MENNONITE LIFE

DECEMBER 1994

In This Issue

The Search for Self and the Search for Ancestors

This arts issue features the self-explorations of a writer and a visual artist and poems by four Mennonite poets—one new to *Mennonite Life*.

Laura Weaver, associate professor of English at the University of Evansville, might admit that her continuing analysis of the covering she wore for the last time in 1967 has become an obsession, but as her article shows, one that yields provocative analysis, including that of interested colleagues.

The featured visual artist is John Blosser who has taught art at Hesston College since 1978; he traces the dynamic between his art and his life, how one Mennonite artist works, thinks, and changes, caught between fear and hope.

Elmer Suderman, retired professor at Gustavus Adolphus College, longtime contributor to this journal, offers a longer poem and family pictures saving the history of his father's run on the Cherokee Strip.

Jean Janzen of Fresno, California, who teachers at Fresno Pacific College and Eastern Mennonite University, and Naomi Reimer-Duke of Tacoma, Washington, both went to Poland in search of family history; they record in their respective poems glimpses of their journeys. But they are very different poets. Jean Janzen's specialty is the tight lyric and the image of hope: "that final restoration,/ all of dancing home." Naomi Reimer-Duke's forte is attention to *place*, the photographic record of details.

Janice Waltner Sevilla's first poems here reflect her candid responses to a life she has learned to live with a disability, observations from her nursing home environment in Goessel, Kansas.

Raylene Hinz-Penner

MENNONITE LIFE

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Front Cover
Long Market Street in Danzig

Back Cover
Mennonite church in Schoensee, Molotschna, Ukraine

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Writing about the Covering and Plain Clothes

as a Mennonite "Family" Possession

by Laura H. Weaver

> After the dress was put on, the cape was slipped over the head and fitted over the breasts. Then the belt was snapped at the waist. The long hair was combed, formed into a long roll, and wound in a circle to form a bun. Finally, the cap was placed on the head, straight pins were used to secure it, and the strings were placed inside the neck of the dress.

Thirty years after I consistently followed the steps in that procedure (with its twin dimensions of routine daily preparation and religious ritual) I am still talking and writing about the experience (especially the cap), and I'll probably continue to do so. During the last fifteen years I have been giving papers and writing essays defining plainness from a child's point of view; contrasting the image of femininity taught to me as a conservative Mennonite child with the one depicted in children's books about girls; reporting my changes in caps, hairstyles, and dresses; and describing other people's perceptions of me first as a plain and then as a non-plain person.

Sometimes I speculate about the reasons for my continuing interest in a personal, detailed treatment of this topic: significance of corners on the cap, white vs. black strings, and amount of hair exposed. Is it related to my academic field, which is not sociology, religion, or psychology, but literature and composition? Or is it related to gender? (Do Mennonite men speak and write about their past experiences with plain clothes? Or, since men's distinctive clothing—limited to the suit—did not include hairstyle and an official head covering, was the change less traumatic for them?) I also wonder whether mine is a common memory among women who once wore a cap and plain clothes. Or has my obsession with caps and plain clothes been influenced by my having lived outside Mennonite communities for 27 of these 30 years? Unlike women who experienced those changes as a group in Mennonite conferences such as Lancaster and Virginia, I experienced most of them alone. Might my memory be individually shaped ("fashioned" hardly seems an appropriate word!) by a Mennonite in exile? This essay is now (in its root meaning) an "assay," a tentative effort, an attempt to discover the reasons for my engagement in that topic.

I began wearing the cap and plain clothes when I became a church member at the age of twelve, and I continued the practice as a student at Manor-Millersville High School (PA), Eastern Mennonite College, and the University of Pennsylvania; and as a teacher at Belleville (PA) Mennonite High School and Eastern Mennonite College. During that time I began imitating the hairstyles and caps of girls and women in more "liberal" conferences: gradually more hair was exposed at the neck, the cap decreased in size, and the cape dress was replaced by a simple shirtwaist dress. I stopped wearing the cap regularly when I began teaching at Bluffton College in 1962, and a year or so later I had my hair cut for the first time. After that I wore the cap only infrequently when I returned to Pennsylvania for visits; I wore it for the last time at my father's funeral in 1967—in retrospect, an unintended symbolic act.

During those years I recorded my thoughts about plain clothes only once in an unpublished journal sketch (sometime between 1958 and 1962) contrasting Mennonite Laura with Lutheran Laura, the self that emerged when I wore my Lutheran cousin's clothes during visits in her home. Why, then, did I later begin writing personal essays about the cap and plain clothes? Several immediate circumstances, I think, led to my beginning to write during 1978-1980. In 1977 (after teaching with a master's degree earlier and then returning to graduate school) I completed a Ph.D., and in 1978 I assumed my first post-Ph.D. teaching position. Although I enjoyed doing research and writing the dissertation, I discovered that writing personal essays was a relief from scholarly writing. Ironically, my dissertation topic probably helped to propel me into personal reflection. In my dissertation I had written about the divided-self theme in British playwright and novelist David Storey's works. As I analyzed Storey's ambivalence about his mining family and community, I wondered whether I was writing about Storey or Laura Weaver; I thought of my own ambivalence about my background, especially plain clothes.

Another dissertation-related reason for my personal-experience writing consisted of my post-Ph.D. self-scrutiny about teaching positions. Why had I delayed my return to graduate school and, consequently, entered a limited literature market? In writing my second personal essay—for a Modern Language Association book on the experi-

ences of women who did not go immediately from college to the Ph.D.—I found a reason: not in marriage and children but in my need to establish an identity as a no-cap woman.

After obtaining the Ph.D., I developed another motivation for writing about the cap and plain clothes. The complicated metamorphosis of the cap, ending with my eventual de-capping—which had taken a number of years—had ended. While going through those changes, I hadn't stopped to analyze my experiences. But later I needed to articulate their significance. The writing of these essays, a re-enactment of the de-capping, constituted (at least initially) a rite of passage.

Beyond the immediate were more complex reasons. Although I no longer wore a cap and plain clothes, they still existed in historical records: the last version of the cap—a small one—in a box in my closet: photographs in yearbooks and in my family's and friends' collections. For example, on a wall in Mother's bedroom are a number of photographs, including several of me with a cap; and, for a long time, in her living room was still a photograph of a capped Laura. So each time I went home to visit, I saw my earlier self.

But not just artifacts, the cap and plain clothes are potent symbols whose power lingers even after the specific practices disappear. To conservative Mennonites, the presence of the cap meant sobriety, obedience, acceptance of limits; its absence suggested the possibility of sensuality, independence, rebellion against limits. And in the groups in which I grew up (both Old Order Mennonite and Lancaster Conference), strings were an important part of its effectiveness. We were taught, "When the strings go, everything does." The rationale was clear: in order for tie-strings to be included, the cap had to be rather large. If the tie-strings were omitted, the cap could be made smaller, the hair could show at the neck, and the hairstyle could be more versatile. Then the woman could take off the cap more easily and go to places she wouldn't go and do things she wouldn't do while wearing it. Thus, the disappearance of the strings would ultimately mean the loss of important Mennonite values. Because plain clothes and especially the cap had such power to set the wearer apart from the dominant culture, I could not *not* write about them.

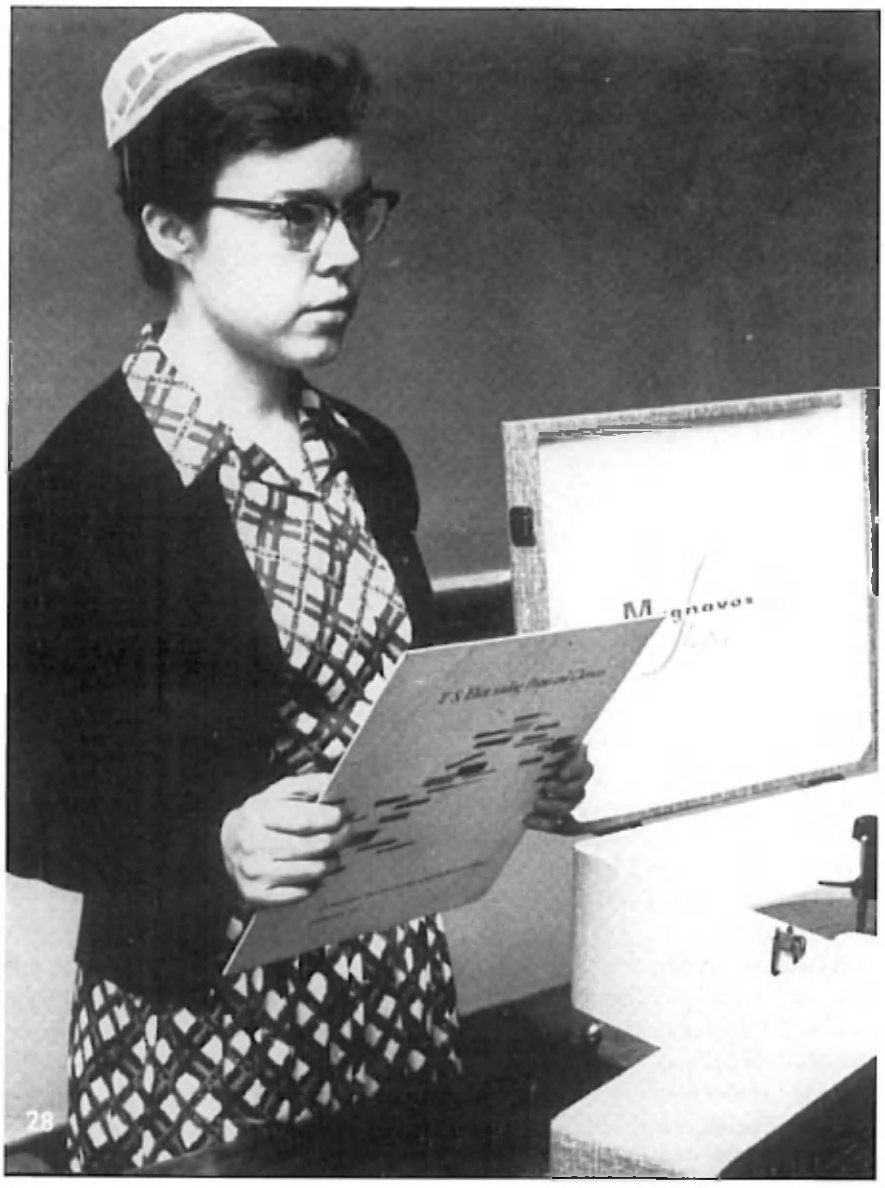
High school graduation 1949

Ironically, the cap itself, an object carrying immense symbolic weight, possessed some mundane features and moments. It became a routine part of our day. In the morning we put it on with our other clothing: lingerie, stockings, dress, and sweater or coat; at night we placed it, along with glasses and wristwatch, on a dresser top, or we hung it on a dresser or door knob. And each individual cap had a limited life. After being used for a while, it became soiled from hair oil and perspiration and needed to be washed and pressed. When it wore out, we bought a new one. Like old shoes, the old cap was worn when we worked in the kitchen or the garden and was eventually thrown away. The new one was worn outside the home. I recall other details: the use of a safety pin at the end of untied strings to keep them tucked inside the back of the dress and (when I was a student at the University of Penn-

sylvania) my strategy to protect it from being crushed by my scarf: I folded the cap, pinned it inside my coat, and put on the scarf. When I arrived at school, I took off the scarf and pinned the cap on my head. When I was ready to go home, I again pinned the cap inside my coat. All of these actions I performed perfunctorily.

Despite those routines, we were, of course acutely conscious of the cap's significance: not only its power to distinguish us from the world—to determine what we could and could not do—but also its ritualistic function in demonstrating women's position (beneath God, Christ, and man) and their prescribed mode of prayer. For example, for morning prayers (when we were still in our housecoats) we placed it on our uncombed hair; for evening prayers (after we had undressed and put on a nightgown) we put on the cap again; and sometimes for mealtime prayers (if we had just washed our hair) we placed it on the wet, uncombed long hair.

That symbolic power continued even after I did not wear the cap. I remember two episodes in particular. The first occurred—years after I had last worn it—during a week-long visit to my relatives, many of whom still wear it. One night, before beginning to undress, I instinctively raised my hand to take off a cap. Having seen the cap as the norm during that visit, I apparently perceived myself as a cap wearer. Another occasion demonstrated my inability to treat the cap lightly. For a Halloween party during graduate school, I decided to wear a Mennonite cap and a friend's army jacket—a dramatic juxtaposition, I thought. The contrast was designed, I think, to show that the two worlds reflected in that juxtaposition could never co-exist comfortably. But before I arrived at the party, I took off the cap and put it in my purse. Clearly, my pairing of these two items had not been a neutral depiction of contrasting values. I discovered that I could not wear the cap for other than its intended use; it was not just a piece of net to be treated as part of a costume. (Interestingly, I had no problem with wearing the army jacket, probably because I did not respect it as I did the cap).



Teacher at Eastern Mennonite College 1958-1962

The power of the cap and plain clothes not only affects ex-wearers but also stimulates the imagination of others to whom we tell our stories. My experience has been communicated to a few other people who have then referred to it in their writing. Their responses, in turn, direct my attention to the topic again. For example, my apparent need to find a new identity, in the change from plain to fancy clothes, was described by Thomas E. Sullenberger (a former colleague at Southwest Missouri State University and now a professor at Southeastern Louisiana University) in the following unpublished poem, written sometime between 1970-1973:

Laura Weaver

Laura—Weaver—desperate weaver . . .
Of new coats.

Whole closets of new color.

What the hell, Laura?
We're all in Egypt now.
And your old coat
was too small anyway.
What the hell![1]

The cap, in particular, has generated responses. The evocative tie-strings saying, "When the strings go, everything goes," has elicited both a poetic

embodiment and a citation by an anthropology professor. After I mentioned the saying to American poet Diane Wakoski during a conversation at the University of Kansas, she reworded it and placed it in the context of a problematic liberation in the poem, "Not Breaking the Silences":

> Laura, wearing her Menonite [sic] cap, white bonnet of chastity,
>
> "If you untie the strings, the devil will pull it off"
>
> spoke of the liberation provided by a wall of books.
>
> Does she know she can be walled up behind those books,
>
> just as Poe's hero was behind bottles of sherry?[2]

The same tie-strings saying was placed in a psychoanalytic context by Robert Bates Graber (an anthropology professor at Northeast Missouri State University) in an article entitled "Psychoanalytic Speculations on Horse-and-Buggy Sectarianism." In a discussion of the covering's variety "in such attributes as size, shape, and presence or absence of tie-strings," Graber, after quoting my report of the statement, observed: " . . . The removal of tie-strings is seen as a fateful step away from the godly restraint of the sect toward the 'world,' where 'everything goes.'"[3] His use of the saying reflects its successful ambiguity: "everything goes" can be interpreted not only as the disappearance of positive values but also as lack of restraints or as permission for anything—including immoral behavior.

Plain clothes and the cap are, then, irresistible for both insiders and outsiders; all of those interpretations affect my perceptions and, thus, create a new context for the next essay that I write.

Another reason for the appeal of this topic is the disquieting possibility that because for so long I had looked different from other people, I don't know any other way to *be*. Therefore, when I no longer wore clothing distinguishing me from the dominant society, I had to remind people of my difference. Perhaps my suggesting to a dominant culture audience, "Although I now seem like you, I'm different," is an ethnic version of the uniqueness asserted in Rousseau's confession, "I am not made like any of those I have seen . . . I am different."[4]

That sounds like supreme arrogance. However, I have found one defense: if I were living in a community containing women who once wore a cap and plain clothes, I would not need to tell them of my past different appearance. The limitation of my daily interactions to only people who have never worn a separate form of dress has created an urgency to tell (and re-tell) my story.

But the need to remind others of my differentness might not be arrogance at all, might not even require that alienation defense. In the following explanation for that urge lies the final reason for my devotion to this topic.

The memory of the cap and plain clothes is an object—like other possessions that I carried with me as I moved from Pennsylvania and Virginia to Kansas, Missouri, and Indiana (the flower garden quilt and the dahlia cushion made by my grandmother, Valentines and birthday cards made by my mother) and other Mennonite items that I have collected recently (Mennonite Hour cassettes, Table Singers cassettes, and *The Central Market* [Lancaster, PA] *Cookbook*). In my essays I am writing about a possession owned by the Mennonite "family" as a whole.

Although this specific memory probably involves some nostalgia, I think it appropriately represents the separateness in Mennonite identity, despite the enormous difference in application among various Mennonite groups. It can be an emblem of the history of Mennonite nonconformity to the world, a separation not dependent on literal cap and plain clothes. Instead of writing about other distinctive features of Mennonitism, such as pacifism (for which I could summon up my memory of other students' throwing books at us on the public school bus because Mennonite men were conscientious objectors), I write about clothing. The cap and plain clothes—existing just as authentically as the quilt on my bed, the dahlia cushion on my sofa, Valentines in a box, the cookbook on the coffee

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table, and the cassettes in the tape player—are always there in my imagination, to be retrieved and re-shaped. Wearing the cap and plain clothes has been replaced by talking and writing about them. And each time this no-cap wearer writes about them, they point to another perspective, another way to *be*.

ENDNOTES

[1]Reprinted by permission of Thomas E. Sultenberger.

[2]*Pachelbel's Canon, Sparrow 71* (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, August 1978): n.p. Reprinted by permission of Diane Wakoski.

[3]Co-authored with Dan W. Forsyth, in *The Journal of Psychoanalytic Anthropology* 9.2 (Spring 1986): 132.

[4]*The Confessions of Jean Jacques Rousseau* (1781-8; New York: Modern Library, 1945): 3.

Father Homesteads a Quarter Section on the Cherokee Strip: September 16, 1893

by Elmer Suderman

On their weathered lumber wagon,
its wooden wheels, steel-circled,
sending dry, sluggish reports
a half mile out from the Chisholm trail
Dan, my father, and two companions creaked
their weary way south to homestead
a quarter section of land
in the Cherokee strip.

It was rough going, and slow,
particularly at first, the only team
of horses father could afford
only partially broken. At Wichita
the horses, tractable now, strong,
willing to tackle any mudhole or gully,
had learned enough Low German to obey orders.

Each day seemed longer than the one before,
the first as long as the buffalo grass they
rattled over, the pitch dark nights longer than the days.

Daniel Suderman homestead in the Cherokee Strip ca. 1904

Lonesome as the long and loud coyotes' howl
at unanswering sky, their only company rattlesnakes,
south wind, September thunder storms, cold earth
at night, hot sun by day and shadows
of moving thunder heads under their feet,
they wondered if they should have waved
good bye to parents, brothers and sisters.

Tired, their eyes pulled into infinite prairie
rolling forever on and on over the world's rim,
they watched whirlwinds carry dust and grass
across the prairie, watched scissortails
cut a path through the evening sky,
watched red ants carry heavy loads,
watched prairie dogs watching them,
their sentinels alert to the men's slightest move,
scolding them for camping on their land.

Homesick, their stomachs rumbling
for something more than *reesche Tweeback*,
the traveling food their mothers
had sent with them, they sang
"*Was kann es schoenres geben.*"
It seemed out of place in this bleak land.

Daniel Suderman ca. 1896

At Hitchcock on the southern border
of the Cherokee Strip, they waited impatiently
for the crack of the pistols
to take them into the promised land.
Once in the strip, men and horses sweating,
they struggled to put the wagon
across Deep Creek's steep banks.

Father chose a quarter section he thought
the creek ran through, but wasn't sure.
No roads, fences or hedge rows told
which way north was. They would come later.

Father watched the sun sink into the empty
reaches of the western sky, watched buffalo
grass sweep up to meet the horizon, wiping out
size and distance leaving him without shape or form
for his mind to cling to, the unknown
bearing in from many miles on all sides.

That night, Father found the north star.
The creek was his, drought-dry, but later, when
it rained, not often, providing badly needed water.

That night, his thoughts hovering between land and sky,
between Kansas and the endless solitude
in the middle of which he had been set down,
shaken by loneliness with too many
names to find words for, surly south wind
blowing around the wagon he would sleep under,
Father fingered kernels of Turkey Red winter wheat,
seed from the wheat his father had brought
from Russia to Kansas, seed he meant
to sow in the red soil he camped on.

Unsettled, he looked to the north star
for something to hold on to.
That was a long and lonely night.

Poems

by Jean Janzen

Glocken

We would step from the kitchen's steamy clatter
into the wide silence of winter, its muffle
and glare, and the sled's hushed glide.
When I lay on my back to make an angel,
I didn't think of the frozen dead
or what they couldn't say. But later
when father tipped piled tubs of snow
into the black cistern under the floor,
I heard the echoing plunk, plunk
of what lay beneath us.

Something waits to stir,
to make its dark music. My own voice
caught in the winter fields longs
for the word, clear and running free.
Like the voice of my three-year-old son
in a febrile seizure. The tense, silent
drive to the hospital, my lift of his slack
body into the December air, and he began
to sing, "Kling, Glocken, kling-a-ling-a-ling"
in a voice high and clear, a bell
in a language he didn't know.

Floodtides of Poland

Rain glazes the rise of dikes
and the elms that arch the narrow lanes.
The marshy fields swell and throb,
spill into streams toward the Vistula River
in its ribboned shine. It glides
in calm, but fierce necessity, pressing
the packed weight of earth dams,
as it has for centuries. Soft,
green rain on the river, on the reclaimed
fields and muddy dikes, gathering
until it breaks through, until
it lifts barns, crops and tables
in roar and ecstasy. Until it has its way.

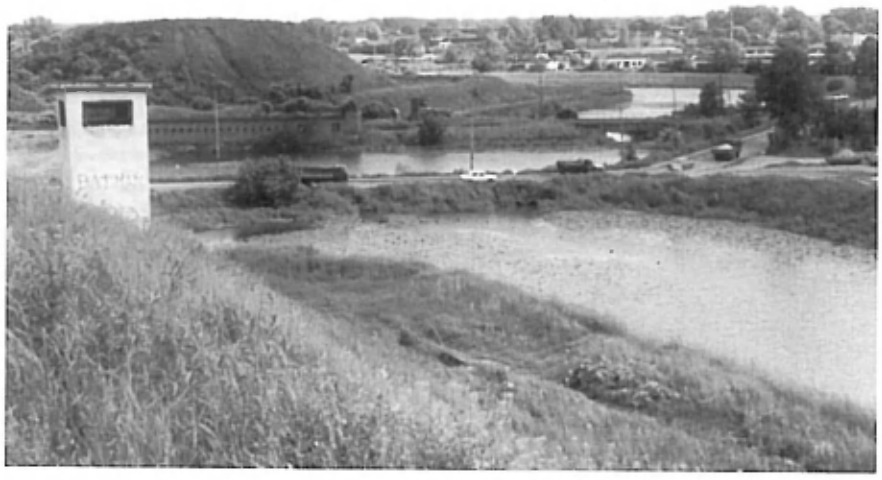
*

We drive past the sea of hayfields,
sun out at last, workers pitching
into horsedrawn wagons, women my age,
stocky and brown in floral housedresses,
lifting great forkfuls in repeated arcs.
They swing the fragrance of stem and seed,
heap for the aching body's hungers.
They tip the centuries back and forth
in the shimmering fields which roll on and on
like waves laboring toward some distant shore.

*

In old Gdansk, street after street
of gabled Dutch houses, but nothing remains
of my family name except an earthen defense
against the flood of invasion. A bastion
named after Adam Wiebe, world's best
water engineer invited from Haarlingen in 1616.
And a medal in the archives for his invention
of the cable system, so carefully calculated
that the filled buckets could move up without power.
Such precision among the tides–the earth
lifted, the flood captured to rise
in the city fountains. A fine tuning,
like the fiddler leaning into the old Dutch
archway. A laborer, sunburned, he scrapes
and presses for the exact tone, loosening
it to float over the medieval weighing station
and up over the green dike, letting it go.

*



View of Gdansk outskirts from the Wiebe Bastion

What the flood leaves is the lush overgrowth
of neglected cemeteries, Queen Anne's lace
up to my shoulders. And here
a young woman's face, classic,
on a nearly buried stone. She gazes
at the shifting shadow of my footsteps.
Carved cheeks and eyes, testimony
to a short life of greening. Like the amber
on my finger, sap from a pine which fell
six million years ago, present now
in its lamplit glow. And a tiny leaf
in it, caught and saved.

*

Heubuden cemetery

Morning mass in St. Nicholas
and the church is rocking.
It is a ship on the swell
with ribs of black marble
and gilded railings.
We are rocking, Nicholas
of the Sailors,
in your giant shoe,
and you are scattering pieces of gold
to save our daughters.
As your ship lists and sways
the old women stumble
in the aisle, swinging
their string bags, Nicholas
of the great red lap
the soft-bearded whispers,
rocking, rocking.

*

Torun, and in the dusk
of the old city square
the figure of Copernicus
holds the sun in his outstretched hand.
In the stopped bronze moment,
he offers the fiery mass
contained in a cool metal ball,
like a thought, freed
from the spinning orbit of the self,
a place to rest before
the flaring of the night.

Home

Sometimes while cleaning the house,
I raise my feather duster high
and do a Slavic stomp and twirl.
My blue eyes flash in the mirror

as dust flies up
and settles down again.
Sometimes, singing,
I stand in the kitchen sunlight

and break twelve eggs into a bowl
for *paskha,* to eat after Black Saturday,
a tower of yolks, sugar and flour
shaped by fire and air.

Father, when a boy, gaped
at the procession of candles
and the blackened face of the icon.
Then the dance in the village street.

Dust flew around the dizzying skirts,
men stomped and shouted,
and he ran home breathless,
the wind on his bare feet.

Somewhere near Karkhoff
where his mother waited. Home,
now a black ash washed into
the earth, where the wind

moans, where the bones
of his parents wait.
Everything waiting,
bread, dust, the elements of fire,

waiting for that final restoration,
all of us dancing home.

Sleepless Under Down

Every morning Maria fluffs
my down pillow and drapes it
with lace, Russian style.
It is a container for grief
and for love, for the memory
of her mother stripping the breasts
of geese. Her browned hands
would grasp and release in quick
motion as she sat, placid,
among the racket of feathers.
During the war Maria dreamed
that the geese clamored over
her bed with burning wings,
moaning with hunger. Then, all day
she stood at the window hugging
her mother's dress until her gray figure
approached in the dark, home at last
from the barns of bawling cattle.
And under her skirt, two dead rats
she had trapped for supper.
When father finally staggered home
from the camps, mother patched his rags
with every color. Like Joseph,
she says, his ankles thin in the fields,
a wild bird gleaning.
Now I lie sleepless under
a softness that was lost and saved,
that once grew lean and desperate enough
to lift its wings into the night.

Poems

by Janice Waltner Sevilla

One of my mother-in-law's favorite expressions was, "You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear!" Of course, she meant you couldn't make something beautiful out of something ugly, something good out of something bad.

I thought about this often after multiple sclerosis made it necessary for me to become a resident in a nursing home.

When it became obvious that I would not be leaving the nursing home any time soon, I decided it was imperative that I find something to do with my time.

During all my years of teaching (as an English, speech, and drama teacher and a media specialist), I could not bring myself to write once I got home at the end of the day. Even cooking and housekeeping were preferable to more paperwork!

When I entered a nursing home, all those circumstances were suddenly altered. I no longer needed to cook, clean, or do laundry. In addition, I was not able to pursue some of my other leisure time activities: sewing, decorating, travel.

Then, too, writing was an acceptable way to deal with the frustration, depression, and anger that accompany such a drastic change in circumstances—better far than pounding the wall, crying, and screaming, which is what one wants to do.

A nursing home provides an endless supply of subject matter for a would-be writer. Here is a large population of individuals, each with a unique life story to tell. Many have brought their foibles with them and left their inhibitions behind. One need only observe.

In short, time and opportunity came together for the writer in me. I would try to fashion a silk purse.

On My Disability

I play the part that's been assigned to me
although, for this role, I did not audition.
I did not crave to be the drama's lead,
to see my name in lights—no such ambition.
But I'd have loved to play an ingenue
or, failing that, a character portrayal.
I would have carried on a spear on cue
had not my body dealt me this betrayal.
But when an actor sees the footlights dim
and audience applause dies down, then stops,
he must retreat behind the flats and scrim
and prompt, or be a grip and carry props,
or man the lights, or put the make-up on,
until it's time to ring the curtain down.

The Lady with the Purse . . .

each nursing home has one.
She tucks it smartly
underneath her arm and rushes by
to meet her next appointment:
—mealtime in the dining room, or
—her twice weekly bath, or
—a movie in the dayroom, or
—a hairdo in the annex.

She checks the purse just to make sure
that all her treasures are still there:
—two used tissues,
—a coupon worth ten cents off
on a package of frozen mixed vegetables,
—a broken rubber band,
—two paper clips, six pennies, and
—the cap from a long-missing ballpoint pen.

But her most prized possessions
kept in her purse are phantoms,
unseen by all but her:
—a ring with car and house keys,
—a wallet with her driver's license, and
—her identity as a person.

Nursing Home Videos

We sit at communal tables
in our own individual cells
playing our private videos
again on the screens in our heads.

The pictures were filmed years ago
when we were still part of real life.
Now we play them over and over
reliving old scripts from our past.
The scenes, which were once living color,
are fading to dull black and white.
And if we're not careful to keep them in use,
they'll fade and vanish from our sight.

Our meals, efficiently served,
bring a brief intermission, at best.
We honor the habit of eating
to sustain the body's existence;
our minds, though, find
elsewhere their nurture.

And so we keep playing our movies
for a captive audience of one
reliving history more current
than even today or tomorrow.
So if there's no communication
exchanged between our screening rooms, it's
because we're reviewing our memories
recorded a long time ago.

My Mother Comes to Visit

My mother comes to visit me on Sundays.
She drives up in her new blue-silver
car.
I watch her coming up the walk:
her gait is brisk;
she's dressed in style.
She brings me snacks,
sometimes bouquets
to brighten my room
in the nursing home.

My mother lives some miles away
in an apartment, nicely appointed
with new furniture.
She entertains her friends, welcomes
her relatives, busies herself with
shopping and light housekeeping.

Meanwhile, I'm sitting by my window
watching for Mother.
I'm gaining weight;
my clothes are old
and on the edge of dowdy.
I haven't shopped
or cooked in years;
my driver's license
has expired.

Mom's in her seventies; I'm fifty-
four.
More testament to life turned upside
down.

Haunted

I hate the picture where
my eyes look haunted,
hunted,

like some small furry creature
cornered in the dark,
spied by a flashlight's beam,

its eyes flaring fear,
looking for escape,
not finding a way out.

Poems

by Naomi Reimer-Duke

The Clamor of My Dead

I.

We go half around the world to look for Sady,
not a girl but a place in Poland
where great-grandmother Helena lived,
baptized a Mennonite there.
New maps don't show Sady. A military map
used in World War II shows it, the place mapped
when war required keeping track of everyone—
potato farmers, growers of cattle, mayors and teachers—
all villagers counted either enemy or friend.
Helena, that sad great-grandmother, not counted,
buried instead in Oklahoma by then.
There are no cottages where the map shows Sady,
only a low, long building and the squeal of pigs being slaughtered,
the invasive smell of raw meat and on a trail that leads
to the woods, several hooves, an ear and skin.
White smocked women lean against a rail, smoking.
Lilac branches sprawl across the littered trail, old bushes of them,
tangled and blooming, their scent a wonderment,
coming as we did from the smells of cigarettes and butchering.
Here in an overgrown cemetery, gravestones askance,
face down in the earth and too heavy to lift,
names remain hidden.
Bird songs tremble from the lilacs. Pigs grunt and moan
and slaughterers shout, and underneath the loam,
the gravid quiet of Mennonite dead becomes a clamor,
like the silent spinning of wheels.
The lives of these dead unstoried,
told only in epigrams on gravestones
or whispered at gatherings of the unshunned.
Together we tug and lift and uncover a name and date—
1838, a Wahl—someone known to that strange father
of my great-grandmother who left wife and children,
Helena twelve then, and went to look for land in Germany.
Gone for two months, he came home to find his children
motherless, his wife buried. The story passed down
through his heirs—he took a shovel and uncovered her grave,
settled his grief, then married her sister to be stepmother.
Was it here in this dark earth left to roots of lilacs
and the remains of slaughtered hogs—did he dig here?

II.

At dusk three roses placed in a vase
in our room in Zaporozhye surprise us.
A soft flow of air stirs the lace
at the windows and touches the petals
spreading their fragrance.
A Ukrainian woman had put them there,
cleaning our room, laundering our shirts,
bringing roses from her garden.
There are roses in the park
next to the Dnieper River,
roses and fountains and Lenin's image in stone.
Behind the dam built for power,
Bethania is a Mennonite memory—
the hospital, the therapeutic baths,
the treatment center for mentally ill—
flooded for progress
and we are told that the village
of Einlage with its Mennonite church is there
settling into the river bottom sand and loam.
The waters are expansive and quiet,
seem like a natural lake ruffled by a little breeze,
like the pucker in a housewife's quilt,
a deliberate error, obeisance to God's perfection.
Red roses in the cemetery near Chortitza
are abandoned and grown wild,
climbing a gravestone,
monument to a Mennonite wife Agnes,
the stone precarious beside a vacancy,
a trickle of earth leaving surface,
eroding to a casket below.
But there are no roses on the grave
of Jakob Hoeppner who had spied out this land
for settlement when Frederick's Prussian war
unsettled Mennonites in Poland.
In nearby Chortitza they spent
their first miserable winter
under the large oak tree that's dying now
and brought a case against Jakob, had him imprisoned
for deceiving them, though generations later
it would be determined he too had been deceived.
Released, he lived and farmed quietly here
and is buried alone under a wild pear tree.

III.

What remains of the church at Schoensee, only
the brick walls with empty gothic windows,
an eyeless visage.
Pigeons roost on metal struts,
dark bird shapes along the framework;
they rise together in one movement,
one fluttering changing body,
underwings white against the blue Ukrainian sky.
The roof is gone, red tiles taken
for a more utilitarian building—bricks remain,
mortar binding them together past use
and reason. Trees grow sturdy
where once the floor was,
where once the congregation
worshipped, where once the choir
sang, where now the unblinking summer sun
shines in past roofless metal struts.

In the cemetery at Sady

IV.

My father talked of Klippenfeld and Wernersdorf
as if the villages were just across the river,
not half around the world in the Ukraine.
He mentioned them proudly,
rolling the "r's" in Wernersdorf,
telling of Klippenfeld with an awe
once heard in children's voices
invoking Bethlehem at Christmas time.
I expected some evidence that Grandfather
had lived in Wernersdorf,
an unusual tidiness, buildings
neatly painted, crops in perfect rows,
in Klippenfeld some indication Grandmother
Anna had been born there—a Mennonite garden,
a messenger telling of the kindness of Mennonite women.
What we saw were two villages, not identical
but so similar we can't tell them apart
in the pictures we took—two goats munching grass
beside a picket fence and a goose with half a dozen goslings,
sunning placid in a puddle. Beyond the fence
the gardens, calendula and roses next to dill,
had been cared for by Babushkas.
Here Anna would have been at home,
milking the goat, making pillows of goose down,
tending the garden. She is resolute
in her picture, and kind, but behind
her wistful eyes are memories: in Tashkent of
the quick death of father, mother and oldest brother;
in Aulie-Ata with her sisters, she was twelve then,
making bricks of mud and straw to build a place to live;
in Oklahoma with Grandpa and two children,
a first home—part sod house, part cave.

She has become the stories
told by aunts and uncles
in visits to Father,
how she quickly painted a barn wall
to keep the accident from Grandpa
when Uncle Jake backed the tractor into it,
how she would never "lie-in" after childbirth—
she bore eleven children.
The winter I slept in her spare room
she thanked God nightly for life's blessings
and prayed for protection for children
and grandchildren,
then warmed a brick, wrapped it
in flannel for my cold bed—cold feet.

In a Russian Mennonite village

Shifts and Changes

by John Blosser

As an artist, I have often wondered what my personal experiences of creating works of art might have in common with the life experiences that non-artists encounter. For years I have suspected that the agonies I have experienced over the years in my struggles to orchestrate major changes in my art have had significant parallels in the life experiences that most people face in the midst of change. New demands and circumstances encountered as life takes unanticipated turns force adjustments to thinking and behavior to accommodate and make sense of these new realities. New paradigms of truth and reality seem to be required. Somehow my models of "how things seem to be" help me piece together some of the splintered questions that new experiences scatter into my consciousness. I sense that my exercise of having to adjust to new realities of life as well as trying to interpret some of life's mysteries is not uncommon.

While on sabbatical this spring, I was frequently asked what my new art was about. I interpreted these inquiries to be asking what subjects or objects I was featuring in my art and perhaps what medium I was employing. Sensing the presence of artistic naivete, I flippantly replied that I was drawing and painting landscapes on location. Those who knew my earlier drawings in charcoal were quick to pick up on my new venture into the use of color. However, I was slow to recognize the defensive nature of my reply. Wrongly or rightly I had interpreted many of these questions to reflect a rather shallow understanding of art in general and of my art in particular. In my effort to shield myself from the trap of explaining the "hidden meanings" of my work, I began to recognize that I didn't know what my new art was about either. Furthermore, I felt painfully anxious about sharing that uncertainty with anyone.

At one level, I suppose my response was honest, but I knew my recent efforts at breaking the old mold of imagery and media and the earnest search for a new "voice" were about more than pretty, colorful renderings of the land. I was aware that in retrospect one can eventually sift out more meaning from one's work. However, it was not at all clear that these newest, more direct pieces held any merit whatsoever. The new art simply was. Any conclusive value judgements and assessments of meaning would need to be withheld. I would simply have to proceed with generating new images in the hope that my adventure into the new would not be in vain.

Such is the nature of creative tension. Art is born of both the conscious and the unconscious. One tries to work as consciously as possible, hopefully controlling some of the multitude of demands and problems connected with the making of an image. However, I recognize that my art also owes much to the unconscious as well. Central to the condition of being human, it seems to me is the fact that one cannot control all of life. I believe that it is in the unpredictable dialogue between images and ideas that inevitably occurs in the process of painting that insight can happen. Intuitive responses develop in the course of making art and these in-

cidental serendipitous associations can profoundly change the course and nature of a work. Remaining open at all times to new connections that might emerge unexpectedly is essential. Such a dialogue between the conscious and the unconscious is at the core of my art and I suspect is at the core of most other reflective thinking.

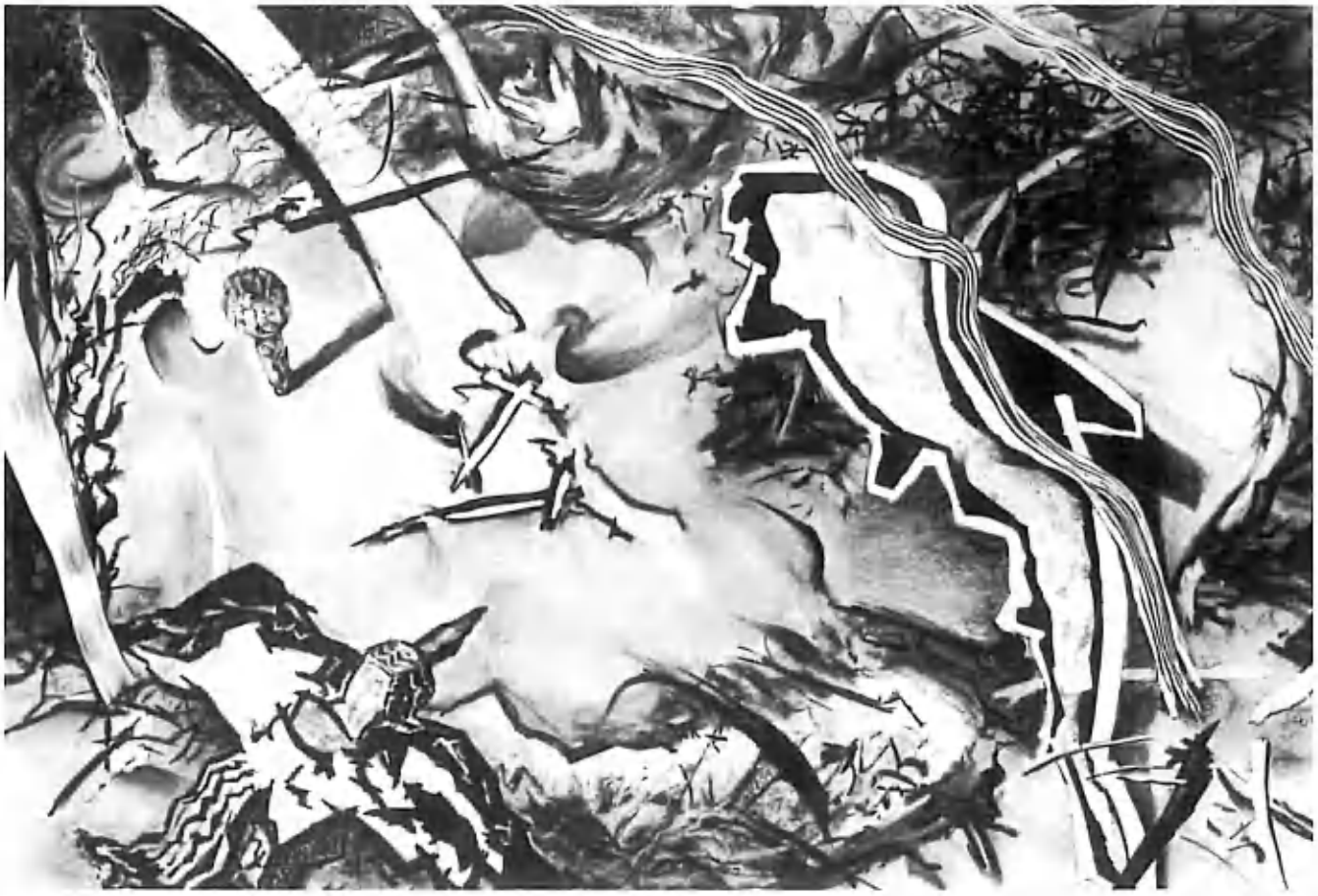
I try to make peace with the reality that I am not in total control of my work or my life. Living with uncertainty can be quite unnerving, but I believe one must accept it as a given condition when walking new paths.

Facing this lack of assurance, I have found, takes considerable courage. If one is to generate new images with new materials, one must forthrightly proceed despite the fear of being an abject failure and the enthusiastic anticipation that something of merit might emerge. For me this creative tension between fear and hope is constantly present and motivates me. I think that art at its best is about life's most profound and awesome realities. Becoming cognizant of these realities is one of my primary reasons for making art. But fashioning a world view that makes sense to me—let alone another viewer—is a humbling task.

Furthermore, I think that my work bears the marks of changes that come with the inevitable shifts in life. My art is thus something of a graphic repository of my personal significant events and enigmas. I also suspect that my art is a ledger of the realities beyond my personal conditions and circumstances. Certainly larger world realities score our lives with the markings of turmoil and strife as well as hopes and dreams. I believe that personal images gleaned from one's own story offer a very direct channel to the universal. Art, like other symbolic assignments to life's events, seems capable of offering meaning and a thread of comprehension to life's enigmas. Thus while the particularities of our personal experiences may differ, it seems we share many common realities. Offering to others glimpses of one's own bruises and anticipations leaves one feeling vulnerable, but I trust can be understood to provide a point of commonality.

"Intrepid Entreaty," charcoal on paper, 50" x 73", 1986

It was with the hope of making sense of some of the pieces of my own life that I began making a series of drawings about a decade ago (figures 1 & 2). Though comfortably back from a Mennonite Central Committee assignment in Africa for nearly ten years and an appreciable distance from my encounters with native North American cultures, I found myself pressed to sort through those experiences. In the time prior to this work, I had increasingly felt driven to come to terms with my experiences with the native peoples and cultures of Zambia, Africa; Manitoba, Canada and northern Arizona. I drew large charcoal images that dealt overtly with unpeopled, rustically primitive shelters, tools and totems. Over the course of several years, I invented compositions featuring these objects in ambiguous space, but was unable to verbalize their meaning. No titles presented themselves to me. I was fascinated, though, by the power of relatively primitive and impermanent constructions of these peoples. In those cultures I had learned that a simple stick fetish or fragments from a blasted



"Sacrificial Site," charcoal on paper, 34" x 50", 1986

tree touched by the lightning bolt of a deity's hand could, in the hands of a skilled tribal shaman, effectively render health or illness to a client. As I continued to draw images gleaned from my memories of those distinctive cultural experiences, I began to make comparisons to our own postmodern condition. In placing faithful renderings next to invented facsimiles of these "aboriginal" cultural artifacts into my work, I understood these visions as a metaphor for the more "advanced technologies" of first world culture. I questioned our finest tools, shelters and totems and suspected that a similar condition of impermanence and mortality resides in them.

I perceived also that primitive images of this art held glimpses of significant events in my life during the time of their formation. Hope and joy, anticipation and anxiety, fear and despair for success, health and meaning for me and my loved ones were resident concerns for me at the time. Pictorial references of things close to the earth seemed to capture a sense of human mortality and fragility, an overarching concern of mine at the time.

In my attempts to sort through the nature and meaning of those charcoal drawings, I looked to others responses to my work. I encountered an amazing variety of responses from both friends and strangers. Some closest to me who had also experienced some of the same events responded with quiet understanding. Occasionally people who did not know me at all found meaningful connections for themselves in my work. Others seemed to read the images singularly as reflections of a pessimistic orientation. They implied that what one sees is what the artist feels. There is probably an element of truth in all of these observations, but the breadth of interpretations leads me to believe that my art holds multiple layers of meanings.

My quibble with the critique which interpreted this art to be merely the pessimistic musings of a disgruntled middle aged artist missed my intention of projecting a vision of hope rooted in the chaos of life. It seems to me that art which fails to recognize both the pain and joy of life is somehow more stunted or myopic in its vision. My intention was to give form to the delicate balance between the chaos of life and the sometimes divinely inspired human effort to surmount that confusion. The sublime and the ridiculous are never far apart. In Christian terms, redemption and hope seem to be born from the womb of recognition of our own inadequacy and consequent despair. Hope is raised in the field of doubt. Light seems most visible and welcome in the context of the dark. Apparently my efforts to communicate my vision met with mixed success.

These more crystallized analytical conceptions occurred to me over time

and only in retrospect. Nonetheless, my effort this spring to generate a new art posed fresh problems. I needed to craft the images well and in the process find some meaning in them.

The last ten years have brought new trials to my family and me. New challenges and consequent demands for adjustment have multiplied and intensified. What should my life and my art be about now? Life had at times been so demanding that I yearned for images drawn from natural beauty. Like Picasso in exile in Paris during the heat of World War II, I conspired to make beauty in the face of some pretty ugly reality. I believe that beauty has the power to heal and generate hope. I wanted to infuse something of nature's spectacular opulence into my work in the hope that its charm might inspire peace for all who viewed it. At the same time, I wanted that beauty to emerge from the caldron of life's tempests, as I had experienced the world.

Having lived on the prairies of Manitoba and Kansas for nearly eighteen years, though reared in the woodlands of Ohio, I discovered that I really had never reconciled myself to the vast, simple land forms in which I found myself. So I resolved to directly approach the land by drawing from it. (figure 3) In the course of this process, I learned that this vast inland sea has been the theater of innumerable human dramas. It has provided shelter and sustenance to many native peoples for untold generations. Sante Fe trail markings meander within a few miles of my home in south central Kansas. This atrophied highway proved to be an artery of destruction to the lives of the resident native peoples and a stream of wealth for those expatriots who later assumed possession of this land. I found that wars were fought, love was made, peace was exacted and people of all stripes have played out their personal and corporate scenarios in this place.

Moreover, I began to understand that I had over the years lived much of my own life in this place. The richly variegated prairie, which I initially found boring, has been the theater of my life as well. My children have been raised here. I have loved, worked, learned and played on this land. I have buried loved ones in its soil. In the act of reflecting upon these prairie images, I have discovered that I have inadvertently over the years become a prairie person as well.

Later in work this summer on a small, well-preserved patch of tall grass prairie just north of Chicago, I found a new freedom to change again. (figures 4 & 5) I found myself adding personal images to the prairie fields. These additions were sketches and jottings that held particular interest for me. Sometimes I appropriated images from such unlikely sources as a physician's simple sketch of some aspect of my wife's interior anatomy, or a child's wonderfully imaginative doodling discovered on the back of a church envelope. I stretched my new art form to an even newer, more personalized style.

This new art seems now, in not too distant retrospect, to offer a plethora of possible directions which truly excite me. They are new wine skins for new wine. Nonetheless, I can no more explain my new art than I can explain the peculiarly absurd realities that regularly infiltrate life. I find much enigma in my art. The mysteries which we cannot know propels my art. These enigmas are hidden both from me and other viewers. That reality continues to make life and thus the making of art enchanting to me.

I wonder if the apparent mutual mysteries of our lives bond us more closely together than we realize? If my premise that the universal resides in the particularities of our personal experience, it seems to me that a useful way for us to find truth and sort through the mysteries is for us to mutually share our own stories and images with each other.

My sincere hope is that my distinctive visions add some light to others' lives.

"Kansas Prairie #2," pastel on paper, 23" x 52", 1994

"Prairie Fires #1," oil paint, sumi ink, and pastel on paper, 34" x 51", 1994

"The Golden Tree," oil paint, sumi ink, and pastel on paper, 34" x 51", 1994

Book Reviews

Keith Ratzlaff. *New Winter Light*. Troy, ME: Nightshade Press, 1994. Pp. 18. ISBN 1-879205-47-5

Keith Ratzlaff, a native of Henderson, Nebraska, now lives in Pella, Iowa, where he teaches at Central College. His 1994 chapbook *New Winter Light* is the winning manuscript of the 1993 William and Kingman Page Chapbook Award, selected from over 140 entries by William Doreski, Keene State College, New Hampshire, and printed by Nightshade Press. In this new chapbook, the poet maintains his midwestern voice displayed in an earlier book, *Out Here*, though perhaps mellowed here into a more lyric calm. The recognizable elements of the poet's voice continue to be a warm, colloquial tone, attentiveness to weather and seasons, quiet mystification at a world which unveils its beauty, and unflappable, matter-of-fact intelligence about the way the world *is*.

New Winter Light consists of thirteen poems, most with bare-bones titles like "The Winner," "The Orderly," "Neighbors," "String," and "Necessity." The persona of the poem varies; sometimes it is an adopted voice, sometimes the self-conscious poet, as in an anniversary poem for his wife Treva,

> Poetry is good for so little else
> than immortalizing lovers. Indulge me.

What holds the poems together is the slant of light, attentiveness to season and place, the circle drawn around the poet's eye—small, domestic, just the neighborhood where the poet casts an authoritative eye at his neighbor's remodelling, the street corner, his own garden. The poet is always interested in how the world works, especially how the weather shapes and instructs us, the psychological necessity of living with this weather on this day; indeed, there is a quality of attunement to "this moment" in the poems, a sacred record of days. In "Armistice Day," the poem from which the book's title comes, "Winter and an old war/walk together into town." The poet muses over his neighbor who "has spent all the years/ since a war trying to make his house forget walls" whereupon the poet decides it is a good day for bargaining:

> I promise to forget the street,
> the old men in their hats, the war
> that stops on the same day year after year.
> I promise to remember only the new winter light,
> its white guns in the brown grass.

The poet seems to keep that promise in these poems, There is the quality of appreciation for the moment, what is in it to sustain life. I found a sense of commemoration in all of these poems. In "Neighbors," which follows "Armistice," the poet commemorates his own street corner where a year ago a boy lost his life, and uses this poem to explore what we forget ("I remember only half his name") and what we remember: "We only remember wind and what we saw:/ our own chapped and vulnerable faces." "In March," too, is a meditation, here on life's practices—how much practice it takes to sing, and the understated reference to human fallibility: "Repetitions. Somehow we are trying to get something right."

I find a kind of midwestern toughness in the poems, for all their lyric beauty. There is something almost mythical about the gardener's revelation of how good it feels to *keep* the garden (Eden?), trim back into tidiness the grapes in "Disciplining Grapes." The poet is caught off guard too, it seems, when he reveals his joy at axing and burning the grapevines which needed discipline, acknowledging to himself: "Fear is what I want./ Respect for a man who knows how/ to handle sprawl." The absurd self-revelation of his own need for control is a nice surprise at the end of the poem: "I only wish I could have hurt them more"—referring here to the grapes. The tone in "String," too, is less pensive, more playful and surprised. According to the newest theory of physics, "the whole pent-up universe is string," thus the poet sees it everywhere—"I'm a sucker for this kind of stuff." With eyes for the new theory the poem's persona retrieves the lost; all is recaptured in string imagery—grapes, peas, jays, wrong notes he has hit—"So many things I thought lost come doubling

back." Ah, yes, and that tough midwestern issue of *usefulness* comes up in several poems—ironic, always, that issue in poems. But in this volume uselessness too can be transformed on a cold day when the Illinois River might freeze (making the foghorns useless), a day for old men in "Closing the Illinois River":

> Old men are so clearly useless
> this day belongs to them.
> One by one they are stepping out
> onto the ice—like sound with nothing
> better to do, like big wrong birds
> skating across the known world.

A lovely flight of the poetic imagination, that last image for old men.

I am always delighted reading Keith Ratzlaff's poems with the tone and folksy intimacy. That is, there is a sense of collaboration with the reader, an easy conversationalism which includes the reader. It is common-sense language coupled with tone that is distinct here, the tone suggesting that we know what we're facing on this earth, and we'll face it. Maybe it is best illustrated in the final lines of "Necessity":

> We don't need the crabapple telling us
> not to worry, it's not winter, and nothing dies.
> We have to. It is. Things do.

Those lines are representative of *New Winter Light*.

Raylene Hinz-Penner
Bethel College
North Newton, Kansas

Philip N. Bier, *The Quest for Shar-I-Sabs*. Pittsburgh, PA: Dorrance, 1993. Pp. 270. ($18.95) ISBN 0-8059-3353-0

Philip Bier's *The Quest for Shar-I-Sabs* is a fictionalized version of what Fred Richard Belk called, in his book on the same subject, *The Great Trek of the Russian Mennonites to Central Asia, 1880-1884* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1976). It is the story of the Russian Mennonites who sold everything, left the Am Trakt settlement near Saratov and left the Molotschna Colony in the Ukraine and went into Central Asia to escape the tribulation of the last days before the Second Coming of Christ. It is the story of an enactment of apocalyptic biblical prophecy. It is the story of what happened to the some 1000 to 2000 Mennonites who first set out into an unknown land in order to find a place of refuge from the imminent turmoil. The place they originally set out for was called Shar-i-Sabs, translated as "the valley of the carrots." It was someplace south of Samarkand. This first volume comes to "End of Book I," and covers the years 1880-1884.

The dust jacket on the novel says that Mr. Bier's novel is "historically accurate." It's not. It probably can't be and it needn't be. The historical records that Fred Richard Belk first gathered and catalogued in his book and the records which Mr. Bier obviously also used are not very good. Dr. Cornelius Krahn once told this reviewer that the Mennonites who went to Central Asia and then came to the United States would not talk about their experiences for many years. They were belittled, derided, humiliated. Some of the memoirs that serve as "historical records" were not written until many years after the events. They were written out of memory and are thus suspect. The other records such as letters, diaries, and newspaper articles are often contradictory. It is, for instance, difficult to tell exactly how many Mennonites went on the trek. It is difficult to determine just how powerful Claas Epp, Jr., the so-called leader of the group, actually was. Some of the other ministers also considered themselves leaders. Where, when, and how did that obsession with apocalyptic imminence get started? What did the German novelist Heinrich Jung-Stilling have to do with it all? The questions are legion.

Some of what would seem to be factual matters are strangely confused and confusing in Mr. Bier's book. The contemporary maps often don't help because some places had several names. That is just one of many problems. Where exactly was Kaplan Bek, where the Mennonites from the Am Trakt settlement spent their first winter in 1880-81? Mr. Bier has steam trains in Central Asia in 1881-82. Is that true? Mr. Bier has Lausan, the settlement in the Khanate of Khiva, on the north bank of the Amu Darya, the river the Greeks called the Oxus. Belk has the settlement on the south bank of the Amu Darya. What this all amounts to is that if the reader wants to read a history he should read Mr. Belk's book. If he wants to read a novel about the events he should read Mr. Bier's book.

The historical problems have a good side. They leave the whole series of events open to narrative development. It is as narrative that Mr. Bier's book should be judged, not as history. The novelist who writes historical fiction often has to make historical facts answer to the prerogatives of narration. It is sometimes necessary for the novelist to alter or select facts in order to make his narrative coherent and dramatic. Mr. Bier does that, for instance, when he has his character Klaus Pelz, who is obviously based on Claas Epp, Jr., attempt to ascend into heaven in 1884. Claas Epp, Jr., didn't try it until 1889 and again in 1891, the first date being wrong because his clock was crooked on his wall. Or so the story goes.

The problems with reading Mr. Bier's *The Quest for Shar-I-Sabs* are narrative problems. The main problem with Mr. Bier's narrative is that it has, in Henry James' terms, no "commanding center." When he used the phrase, Henry James was talking about point of view. It is commonly said that the great advance in fiction writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the management of point of view. Mr. Bier does not manage his point of view well and he gets into the narrative problem that that management was supposed to solve, namely, the control of narrative's constant force towards diffuseness. Mr. Bier's point of view jumps around and thus there is not great dramatic focus of the events until his character Klaus Pelz arrives at Serabulak in 1882. From then on the narrative is at its best and culminates in the fine scene when Klaus Pelz attempts to ascend into heaven.

A second narrative problem is that the

characters are not well defined. Because the narrative is not focused into and through a single perceptivity, the characters remain vague. Mr. Bier gives the reader a roster at the beginning of the book and it is often necessary to consult that list in order to keep the characters separate. There are some interesting characters: the butcher Henry Abrams, a teacher and linguist Susanna Allers, the prophet Klaus Pelz, the German smith George Phillip, the retarded boy Meron Horski, the aged Karl Wenner and his fourth and young wife Tatiana Wenner, who has an extra-marital affair with Grigori Rosanov.

There are other problems: lots of cliches, stodgy dialogue, a confused narrative order, unexplained time shifts, weak or no description of settings. But in spite of the historical and narrative weaknesses, it is a great story. In spite of all the meandering in the narrative, the central story comes through. A group of Bible-haunted Mennonites studied the book of Daniel and the Apocalypse. They believed that those books were guides to the future. They filled in the blanks with exact historical events and found out that the tribulation was about to come upon them. They sold everything and set out on a great adventure. They were human beings who believed and were thus caught up in a biblically determined scenario. As Mr. Bier has it, they might have been heading for Shar-i-Sabs, wherever that was to be, but they still were people who suffered, died, hoped and finally endured a great disappointment. Think what it must have been to travel thousands of miles and end up in the so-called Big Garden, also called Ak Metchet. Then to sit and wait for Elijah, who never shows up. Finally, none of the pilgrims escaped the tribulation. For those who stayed in the Khanate of Khiva it came in the form of Russian Communism. For those who came to America it came in the form of U.S. militarism. What comes after the tribulation is yet to happen.

Dallas Wiebe
University of Cincinnati
Cincinnati, Ohio

David A. Haury, *Heritage Preservation: A Resource Book for Congregations*. Newton, KS: Historical Committee of the General Conference Mennonite Church and Historical Commission of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1993. Pp. 30. ($5.00 paperback)

This booklet will be a welcome and handy resource for Mennonite (and other) congregational archivists as well as archivists for church-related organizations. It seems to me that few people really understand what an archivist does or should be doing. This work defines very well the work and role of the congregational archivist. The work of an archivist is not usually the same as that of the historian, although in a small organization or congregation there will probably be some overlap in the job descriptions. Archivists are the collectors and preservers of the records, not necessarily the writers of the history.

The book can be divided into four main sections: what is and who should be the congregational archivist; what records should be created and kept (documentation); where and how should the records be kept (preservation); and a section of appendices with helpful lists.

The first section defines the role and "qualifications" of a congregational archivist. Probably the most important skill needed is that the person have organizational abilities and persistence or thoroughness. "Ultimately enthusiasm about the past may be the top prerequisite." Every congregation should appoint an archivist to insure the survival of its heritage.

The second section, on documentation, discusses in detail the types of records that should be created and preserved. The content and value of each type of record is also described. Equally important, records that do not need to be kept are also discussed. A good archivist needs to learn that certain types of records are not of long-term value and do need to be discarded. You simply cannot and do not need to save every piece of paper that has data on it. This section also includes a good discussion of the value of various types of photographs that should be taken and preserved in a congregational setting.

The third section, on preservation, deals with the important issues of where and how records should be kept. For long-term storage, certain temperature, humidity, and light levels should be maintained for the preservation of records. A secure closet or fireproof filing cabinet should be used for housing archival records. If these storage conditions are not available, a congregation should consider placing their significant records, or at least copies of them, in an established denominational archives. Other preservation issues such as security, handling, and use of acid-free containers are discussed in this section.

Another part of this section deals with proper arrangement and description of archival material. Most papers will be sorted into record groups. Within each record group, most material will be filed chronologically, but occasionally alphabetical arrangement is used. The author gives practical and comprehensive advice on the arrangement of various types of materials.

The final section has several appendices of helpful lists of archivist responsibilities, records to keep and discard, denominational archival repositories, vendors of archival supplies, and a note on recommended readings.

The author, David Haury, has considerable experience as a professional archivist, and has provided a helpful resource for congregational archivists. I recommend it for use in large or small congregations.

Joel D. Alderfer
Mennonite Historians of Eastern Pennsylvania
Harleysville, Pennsylvania

J. B. Toews, *A Pilgrimage of Faith: The Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia and North America 1860-1990.* Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1993. Pp. 376. ($11.95 paperback)

The purpose of this book, in the author's words, is "to provide a biblical and theological framework for the Mennonite Brethren search for identity amidst the blinding cultural changes of the late twentieth century" (Preface, iii). J. B. Toews has himself experienced much of that history, but more than that, he has helped to shape much of Mennonite Brethren history during approximately one-half of the life of the church. He has had leadership roles in education, in missions, as well as in pastoral and conference positions. While the earlier part of the book relies heavily on the usual written sources such as P. M. Friesen, the latter part of the book includes much that derives from the author's own experience. The latter part of the book also draws heavily on the 1982 Mennonite Brethren Church Membership Profile (see *Direction*, fall 1985).

Toews's basic understanding of the Mennonite Brethren Church and the Mennonite context in Russia out of which the church was born follows the standard Mennonite Brethren historiography from P. M. Friesen to J. A. Toews. The emphasis is very much on the Mennonite Brethren movement of 1860 as "Anabaptism revisited," and Anabaptism is understood basically as defined by Bender's concept of the "Anabaptist vision." While the role of Pietism and movements such as the Baptists is acknowledged, it is carefully circumscribed. Toews believes strongly that the heart of the Mennonite Brethren movement relates to their understanding and experience of conversion and "personal salvation." This is seen more in terms of a return to Menno Simons than in terms of the "outside influence" of Pietism. The old church in Russia had forgotten its roots.

Toews acknowledges many of the problems which Mennonite Brethren encountered in their earlier history (e.g., the exuberant movement, the dispensationalist theology of the Plymouth Brethren, the legalistic tendencies) but in essence the Mennonite Brethren Church remains true to its early vision. Indeed, Toews states that "our fundamental theology has not changed in more than 130 years" (p. 204). On the whole, however, Toews is much more critical of recent developments and suggests that the struggle has intensified. Toews is particularly critical of such issues as the continuing paternalism in missions, the cheap grace offered by the Church Growth movement, and the "one-man style" or "chief executive officer" style of pastoral leadership in recent history. In general terms Toews sees today's Mennonite Brethren as having to stand vigilant against the evils of relativism, pluralism, pragmatism, secularism, and modernism. We are "buffeted by a sea of change" and the prospects don't appear very bright (p. 205).

The quality of the book is unfortunately marred by a number of errors and other flaws. The binding is extremely inflexible. The table of contents divides the book into four sections with specific headings, but these divisions disappear in the text. In fact, the text refers to Parts I and II, but this division is not otherwise evident. "Foreword" is spelled "Foreward" (vii and back cover). Block quotations which sometimes run for many pages are slightly indented in the left margins but otherwise not clearly set off from the text. Hyphens occur where should not ("Chi-na" p. 162; "Je-sus" p. 177; "Anabaptist," p. 161).

Toews does not claim to investigate new sources or offer profoundly new interpretations of Mennonite Brethren history. He does, however, offer the reader some unique and profound insights. His deep concern for the Mennonite Brethren denomination makes the book a prophetic call for renewal. Toews is one of the last remaining links with an earlier Mennonite world both in Russia and in North America and has witnessed and experienced a larger world of unprecedented change. For Mennonite Brethren (and other Mennonites) who have been preoccupied with the quest for identity in the modern world, this book offers significant material for reflection.

Abe J. Dueck
Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies
Winnipeg, Manitoba