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INTRODUCTION

Mennonites have a long history of profound commitment to their faith so that, from their founding in mid-sixteenth century Europe, impoverishment, suffering, and steady movement were their lot. They spread, over the years, through Switzerland, the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, Russia and Ukraine, to the United States, and finally into Canada, the earliest arriving here in the mid-eighteenth century, and more following well into the twentieth, until there are now more than one hundred thousand spread across our country. The Mennonite beliefs in adult baptism and in communal living, in pacifism, and living one's religion may have often set them at odds with their ruling governments and their neighbours, but at the same time, these beliefs also create close-knit, caring communities that provide a kind of physical and emotional security among its children otherwise hard to find in the modern Western world.

The writers who are represented in this anthology were all raised as Mennonites and share that troubled past and the beauty of the lived faith. They are all, regardless of where they were born, also today residents of British Columbia, so that we have something unique in this anthology: a mixture of the memory of the shared past, and of Canadian prairie farm and/or Mennonite village, and the damp, the rainforests, the mountains of B.C., and the vast and cosmopolitan city of Vancouver.

These stories and poems record the present that has grown out of the past: transformed as it often is, in men, into the ability to do and to love to do, for example, woodwork, things with the hands that fix and create the home and the shop, and for women, the garden, both vegetable and flower, and the tender, yet common-sensical caring for the one or two children — instead of the required six or ten of the past — of the modern Canadian family. All of them learned early the necessity of work and are willing to do it; only some, helplessly, question work as a value in itself. Nearly all the writers included here drop Biblical references, pious sayings of the church elders and of their parents or grandparents, and the oft-repeated teachings of childhood, often in the Low German in which originally they would have been said. Sometimes these are used with reverence, sometimes with humour, sometimes with a kind of head-shaking disbelief at such useless faith. But also with a hint of wonder that might be the deepest admiration.

The more traditional communities, though, turning their faces away from “progress” of all kinds, tended to ignite dissent in the breasts of some of their less conformist children. At its worst, as poet Robert Martens puts it in “a little mennonite goes a long way”:

. . . everyone could use a
little mennonite at their side. dressed
in black. hollow-eyed and tight-lipped.
gloom pressing like anvils on his shoulders.
recondite in homilies of grief . . .

The writers in this anthology are often torn between the two sides of the proverbial coin: the god, peace and home-loving sim-

ple ideals, and the too-tight rein kept on ideas and experience outside this realm. It is no wonder then, that today, the well-educated, prosperous, and sometimes faith-denying offspring of the Mennonites should turn to literature to express their very mixed feelings about both that past, and its influences on them, and the influence on them of the way the faith has been “lived,” with the desire to tease out its meaning for the modern Canadian. These writers record and witness, laugh and sometimes weep, over the past that formed them. There are no stories of hate, or of rage at all the pleasure forbidden, lost and denied by such a faith, and only the occasional expression of bitterness; there is a sadness, a yearning for the beauty of the simple certainty left behind forever, for the honesty of it, and even for the pain such simple honesty brought or caused — the unimaginable suffering of the European past that cannot be denied, that must be assimilated by even the coolest teen, or the doctorate-owning, university-professor poet. And always with that unshakeable nostalgia for the imagined perfection of belief. How to use all of this? What to make of it? It is unlikely the answers to such questions will come from pastors or grandparents or history books. What is required is this — this anthology of first-rate poems and stories — where Mennonite artists struggle for meaning, for a truth, and to tell it *slant*. Give this to the children to read.

— Sharon Butala
March 29, 2006

Safe Places On Earth

- OSCAR MARTENS -

“No mercy without imagination”

— SOMEBODY

I've been from coast to coast, crossing borders in trucks or rattling motorhomes. I have stolen lunch money, firearms, and clothes from a laundromat dryer. Once I rolled a paperboy. I have been kicked in the head by a hooker I tried to rob in Denver. I lay in the dirt while she squatted over me and washed my cuts with her piss, stuffing a dirty American twenty in my mouth. I am the wrong kind of famous in Montana and Nova Scotia.

My life is rich and meaningless.

Rivers, MB

Combines, seen from the bus window, sweep along the dry prairie stubble, their wide mouths pulling in straight, flat tongues of wheat.

Coming into Rivers in perfect time, the tail end of summer, harvest time, with gears spinning in their hot grease all day, slowing only when the women come in pickups to bring hot meals in tin-foil.

Stepping off the bus into the dusty heat, walking back over the creek, up the hill, down the gravel lane between the windbreak where the dogs begin to bark and run towards me.

Another yard light switches on, another in the kitchen, throwing a square of light onto the yard. Standing on the front steps, hoping the Dycks will remember me from three summers ago.

Mrs. Dyck silent behind the screen door in a shadow while she puts her glasses on. Pushing the door towards me and pulling me into the parallel dimension of the rural Manitoba farmhouse, unchanged from one year to the next, bible verses hanging from small plaques over the kitchen table, butterfly fridge magnets holding up the shopping list, the smells of summer sausage, *zwieback* and *rollkuchen*.

Strangers

There are three types of strangers: the complete stranger, the perfect stranger and the total stranger. I am all of these.

The complete stranger has nothing and that is exactly what he needs. He has appeared and will appear in the future as someone who belongs exactly where he is at any given time.

You don't look twice at his face because he has always been there and when he leaves you will not notice. When he is gone you will not remember.

The perfect stranger is almost always grey and when he is not grey he is beige. These are the primary colours of the man-made world in which he can easily hide.

In order to hide from you, he would sit right next to you while grey thoughts looped in his brain, as he sat with grey posture and matched the grey faces of those around him.

The total stranger is the sum of the parts of his life.

Rivers, MB

The Dycks had enough help for harvest that first summer but they let me do odd jobs like bringing meals to the men or painting fence posts.

I spent time around the house, snooping through their things. In the sewing room, on the top shelf, I found back issues of the *Mennonite Reporter* from '72 on.

There were Mennonites everywhere from Skookumchuck to Madagascar. I had discovered a network of gullible do-gooder pacifists ready to be exploited. The Dycks were delighted with my interest in the Mennonite church.

When I had enough information, I began writing reference letters for myself. I started with names:

Peter Dyck
Irene Friesen
Agnes Paetkau
Bernie Wiens
Henry Loewen
John Rempel
Elmwood Mennonite Church
"Sing to the Lord" Mennonite Choir

Dear Bernie (pastor of target church):

You probably don't remember me but we met at the '82 General Conference in Wichita, Kansas (lie) and participated in a discussion group on "The Healing Power of Christ" (lie). I have fond memories of our fellowship and sharing (big lie).

I am writing this letter to introduce you to John Rempel, a dedicated member of our congregation who has decided to move to Calgary in order to be closer to his sister who is ill (lies, lies, lies).

John has just been through a troubling time (no job, no money, no future) and would appreciate your support (how about a place to stay).

Many Conference members here have spoken of your generosity and unfailing stewardship (meaningless Christian buzzword which will induce guilt if John (me) does not receive assistance).

I'm sure John will benefit greatly from your guidance (implied request and assumption that Bernie will help).

Yours

Sincerely (tee hee),

Henry Loewen

Elmwood Mennonite Church

Language

The alphabet is my best weapon.
It's all there.



abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz



That's all you need
to slip through bars
or start a holy war.

Mennonite ideology

Mennonites believe in God. I believe in Mennonites, but through my reading I have come to a disturbing revelation. Modern Mennonite faith is based on prudence. The original movement was not. Early converts ran from disgruntled clergy who wanted to stretch them on racks, castrate them with white-hot pincers and scrape out their eyes with wire brushes.

It has become a comfortable religion. Those who met in caves and shared the dangerous new words would be disappointed to find their pale followers clinging to ancient ideals that have become easy to hold, even fashionable.

I doubt that you could sell the religion in its original form.

Believe this, even though they might torture you. Say this, even though you might die. Untested faith leaves them spiritually fat.

Drowning

How could you call it murder? I was holding his head. Underwater. And I kept holding it and I remember it was very hot for early morning and the water was just over my waist in the murky muddy Assiniboine so that I couldn't see him beneath the surface.

How long did I hold him after he had stopped thrashing? Half an hour or an hour? How could it have been anything but peaceful, letting go, letting him drift free of my hands, his hair through my fingers?

Camp

The camp is dark except for one light at the main centre. It's a Mennonite camp, which means that I must stay in the empty counsellors' quarters till midnight, then stumble to her mobile without a flashlight and hiss under her window screen.

In the morning I watch from the arena fence as she drives in horses from pasture, her chin down slightly, warmed by the rough Carhartt, small branches slapping her chinks. She dismounts the horse named 3-10 and begins to cut away horses for the first ride of the day.

An old canner named May, who has become fond of me over the last few days, wanders over to me. Flies eat her eye-sand and I can tell by the lazy way she blinks that she's tired. She moves away when Michelle comes to get her for the ride, but Michelle just keeps walking after her, walking, as I see her patience and love her for it, walking.

Things I miss

- 1.) My name
- 2.) The luxury of answering the door
- 3.) The luxury of answering the phone

- 4.) The luxury of arousing suspicion
- 5.) The luxury of telling the truth
- 6.) The exotic and comforting mediocrity of beef stroganoff, venetian blinds and a full bag of grass clippings by the curb
- 7.) Credit cards

Fisherman's Wharf

Which one was it? Rows and rows of dumpy plywood shacks that floated. She slowed in the middle of Dock "C" in front of the smallest one, painted like a zebra. It was refreshing or insane, just like the occupant, and as we got on and sent a set of oily ring waves across Fisherman's Wharf I thought of our position on the water, floating on top of something huge, like a water bug must feel on a lake, buoyed by tension only, and that solid land was not real, but rather a large floating raft constantly moving and things were more fragile and temporary than they seemed. I had all those thoughts waiting for Ms. Klassen to unlock the hatch and when she finally did I grabbed her ass with both hands as she bent over to step in and forgot about my lake-bug existence.

Britannia Yacht Club

There's a place where you can go to stand and wait as they pass in their boats. And if you've had a chance to shave and comb your hair and are wearing clothes that aren't obviously dirty, you might be asked to crew. A woman might come over as her boat is being refuelled and invite you onboard.

And moments later you're wrapping rope around a capstan and telling ferocious lies, inventing new extended families and an intricate personal history.

The captain decides to give up the race you have entered. Cut-throat crazy rich people slice past on either side as the helmsman sets a course for the islands where you drop anchor.

Several wine bottles later, you fling the bones of the BBQ chicken overboard and loll about in your fattened state. The anchor is pulled, the sun is setting, a course is set, and the boat is moving slowly, one sail only.