the name given her (“The Thunder, Perfect Mind”) bends and boggles our categories:

I am the first and the last.
I am the honored one and the scorned one.
I am the whore and the holy one.
I am the wife and the virgin.
I am <the mother> and the daughter.

⁶ Rubem A. Alves, *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet* (Philadelphia: SCM Press, 1990), 99.

I am the members of my mother.
 I am the barren one
 and many are her sons.
 I am she whose wedding is great,
 and I have not taken a husband.
 I am the midwife and she who does not bear.
 I am the solace of my labor pains.
 I am the bride and the bridegroom,
 and it is my husband who begot me.⁷

Yes, this voice refuses to be orderly and reasonable. Yes, this voice is mainly but not entirely female. Yes, it seems entirely worthy of our praise.

20 Could it be that God has work for us besides “saving” our souls?
 Rainer Maria Rilke claimed so, in a poem that feels to me both beautiful and true. It starts this way :

JUST AS THE WINGED ENERGY OF DELIGHT

Just as the winged energy of delight
 carried you over many chasms early on,
 now raise the daringly imagined arch
 holding up the astonishing bridges.
 . . .
 To work with things is not hubris
 when building the association beyond words;
 denser and denser the pattern becomes
 being carried along is not enough.

The poet’s work begins in delight and desire, but to build “the association beyond words” requires more than “being carried along”:

Take your well-disciplined strengths

⁷ James R. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990). Web version accessed April 4, 2012: www.gnosis.org/naghamm/nhl.html.

and stretch them between two opposing poles.
Because inside human beings
is where God learns.⁸

21 Could it be that we ought to pay more attention to growing souls than to saving them? When I read some poems, I am convinced that this is so. Consider Julia Spicher Kasdorf's "Bat Boy, Break a Leg," a meditation on a tattooed student and a bat that's invaded her house. Somehow she manages to get through the night without panicking at the knowledge of this intruder; in the morning the bat perches on the screen while she works, then leaves in its own good time:

Pale boy dressed in black,
Maybe the best that can be said for any of us is that
once we were angelic enough to sleep with strangers.
He touched my cheek. I opened the screen.
He flew in his time. We did no harm.⁹

22 And could it be, as some have been saying for a very long time, that the One we worship is outside, under every stone, within every tree and brook? "How do you know but ev'ry bird that cuts the aery way, is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?" So asked the mad and holy Blake. More calmly, just as extravagantly, here speaks David Abram:

The ineffable and sacred One toward which all monotheisms direct themselves . . . is still whispering even now, beckoning to us from beyond the monotonous hum and buzz of our worded thoughts, inviting us to free our senses from the verbal husk into which we've retreated. . . . An eternity we thought was elsewhere now calls out to us from every cleft in every stone, from every cloud and clump of dirt. To lend our ears to the dripping glaciers—to come awake to the voices of silence—is to be turned inside out, discovering to our astonishment that

⁸ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Selected Poems*, tr. Robert Bly (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 175.

⁹ Julia Spicher Kasdorf, "Bat Boy, Break a Leg," in *Poetry in America* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), 7.

the wholeness and holiness we'd been dreaming our way toward has been holding us all along; that the secret and sacred One that moves behind all the many traditions is none other than this animate immensity that enfolds us, this spherical eternity, glimpsed at last in its unfathomable wholeness and complexity, in its sensitivity and its sentience.¹⁰

23 Yes, this is not precisely what I was taught before the ritual of baptism, nor you, I suspect. Is it what I “believe”? How can I answer that? I can only say that discovering others working to revise and rethink our views of fundamental questions has been liberating and transforming for me. One of the most provocative of such thinkers is Grace Jantzen, who undertook a marvelously ambitious and nuanced project in theology and religious history (unfortunately cut short by her early death). Jantzen advocates a “deliberate feminist effort to restructure the religious symbolic,” based not on “the justification of beliefs which separate the ‘true’ from the ‘false’” but on “an imaginative longing for the divine in a reduplication of desire not content with the old gods,” seeking a new future in which all living beings might flourish.¹¹ The question is not what we believe, Jantzen insists, but what we desire for ourselves and others, and how we act in the world.

24 Where might such beautiful, unorthodox images and ideas lead us? Keats claimed that what the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth. He did not mean that lightly. If the world, and God, are bigger and wilder and stranger than we can imagine, what makes us think that we can bind it with propositions and belief-systems? Consider also Gérard de Nerval:

Do you think you are the only thinker
on this earth in which life blazes inside all things?
Your liberty does what it wishes with the powers it controls,
but when you gather to plan, the universe is not there.¹²

¹⁰ Abram, *Becoming Animal*, 178-81.

¹¹ Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1999), 99.

¹² Cited in Robert Bly, *News of the Universe: Poems of Twofold Consciousness* (San Francisco:

25 This theopoet loves and embraces some theologians: besides Grace Jantzen and John D. Caputo (to be taken up soon), I recently, belatedly discovered the rebel priest Matthew Fox. He mistrusts St. Augustine, asceticism, and the doctrine of original sin, and praises the bountiful universe which is in fact our home, despite the efforts of reductionists and tyrants to deny that we are part of something bigger, stronger, and stranger than any human structure. Fox argues that scientism and authoritarian patriarchy have cost us dearly:

The cosmos has been lost in the West, and especially in religion and its rituals. . . . One reason has been the Newtonian parts mentality of the scientific era . . . which does not allow one to feel the mystery and the interconnectedness of microcosm and macrocosm. Another reason is patriarchal politics: . . . a threatened ecclesial establishment trying to control those who suggest that life is bigger than controls, that life is cosmic for everyone.¹³

26 Even the Mennonite quasi-patriarch John Howard Yoder, of course, sings the praises of not being in charge, listening with patience, and following the grain of the universe. The Yoderian Jesus is a nonviolent revolutionary, the Yoderian community one of nonviolent witness and communal service. Yet even Yoder was heard to go on in a rather brusque manner about the virtues of “missionary arrogance” (in “That Household”¹⁴) and to assert even more grandly that “The Rule of God is the basic category. The rebellious but already (in principle) defeated cosmos is being brought to its knees by the Lamb.”¹⁵ When this Yoder begins to explain how the fellowship should be regulated, I do my best to listen and sit still. But the bald cypress outside the window is waving in the wind, the muddy water of the creek is hurrying off to the north, and the buzzards are back from the south. None of them seem

Sierra Club, 1980; 1995), 38.

¹³ Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2000), 75.

¹⁴ John Howard Yoder, “That Household We Are.” Typescript of presentation at Bluffton Believers’ Church Conference, 1980. Personal copy in possession of the author.

¹⁵ John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 53-54.

remotely interested in wrestling with the Lamb.

27 There are many varieties of humility, of yieldedness, of pride. This theopoet is convinced that the “humility” which despises the self and the body, and which demands that others submit to the group in all things is as far outside the perfection of Christ as the sword. With Matthew Fox, I believe that true humility is close to the earth, does not regard the body as an enemy, and is ready always to praise the Great Being within and around all things. I will readily confess that I know this Being through the many things and creatures of the cosmos and through the words and images that God’s creatures offer up as part and parcel of this creation, and that I continue to love the world, though I lament the many ways that its glory is pierced and wounded.

28 What is it that makes me unwilling to yield myself up fully to anything less than everything, unable to surrender to Community or Discipleship or Nonresistance, or even to the Messiah who is so often described and defined by others as though their version of him is as precise and authoritative as a stop sign or the Ohio Revised Code? What is it that makes me yearn always for the mysterious, elusive Jesus, the one described in the Gospel of Thomas, itself hidden away in the desert for more than a millennium? In its noncanonical but beautifully eloquent verses we read of a Jesus who said, “It is I who am the light which is above them all. It is I who am the all. From me did the all come forth, and unto me did the all extend. Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.”¹⁶

29 Walt Whitman lived while the scrolls of Nag Hammadi slept in their red clay jar. He never read the words of Jesus about turning the stone and breaking the branch. But his “Song of Myself” and other poems are central texts for this theopoet, at least, and much of what I have written here is an homage to him, uncredited until this too-hasty acknowledgment. The grand “I” of “Song of Myself,” Whitman insisted, was not merely himself but the voice of all people, all times, all places, “For every atom belonging to me as

¹⁶ James R. Robinson, ed., *The Gospel of Thomas*, in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), verse 77. Web version accessed April 4, 2012.

good belongs to you.”¹⁷ In the poem’s visionary final stanzas he also imagines a marvelous reunion:

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.
You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.¹⁸

30 The name of God is a call, not a presence, says John D. Caputo, and what we seek is not physical reunion but a uniting of desire and deed in “making truth come true”:

The world quivers quietly under the weak force of an event, made restless by the silent promptings of God’s divinely subversive call. But is it really God who calls? Who knows who is calling? . . . No matter. We have been delivered from the search for the name of God by the event. . . . The truth of the event releases us from the order of names and transports us to another level, where truth does not mean learning a name but making truth come true, making it happen.¹⁹

31 We know so little. The world is so large, and the spaces within as well, and this world is but a grain of sand on the edge of one small sea. The

¹⁷ Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” in *Leaves of Grass and Selected Poems*, ed. John Kouwenhoven (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 23.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁹ John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2006), 199.

infinities within and around us may be terrifying, but they are exhilarating to contemplate and to explore, as best we can. Let us take to the open road, to the wide and unbound world. Let us listen for the call, and turn the stone.

32 Poetry, my friend Dean Young insists, is about the making of birds, not bird cages.²⁰ I suspect I will never make a real bird—but the gifts of voice and attention and imagination have been given to me, and to all of us, and why would God give such gifts if not to be used, if not for the making of songs and stories that have not yet been heard? Cages are useful, perhaps needful at times, but so are windows, doors, and wings.

33 Not so far away, as God measures distance, planets spin under strange suns, and perhaps creatures who look nothing like us—or a great deal like us—tell stories of One who came among them, bearing wisdom and offering a difficult, joyful new life. With voices unlike any we have known, perhaps, they sing and praise, so sweetly that the fabric of the cosmos shivers and wavers. And if we pause in our daily busyness and bluster, if we still ourselves deeply enough to listen, we might catch an echo of their song.

Jeff Gundy teaches English at Bluffton University. His new book on theopoetics, Songs from an Empty Cage, will appear later this year from Cascadia.

²⁰ Dean Young, *The Art of Recklessness: Poetry as Assertive Force and Contradiction* (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2010), 88.

Nine Streams towards the River of Theopoetics: An Autobiographical Approach

Jean Janzen

The Power of Place and Displacement

The body's awareness of our place on earth is powerful. In the Midwest I experienced the big sky, and the bordered and cultivated land. In retrospect it seems that farmland became an emblem of good behavior and right belief, a way of controlling God, even as the threatening tornados could appear overhead. Moving to the San Joaquin Valley in California changed that. Here the vast areas of wilderness, the grand mountains and the ocean, and the threat of earthquakes allow little possibility of control. Living in this place requires continual relinquishment, a surrender to uncertainty. The body with a renewed sense of place can be in a process of a growing recognition of a sacramental view of matter. The story of the incarnation and the cosmic Christ thrives in this connection. "We all ride earth's original music," I say in the poem "Night Falls on the Neighborhood."¹

My Father's Story and Mine Intertwine

In 1980 I entered the graduate creative writing program at California State University in Fresno with the hope to render an artistic version of my father's story—the tragedies of his childhood, his adolescent journey as an orphan to Canada, and his search for joy as he changed vocations and furthered his education, taking us along on that adventurous ride. He moved our entire family from Saskatchewan, where he had been a country school teacher for over twenty years, to Mountain Lake, Minnesota, where his first pastorate coincided with World War II and with revivalists traveling through. Then we moved to Tabor College in Kansas, where at the age of 13 I lived in a men's dormitory house in which my father and mother were house parents. Theology and intellectual discussion were at the table throughout childhood

¹ Jean Janzen, "Night Falls on the Neighborhood," in *Piano in the Vineyard* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2004), 56.

as my father discussed ideas with my older siblings and fellow college students. And always there was singing and harmonizing.

Even as my father clearly leaned toward theology, he opened the door to new discoveries by his restless inquiry and his constant search of scripture for possibilities of meaning. By his physically moving our family into new settings, he shaped my own development of faith. As Stanley Hopper has written, “What theo-poiesis does is to effect disclosure through the crucial nexus of events, thereby making the crux of knowing, both morally and esthetically, radically decisive in time.”²

My Marriage

All seven of my siblings were either preachers or church musicians, or married to preachers. I married a doctor, a marriage which began in Chicago while my husband Louis was attending Northwestern Medical School. We lived with other Mennonite students attending seminary and graduate schools on the city’s South Side. These were crucial years of enlarging our faith as we learned for the first time about our Anabaptist heritage. Our churches in the Midwest had moved into the evangelical, fundamentalist stream, and now we were engaged in worship and conversation with graduate students who were involved in peace and justice issues. Here is where I learned that the Sermon on the Mount was not for a future world but for the present. And we were living in a neighborhood where many African-Americans were crowded into rooming houses and seeking jobs. We worshiped in an integrated Mennonite church, and we entered the arts, which Chicago offered in abundance. Here is where I also began to study literature as my major.

While my marriage to a doctor was not a transgression, the early years of exposure to the city opened the door of inquiry and led to questioning some of the “truths” of my childhood God. This was a time of learning about false piety, and finding some release.

The Presence of Music

For me the piano has become an emblem of the power of music, of how faith and the arts are intertwined and how music is sometimes profoundly itself

² Stanley R. Hopper, “Introduction,” *Interpretation: The Poetry of Meaning*, eds. Stanley R. Hopper and David L. Miller (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), xix.

and new. The elemental effect of a pitch or interval continues to be a mystery, and the power of solos and harmonies opens the self to new spaces. Louis and I had a big upright piano moved into our first apartment in Chicago, which became a solace and stimulus for me, and that continues. Pure music without language seems to come from a source that underlies and challenges our perceptions, drawing us into unfamiliar territory. Jeff Gundy writes that one of its faces is in the “strange and disturbing stories that rise, strong and dangerous as snakes, from some deep hollow within, refusing to be neatly contained or explained, but demanding to be reckoned.”³

The Earth and its Gifts of Sustenance

Life in the San Joaquin Valley offers the blessing of vines and orchards, and a strong sense of earth's gifts. Growing up in Minnesota with cornfields, wheat, flax, and extensive gardens became a foundation of connection. Food as central to our knowing who we are is a theme of Scott Holland, as he reminds us of the many feasts that are laid out in Scripture for the sake of body and soul. He writes that poets have been teaching him about the tongue as an organ of both language and taste, and describes the Eucharistic hunger underlying all our loves and losses.⁴

The pomegranate, which seemed so exotic to me in the Valley, holds various meanings in ancient history. I learned that for the Jews it became a symbol, its 613 seeds standing for the 613 commandments of the Torah. I choose it as an emblem of the Two Great Commandments of Jesus when I cut it in half and press it for juice, trusting my imagination to test the boundaries of theology.

At the age of 46 I made a choice between seminary and graduate school in creative writing, a choice which determined the shape of my life. I entered the great poems of the world and learned about Keats's concept of Negative Capability, the ability to be in “uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”⁵ My inspiration to pursue writing

³ Jeff Gundy, “Notes toward the Heretical Sublime” in *CrossCurrents* 60, no.1 (March 2010): 43.

⁴ Scott Holland, quoted in Jean Janzen, *Elements of Faithful Writing* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2004), 4.

⁵ The definition offered by Philip Levine in Philip Levine, ed., *The Essential Keats* (New York: Ecco Press, 1987), 11.

was fortified by the work of Rudy Wiebe, Katie Funk Wiebe, and John Ruth. I was challenged to write with humility, patience, and honesty—a lifelong task—and to ask the questions: Is it true? Is it beautiful? Does it lead the reader to her own experience? This can be a wild terrain, as one ventures into unknown territory with every poem in progress.

An early influence was Emily Dickinson, who continues to challenge me with her theopoetics. Her questioning of tradition and easy answers, and her affirmation of the elemental in human experience, sets a high standard. The presence of the Sacred is given unexpected description as she trusted her imagination as an inexhaustible source of truth. Poets like Theodore Roethke were early influences in my writing, stretching the possibilities of exploration. And sometimes in the process of writing a poem, I found that my theology was altered and that I was willing to risk “a new theology.” I also found that poetry can become a kind of container to hold what is overwhelming, a kind of “domestication” without losing immensity and intimacy.

Meeting Three Medieval Mystics

Early in my writing life I had become acquainted with Hadewijch of Antwerp (ca. 1220-1250) while I explored early Dutch literature. Her stunning images included the idea of “the upside-down tree,” which inspired a poem and a kind of theopoetics. In 1991 the Mennonite Hymnal Committee sent me the writings of three medieval mystic women, asking me to consider writing hymn texts based on their work. Hildegard of Bingen, Mechtild of Magdeburg, and Julian of Norwich made claims of visions I had never had, their intuitive insights stretching my imagination and offering a feminine point of view. Shaping some of their wild language into hymn texts was a privilege and gave me a sense of being found. Their writings and those of other mystics assure me that we will never exhaust the possibility of names for God and our experience with God.

My Travels into History

Thanks to my husband's love of history and the arts, we traveled to places which brought rich resources for poetry and theology. Living in the Netherlands for a month in 1996 allowed me to smell and taste and touch

my history. Finding my lost family in the former USSR in 1989 opened a deep vein of sorrow and joy. I also became fascinated with the intersection of the lives of my grandmother Anna Akhmatova and the Czarina Alexandra in the early 20th century, and I borrowed the parable of “the pearl of great price” as an emblem of suffering. In this process I found that parables allow and encourage the reinterpretation of faith experiences and descriptions.

The Power of Visual Art

In my journey with poetry I have periodically been drawn to visual art—Vermeer, Breughel, Van Gogh, Fra Angelico, and now paintings by my own son and son-in-law. Entering into paintings or sculpture, one is laid open to energies that run deep and offer the spaciousness of possible new understanding. During a visit to Venice, I found Bellini’s “Mother and Child” in the Frari Church, a painting in which the Madonna resembled my own mother. I wrote about this in a poem and found myself seeking connections to my mother’s life, and I continue to ponder the possible meanings of this painting for me. During this process I read a review by Peter Schjeldahl in *The New Yorker* magazine. He admires the work of artist Frida Kahlo, observing that her self-portraits, like “the serene Madonnas of Giovanni Bellini, with their hints of crucifixion . . . assure me of two things: first that things are worse than I know, and second, that they’re all right.”⁶

* * * * *

These nine streams, though limited, allow me to identify part of what I understand about theopoetics as a deepening river—a river ever recirculating the original waters of our world, and ever resisting passivity and shallow living. These sources also reassure me that God’s breath continues to brood over the waters of our world and ourselves.

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⁶Peter Schjeldahl, “All Souls: The Frida Kahlo Cult,” in *The New Yorker*, Nov. 5, 2007.

Seven Words of Silence

Rudy Wiebe

In our 21st-century world that is often so screamingly loud, writers work in silence. They work with words, silently, in order that their work may eventually be seen and, in the act of seeing, be heard. For a few moments, let us consider seven words concerning silence.

The first word of silence is SOUND.

In the Canadian parkland where I was born, the silence of living things surrounded me. On our pioneer farm we had no electricity or gasoline to make motors roar; horses and cows snuffled in barns, pigs in pens, chickens. I was the youngest child by four years and grew up largely alone. The winter snow falling, spruce branches in wind, mosquitoes after a rain or birds just before sunrise, coyotes at night; on a hot summer afternoon cowbells, or thunder; somewhere a dog barking. In autumn, if I was very attentive, a poplar leaf falling to the ground. These were the sounds of my growing up. These slight sounds were not dominating in any sense; rather, they defined the earth's fundamental silence in the same way that lines on a page, or the road-allowance grid of the land survey, sketch the unfathomable nature of paper or land. These tiny, living sounds, any one of which I can recall in an instant no matter in what cacophonous surroundings I may find myself anywhere on earth, these indelible sounds were and are for me the affirmation of the fundamental silence of the universe. As Wordsworth wrote:

Fair seed time had my soul, and I grew up
Fostered alike by beauty and by fear.¹

Beauty and fear: these will be recurring themes this morning. They are the

¹ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude. Book First: Introduction—Childhood and School-time*, lines 301-302.

composites of silence.

The second word of silence is DEATH.

Canadian poet E.J. Pratt explicates this word with an ocean image:

SILENCES

There is no silence upon the earth or under the earth like the silence
under the sea;
No cries announcing birth,
No sounds declaring death.
There is silence when the milt is laid on the spawn in the weeds and
fungus of the rock-clefts;
And silence in the growth and struggle for life.
The bonitoes pounce upon the mackerel,
And are themselves caught by the barracudas,
The sharks kill the barracudas
And the great molluscs rend the sharks,
And all noiselessly—
Though swift be the action and final the conflict,
The drama is silent.

There is no fury upon the earth like the fury under the sea.
For growl and cough and snarl are the tokens of spendthrifts who
know not the ultimate economy of rage.
Moreover, the pace of the blood is too fast.
But under the waves the blood is sluggish and has the same
temperature as that of the sea.

There is something pre-reptilian about a silent kill, . . . ²

² E. J. Pratt, "Silences," in E. J. Pratt, *Complete Poems*, Part 2 © Univ. of Toronto Press (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1989). Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

The poem continues at length, but its explication of “death” is, I believe, more than understandable to us all.

The third word of silence is CREATION.

In the tradition of the Jewish-Christian faith, it seems creation begins in silence. Consider Genesis 1:

In the beginning, when God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was without form and void, and darkness lay upon the face of the deep; and the wind of God was moving over the waters.

And God said, “Let there be light.” And there was light.³

God speaks into the silence, and his Word creates.

And God said, Let us make man in our image . . . so God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him, male and female created he them.⁴

God’s *word* shapes the unspeakable beauty of all creation, and, in particular, it shapes us: us human beings. By God’s *word* creation comes out of fathomless silence—even modern science cannot theorize about what was before “The Big Bang”—into an existence that our human senses can grasp. In this biblical image of human understanding, all creation is God’s speech; including ourselves. When I look at you, you look at me, we see God’s speaking word. But strangely, in the continuing biblical text, we see again and again that when God speaks to humans directly, we are suddenly afraid.

The story of Adam:

And the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, “Adam, where are you?” And Adam answered: “I heard your voice in the garden, and I was afraid. . . .”⁵

³ Genesis 1:1-3. Various Bible translations are used throughout this article.

⁴ Genesis 1:26-27

⁵ Genesis 3:10

The story of Israel at Mount Sinai:

When all the people . . . saw the mountain smoking, they were afraid; they stood at a distance and said to Moses: “You speak to us . . . if God speaks to us, we shall die.”⁶

The fourth word of silence is JOY.

We must also notice, in the biblical tradition, that when God breaks his silence with speech, the result is not always human fear. There is the story of the boy Samuel:

And the child Samuel ministered unto the Lord before Eli (the priest in the temple). And the word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no open vision. And it came to pass at that time, when Eli was laid down in his place, and his eyes began to grow dim, that he could not see; and before the lamp of God went out in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was, and Samuel was laid down to sleep; that the Lord called to the child Samuel: and he answered, “Here I am.” And he ran to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” And Eli said, “I called not; lie down again.” And he went and lay down. And the Lord called again, “Samuel.”⁷

This happens three times; and each time Samuel runs to Eli and says, with childish acceptance, “But you did call—here I am,” until Eli—more than his eyes are “growing dim”—begins to understand and instructs the little boy properly. The story continues:

And the Lord came, and stood, and called as at the other times, Samuel, Samuel. Then Samuel answered, Speak, for your servant hears.⁸

A child, Samuel, is not afraid when God speaks out of the silence. Nor in the biblical story given by Luke is the teenage girl Mary. You will

⁶ Exodus 20:18-19

⁷ 1 Samuel 3:1-6

⁸ 1 Samuel 3:10

remember that when the birth of the forerunner to the Messiah is divinely announced to aged Zachariah (like Eli, a priest), Zachariah is so incredulous, so unbelieving, that he is struck dumb (an appropriate punishment) until the child is born.⁹ The girl Mary, when she is told that she is to bear and give birth to the Messiah, the Redeemer of the world, simply asks an obvious question, and when it is answered, responds:

Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be with me
according to your Word.¹⁰

And a little later, she expresses her profound feelings in one of the great poems of all time. It begins:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
And my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior,
For he has considered me ...¹¹

When the eternal silence becomes absolutely personal, some people are terrified; but others are surprised by joy, overwhelming joy.

Like that other Mary we just read about, Mary Magdalene was devastated by sorrow outside the empty tomb; she can see it with her own weeping eyes: the body of the dead Jesus is gone. But the living Jesus she cannot recognize; she can only beg him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” And then Jesus says to her: “Mary.”¹²

In this time of Lent, on Palm Sunday, at Easter, it is good to be distraught, to weep, to question God. For then we are ready to confront the risen Son of God, and if we confront him, he can name us. And then we will recognize who he is—even as we recognize ourselves.

The fifth word of silence is SONG.

The first written use of the word “silence” in an English text occurs in the 13th century. The word itself comes from the Latin verb *silere*, meaning “to

⁹ Luke 1:21-23

¹⁰ Luke 1:38

¹¹ Luke 1:46-48

¹² John 20:15-16

abstain, to forbear from speech,” and it is used twice in one 1225 document called *The Ancrene Riwe*. This “Rule/Guide for Anchoresses” was written at the request of three noblewomen who had abandoned the world to live in religious seclusion. That is, the manual was to provide a tolerant and enlightened guide for a humane religious community. The first text states: “In silence and in hope shall be our strength.” The second use of the word in the *Riwe* is even more powerful: “She may also hope that she shall sing through her silence sweetly in heaven.”¹³ When devotedly practiced, silence can become a heavenly song.

The sixth word of silence is STONE.

Luke tells the story that when Jesus entered Jerusalem riding a young donkey—the event we celebrate today as Palm Sunday—his followers began tearing branches from the trees to wave over him, spreading their clothes on the road for him to enter the holy city as on a royal carpet, and screaming with happiness and triumph. They really seem ready to storm the Roman garrison and set Jesus on the Throne of David in this triumphal entry into the Jewish royal city. In fact, the crowd is so loud that the religious leaders get worried; the Pharisees (decent people, with a sense of proper decorum) tell Jesus to order his followers to behave themselves and shut up. Jesus looks at them for a moment, and then answers: “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.”¹⁴

Do stones ever, have stones ever, broken their silence? Do they ever speak? Writer Annie Dillard tells us in an essay that she knows a man who is trying to teach a stone to speak.¹⁵ It is very slow work, so slow he may not accomplish it in his lifetime, but he is already training his infant son to carry on the task after him. Dillard wrote the essay 30 years ago, and I still haven’t heard whether the man was successful.

But of course we all know that stones really do speak. When I walk

¹³ Definition of “Ancrene Riwe” in *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. II, 2823/41.

¹⁴ Luke 19:40

¹⁵ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 85-94.

through the enormous excavations in the central plaza of Mexico City, the great layered, carved stones now exposed tell me endless stories of the human beings who lived and worked there 3000 years ago. When I walk along the gravel banks of Strawberry Creek in northern Alberta, the stones I find imprinted by leaves, by sticks, by shells, these chunks of fossilized trees, these porous shards of fossil bone tell me stories of life—here where my feet stand, here in the palm of my hand—life millions of years ago. Stones do speak.

To return to Luke's story of Jesus: suddenly, after his stony rebuke to the specious Pharisees, Jesus is weeping! This eternal rock of confidence in his "Heavenly Father" weeps at the sight of the great city of Jerusalem spread out below him. He laments: "Your enemies . . . will surround you and dash you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave one stone upon another in you. . . ." ¹⁶

Very soon, Jesus weeps, the mighty stones of this mighty city will cry out in devastating Roman destruction. And then we remember the words of the Apostle Peter, the disciple whom Jesus called The Rock, writing a letter years later while in prison in Rome:

Come to him, our living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house. . . . The stone which the builders rejected has now become the corner-stone. . . . ¹⁷

With that image of immoveable conviction, Peter the Apostle, from his prison cell in Rome, brings us to the seventh word of silence.

The seventh word of silence is WRITING.

The mystery of writing is that writing is words gathered together in silence. Writers know this perfectly well, it needs no discussion: we all want to write so well that, when the reader sees what we have written, our mutual silences will open into listening, and by *seeing* we will begin to *hear* what we have never been able to imagine before. May God give us grace.

¹⁶ Luke 19:43-44

¹⁷ 1 Peter 2:4-7

* * * * *

The seven words of silence: Sound. Death. Creation. Joy. Song. Stone. Writing. To understand these words, we may need more silence than we can ever find on earth. Perhaps that is what eternity is for. There, in eternity, like the three devout women of the 13th century, we may in hope “sing through our silence sweetly in heaven.”¹⁸

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¹⁸ An earlier, very different, version of this essay, titled “The Words of Silence: Past and Present,” was published in *Silence, the Word and the Sacred*, ed. E.D. Blodgett and H.G. Coward (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 1989).

Stop Meaning and Start Singing

Patrick Friesen

I

A writer needs his work to move off the desk and into the world. This means publishing in magazines and in books, but for me it means, just as importantly, to read my poems to audiences. And, over the years, decades, I came to rely on Hildi Froese Tiessen's invitations to read in Kitchener-Waterloo at one venue or another. I am grateful to be here in Waterloo once more. I'm calling this reading/talk "Stop Meaning and Start Singing." This suggests something of what my writing life has been. For me the learning has been gradual, though the transitions have often happened suddenly, in a single poem or a small grouping of poems.

It began with sound and image. My first memory was the crunching sound of my parents' walking in snow behind the covered sled in which I was being pushed. An early visual memory is of an old woman in her coffin, some distant relative. She wore a black dress, and a black kerchief with red roses on it. These things stayed with me, but what really struck me, as I walked by the coffin with my parents, was a blowfly sitting on her forehead. Beauty and mortality. A blowfly is also known as a bluebottle, and that word acquired some importance for me over the years. My second book was called *bluebottle* (1978).¹

And then singing, the different forms of singing, loving the sounds of words, the rhythms of phrases, as I discovered language. As a child I often repeated a specific word over and over again during a day's play. It was the weight of the word, the sound of it, that I was considering, unselfconsciously, with no purpose. Like it was an object in my mouth, a stone or a seed. This is how one learns language. I remember only a few of the words that preoccupied me long ago: stomach, doldrums, bone, stone.

Aside from hearing my parents sing every day, and they sang very

¹ For a complete listing of Patrick Friesen's publications, go to www.patrickfriesen.com.

well, I was taught to read early by my mother, and I read constantly. If I was standing still for a moment, I'd pull a paperback out of my pocket. Inevitably a child loses something in becoming literate, even as he gains other things. His apprehension of the world is mediated by others, shaped by whoever his educators are.

Meaning, I learned, was what words were a tool for. And, if you worked at it, you could utilize the sounds, rhythms, the images associated with words to enhance your meaning. Of course, as a young poet I overused the frilly aspects of language, going over the top. But whatever stage I was at as a poet, meaning was at the core of it all. Denotative meaning, certainly, but also connotative meaning. Like all poets I learned how to use figures of speech. Metaphor, after all, was the foundation of human thinking. But I found something missing, something I had known as a child, speaking but not writing. I think the one figure of speech that really got my attention was synesthesia: I loved how it crossed borders, and it reminded me of childish thinking, one sense covering for another. In fact, all children apparently have synesthesia for a time when their brains are still developing. Senses all over the place. And there are adults, probably van Gogh, certainly John Lennon, who experience one sense for another. Sir Isaac Newton apparently saw color when he heard middle-C. For Emily Dickinson the sound of a bugle was red.

Over the years of writing I found myself embracing the song aspect of poetry, often finding meaning to be an unimportant, boring, clichéd byproduct of singing. Imposing meaning on the poetic structure, it seemed to me, brought about a rapid death of any poem. It was like placing a saddle on a sparrow. I had to get rid of the saddle, realize that the sparrow was not for riding but for listening to and singing along with. Singing sometimes, I hoped, like an angel, and other times like a demon. The full range. Singing as sound and picture and motion. I had sung as a child; then I had been educated into meaning. Now I was trying to balance the two, and even unbalance them in favor of singing. Meaning always emerges, of course, just not necessarily the meaning you intended. This is another part of the process of becoming a poet: to trust the language, its sounds and images, and to let it lead you.

I have always been a fan of rock 'n' roll, my era being the late 1950s and the '60s. At first I thought songwriters had to get away from "moon" and

“June” and “love” and to get serious with their lyrics. The best of them did. But I also realized after a while that even serious lyrics hardly mattered when I was in fact listening to, and loving, the singer’s voice. The voice itself was the meaning. The texture of it, the range of it, the way a voice could leap into falsetto. The shaping of words in a singer’s mouth, the phrasing. That was for me the heart of it. If the lyrics were pretentious, trying to be meaningful but failing, well, that hurt the song. If the lyrics fit the voice, if the voice sounded as if these were the only words it could sing at that time, well, that was a deep pleasure.

Different voices, doing different things, but always authentic voices. Voices within which you could hear hurt, or joy, or despair. For me, in my era, it was voices like Richard Manuel, John Lennon, Tom Waits, Van Morrison, Sandy Denny, Kiri Te Kanawa, Elly Ameling, Etta James, and others. Voice, of course, extended to instruments. One speaks of a particular pianist’s “voicings” on the keyboard. A pianist like Bill Evans, for example, or Marilyn Lerner. They “voice” their music. Jazz played an important part a little later, as I was developing my long line. Particularly, the long line of Bill Evans—and improvisation. I spent a lot of time listening to jazz albums with my son, a drummer. At first, when he was young, I was able to point out things for him to pay attention to. It didn’t take long and he was teaching me what to listen for, what to hear.

I realized at one point that I was reading my poems with a “head voice,” without fully engaging my body in my voice. At the same time, as I played around with how I might read my poems, I began to write them differently, to fit my physical voice. I began writing in long lines, lines with overlapping phrases, lines that suited my breath.

II

Every writer comes with a suitcase. We are born from the dead, our ancestors, the lands they lived in, the terrain we are born into, language, all aspects of culture, etc. I came out of several hundred years of Mennonite history, culture, and theology (though I didn’t learn much of Mennonite theology where I grew up; I caught up with it while I was attending university). I made some choices as I entered my teens that meant I would not follow the

religion I was born into. This isn't a simple matter, because the religion is intertwined with a language, High and Low German, with cultural customs and traits. I began writing poetry at about the same time that I rejected not only the Mennonite approach to religion but Christianity itself. This in turn meant complications. I was born into a Christian society and culture. How would I use language from the place I was leaving? Of course, as I found out, you never completely leave any place. There are trailing threads, and you often return, circling the old place, re-entering for moments and leaving again. Slowly the returns are less frequent, less intense. And some of the threads gain strength.

My subject matter early on was general. It came from observation, from what I was reading, and so on. I had no sense of "Mennonite" writing. I knew Rudy Wiebe had published *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962), but I hadn't read it, and I didn't read it for some years. Eventually I became aware that Andreas Schroeder was writing poetry on the west coast. Again, I didn't see any of it till many years later. For me, to write about my Mennonite heritage was a journey I hesitated about at first, and one I had no real precedent for.

Not long before I published my first book, I finally recognized that my closest subject matter was my Mennonite heritage and my relationship to it, and my family within that heritage. Along with this came the prairies. My first few books tended to explore the prairies, or simply held the prairies. I came to visualize, and remember, one piece of land, my grandfather's farm. He represented the prairie farmer for me, and his farm continues to be of great importance for me. My third book, *The Shunning* (1980), is set on this farm with its creek, its bush, fields, and buildings. It was after that book that I began to shift some of my attention to Europe, where my people came from. In fact, when I look back, I can see that though the prairies never left my work, different aspects of European literature and philosophy became more and more important.

About the time I wrote *The Shunning* I wrote a poem that began to break open poetry for me. For the first time I used a prosy, colloquial language that felt looser than what I'd written until then. Most of the lines were still short, but they began to run into each other, creating a problem for me. I observed that when I read the poem aloud I was not hesitating at the end of a line, but running over into the next. I was accommodating my

breath and how I preferred to read poems aloud. I also incorporated a bit of song, and for the first time I threw directly into the poem things I saw or heard outside my window, like my daughter singing in the back yard.

It was while I was making these discoveries in form that I decided I needed to write a book-length exploration of my heritage. What issues were important to me? And how should I deal with them? I wrote the equivalent of a manuscript that I threw away because it didn't know what it was doing. Mixed up between content and form. Then I wrote a piece for voices, voices only loosely identified. I had already begun writing in a looser, prosier style, so incorporating prose in this book was a natural thing to do. The prose bits tended to be related to narrative, the poetry to stiller moments.

I chose as an issue excommunication or "shunning," because it seemed central for a religion that was opposed to physical violence yet condoned spiritual violence. I had in my mind an image of a man lying dead beside a creek with one boot untied, the other tied, and a rifle lying beside him. I also drew on about a dozen pages of dialogue I had written between a man sitting on a gravestone and the man buried beneath him. Then I saw a TV program on shunnings that at that moment (late '70s) were going on in my hometown. I did some research, figured out how I wanted prose and poetry to interact, and came up with *The Shunning*.

I paid close attention to visual images in this book. I used several photographs inside it, and I chose the cover very carefully, including the color. The back cover was an old photo of my father as a boy, standing beside his mother who would die of Spanish flu a few months later. Her death had an impact on all her children, so this seemed a transitional moment, this photo. There was a photo in the interior of my cousin Larry and me at the same age as my father had been on the back cover photo, and another of one of my brothers, again at a young age, pointing a toy rifle. I wanted the book to look and feel like a novel. The setting is my grandfather's farm just outside Steinbach where I was born.

Some personal history was integrated into *The Shunning*. I continued with that approach in a series of poems related to my father called "the pa poems." My father, a man of great integrity, had represented a repressive religion to me, so I had a distant relationship with him. In my teen years I had called him "father." Now, years later, in an effort to come to terms with it

you rowing that boat into mother's dreams
 someplace out there maybe still looking for the words
 and one night with me sleeping creepy
 you'll find them and you'll find me

sitting in bed shivering
 maybe before I find you
 you'll tap me on the shoulder
 I'll turn
 I'll recognize you

and see you old dead man
 how I start with my grievance
 and always end up with this Goddamned love
 but I tell you that won't happen everytime
 or it'll kill me²

By the time I wrote "the pa poems" I was opening up the poem more and more. Still working on line length, I used caesura a lot to indicate breathing spaces. Struggling to loosen things up, to find a rhythm that felt right, I took risks with jumps between poetry and prosy bits within the poem. I felt like I was opening a door to see what would come in. I can see, now, that I was moving my children more and more into poems and leaving the Menno/father issues behind, though they resurface. Because I was bringing more and more into the poems, I began to write poems in sections, like chapters. A real mix of short lines, long lines, and caesura.

In *Flicker and Hawk* (1987) I pretty much found the long line I wanted. I was experimenting with it. Here some long lines run up to 8 or 9 lines in length (indentation showing that all the lines are really part of one long line). Some of these long lines look like paragraphs on the page, and they're a bit of a challenge for public reading, where I have to know how to control my breath.

It was when Kim McCaw, artistic director of the Prairie Theatre Exchange in Winnipeg, asked me if I'd be interested in adapting *The Shunning*

² Published in *Unearthly Horses* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1984).

for the stage that my involvement in drama began. It took me only a few weeks to write an adaptation, because working with drama felt so natural. I think there is a closer link between poetry and drama than there is between poetry and fiction. Dialogue and motion interest me a great deal. After this foray into drama I frequently wrote for radio, wrote for dance several times, and began to work with musicians. All of this had been inside me but hadn't emerged, except that I'd been looking for the long line because that was where my voice most naturally resided. This play was dusted off 25 years later by the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre and staged again in early 2011. At that point I re-edited it a bit, and Scirocco Press in Winnipeg published it in book form. I did this editing while working on another project in southern Spain. I had brought along the one existing piece of audio tape of my father speaking, in Low German and English, just to remind me of the speech rhythms in *The Shunning*. To hear his voice speaking in a room in Spain was to find myself at the heart of my writing.

For the first time, consistently, I began to use language from my inherited religion, words I had real trouble using at first, but I decided that they were an authentic part of my linguistic inheritance and that maybe I could reshape them. The key word was "lord"; I recall weighing that one for a long time. At the same time, elements of Zen unobtrusively entered my writing. I had done a lot of reading and thinking about Buddhism, and attended a Buddhist church for a while, primarily for the bell meditation. My poem "an audience with the dalai lama" is probably the first example of the presence of Buddhism in my poems. And it holds many of the questions I had, and still have. There is a reference to Richard Manuel in the poem, one of the singers with The Band.

**an audience with the dalai lama
or, the old-fashioned pas de deux**

on the one hand a leaf in the shrub beside you
on the other family and work
I have never seen God I have been empty and filled and empty
again

what can I say about what I know?
hymns that come easily to my lips while I walk
an ancient anger and the bags I carry filled with hats and shoes

I don't think I know much beyond what I know
my left my right hand a leaf wife and children
and sometimes a stony eye

my room you wouldn't believe the books and clothes all over the
floor the records and stamps the lamp my smell around the typer
nothing much has happened there if you think of it and I have
on the other hand nothing more has happened outside the room
I grew up with lilacs there are lilacs outside my window there's
not much I can make of that
it's like looking at old photographs in a way like catching a second
wind or an animal in me sniffing out its old grounds

sometimes I think I have a questions I want to have a question about
things that matter
my body used to give me pleasure still does but it's beginning to
break down maybe there's a question here
my knees my eyes sometimes there's a ringing in my ears and who
knows what's happening just now in my most hidden cell a
small detonation
but it seems clear where everything's going
I feel a lot more stupid than I did is this wisdom?

Listen my love is someone other than me this must be what I need
she goes on journeys you should see her walk toward the clearing
trees making way you should see her in her wedding dress the
hem wet in the grass
you should see her when she drops the armour of her veils

when she's away and it's late when I crawl into bed I find she's
dressed the emptiness beside me with her gown

all night I'm restless I wake when my hand finds silk my legs
want to wrap around her
no bed has ever been this empty or so full its feels like god

a man can't say what he is that he needs to rut like a plow knows
earth that he loves it
that he bends his knee to words he loves this too falls insensible
sometimes before the beauty of memory and ruin
sir richard manuel died a lousy death hanging there cold as a fish
I can't explain it just listen to any of his songs just listen to how
pure and sad a man's voice can be when he wants paradise
but his arms aren't long enough
some voices belong to everyone

the boy in me doesn't like conversations he's busy wants to be free
a word for what he remembers he could have said captured
surrounded or surprised
he dreams time before love when he could sing the words didn't
matter only the voice he was
but the man in me accommodates love and loss contemplates
smoke and mirrors from a distance
he moves toward religion like prey to the lion a leaf to earth
or a fish to the hook

does the prey feel ecstasy as it kneels into the lion's need? its
stem hardening does the leaf desire release?
no I don't look for answers the questions are old and will grow
older I want something other than rhetoric or ritual maybe
a gesture
my devotion to the lord is imperfect there's some fight left in
me I may be hooked I am not landed

what's there is my room my hands on the typer my eyes we used
to say what's the diff
my children chewing at my knees my wife smiling through the

window where's she going or is she coming home? she loves me
 she loves me not she loves me
 what's there is the usual concoction hubble bubble eye of newt
 babbling tongue the old-fashioned pas de deux me and you
 sometimes mother's on the phone do I love her eyes yes I do and I
 still have father's hat
 no I haven't seen God I live with angels some fallen
 I sing *have thine own way lord* half the time I don't mean it
 my wife sloughs her gown my pants at my knees like some clown
 my son with his other world eyes you could never know them
 or their danger
 or my daughter's prayers at night when everyone's asleep this is
 a way she speaks
 and this is what I know what I need to know I want to redeem
 love before it does me in³

By 1987 I felt I was in full stride as a poet. I was comfortable with the line, with breath, and with subject matter. I began to work with dance. One of my favorite projects was writing text for a dance work. Through my daughter, who had been taking dance classes at Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers, I met numerous dancers and choreographers, including dancer/choreographer Stephanie Ballard and dancers Margie Gillis and Ruth Cansfield. Ballard and I worked on a piece called "Anna"—Anna for the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, a deep influence on me, and Anna, my great-grandmother, also influential. My work opened up even more. I learned a lot from watching Gillis open up the words with her arms, her facial expression.

The Shunning had been set on one grandfather's farm, and it utilized some of the events that happened there. In 1992 I wrote the *The Raft*, a new play that emerged from some of the history of my other grandfather, my grandfather Sawatzky, and I wrote "A Handful of Rain," a text for dance, with choreographer Ruth Cansfield. I also got involved in translation for the first time, with my friend Per Brask, whom I had met when he became the dramaturg for *The Shunning*. Per convinced me to co-translate with him poetry from Danish. We published several books, including *God's Blue*

³ Published in *Flicker and Hawk* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1987).

Morris and *We Are Here* by Niels Hav, *The Woods* by Klaus Hoeck, and *A Sudden Sky* by Ulrikka Gernes. This meant trips to Denmark to meet writers. Meeting them and translating had a real impact on my work.

Just before I moved from Winnipeg to Vancouver, I wrote a book called *A Broken Bowl* (1997). My daughter Marijke had moved to Vancouver, then hitchhiked to Central America, leaving behind anthropology texts in which I became very interested. Ancestry much deeper than my Mennonite history. At the same time, because of my interest in Anna Akhmatova's work, I was mulling the notion of writing something in fragments. She had written a lot of fragments out of necessity during the Stalin regime, fearful of having poems discovered. I liked the connection between Akhmatova's fragments and the fragments of pottery and bone found in archaeological digs. The ongoing history of human violence, on which I did some research, was central to this book—questions of human violence done not only to people but also to the earth. Social injustice, greed, and lies. The arrogance of power, and human ignorance and denial. And what came before history, pre-history?

My first book where every single poem used the long line was *the breath you take from the lord* (2002). This had been a suggestion of poet Dennis Lee. Half the book is a sequence of poems called "clearing poems." Anything could appear in a clearing. Bill Evans, for example, playing piano. A return to the prairie, probably a result of moving to Vancouver. I did a lot of thinking about the prairies while listening to the rain on the coast. Some of the poems are meditative, with old themes returning in new lines.

clearing poem 3

when god tears at your heart or you think that's it you want that to
be it angels perhaps or demons
when you need something to shape suffering something to hold it
with intention

when the night deepens and you stand slow and waiting for your
eyes to take in the trees
when you make your way through deadfall scraping your arms on

the knuckles of a poplar

when the clearing flares with light the moon's brilliance carefully
milking the thistle
when the stone pile glistens and cools sun's heat rising into the
lowering sky

when nothing my god happens nothing in the vastness of your small
rash living
when you have to laugh at the end of yourself at the god you think
you've reached

when you crouch at a cold bethlehem as a constellation wheels
across the clearing
when the offering you brought lies scattered at your feet and the
only gift a broken heart

when you watch as you always have from the edge suddenly aware
something breathes behind you
when you fear the darkness of bush the animal there but no safety
in the clearing

when you find the body of the child struck down in its ecstasy of
light and lamentation
when you step into the barefoot prayer at last when you pass into
the open night⁴

I had met and worked with improv pianist Marilyn Lerner during my last two years in Winnipeg. I'd go over to her house with a handful of poems and read them as she improvised around them. After a while I began improvising within these poems, and sometimes I'd improvise a new poem as she played. We did a project for CBC Radio Winnipeg called "Blue Door," and we appeared together at various writing and jazz festivals. I moved to Vancouver, and she moved to Toronto. Still, we worked together. In 2002

⁴ Published in *the breath you take from the lord* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2002)

we recorded on CBC Radio Vancouver. After the program aired we put this project out as a CD called *Small Rooms*. In 2005 we added cellist Peggy Lee and my son, percussionist Niko Friesen, to record *calling the dog home* at the Western Front in Vancouver. I hope to record at least one more CD with Marilyn, this one based on the Spanish poems from my upcoming book.

I learned so very much from working with Marilyn. I learned more about the long line, about how it could interact with music, and how the short line could be used to great effect in the midst of the long lines. Rhythms, phrasing. I learned about improvisation, returning in a way to an early influence on me, Jack Kerouac. And I learned a lot more about voice, my physical voice, how to use it with music, not literally singing but still singing along with the piano. Once, at the Atlantic Jazz Festival, out of necessity we both improvised at the same time—one simple song with piano and words only. I've also co-written songs with Big Dave McLean and Cate Friesen; the latter appeared on her album *Joy's Desire*.

III

The old themes don't disappear. They shift sometimes, and interweave with other themes, but they are there. In my most recent book, *Jumping in the Asylum* (2011), my Mennonite origins return and the theme of music re-enters. Music, rock 'n' roll at first, was crucial in my turning away from something that didn't seem the best fit for me. It saved me. The music itself, but also the release, "jungle music" as my father called it. That uninhibited explosion out of the staid, correct life I was looking to escape. Music was my introduction to the Dionysian approach to life. I finally wrote the poem below about what that was like for me.

loose in the house of fundamentalism

You go dancing around your room banging off red walls
 pictures swinging wildly on their hooks
 shivers down your backbone tailfeathers ruffling and you
 playing piano with a ball peen hammer

words and doors unhinged as night blooms in the brain's
soil flowering like the watered grave
you're flagrant and lost sniffing for primal heat kicking
your way through the room's furniture

nighthawk or crow this is the word loose in the house of
fundamentalism wings beating against glass
cries of blue fire anger's call for vengeance rocking on
your toes knocking the clock from the wall

a quiver in your bones old as old but who's counting bog
piltdown man and lucy in the sky
bestial and defrocked some god undone with one blue eye
lazy and the other dark and crazy

you skid scuffing linoleum all feathers and mischief
careless damage along the million mile wall
bitching at some yellow-eyed parrot *not enough* nothing
memorized just holy ghost and a slippery foot

wella wella sings the crow *bird is the word* hopping from
leg to leg a cockeyed killer and awry
wella wella next flight out of here heading anywhere and
anything goes and always it does⁵

Reflected in my latest work is my interest in Spain, which goes back a long way. I wrote a poem in my second book that began: "let's go to spain/ live the old ways/before we wear out." When, years ago, I was asked to write an essay for an anthology called *Why I Am a Mennonite*, I wrote "I Could Have Been Born in Spain." My entry to Spain is primarily through Lorca and other poets, and later through Goya. While exploring Lorca's last days in Granada, I discovered the cedar tree beneath which St. John of the Cross was supposed to have written *The Dark Night of the Soul*. Equally important has been my love of *cante jondo*, or deep song, flamenco. I travelled to Granada

⁵ Published in *Jumping in the Asylum* (Toronto: Quattro Books Inc., 2011).

because of the great Canadian poet P.K. Page. I was traveling to Lisbon for a month to listen to *fado*. When I told her, she said I must go on to Granada to see the Alhambra, a place she'd always wanted to see but now was too old for. And in 2010 I lived in Spain for six weeks working on a book. My interest in *fado*, a genre of Portuguese folksong, and the fact that my son-in-law is of Portuguese heritage, led me to Portugal as well. In 2005 I stayed in Lisbon for a month, exploring *fado* joints and many other things.

Fundamental to my writing for the last decade and more is something that Robert Bly once called "leaping poetry," a notion deeply rooted in the Spanish poets. It's a kind of poetry that moves beyond metaphor to quick, instantaneous associations. In Lorca's case this leaping was probably somewhat influenced by surrealism. I find it to be a psychologically and spiritually authentic thinking process. It may be best done in Spanish, but I keep trying to make it work for me in English.

Among my recent poems, both "lorca" and "goya," for example, include images related to the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s: such as, for example, the cemeteries where the fascists lined up and shot pretty well anyone who disagreed with them. Lorca, a life-loving, generous, brilliant man, was murdered at the start of the civil war, possibly because he favored the republic, not the fascists, and probably because he was a gay man. He was shot by the forces of a grey, monolithic authoritarian government that also banned a lot of music, literature, and festivals. All authoritarian governments do this, no matter what country.

LORCA

heard water in the aqueduct
before dawn in la colonia

and if there had been light
could have seen childhood

water flowing is the shortest time
eternity is a poor word for this

what can be done about a dream
of black veils and a crucifix

what can be done when you've
forgotten your mother's prayer

only death listens to fear
only his body hangs on to him

smelling the road's dust
hearing the rifle's bolt⁶

GOYA

his hands all over
the black walls of his house
calling the dog crawling
out of the mud

saturn slaving and
bug-eyed devouring
his child in hallucinations
of the darkest god

monstrous night black
and gaping the spittle
of thunderbolt neutrons and
appetite

the town idiot sordid and
sallow hungering for
meat for the son in
his jaw

⁶ Published in *A Dark Boat* (Vancouver: Anvil Press, 2012)

headless in his grave
goya never rolls over
after the executions and
the cemetery walls

after dark housebound days
there will never again
be anything to roll
him over in his grave⁷

* * * * *

What I've done here today feels a little odd to me, like writing my own obituary, but this occasion has also been an opportunity to clarify for myself what my learning arc as a poet and human has been, and possibly to point out directions still to take. Hildi suggested I read/talk my way through my "career" as a poet, though I don't think of my writing poetry as a career. It's not something I chose like becoming a lawyer, a teacher, or a hockey player. It's just something I've always done; it's my life. Poetry is a way of perceiving. It felt strange to go back through my work, to find poems I had little memory of, for example. Before preparing for this event I had a sense of a certain arc to my writing, but I wouldn't really have been able to explain it. Thinking about my life as a poet was an exercise that made me see the movement of my work, the shifts and transitions. And, so, allowed me to kind of relive my life.

Born in Steinbach, Manitoba, Patrick Friesen now lives on Vancouver Island. He has received the Manitoba Book of the Year Award and the Relit Award for Poetry.

⁷ Ibid.

Writing towards Home: A Prodigal Daughter Looks Back

Darcie Friesen Hossack

Thank you so much, Hildi, for welcoming me here tonight. Listening just now, I kept trying to spot this Darcie Friesen Hossack you speak of. I have a copy of her book and would like to point out some typos. Like, on page 80, where two words are repeated in the middle of a line—and not for effect. And on page 88, where the word “door” is used three times in the space of just one-and-a-quarter paragraphs. I’ve also heard a few other things I think you should all know about this so-called Friesen. That she pulled up her Mennonite roots when she was 13 years old and spent more than a decade as a Seventh-day Adventist. Or that she didn’t know the name of a single Mennonite author until she was almost 30. And more, she’s Mennonite on her mother’s side only and is therefore not really entitled to the name Friesen. All I can say is that she’s lucky her readers, and also the literary press, have been very forgiving.

Several months ago, when I was first asked to step up to this stage, I knew I had to say yes before taking any time to think about today when I’d actually stand here in my size seven shoes, in the footsteps of giants, the floor still warm from the feet of a Giller Prize winner. If I thought about it right now, I can tell you that the marrow in my bones would be wobbling like the jelly salad at a Mennonite potluck, and one of you would have to scurry up here with a handful of paper napkins to scoop me up.

For the last month, however, while preparing what I wanted to say tonight, I did dare to peek at the online videos of this reading and lecture series. It was Patrick Friesen who unknowingly sent a snipping of courage in my direction when he said that he, and just about every other Mennonite author in the Western world, has at one time or another slept in Hildi and Paul’s guest room. Well, I thought, sharing a mattress must make us some kind of kin. And if I can manage to fall asleep in a bed with some very illustrious dust mites indeed, maybe I’ll wake up and not think I’m still dreaming.

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As a wannabe author, which I was until about ten minutes ago, and will be again in about an hour, I learned to have expansive dreams but to keep them in an airtight box. To write as though it matters but expect no one will notice. To be noticed by Hildi, then, who's spent a career ensuring that the brightest voices of an entire tradition have been heard in a crowded room, is one of the greatest, unlooked-for blessings I never saw coming.

So, before I get to *Mennonites Don't Dance*, I'd like to express my gratitude. Thank you, Hildi, for bringing me here, giving me a home while away from home. Thank you for allowing me to sleep where great writers have slept, and for gathering me under your umbrella.

* * * * *

Fourteen years ago, the first time I decided to write a book that I'm willing to admit to, I was told that to write well, I would have to write what I know. So, naturally, being the granddaughter of Dutch Mennonites and having travelled as far east as Winnipeg, I did the sensible thing. I began a novel—about India. My thought was that I could learn something I didn't previously know, and therefore avoid writing about the prairies, grasshoppers, hard winters, things fried in lard and other subjects no one, surely, wanted to read about anyway.

If I learned something new, I also wouldn't have to meddle with stories and themes that would later shock and annoy my family, whether Mennonite or—when I yoke them together with the other side of my family for the book I'm writing next—the Seventh-day Adventists.

So there I was, writing about India, a place I've only seen on the Discovery Channel. And after three years of hoarding more than a hundred library books, I did know a little more than I had known before. I even had 400 pages of writing that I proudly referred to as a novel. After a few more years, I had a file filled with rejection letters from publishers. And a strong sense that no more postage stamps should be licked-and-sticked for the sake of a story I no longer believed in. I placed that novel in a box and wrapped that box with duct tape.

In the meantime, however, I'd begun to work on a few short stories—and dammit if they weren't turning out to be Mennonite. Mennonite and, if

I'm being honest, Seventh-day Adventist too, although at the time I didn't have a strong enough wooden spoon to stir two such very big pots at the same time. So, where the different beliefs share a few square feet of common ideology, I folded them together, believing the Mennonite community was the more likely to forgive me.

As it has turned out, so many readers have been gracious and supportive beyond my hopes. Others wonder why I can't, perhaps, write nice stories that give people a laugh. Still others would rather I didn't tell people where I'm from. Stories, though, when their silence has had the power to send shockwaves through generations, must finally be told by someone who has felt the past give shape to the present.

It's been said that my stories are grim. They're dark. There's little humor to be found. I suppose this is what leads readers to ask whether I have any good memories of being Mennonite and why didn't I draw on them instead. In fact I've made treasures of some wonderful memories. And I hope they show up in these stories in moments of grace, like when Magda's grandfather keeps watch over his favorite girl. Or in the title story, when a mother rubs dough from her adult daughter's fingers with a little flour. If there is grace to be found in this book, it's because I have received it.

I remember being sick with the flu while spending the night with my grandparents in Schoenfeld, Saskatchewan. I was still young enough that I was sleeping in a crib they'd set up in the living room. All through that night, my grandmother slept across from me on the chesterfield, her hand reaching through the crib's spindles, where it rested on my forehead until my fever broke in the morning. I remember the night my grandfather put on his hat and coat, and drove all the way into the city because I'd forgotten my pink blanket in the dryer that morning and couldn't sleep without it. I remember him making a swing to hang over the rafters in his workshop, so I could spend time with him while he cobbled together bits of wood.

Because of my Grandma Friesen I know when bread has been kneaded enough. When a pot of cream gravy is ready by the way it coats the back of a wooden spoon. And, because of my Grandpa Friesen, I know that scripture being spoken in Low German at the breakfast table sounds like music. I also know what it is to pretend that I have joy down in my heart, when hidden there are sorrows that remain invisible to eyes that don't know how to see.

John Lent, a fellow Thistledown Press author and one of the first writers I ever met in person, said that “Writing fiction is taking a grain of truth and then lying like crazy.” This, of course, for the purpose of telling a greater truth.

So, with the India novel put aside, I began to write what I knew. I lied to tell the truth, and all the time wondered who besides me might want to read short stories (when no one reads short stories anymore), written by a once small town girl, about an obscure group of conservative Christians who believe farming is next to godliness and fight over who gets to eat the chicken’s feet at lunchtime. I wrote about prairies and grasshoppers, hard winters, things fried in lard and other subjects no one, surely, wanted to read about anyway. I wrote “Poor Nella Pea,” a story of how a grandmother’s suicide affects, years later, the granddaughter she never knew.

An Excerpt from “Poor Nella Pea”

The last time I saw my mother alive was early last December. I drove all night, blowing snow making the usual two-hour trip from Regina a wheel-gripping four, until I finally pulled up in front of the house near midnight.

As always, my father had left the porch light on for me and was dozing in a living room chair when I let myself in. It was an old habit of his, waiting up for me. Mom couldn’t go to sleep if she thought there might be a knock at the door in the middle of the night. With Dad keeping watch, if I didn’t come home and was discovered lying in a ditch somewhere, he’d be the one to meet the police at the front door. He could break the bad news to Mom, gently, after breakfast.

“Hi, honey, rough trip?” Dad had yawned and stood up when I came in and shoved the front door shut hard against a gust of wind and snow and an ill-fitted frame. I stomped my boots, snow slugging away from them to melt on the rubber mat that filled the entryway.

“No worse than usual.” We both knew it was a lie, the kind we always told if Mom was in the room. Even when she had still been lucid. “How is she?”

My mother had been diagnosed with dementia a year earlier

and ever since we had watched her give in to it as though she were crawling under a warm blanket for a long and needed sleep.

"I think she's still awake. Why don't you go on up and check on her before you head in."

Abandoning my suitcase, I flapped my arms out of my winter parka and headed up the stairs, padding softly over the hallway floorboards without causing a noise.

"Mom?" I said quietly when I reached her half-opened door. I learned in and found her sitting up in bed, an afghan and lamplight draped across her lap along with a picture album open to the middle. She was staring off into a corner of the room as though she truly was somewhere else. Off wandering through those pictures, perhaps. Re-imagining our history.

"Mom? It's me. I just got here." I stepped round to the side of the bed and knelt on the bare floor where that old rug used to be. When she didn't acknowledge me at first I rested my head on the mattress, tired from the trip, tired of pretending I didn't think dementia was just another way for her to keep me at a distance.

After a few minutes I lifted my head when my mother spoke.

"This was my daughter," she said. Her words came slowly and she paused, seeming to search for her next syllable. "Tess," she added with some difficulty and pointed to the page she'd stopped on. Both sides were covered in a tidy collage of pictures. Me as a grass-skirted hula girl in my first figure skating recital, dressed in stiff corduroy slacks and vest for my first day of the third grade. Another of me hugging Socks.

"Mom, that's me," I said and covered the papery skin of her cool, age-mottled hands with mine. Like everything else about her, her hands had aged suddenly, blotting out the woman she used to be.

"No," she said. "My daughter died a long time ago. Like everyone else."

I looked into my mother's face, expecting to find the worry creases she'd always worn at the corners of her eyes between her brows. They weren't there. Her face after all her years, was more peaceful than I'd ever seen. As though in believing she had really, finally, lost those

she always pushed away—seemed to test whether we'd keep coming back—she had found a way to let go.

I took the album and closed it lightly, kissed my mother on the cheek, and turned out the lamp. When I went downstairs, Dad was waiting for me in the kitchen with a pot of camomile tea.

"Figured you probably drank a lot of coffee on the way here," he said and handed me a clunky mug, which I'd always preferred to Mom's dainty teacups that had been passed down to her from my grandmother. Now, Mom is gone and I can hardly believe how distant that night seems. And I'm here, alone, following my mother's footsteps into her kitchen.

I open the door to her tea cupboard where delicate cups still dangle by their ears from small brass hooks. The hooks were installed because of the trains that sped along the tracks just yards from our back fence.

The whole house rattled when the trains passed by, carrying their heavy loads of wheat and potash out of the province, causing the china to tremble to the edge of their shelf. So I suppose it may have seemed deliberate when, a few days after my cat was eaten by coyotes, I opened the cabinet door and one of the teacups fell, breaking in half against the sharp edge of the countertop before tumbling to the floor and shattering.

My mother rushed into the kitchen, already wringing her hands. "What did you do?" She grasped my arm with anxious, pinching fingers that would leave a bruise.

"It—it fell," I said. "I didn't mean—It was just there when I opened the door. I tried to catch it." For proof I held out my hand, which had been cut against a falling shard.

"But you didn't catch it." She sucked in a thin, serrated breath before she let go of me and stared at the shelf, as though expecting to see the rest of her teacups lined up along the edge, ready to leap down after the first. Tenderly, nervously, she nudged each one to the back of the cupboard, counting as she touched their rims. With one gone, the remaining ones could no longer be called a set.

She knelt and, with shaking hands, began to pick up the pieces

of broken pottery into her apron.

“From now on you don’t touch these,” she said. She glanced at the blood that was dripping slowly from my fingers. I thought she’d offer a Band-Aid, but she only cradled the broken cup in her lap, fitting a few pieces together as though it might miraculously be made whole again if it was all accounted for, and fault assigned.

“We could try to glue it,” I said, tucking my hand behind me.

My mother was quiet for a moment. “And do what with it? Tea would dribble into my lap. It’s in a hundred pieces. No. No it’s broken, and that’s that.” She stood up, found a small box in a drawer, arranged the shards inside and placed the box on the shelf with the rest of the cups.

While I swept up what remained, dust and slivers, Mom went upstairs to lay a cold cloth over her eyes. She disappeared into her bedroom, drew the blinds and didn’t come back downstairs until after I’d left for school the next morning. By then my father had installed the hooks.¹

* * * * *

But what, people want to know, does it mean to be Mennonite? Sometimes the answer seems so elusive, the only one I can think to say is that being Mennonite is why I will never, ever, be skinny. It was my Grandma Friesen who taught me to cook like a Mennonite. In an impossibly small kitchen built onto the side of their farmhouse (because the kitchen that came with the house was, of course, just for show), we baked *zwieback*. We cooked fatty meats, and stuffed pockets of dough with cottage cheese, or saskatoon berries and sugar, for *verenyky*. We made *plummamoos*, because fruit is always better cooked in cream. Home-made noodles were covered with cream gravy and Rogers syrup. We ate *porky* cracklings. And if I spent a morning in the barn with my grandpa, grandma would greet us at lunch time with a platter of lard-fried chicken and spears of sweet watermelon, because a little fresh fruit never hurt anyone.

Growing up, I spent most of my weekends at my grandparents’ farm.

¹ In *Mennonites Don’t Dance* (Saskatoon, SK: Thistledown Press, 2010), 181-84.

It may have been because I insisted on naming the livestock that Grandpa always seemed to know I wouldn't one day marry a farmer. Once the chickens had had their heads lopped off, though, I did love helping to pluck and then reach inside those freshly-killed birds to pull out warm gizzards and half-formed eggs. Or when it was time to slaughter pigs, I'd bring a snout to my city school the next day for show-and-tell.

I am Mennonite. And I am a prodigal daughter. Before I turned 14, I left Saskatchewan, my grandparents and my mother, and in Alberta became my father's daughter: a Sabbath-keeping Seventh-day Adventist vegetarian, eating peanut butter and onion loaf, fried gluten steaks, and mayonnaise and banana sandwiches. At the time, I didn't know to think of the change as culture shock. I simply knew I had to keep moving.

From Alberta we moved to British Columbia, where I finished high school, worked at a lumber yard, started university, got married, worked in a pancake house, dropped out of university, worked two jobs in retail and reception to put my husband through cooking school, wrote a bad novel about India, began to freelance, established myself as a food writer, wrote some Mennonite short stories, published one, won a minor award with another, published a third, and finally discovered that I was still Mennonite and that I wasn't alone in not understanding what it meant.

It was Miriam Toews's novel *A Complicated Kindness*, with its bewildered teenage girl trapped in Manitoba Mennonite country, that began to peel back my own pages. Although I despaired a little at how high the literary bar had already been set, I began the first ten years of reaching. During this time I dared to believe that if I had been dragged to an unlicensed chiropractor to have my spine manipulated by a hundred-year-old woman who'd gotten her start on chickens before moving up to sheep and people, others might be able to relate. From there, doors began to appear. One opened when poet and memoirist Elsie K. Neufeld accepted my story "Ashes" for publication in *Half in the Sun*, an anthology of writing by West Coast Mennonites that included Andreas Schroeder, whose writing I was also discovering for the first time. I thought I was finally getting somewhere.

And then, as still happens right about the time I think I've learned something about writing, I discovered that I am, and always will be, dust. In 2005 I sent a query and my first few stories to Thistledown Press, a

literary house in Saskatoon. They surprised me by asking to see an entire manuscript. After those first stories, though, something had gone terribly wrong. I'd begun to drag emotional baggage across the page, dropping socks and underwear as I went. If I'd ever known before, I'd forgotten how to write. Thistledown's subsequent rejection letter, which arrived within the month, simply and firmly said, "These stories are not yet ready for a literary audience."

I needed help. While I probably should have started with a 101 course on beginnings, middles and endings, I gravitated, like any good Mennonite, to a trial by fire. College dropout though I was, I applied to the post-grad mentorship program through the Humber School for Writers in Toronto. A correspondence course that would allow me to slowly lose my mind in the comfort of my own home. For whatever reason, Humber's advisory board took a chance, waived their own admissions requirement of a bachelor's degree, and paired me with Sandra Birdsell, whose Giller-finalist novel, *The Russländer*, would become the book I read whenever I need to feel completely inadequate as a writer.

Now, given that tonight's theme seems to be my great and abiding ignorance, it shouldn't surprise anyone to know that until I had to choose which of Humber's instructors I'd like to work with, I had not yet heard of Sandra Birdsell. But by the time I wrote down her name, I had read every book of hers I could find, and I can promise you that I'd acquired the proper amount of fear and trembling. I was so afraid, in fact, that I listed her as my second choice.

The advisory board saw through me, and "Mennonites Don't Dance" became a book during that year with Sandra. Some stories went in the shredder. Others were stripped back to their titles more than once, after Sandra, as gently as was possible, might say of them, "Well, Darcie, it's clear that you tried very hard." Among my fellow correspondence students, who faithfully spatulaed me off the floor, this became known as "being Birdsell'd."

There were days when I forgot to rinse the conditioner out of my hair. Or my husband would come home to find me rocking and humming on the couch, after which he'd take me for a long drive until I'd recovered my wits enough to start over. Eventually, Sandra taught me to get out of my own way and just write.

And so I wrote a story about a young boy who, as he grows up, struggles to undo the sins of his father. I knew something was finally going right when Sandra's critique arrived in the mail, and she said, "I have been wrapped in my mother's afghan and reading 'Luna' nonstop and thinking what a fine story this can be!" After "Luna" things that had hidden themselves began to become clear. Characters came to life and grafted themselves into their settings. By the end of school, I had workable drafts of eleven stories that were almost, but still not quite, ready for a literary audience. For several months following, I worked with an editor who was also a classmate, and then took a giant breath and began to submit my work to publishers.

* * * * *

Over the next two years, I sent queries to Thistledown Press and half a dozen other houses. Three of them took "Mennonites Don't Dance" to a final vote of their executive boards before saying no. Critiques included "Are there too many stories here about very young people?" and "A few of these are the best stories we've read all year, but we've decided to go with another author." One day, holding a letter that read "I have no doubt you'll be published someday, but not with these stories," I began to wonder whether I should have listened to my grandmother-in-law, who once tried to put a stop to my typing and fit me for a job as her dry cleaner's apprentice. My book's final rejection arrived in the mail while my now chef husband was overseas.

Eight years had passed since I began these stories. Eleven since I began that novel about India. Although it wasn't the first time terrible doubts had knocked at my door, it was the first time I'd let them in. My husband sent flowers, while my sister got on a bus and arrived in time to sweep the crumbs of me off the floor. My Humber classmates, spread over the entire country, gathered round by e-mail and were as protective of me as a circle of buffalo.

And then. Finally. Thistledown Press, which had been silent for a year after I sent them an unsolicited rewrite, offered to publish "Mennonites Don't Dance." It took two more years, but the book was released in September 2010. And by October, before a single review had been printed, *Mennonites Don't Dance* was quietly banned by a public library in a Mennonite community. Looking back, I probably should have taken this as a good omen. At the

time, though, I'd never felt so far from home. Advice included everything from "Don't let it get to you" to "Quick! Call the CBC and Right to Read Foundation! This could be your ticket!" I can tell you that it did get to me. I didn't make those calls, although I did keep the very book which that library sent back, and it's the one I've been reading from tonight.

In time reviews followed, and shortlists, including one for the Commonwealth Prize. My name began to appear alongside Mennonite authors who had, though shamefully recently, become my heroes. Last May the Writers' Union announced *Mennonites Don't Dance* as a runner-up for the Danuta Gleed Literary Award, and although I wasn't able to attend the presentation myself, I was later told that Andreas Schroeder and David Waltner-Toews made up my cheering section.

This and other reactions from the Mennonite literary and scholarly community have been a homecoming of a kind. And while this is only the second time I've been anywhere in Ontario, tonight has been a homecoming also, and one of the things I will treasure in my heart and remember when I find myself far from home.

Darcie Friesen Hossack, a longtime food columnist for print newspapers, is at work on her first novel, "What Looks In." For more information, go to darciefriesenhossack.wordpress.com.

From “A Brotherly Philippic” to Tante Tina to the Mysteries of Disease, Death, and Transformation: Mennonite Reflections on a Life of Poetry and Science

David Waltner-Toews

Time to wake up!
Time to move
 to sit up in your padded pew and shake
 to grab your neighbour by the collar and shake
 stamp down on the carpet till you break
 both feet on the ground.
Time to wake up,
Time to move
 to break the shouting, sterile silence with a cry
...
Out of the darkness of eternity echoes and re-echoes the
 unanswered cry,
 Love me!
Answer ye people!
 Or forever die.

Those are fragments from a long tirade, “A Brotherly Philippic,” which was included in a book of essays called *Out of Concern for the Church*,¹ a publication of Christian Reformed Church activists and scholars. It is the first and only piece of my writing that I registered with the Canadian Copyright Office—under the pseudonym D.T. Ivanovitch (“David Toews, son of John,” the Russian version, in case you wondered). What was I thinking? That someone would steal this?

In 2006 and again in 2011 I got an e-mail from an insurance salesman

¹ Toronto: Wedge Publishing, 1970. For a complete list of David Waltner-Toews’s publications—those of which he is the primary author or editor—go to www.davidwaltnertoews.com. Note that this website does not include the many anthologies that include his work.

in Pennsylvania who had been deeply influenced by “A Brotherly Philippic” and has used it regularly for campus ministries in which he is involved. He wanted to know what reflections I had after 41 years of journeying, if I had other materials to place alongside the original. How can I begin to respond? Writing for me has never been just about writing. It is about who I am. Being a writer is part of my identity, like being male, heterosexual, or Caucasian: genetically programmed, socially molded, and difficult to explain to those who aren’t that way. In preparing for this talk I pillaged from other pieces I have written over the years. This has been a scary experience, dumpster diving into my soul.

As a teenager I was a true believer, and my writing reflected that. But I was also, regretfully (to me, as a Mennonite Brethren), human. My relationship with writing was lust at first glance, a deep, physical, sinful, desire for poetry—and it took a long time before I discovered she had a sense of humor. Darkly despairing fragments from my teenage years speak of “Chipper dipper Jack the Ripper lustful flesh of a nightclub stripper.” I suppose that says it all: the desire and the loathing, the need and the rejection of that need. We Mennonite Brethren didn’t have needs. We didn’t have bodies. Well, we had bodies, from which we were to be saved. We didn’t have desires. So, what was all this I was feeling? If the devil, as we are told, was in the details, then the devil lived in every little muscle of my body. Sadly, I had notebooks full of stuff like “Chipper Dipper.” Most of it never oozed past my notebooks and maybe a few tolerant friends.

Mennonite Brethren, of which I was the most ardent among the ardent, didn’t really take poetry seriously as poetry. There were hymns, of course, and rhymes that exhorted people to be good. But poetry? What good was that? If it was to be a passion, it had to be a secret passion. I remember my first crush. My grade five teacher, in a stroke of genius or extreme frustration, asked me to write a poem as punishment for talking in class. How did she know I was even interested (in poetry, I mean, not punishment)? It was near Christmas. I wrote something that rhymed, about wise men, a kind of upbeat version of T.S. Eliot. Had I read Eliot? I don’t remember. The teacher liked the poem so well that it was published in a Manitoba teachers’ society journal and read on CFAM, Radio Altona (no money paid, of course). Poetry as punishment and glory: it is something I

have wrestled with my whole life. Sometimes, I have felt like the Jewish prophet Hosea, who was asked by God to marry an unrepentant prostitute.

As a callow, bookish boy, I walked down dark windswept Winnipeg streets chanting the lines from Hamlin Garland's "Do you fear the wind?":

Do you fear the force of the wind,
The slash of the rain?
Go face them and fight them,
Be savage again.
Go hungry and cold like the wolf,
Go wade like the crane:
The palms of your hands will thicken,
The skin of your cheek will tan,
You'll grow ragged and weary and swarthy,
But you'll walk like a man!²

Being steeped in Anabaptism, I felt that my writing had to be useful, something to create calluses on the palm or thicken the coverings on the brain, like carpentry, feeding cows, or reciting Bible verses. I wrote for occasions—birthdays, funerals, anniversaries. My valedictory talk from the Mennonite Brethren Collegiate Institute was a long poem. It was published in the *Mennonite Brethren Herald* and resulted in my first check, for two dollars from Christian Press. I still have that check.

For some unfathomable reason, perhaps because I was J.A. Toews's son, the *Mennonite Brethren Herald* published several of my poems and letters over the next few years. In 1966 a letter from another *Herald* reader advised that 2 Peter 2:12 should be applied to me. For those who are not Mennonite Brethren and hence don't know their Bibles so well, verse 12 is "But these, as natural brute beasts, speak evil of the things that they understand not; and shall utterly perish in their own corruption." Writing as glory and punishment. Chipper Dipper come home to roost.

On January 19, 1967 my first story was published in *The Uniter*, a

² "Do You Fear the Wind" appears in *The Little Book of American Poets: 1787-1900*, ed. Jessie B. Rittenhouse (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1915). We must have studied it in high school English class.

paper of United College at the University of Manitoba. “A Helping Hand,” it is a sad tale about an old Saint Bernard, abandoned and dying in the streets of Winnipeg, who saves a young girl’s life, is killed by a truck, and is taken away by the garbage men. Premonition? The idea that I might someday become a veterinarian was not even a vague fantasy. My high school English teacher predicted at our graduation that I would teach history at the Mennonite Brethren Bible College.

We had to take a so-called “religion” course at the Mennonite Brethren Collegiate Institute (MBCI). I remember one class: it was about original sin. The gist of what I took away from that class was that if a non-Christian mother ran into a burning building to save her child, it was an act of selfishness. If a Christian mother did the same thing, it was a selfless act. There was “us” who were going to heaven and “them” who were going to hell, and you couldn’t tell the difference by just looking at the external evidence. You had to know what was in the heart.

In 1967 my parents left home. I took the hint and hitch-hiked from Winnipeg to Montreal, took a freighter to Europe, and vagabonded overland to India and Southeast Asia. On my journey I was taken in by families who fed me, gave me a place to sleep, and generally treated me, a stranger, with great generosity and kindness. Were all these people going to hell, as my teachers had told me? Or were all the teachings of my childhood something far worse than a lie, what philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt in a famous 1986 essay called “bullshit,” that is, teaching *indifferent* to truth.³

In this retelling of my childhood, the MBCI religion teacher became the evil one he had warned us against. Now, in a state of shock, depression, and awe, I had to figure out the meaning of life from scratch. If I couldn’t trust the teachings of my childhood, taught by people who had gained a state of unassailable righteousness by surviving the Russian Revolution, then I couldn’t trust anyone or any system where ideas trumped evidence. They—Marxists, Buddhists, Hindus, Catholics, Muslims, capitalists—were all indifferent to the world we lived in, to the evidence around us. In retrospect this explains two major themes of my life. The desire to find a home for my deep skepticism, a community that would defer to evidence rather than

³ The essay, titled “On Bullshit,” was published as a book by Princeton University Press in 2005 and became an immediate bestseller.

dogma, led me to science. And the desire to re-connect with humanity in some meaningful way led me to literature.

In 1969, exhausted from my travels followed by six months working in a sawmill, and believing in nothing, I went to Goshen College. In a 1970 letter to the *Canadian Mennonite*, Rudy Wiebe wrote: “A double-fisted kiss (Russian style) of congratulations to David Toews. . . . He writes with his head and his gut—and he is beginning to hate well.” Little did he know how deeply that hate went. While at Goshen, after flirting with Zen Buddhism, and studying the music and art of John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jean Tinguely, I put together a collection of my writings called “Again the Enemy Soldiers: a terminal artgame” or, alternatively, “Non Cents and Other Rates of Exchange.” Nick Lindsay’s comments on my work were that “I think it’s delightful. But of course I think it’s a lot of rubbish.” To which, privately, I responded with a quote from Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*.

“Poetry is rubbish!” said Smerdyakov curtly.

“Oh no, I am very fond of poetry.”

“So far as it is poetry, it is essentially rubbish.”

I took all this to heart, but kept writing. As I said, something deeply genetic. In 1969 I initiated an exchange of letters with Jack Dueck, a professor of English at Goshen College. If the universe had no meaning, I argued, then writing was pointless. Which meant that I myself, being a writer, was of no consequence. I told Jack that “my writing [since of course I could not stop, even though it was pointless] exhibited desperate silliness. Giggling in the face of disaster. Hallucinatory. . . .” My poems at Goshen were absurd, full of death, judgment, and hopelessness.

My teacher Nick Lindsay’s influence—and that of his father, the former poet laureate of Seattle—was also palpable in the forms of my writing, the chanting rhythms and public performance. One poem from that time, “Animal Farm Comes to America,” begins:

The streets rumble under the thundering herds
Flee to the mountains; crouch in caves.
With gluttonous grunts, snorts of murder.

Flee from the muck of the open graves.

The poem ends with:

Flee with your heart and shirt undone
 Flee to the mountains; crouch in caves.
 For Circe who turns men to swine has come,
 And the world wallows down to the open graves.⁴

Or again, in a quieter moment of despair, “Haiku”:

On the white mountain
 the bare, stretched arms of a tree.
 There will be no spring.⁵

But, being freed from having to advocate for an ideology, I found also a kind of wild, absurd freedom. This was 1969, after all. Despite my personal nihilism and sense of uselessness, I wrote relentlessly—essays, plays, stories, poems, rhyming poesie, Bob-Dylan-like song lyrics on and on and on. Nick Lindsay of course incited us to write, whether we believed in it or not, and Pinchpenny Press seduced us with promises of publication. For a time I edited a student paper, “The Other Wall.” I have no idea what the first wall was.

In 1970, under the pen name Cherain (I don’t know the origin of this name), I published a sonnet, “Circus Animal,” which was later renamed and included in my very first collection, *That Inescapable Animal*.⁶

CIRCUS ANIMAL

I come from the Midwest—but don’t let that fool you
 I have seen elephants, camels and poets uncaged
 that would make our virgin libraries blush and smudge

⁴ Published in Harley King, ed., *Thirteen Poets* (Goshen, IN: Pinchpenny Press, 1971).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Goshen, IN: Pinchpenny Press, 1974.

the kleeer sheen wax on the floors of our banks and brothels
forever. I have seen the circus tents
rise up like pregnant zebras and deliver
a litter of loving prophets into the streets.
I have seen what the old man fears to tell.

Every man must now play clown or beast
and even the Midwestern rocking chair is in the ring.
The elephants are in our elevators, the camels on the stairs,
the ringmaster howls on the corner with a clenched fist.
Knowledge is afoot—let the libraries take care. Laughing
free in the streets, the poet has escaped his lair.

At Goshen College, two professors profoundly influenced my life and my writing: Mary Oyer, from whom I took courses in the history of music, arts, and western civilization; and Mary Bender, who taught 20th-century fiction and French language and literature. I would get up at eight in the morning to hear her lectures, and was riveted. She taught Sartre, Camus, Ionesco, Kafka, Dos Passos, Wolfe, Mansfield, Joyce, all those writers who helped define the 20th-century European way of grappling with the troubles of the world.. And then she looked up at us, at ME, and said, “They have defined the problem. Now it is up to you to find the solution.” This was my Great Commission. But how would I even begin, when all those great minds had already foundered on the dark shoals of World War?

I could go on about the breadth and depth of Mary Oyer’s knowledge of music and European culture, and how she could impart a sense of the sweep and complexity of European art, music, and architectural history. But one story sticks with me in particular. She had gone to Africa on a sabbatical. Before that, she taught that there was Good music and Bad music, a Right way to play and a Wrong way to play. John Cage argued that Beethoven was wrong; she argued that Beethoven was right. She tried learning a new African instrument, let’s say it was the thumb piano. When she asked the teacher if she was doing it right, he paused and hesitantly said “yes.” She practiced harder. When she returned to the teacher and asked the same question, his “yes” was a little more certain. After many weeks of practicing, he answered

with a big smile and a resounding “Yes!”

So, in my response to Mary Bender’s exhortation, I could start anywhere. There was no RIGHT answer as defined by some dogma. But surely, with hard work and practice (which is what I learned from Oyer), with keeping my eyes and ears and mind and heart open (which is what I learned from Cage), there were ways to move in a right direction. Without any sense of where any of this was going, I kept writing. It seemed the only way.

In a brief moment of peace I wrote a poem in German for my grandfather’s funeral. “Nun ist er fort—doch nicht gestorben,” I wrote. “Nur vorangegangen.” Did I believe this? If it is possible to believe one thing in one language, and something else in another, then perhaps I believed this in German. In English I re-wrote the Lord’s Prayer, in which I spoke of “Our kingdom of stone upon stone/And life upon life/and each life alone” and ended with “For ours is the tomb/And ours is the earth. Amen.”

In 1971 Kathy and I were married, I finished my BA at Goshen, worked for a religious publisher in layout and design, wrote an incredibly boring novel, and wondered what I would do with the rest of my life. Having seen the utter poverty and wealth disparity in India and Southeast Asia, I needed to do something that was useful, real, engaged with life, and from which one might actually make a living.⁷ In 1972 I started studying science, with a view to becoming a veterinarian. That would be practical. Even if I never wrote another word, I could do something useful in the world. Studying science was exciting, stimulating, grounding, and confusing. Here was a whole new body of evidence that defined different battle lines between what was admissible to ask in science and what was the domain of religion and philosophy. It was as if, behind the belief in religion and as well behind those who studied science, there was an even deeper, prior belief that we lived in a fragmented universe. For many years I was sucked into this binary mindset. I struggled with how one might integrate the two, when the resistance on both sides was fanatical. The language of literature, which valued ambiguity and

⁷ I recently received a royalty statement from a poetry publisher for minus 54 cents. While lower than most, this is within the ballpark of royalties one earns from poetry. Naïve though I was, I was not mistaken in my assessment that I would need a source of income other than writing.

harmonic resonance, was completely at odds with the language of academic scholarship, particularly science, for which precision and perfect pitch were the highest values.

From the start I tried to bring them together, if only for my own sanity. In any case, I've never been a big believer in thinking outside the box. That assumes there are boxes. If they are there, they are only in our heads. The universe in which we live was not assembled from a big-box store. In 1973 I published a poem in *The American Journal of Nursing*.

THE WAY OF MEMORIES

All that I have met is part of me
carried down secret corridors
electric passageways, down mysterious axon
elevators, packed in molecules of RNA
stored in grey salt mines of cerebral cortex like radioactive waste.
What is the half-life of memories?
Somewhere my childhood is decomposing, my first love
disintegrating into constituent atoms,
beyond the reach of even the most skillful miner
the most dexterous neurosurgeon.
When the millennia of digestion are over
the memories, no longer hot,
are shipped in protein submarines
along tropical rivers of blood
dumped in the liver for a final detoxification.
Surely, I shall die of obstructive jaundice,
my common bile duct clogged, painfully,
with calculi of memories.
In the final moment they will dissolve
and I shall remember everything.⁸

(As an aside, thirty years later, I returned to a similar theme, with a less sanguine ending in which the “sanitary dream engineers” clear out my

⁸ *American Journal of Nursing* 73, no. 11 (1973): 2012.

memories and dreams on a daily basis. Those of us of a certain age can relate to this.)

In the mid-1970s, while in veterinary college, I wrote a second novel, “The Sasquatch Memorandum, by Ima Buffalo.” It was a farce about Western Canadian separatist movements with links to Quebec separatism. An editor at a Toronto publisher liked it but said that the topic was too timely and wouldn’t be of interest by the time the book came out. It was a lesson, once again, about the multiple solitudes that are this country. In 1976, between my second and third years at the college, I got a Canada Council grant to write short stories. I read and re-read Philip Roth’s *Goodbye, Columbus* to figure out how one might do that, and started what 30 years later would become the connected short-story collection *One Foot in Heaven*.⁹

By 1978, at the age of 30, I had never written anything creative with the word “Mennonite” in it. But, without stirring up all the anger and angst and cynicism that I associated with my MB upbringing, could I do this? I knew it would need to have food in it. And, since the real history of Mennonites was told by women in the kitchen and not by the historians in the library, the voice would need to be female. My mother and her sisters, especially the strong-willed and outspoken Tante Truda, were obvious choices.

In the end I was saved by a long poem from Uganda, introduced to me by Mary Oyer through Kathy, who had taken an African Arts course as a side to her nursing studies. Okot p’Bitek wrote “The Song of Lawino” in 1966. He wrote in Luo, a decidedly non-mainstream African language, and it was translated, warts and all, directly into English. He called his style “comic singing.” Dancer, drummer, anthropologist, and social critic, he sang recklessly, full of love, and therefore without self-censoring his deepest feelings, about the woes of modernization, of men running off to the big city, running after big city women and taking on big city airs, about corruption and infidelity and salvation, a song full of nostalgia, anger, hope, and, what was this—humor? I devoured the book-length tale-telling song at a sitting. That was me. That was my mother and her sisters. That was all of us. Straight from Luo into English.

And that became Tante Tina, straight from mangled southern Manitoba Mennonite English. She the poetic muse who saved me and

⁹ Regina, SK: Coteau Books, 2005.

became my poetic voice for a decade, the 1980s, when many men were getting self-censored laryngitis. How could a white middle-class male with all the privileges and rights thereto attending have anything important to say at all? How could we get drunk and be miserable and happy without being accused, again, of some form of wrong-thinking or inappropriate feeling? So, I did the only thing I could: I got out of myself, sex change and all. I became an older woman.

My first “real Mennonite” poems, “Tante Tina’s Lament,” “Haenschen’s Blues,” and “Wald Heim,” were published in a Toronto-based but national magazine, *Canadian Forum*, in about 1979.¹⁰

TANTE TINA’S LAMENT

Haenschen is a fool
and I am his mother,
Dear Lord, forgive us both.
Haenschen in the city
struts, like a chicken.
He is wearing a pink shirt
and plaid, big-bottomed hosen.
When he was little,
his bottom was like a zwieback.
His little buns I spanked
and how he crowed!

* * *

He does not listen.
We are poor, he says.
We do not know how people are money making.
He wants to be rich, like the Engliche,
and from mannagruetze to save us all.
His heart is tight as a pfeffernuss.

¹⁰ The *Canadian Forum*, which ceased publication in 2000, was a literary, cultural, and political journal. In its 80-year history the *Forum* published work by leading writers and thinkers. Editors included the literary critic Northrop Frye.

His head is a piroshki
with fruit stuffed.

* * *

Oh my son
my heart so heavy is
thick as glums.
If you come home
it will rise, light and sweet.
I will make you porzeltche for breakfast
and every morning the New Year
we will celebrate.

It ended on an upbeat note. So, not only had I managed to write about Mennonites, I had done so without descending into judgment and recrimination. I had to laugh at the illustrations when the poems appeared in *Canadian Forum*—Old Order Mennonites in black hats and kerchiefs, nothing at all like the Mennonites Tante Tina was talking about. A whole other tribe. Another sign to me that every label—Mennonite, Christian, socialist, scientist, poet—is both an opportunity and a trap, that every boundary we draw around ourselves is both necessary and necessarily renegotiated day by day, fragile, temporary, not to be confused with reality, and usually misinterpreted by those around us.

Along with Kathy, our young children, and the cow poop and blood of my daily work, Tante Tina grounded me in ways that I had not been before. Tante Tina gave me a voice. Did I appropriate that voice? More accurately, I would say she appropriated me. I am, after all, the one who puts on the dress and babushka to wag my finger about Pierre Elliot Trudeau, Salman Rushdie, and the incorrigible stubbornness of Mennonite men. I am the one who loses my sanity and my rational epidemiological voice when she possesses me.

Tina allowed me to accommodate science and storytelling, and, interestingly, helped me regain a voice that was not Tante Tina, to find other ways to speak across chasms of culture, belief, science, and humanity.

I continued to write myself into existence—poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, essays, stories, and tirades. I edited the student paper during vet school and wrote short pieces for it. With a career in veterinary science and a growing family at home, there was no mental or physical space for sustained effort that longer works required.

I recently came across a retelling of the Red Riding Hood story that I wrote in 1981, in which the wolf is rehabilitated after his death, and finally, honored. I wasn't sure what it meant until a couple of years later, when I wrote "The Shadow."¹¹

THE SHADOW

loping over the moon-white ice, my soles barely skimming the
stinging crust. slim, mottled, luminescent trees around me,
supplicating the moon's hem. I thrill unthinking, in free sheer
flight across the black night.

in mid-stride, in the corner of my eye

a shadow flits out of the cold-crackling trees, a lean, loping
fear, it leaps

This is when Kathy heard me whimpering and woke me up, I
explain at the breakfast table, and Matthew, at six years before
the very gates of the kingdom, asks

were you the wolf, Daddy?

So, hearkening to the voices of children, and in the tradition of the priesthood of all believers, I had taken confession and absolved myself.

The mix of literature and veterinary medicine kept me sufficiently off-balance that I could never aspire to that great Mennonite goal—pride in humility. It also helped me keep a sense of humor. In 1983 after a conference

¹¹ Published in *The Impossible Uprooting* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1995).

at the Mennonite Center in Intercourse, Pennsylvania, I received a letter that said “. . . your writings were so delightful I found my interest caught from the beginning. . . . Incidentally, do you treat hogs . . . we could use a good hog vet.”

In 1984, when Larry Danielson wrote and put on a stage adaptation of my poems in Morden, I understood that there might even be a space for my voice somewhere in Southern Manitoba. The poem about Rudy Wiebe (which claims not to be about Rudy Wiebe), “Roots,” I am told, got the biggest applause. I don’t know what that means. I could read into that something about the necessary overthrowing of the elders, but I am getting too far along myself to go along that road.

In 1986, when we were in Indonesia, I attended a conference in Singapore of the Commonwealth Languages and Literatures Association titled “Englishes of the Commonwealth.” I read Tante Tina, and made an immediate connection with the British-Guyanese writer David Dabydeen, who said his own grandmother would tell the same stories, with their own unique brand of English. That same year, I got a handwritten letter from the religion teacher at MBCI who had put the millstone around my neck before I threw myself out into the world. His father was dying, and he had picked up my collection of poems, *Good Housekeeping*,¹² in which I had poured out my feelings at my own father’s death. He wrote to thank me, as it resonated deeply with him. He wrote that he remembered me affectionately. Damn! So much for good guys and bad guys.

While in Indonesia in the mid-’80s, I also began my long, painfully rocky road back to writing fiction. For me, this reflected a need to go beyond the *Good Housekeeping* and Tante Tina family saga to find a narrative that could accommodate the whole messy world in which we lived, to address the larger questions that Mary Bender had sent me into the world to solve. I wrote a draft novella, but given the responsibilities of my job and family, poetry and essays still dominated my public voice. But the scope expanded. Again, Tina, never one to limit her ideas to the kitchen, was helpful.

In 1993, at the twentieth anniversary of the Writers’ Union of Canada, held in Ottawa, I was asked to read “A Request from Tante Tina to the Mennonite Women’s Missionary Society to Put Salman Rushdie on the

¹² Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1983.

Prayer List.”¹³ Graeme Gibson suggested I do it in costume. At the time, I had never done this. So I went room to room in the university dormitory, asking if someone had a dress I could borrow. Then, between the main course and the dessert, I went to the men’s bathroom to change. Apart from the sagging breasts made of hand towels, I was told it was very convincing. I was simply introduced as a woman from southern Manitoba. And the light was poor.

A REQUEST FROM TANTE TINA TO THE MENNONITE
WOMEN’S MISSIONARY SOCIETY TO PUT SALMAN
RUSHDIE ON THE PRAYER LIST

Dear Sisters and Brothers in the Lord.
Sometimes when I am the chickens feeding
and the radio by the barn plays,
even like a Mother Hen the Lord
is me to the kernels of His wisdom guiding.
Many times has the Lord reminded me from
the days in Russia. When the Indians
in Quebec have their guns taken
their graveyard to defend
against a golf course,
I have remembered the Bolsheviks
And how they to our village came
And a factory from the church made.
Ja, but this evening this is not
what I am wanting to say to you.”

The poem goes on to make connections to stories in Russia and adds:

That is why Stalin and the Ayatollah
and even some Christians

¹³ “A Request from Tante Tina to the Mennonite Women’s Missionary Society to Put Salman Rushdie on the Prayer List,” in *The Impossible Uprooting* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1995), 92-94.

do not like stories so much
because they think maybe God
is in the story hiding like meat in a fleisch piroshki,
and when we open the bun,
God is on us checking to ask
how are we caring for the beautiful vineyard?"

Later, I couldn't recall whose dress I had borrowed, and the next morning when I stood up at the annual meeting to declare that I had a woman's dress from the previous night but I couldn't remember her name, the response was predictable.

Once Tina was out of the Kitchen, she opened a great many conversations. She conversed several times with broadcaster Peter Gzowski on CBC. But, more important to me, she was able to chatter on in situations that could have just as easily degenerated to slammed doors and shouting matches. She was invited to speak at several conferences of the Mennonite Economic Development Agency (MEDA), whose members include successful businessmen with whom I have over the years had some strong differences about the accumulation and distribution of wealth. In 2008 Tina in full costume shared a stage in Altona with a very serious Roland Penner, whose Jewish and Mennonite parents were among the founders of the Communist Party of Canada. But Tina could also be a trap. Could I write in my own voice? What language would I use? And I don't mean English or French or German.

I continued to try to reconcile the irreconcilable languages of scholars and poets. If my 1970 poem on death, "Mortal's Prayer," was framed by the Lord's Prayer, the poem that opens my 1995 collection from McClelland and Stewart, *The Time of Our Lives*,¹⁴ is rooted in a celebration of the Now. "I am having the time of my life/digging up an old pine stump/ with my daughter/ in the bright fall sunshine," the poem begins. "Everything I need to know about life/and death is in this moment." The poem ends "as the roots lift free, I am dug in,/rooted,/earthworms, beetles, fungi/bacilli all around me,/ skittling up the spade handle toward me, singing:/Welcome home./Your turn is next." Based on work like this, one of my scientific colleagues called

¹⁴ Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1995.

me a “Nowist.”

Behind the public writing and performing, my underlying angst about the pointlessness of writing, the darkness that surrounds us, the problems of finding the right language—is there a right language?—has continued to plague me. In 1999, apparently trying to reassure me, Julia Kasdorf sent me a quotation from Robert Frost: “The right word, it’s just a matter of life and death; that’s all!” Thanks, Julia. But I am unfair. She did also remind me that when the world got tough, I turned to poetry, not science, to give me courage to keep going.

In 1997, before an international audience of epidemiologists in Paris, and as part of a presentation on complexity and health, I read a poem about Mad Cow Disease, “A Bill from the Power Company,” in which I explored how, even with the best science we have, tragic outcomes can spring from the most noble intentions. The poem resonated, and was later published in a journal called *Preventive Veterinary Medicine*.

Oddly, the path into longer narratives and finding languages that might say what I wanted them to say led through the discovery of the ways in which stories inform science, the selection of which evidence is admissible, and how we make sense of it. It has become clear to me that the need for precise communication in science hides an underlying uncertainty, a conflicted and anxious humanity, and that the flat sharpness of the language is both a strength and a great weakness.

In the last decades, through books like *One Animal Among Many*, *Food Sex and Salmonella*, *The Chickens Fight Back*, and most recently *The Origin of Feces*,¹⁵ I have explored the possibilities of new, integrative ways of seeing, and talking about, the amazing universe we live in. I attempted again to grapple with ecology and death in a poem, “How the Earth Loves You.” The “light will break through,” the poem ends, “and the darkness, together,/and you will understand, finally,/who it is who has loved you/all this time, so well.”¹⁶ Tragedy, love, and open possibilities. I have written less poetry and more prose, partly because I feel as if, in my poetry especially,

¹⁵ *One Animal Among Many* (Toronto: NC Press, 1991); *Food, Sex and Salmonella* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2008); *The Chickens Fight Back* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2007); *The Origin of Feces* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Published in *The Fat Lady Struck Dumb* (London, ON: Brick Books, 2000).

I am repeating myself, and perhaps because, finally, I am able to embrace the complex anguish of the whole world, to love the bad guys as well as the good guys, to rediscover the bad guys and the good guys in everyone, to find languages shared with the species that surround us. Hence, I suppose, my interest in writing Mennonite veterinary murder mysteries, to understand our own complicity in the world we co-create.

It is no coincidence that the stories in *One Foot in Heaven*,¹⁷ and *Fear of Landing*,¹⁸ and in the three novels currently calling me, annoyed that I am not giving them my full attention, constitute a kind of Mennonite family saga, with the same characters growing through the confusion of life. They allow me to explore more fully the web of interactions and co-creation among parents and children, teenagers and chickens, community, history, dead cows, death, the lure of political and economic power, and the ways they are rationalized. These are the same questions I have been working on in my science for the past two decades.

One veterinary student described *The Chickens Fight Back* as a religious book because it so often mentions god and God. I suppose it is, but it is also a science book, a social commentary, and a story book. I have come to value the distinctions less and less. Here is a brief excerpt:

In *1001 Arabian Nights*, Sultan Schahriar feels betrayed by his first wife. He seeks his revenge on women in general by having his grand vizier present him with a fresh bride every night, and then having her strangled (by the grand vizier) the next morning. Scheherazade, beautiful daughter of the grand vizier, decides to put herself on the line for the sake of all women. In a successful, non-violent stratagem, she recruits her less-than-beautiful sister, Dinarzade. Every day, just before dawn, her sister awakens her and asks Scheherazade to tell her a story. The sultan is of course listening in and is left at dawn wanting to hear more. Every day the sultan decides to spare her, and eventually he falls in love, first with Scheherazade's stories and then with her; he abandons his brutal, tyrannical, obsessive plans. She lives a long and meaningful life and is celebrated by young people and peace

¹⁷ Regina, SK: Coteau Books, 2005.

¹⁸ Scottsdale, AZ: Poisoned Pen Press, 2007.

activists the world over.

The tale of Scheherazade is, finally, a tale about all of us. The earth, like Schahriar, has cut the heads off many species before us. Global history is replete with sudden or slow mass extinctions. The earth is literally built from the bones and decomposed molecules of our forebears. We humans, too, have betrayed our hosts and the bacteria who collaborated to make us possible. If we are not soon to go the way of the glyptodont and the pterosaur, then our global human family needs a good dose of psychotherapy—not just any therapy, but a narrative therapy in which we have re-imagined and retold our tale as one of survival, justice, ecological at-home-ness and conviviality. To find this story requires an effort beyond anything we have tried before; like Scheherazade, our lives depend on it.

. . . The biosphere might yet spare us. Or, if the stories don't save us, they will at least, on our deathbed, in the last days of our species, have us saying, "We did quite all right, didn't we? We left a story of ourselves worth telling the universe."¹⁹

As I was preparing for this evening, I lamented to myself how my writing has been asking the same questions again and again. Is there indeed nothing new under the sun? Is *The Chickens Fight Back* another version of the "Brotherly Philippic"? And the answer, love or die, the same?

The comfort I get in this life is from the immediate, the world in which I am daily immersed, family, friends, animals, trees, sun, children, baking pies, cooking supper, drinking wine, thinking about the true meaning of excrement. The novel *Fear of Landing* opens:

There is something warm and comforting about doing an autopsy on a cow. It's real. You don't have to worry that they don't speak English or Flat German. You don't have to speak Indonesian or Javanese. You forget about your addiction to chewing sunflower seeds. All you need is a sharp knife and all your senses on heightened alert: touch, sight, smell, even sound.

¹⁹ *The Chickens Fight Back*, 224; 228.

You lightly brush your hand over the coarse hair along the belly, feeling the stiff hairs flip back against your palm, ruminating on the life of this beast, one of those infinitely curious bovines, dwelling in her ever-present years with a kind of dim-witted patience that sometimes passes for wisdom. Perhaps, in a devious and fast world, this is, indeed, a kind of wisdom. . . .²⁰

Now, if I look back over this journey, my journey, the journey of humanity from the earth without form, from the darkness and the waters, I am amazed. Another sonnet:

FLYING

We did not know to what we were committed when we stood up that day, the rush to dance, heirs to the earth, like fish lifting from muck, on wings. That feeling of how good it was, was what we had, the rush into the bronchioles, flushed with the burst of pent-up possibility, of what-a-chance-we-have. Reeling

in air, we swaggered and bred, put on airs, strutting our songs, soaring up on wafts of gnosis, among the clouds, and then the blur of birth and nesting, seeking after food, doing good, writing and righting wrongs, a lifetime of being primates, a little lower than the angels, at home on earth.

But for a moment, now, we pause, in the pale of late midwinter, amazed at what we've wrought, to what we have committed, our fire transformed, made real, a place of woods and streams, small animals, children, where grace in flight sings songs of err, and flight, and err, and flight again, our fears

airborne by alchemies of love, our certainties upturned by drafts, the only cure for life, our friends, still swooping, synchronously, into the falling evening air.²¹

²⁰ *Fear of Landing*, 1.

²¹ *Rhubarb*, Issue 29 (Spring 2012), 6.

Am I asking the same questions as I did in the “Brotherly Philippic”? Perhaps. But the response is different: In 2002 *The Conrad Grebel Review* published my “A New National Anthem: The Morning Shower Version,” which fumbles toward some new kind of answer:

A NEW NATIONAL ANTHEM:
THE MORNING SHOWER VERSION

I sing of myself in the shower

* * *

I sing in tears of love
of my germanic heritage, four-part,
six-part multi-hearted harmony:
beethoven, bach, my grandparents,
adolf hitler, dietrich bonhoeffer and albert einstein,
the millions who were massacred,
and the millions who made us who we are
because they lived. I celebrate the mennonites
who would not kill and the anarchists who killed them.
We are a cornucopia of history’s compostibles.
recycled rage, wisdom, control, chaos, a choir
of ayatollahs, borks, falwells, herzogs,
netanyahus, arafats, stalins, maos, john-pauls,
binladens, gueveras, mandelas, ghandis, mother theresas;
I sing of roots, equality, peasants, pageantry,
leaves, earth, & never again
from generation to generation.

* * *

Let us create a movement and call it
one-quarter chinese one-eighth black
some part indian-semitic-arab a pinch of aboriginal

some russian mongolian a bit of monkey
and a little white
is beautiful.
Let us wiggle our butts,
sing our faith and the delights of our impurity.
Let us dance our despair.
Let us love ourselves,
all of us, in the deluge,
in the shower.

Sing now, at last,
to the lambs we were,
what we lost sight
of, have become,
little tygers, burning bright
our might undone, down
on our knees

the sky a shivery blue clean,
the crackling sun,
sizzling on this four-dog day,
Ra Ra
welcoming us to another broken
dazzling day.²²

A Postlude

In July of 1968, in the midst of some of my darkest hours, I took comfort in a ratty copy of *Gitanjali, Song Offerings*, by the Nobel-prize winning Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, with a preface by W.B. Yeats. I had picked it up at a street vendor in Calcutta. I carried it with me everywhere. Once, book in hand, I sat staring out to sea on a wide, hazy beach south of Orissa. A businessman from Calcutta, walking past in his suit, barefoot in the sand, saw what I held in my hand. He asked if I knew the melodies to these songs. I said that I did not. He sat next to me, closed his eyes, and sang several of the

²² *The Conrad Grebel Review* 20, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 65-69.

songs to me, and then continued on his way. It was a small gift, one human to another. For my own writing, for my life, that is the best I can hope for, to pass on these small gifts that make it possible to go on.²³

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²³ Several fragments included here have been pillaged from essays written for *The New Quarterly* and *Rhubarb*.—Author.

Jennifer M. McBride. *The Church for the World: A Theology of Public Witness*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

The Church for the World began as a dissertation but also has roots in Jennifer McBride's participation in two non-traditional ecclesial communities: the Eleuthero Community in Portland, Maine, and the Southeast White House in Washington, DC. McBride engages the praxis of these communities through the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. She hopes to extend Bonhoeffer's thought into the contemporary context of the United States.

The book's tone is communicated well when the author declares that "My concern is not whether the church should be involved in public life but *how* . . ." (4). A subsequent feature of her methodology is Bonhoeffer's concern for the church's concrete communication of the Word of God. This manifests itself most distinctly in the third part of the book, where McBride employs ethnographic tools to examine the communities mentioned above. Her goal is to describe how American Protestants might offer a non-triumphalist witness in a pluralist setting. This draws her reading of Bonhoeffer beyond his own context and provides the book's contextual grist.

In the first part of *The Church for the World* the author contends that the witness of American Protestants, both conservative and liberal, is troubled by their assumption that they possess privileged knowledge of morality and truth. Yet Karl Barth, one of Bonhoeffer's mentors, unmasks such attempts as religious self-exoneration, an evasion of complicity in sin and injustice. Further, the Protestant misconstrual of witness as claims to moral or epistemological superiority misses what Bonhoeffer believes is the true form of public witness—incarnate presence.

The second part does the theological heavy lifting. Following Bonhoeffer, McBride argues that Christ's assumption of fallen human nature implies divine repentance. The work of Christ is apocalyptic, transforming reality. The church participates in it by taking the form of the crucified Christ through confession and repentance. This is the church's definitive work, and public recognition and turning from sin is the key to McBride's appropriation of Bonhoeffer. It is how Christian public witness avoids triumphalism. The third part of the book analyzes how this has been practically worked out in two communities.

The Church for the World is a timely and good book. The combination of reading Bonhoeffer closely and considering real instantiations of confession as public witness is welcome. In this way the book fits with a wider contemporary conversation about the overlap between theology and ethnography and the topic of ecclesial repentance, even though official examples of the latter are not discussed in depth. It is particularly interesting to see how the connections between Bonhoeffer's work and the current interest in apocalyptic among theologians enliven McBride's analysis of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*.

Yet I am unconvinced that Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship* should be marginalized; it can be read in greater continuity with *Ethics* and the prison writings than McBride allows. Also, the bones of a dissertation show through the skin of her book; some chapters remain saddled with the clunky, self-referential language of academia. Similarly, though the anthropological methodology is welcome, detailed quotations and minutia test the reader's interest.

Though many will applaud the goals of the Eleuthero Community, the Southeast White House, and communities like them, the question remains why these sorts of communities are not representative of the dominant form of ecclesial life. Also, why do they seem to be started by middle-class folks who move into urban neighborhoods? Where did they come from, and why is their original context not in need of incarnational witness? What would it be like to live out Bonhoeffer's theology—focused on racial reconciliation, environmental stewardship, peacemaking, or whatever the context demands—in the suburban cul-de-sac? Why does one have to move somewhere else to embody public witness? These questions aren't meant as a critique of the earnestness of such communities, but it is hard not to wonder if this sort of rootless 'incarnation' is somehow not the avoidance of either the troubles or the blandness of home. McBride's analysis is overwhelmingly sympathetic; a critical edge might have explored these questions more fully.

Anabaptists will find *The Church for the World* interesting. (McBride seems aware of this stream of Christianity. She reports, for instance, that she joined Peter Frick and James Reimer in Europe for a Bonhoeffer Study Tour.) Her work should suggest to Anabaptists, and Mennonites in particular, that vigorous theology is not divorced from practical expressions

of peacemaking and reconciliation. The book also sensitizes us to how moralistic fundamentalism characterizes some articulations of Anabaptist ethics, in both traditional and progressive circles; it reminds us that rigorous ethics can become an ideology that takes the place of God's self-revelation; and it chastens an activist mentality that assumes that once we know how we are to live we can go about it as though God does not exist.

None of those things, however, is really what the author intends. Despite a need for refinement, McBride's book is valuable for its intended purpose: it provides, in theoretical and practical ways, a vision for non-triumphalist witness in a pluralist context.

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Daniel Colucciello Barber. *On Diaspora: Christianity, Religion, and Secularity*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011.

It is tempting to accept the terms of a conversation when it is already in progress. Arguments over the relationship between and dominance of science, philosophy, and theology characterize much of the modern period. Entering these debates has often meant making prior commitments to things like Reason, Nature, or God. Daniel Barber's *On Diaspora* challenges the terms of that debate. The author interprets the tradition of the West, from Christianity to secularism, as being consistently marked by the logic of transcendence. The invitation of *On Diaspora* is to the task of thinking otherwise.

According to Barber the logic of transcendence influences the world through authoritative claims of something *separate* and *unaffected* by the relations *in* the world. This could be a transcendent God, an edenic or utopian vision, pure Reason, Nature, or anything else that defines reality but is not itself put into play with the relations it defines. Transcendence then can be thought of, perhaps simplistically, as fixed content. Immanence, by contrast, "begins as a manner of relation" (1). Nothing is unaffected because

there is no separate plane, only various manners in which things relate.

On Diaspora is important in how it mounts a case identifying transcendent logic as a key component in destructive tendencies of the Christian (and secular) West. Barber spends the bulk of his work tracing the way that transcendent logic was articulated through Saint Paul, the rise of orthodox Christianity, and the development of secularism. In all these expressions identity was fixed by an appeal to a transcendent 'other'. This appeal, in turn, fixed the identity of those who did not fit within the claims of the transcendent (supercessionism being a key component of these expressions). In the case of Christianity, this gave rise to determining anything non-Christian as a heresy or false religion. With the development of secularism, the excluded form was unified as the inferior realm of religion in general.

The concern throughout this book is the manner in which expressions of transcendent thinking entrench dominating ideological and social structures. There is no function within transcendent paradigms that allows for overturning what is perceived to be sacred, that is, unaffected on another plane.

Barber's response, then, is not yet another rejection of the current understanding of reality, which will likely extend and employ transcendent logic, but rather a fundamental shift in how to think reality. To think immanence is to accept that nothing remains unaffected, and thus key to his claim is taking seriously our inheritance of Christianity, which includes secularism. Barber denies any notion that there is a pristine form of Christianity to recover; he also denies creation *ex nihilo* under the same logic. But he asserts that the movement of chaos and creation is itself eternal, and he calls for the ongoing (diasporic) work of decomposing sick and destructive forms of thought and life while recomposing or re-staging them in the name of health.

It will be interesting to see what place Barber's work will find in larger theological conversations. To call it 'heresy' or 'unorthodox' will already be to submit to a logic that Barber is trying to think otherwise. There will certainly be pushback as to whether the basic premise of immanence is required to achieve the sort of challenge to (destructive) transcendent authorities that is a chief aim of the book.

John Howard Yoder, a key figure in *On Diaspora*, clearly works in a more ‘materialist’ mode than many other traditional theologians, but he does not engender the sort of fundamental shift that Barber advocates. In fairness, the latter does not claim that his account is embedded within Yoder’s thinking. So the question, again, will be whether Barber’s move to immanence is indeed necessary.

Barber is neither friend nor foe of Christianity. He invites readers to think along with him, to consider whether there is another way of thinking better suited to identify and address the destructive forces at work around us. The claim that should linger in the minds of Christians and theologians as they work through his book is whether the logic of immanence may indeed be what best facilitates the call of Jesus towards enemy-love in which no boundary is final and life remains eternally open to re-creation. And if this might be the case, then what does that tell us about orthodox (transcendent) theology?

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Tom Long. *What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012.

Tom Long, the Bandy Professor of Preaching at Candler School of Theology, has written a book on the theodicy problem particularly for preachers. It is not a philosophical examination that tries to solve the problem of evil or to defend God with logical formulas. Rather, it is about what preachers can and should say about how faith in God can be plausible in the face of suffering in the world.

In chapter one Long examines how the question of theodicy arose. He begins with the massive earthquake at Lisbon, Portugal on All Saints Day, November 1, 1755 that turned the city to rubble. In an age of reason, this earthquake made no sense. It shook the foundations of both reason and faith, and the old ways of thinking about both. Prior to the Enlightenment

all disasters were viewed as coming directly from the hand of God; Lisbon did not fit divine causality. From the ashes of Lisbon arose philosophical and theological reasoning for natural disasters and human suffering.

Chapter two moves the problem of evil and suffering from philosophers to the questioning person in the pew. Bart Ehrman, a New Testament scholar who wrote *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer*, exemplifies a thoughtful Christian whose has struggled with the issue. Ehrman could no longer hold together four basic truth claims forming the classic theodicy problem: 1) There is a God; 2) God is all powerful; 3) God is loving and good; 4) There is innocent suffering. Long appreciates Ehrman's clarity but critiques the lack of theological imagination keeping him stuck in the wooden box of rational logic. Ehrman represents many in the pew who have experienced tragedy and suffering, and who find making sense of it strains all (theo)logic.

Chapter three proposes that theodicy is neither merely theoretical nor an issue to be avoided. We must speak a wisdom that touches the depth of human suffering; we must address the problem of evil and suffering from a faith perspective. The God of Reason and the Enlightenment, the first cause of existence, is not the God of the Bible, whose existence is not up for grabs or proven at the end of a logical syllogism.

We are introduced to “fellow pilgrims” on the theodicy road in chapter four. We meet J.L. Mackie, an outspoken atheist who dismantles the logic of theodicy and devastated the “free will” argument; Alvin Plantinga, a Christian theologian who critiques Mackie's definition of God's unlimited omnipotence that grounded his argument; Rabbi Harold Kushner, who questions both the very omnipotence of God and the view of suffering as a “teaching tool” for building moral character; process theologians like John Cobb and David Ray Griffin, who redefine God's power in terms of persuasion within a universe of changing processes; and John Hick, who re-examines Irenaeus's free will argument, in which God created not an ideal paradise but a world with risks, challenges, and some creative distance between God and humanity ripe for “soul-making.”

In an interlude Long explores the book of Job for what it has to say about evil and suffering. Then, in his final chapter the author uses Jesus' parable of the wheat and weeds as a biblical story that can address three

important questions related to the subject: 1) God, did you cause this?; 2) Can we fix it?; and 3) Will it always be this way? In the end Long describes God as a warrior of love out to defeat evil and suffering in the world.

The author has provided preachers with a helpful resource on dealing with the problem of evil and suffering in a congregational context. Pastors can move beyond providing a “ministry of presence” to facing the challenging questions and helping people hold onto faith in the midst of suffering. Long notes both the strengths and inadequacies with various approaches to theodicy. Yet his own biblical/theological answers (e.g., God is always present, God is not the cause of evil, God will be victorious over evil in the end) can also be found wanting. I would like to see more clearly how he uses “theological imagination” in addressing theodicy. Long will not satisfy those looking for an airtight, (theo)logical approach to theodicy, but he will assist preachers in proclaiming hope in the midst of sometimes overwhelming evil and suffering.

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