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.

The Conrad Grebel Review 31, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 185-207.

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 kleer 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 Englische,
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 re-negotiated 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]

A University Professor Emeritus at the University of Guelph, David Waltner-Toews is the author of seventeen books of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction.

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