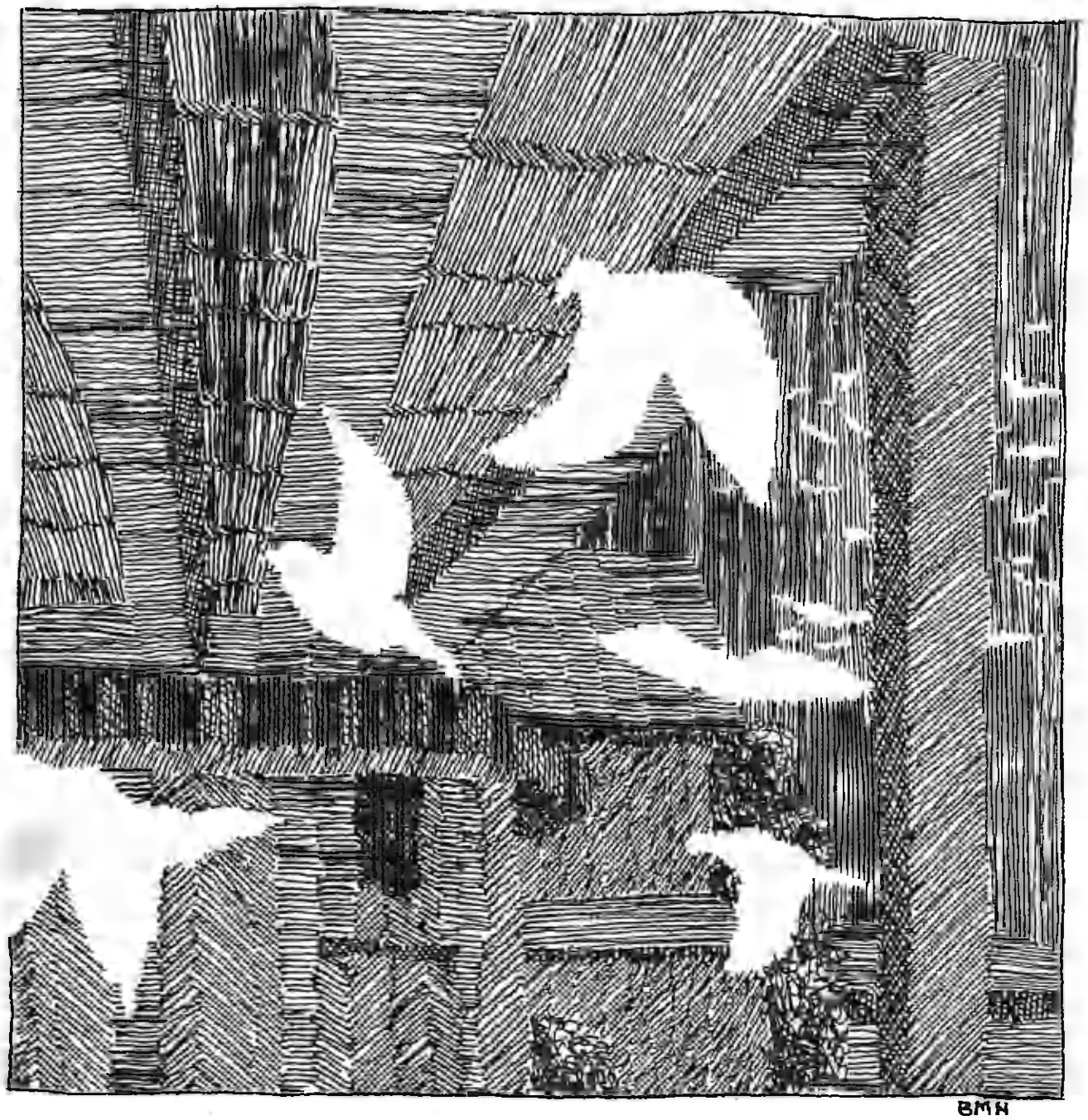
MENNONITE LIFE

DECEMBER 1995



In This Issue

A Christmas issue! Not the usual approach for this journal, even for the December arts issue. It began when Warren Kliewer sent one of his historical essays titled quite traditionally, "The Best Christmas Ever," but intriguing, humorous, anything but traditional in its presentation of a kind of childhood different from the current commercial one. Its author admitted later that he wrote the piece because he personally despaired of most expressions of Christmas: "To some extent I've been influenced by the Quakers, who maintain that Christmas has nothing to do with them because 'every day is a holy day' . . . and because it's an unnecessary expense. I particularly dislike the commercialized version of a Dickensian Christmas which has taken over. . . . "

And so do we all. Therefore, I was curious to see what would happen if, in addition to the "wintry" fiction I already had for this issue, I asked for poetic expressions of Christmas or "winter" themes. Included here are the responses of Jeff Gundy, Jean Janzen, Julia Kasdorf, Leonard Neufeldt, Carla Reimer (first publication in our journal), Janice Waltner Sevilla, Elmer Suderman, and Dallas Wiebe.

The fiction writer new to *Mennonite Life* is Evelyn Miller, whose story, "On Display," written in January 1994, is a wintry piece in both setting and spirit. I am most impressed with this new writer's ability to make real the internal struggle in vivid detail, to "accurately" portray memory, consciousness, internal pain in her memorable female character, Viola Helmuth, a member of the Beaver Run Mennonite Church.

From Marian Kleinsasser Towne's "semi-fictional" work, *Bread of Life: Diaries and Memories of a Dakota Family*, including her father's diary entries made following her mother's death in 1937, we have excerpted several Christmas entries which portray one Dakota family's Christmases fifty years ago.

The photographed art is from the catalog, *Visual Arts: Wichita 95*, the exhibition of works at the joint conference of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church in Wichita this past July. The catalog contains the work of more than sixty artists with connections to Anabaptist faith traditions and is available from Merrill Krabill, Bethel College Art Department for $4.

Other photographs on a Christmas theme are from the Mennonite Library and Archives photograph collections. Some are unidentified; if you recognize place or name, let us know.

Please check the book reviews. A number of writers in the arts have new books available.

Raylene Hinz-Penner

MENNONITE LIFE

December 1995 Vol. 50 No. 4

Front Cover
Barn Birds, Becky Mast Nordvall, Pen and ink, 11" x 14": "I have always been interested in the play of light and dark, sun and shadow. Recently I have been incorporating birds and other animals in my landscapes. Not wanting to freeze them by detailed, specific representations, I have chosen rather to leave the creatures in silhouette, defined by the background which is often a barn in some state of weathering graceful disrepair."

Back Cover
unidentified Christmas scene, ca. 1920?

Photo Credits
Front cover, pp. 6, 25, 29, *Visual Arts Wichita '95*; pp. 16, 32, 43, back cover, Mennonite Library and Archives; pp. 13, 14, Marian Kleinsasser Towne.

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Winter

by Leonard Neufeldt

i

First of all, forgive me
for writing this season.
I've no reason for it.
no message from an angel
or news-breaking facts
from the expert
who after years of trying
found the gene that makes thoughts
age, starting from the outside
one by one, and die to the core
at the end of the year.

ii

In the lamplight the street
shines tonight with salt and snow,
and small drifts clumsy
with the white of hospitals
feel the world crawl this way
and that beneath them.

iii

In the beginning God said
"let there be winter."
The woman, feeling change
in the air, covered the man
with her thin coat. On the hill's
south side the last flowers
were brown by morning
and by afternoon
black trees jutted out of snow
and the sky between them
grew immense with hawks
circling lower, one of them
screaming.

iv

Winter read out of Thoreau
and Pasternak and Rudy Wiebe.
How none of the shadows is right.
How the hawk will not relent.
How the stillness of ice
explodes like a rifle shot.
How the words are not possible.
How a man buying a newspaper
is warmed by the morning sun.

Annunciation

by Leonard Neufeldt

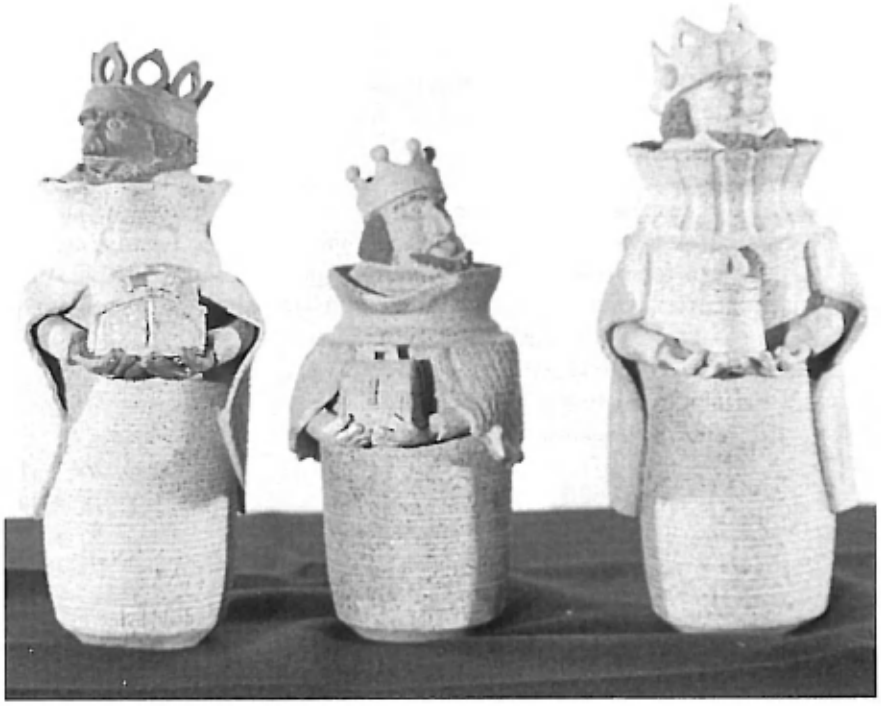
Shepherds have come out of their separate
sleep in a Book of Hours, but the hour glass
hasn't run down: only circles loosening,
spiraling past palsied fingers and eyes
leaning back, past this side of the black hill
to where the sky deepens.

Trying
to keep still the minds moves
like the herd dog sleeping nose against tail
and one eye open, like the tree canopy
circling over stumps gray as thousand-year-old
saints, like the shepherd's golden horn
and crook-end staff, unshorn white sheep
in a circus ring of pasture, a hand
shielding against blinding light.

Above the bitter whorl of the tower
and the impatient mountain gazing from
the other side, and just beyond
the slow freight turn of windmill vanes
slipping behind the green fringe
of the world to touch cold sky
lizard-like, a white ribbon feathers peace
and drifts across as if to stay.

We Three Kings
Jim Harnish
Wheel thrown stoneware
5" x 10" x 11"

We Three Kings is a ceramic sculpture group of three thrown lidded jars. The lids are embellished with crowned heads and the jars with arms bearing suggested packaged gifts.



The Best Christmas Present Ever

by Warren Kliewer

When I was a child, Christmas came but once a year, and that was too often. Girls always got the best Christmas presents: pretty things like dollhouses which you could spend months playing with, productive things you could make other things with, like miniature sewing machines. Well, I'll admit there were a couple of boys in rich families who made out just fine at Christmas. They got board games like Monopoly or complicated model airplane kits. I knew one boy who got a chemistry set, and he spent months mixing liquids to create foul odors. But what did I get for Christmas? Socks. A scarf. A flannel shirt. One year I got a book called *What Every Young Boy Should Know*, an introduction to sex, heavily weighted in the direction of exercise and cold water, and in the section dealing with physiology, there were no pictures. Some Christmas that was! Early in life I learned that there's no such thing as a guaranteed payoff.

But there was that exceptional year when Uncle Pete gave me a present. It was, in fact, in his farmhouse that this miraculous gifting occurred. The family lived about a mile and a half south of town, a short bicycle ride, but a tortuous one because the road had been graveled with fist-sized rocks. It was in this farmhouse that my father's unmarried sister and four brothers gathered every year for the annual Christmas reunion, bringing along their wives and children, my aunts and cousins. On this particular morning everyone had, of course, attended church—everyone, that is, except a wife or two whose morning service was devoutly basting the ham in the oven. The festivities began just after noon with the feast—an enormous array of beans and corn and mashed potatoes and bread and rolls and relishes and pumpkin pie surrounding this shank of a pig that two or three months earlier had walked around in its pen some fifty yards from the kitchen.

Because the gathered clan was much too large for Uncle Pete and Aunt Anna's modest dining room table, the grown-ups ate at the first seating. We children waited. When the grown-ups were finished, the table was reset for us, and we were joined by Aunt Anna, who had been the presiding cook and now became the children's chaperon. Nowadays, it seems odd, maybe even cruel, to make children wait patiently for their meals. At this end of the twentieth century we've had many decades of psychologists and advertisers persuading us that children have sensibilities. But I lived my childhood in the last vestiges of a nineteenth-century European peasant tradition. Age had its privileges, and children went to the end of the line. We learned very quickly that people get rewards for growing up, and no one gets a prize for staying young and small. We kept our irritation to ourselves and entertained vague notions of growing up and sitting at the first table when the meat was still hot.

It was the waiting time after dinner that was hard to bear. The red-and-green wrapped packages were stacked and waiting under the Christmas tree, but the grown-ups were delaying. We children would drift like a small flock of lost sparrows into the kitchen where we'd watch the women putting food away, washing dishes, drying them, and laughing and talking as if this were a plain, old, ordinary day, not Christmas. We wanted to ask, "Aren't you almost done?" but no one dared. So we sparrows fluttered into the living room where the men had gone, as they said, "to digest." One had fallen asleep. Another was lost in thought. The rest were talking quietly, and it was only a matter of time before they too would drift off.

The silence made me nervous. I was sure that whatever was waiting for me hidden by red tissue paper was something that someone thought I needed, like a bathrobe. But being a part of the flock of cousins, I caught the fever of hope. There was always a tiny chance that someone had decided a Christmas present should be fun, not a duty. I looked hard at the package with my name on it. It didn't look like a bathrobe. Maybe...maybe...

But in that German-Russian Mennonite village, youth waited for age. This deference to age was, in fact, the reason we always gathered in Uncle Pete's house. The Christmas reunion had begun in my grandparents' house, and when they had both died, the locale passed to Uncle Pete's, not because it was the largest (which it wasn't) or because it was convenient (far from it), but because Uncle Pete was the oldest of the six living descendants. I understood all that, and I knew very well I couldn't hurry the grownups into anything they weren't ready for.

For that matter, no one, young or old, could hurry Uncle Pete along. He was

his own pacesetter for whatever he was doing. He was determined to do all things once—thoroughly, making no mistakes, because he really hated to go back and do things over. So he had had to devote his life to being skillful. At what? At plowing or husking corn or whatever was needed, even little household chores. It was Uncle Pete who taught me how to fry eggs in such a way that you put a thin skin over a soft yolk. How many short-order cooks know how to do that?

I once saw his range of skills during what was probably the last hog-butchering on that farm. The relatives and neighbors gathered early on that chilly fall morning, and I was there watching everything, trotting along behind the men as they went out to the barn.

Uncle Pete, carrying the single-shot .22 rifle, squatted down behind a heavy-timbered gate and stuck the barrel through a gap. Another man herded the small white sow, balking and squealing, into an open space between two pens. When the sow had been maneuvered into the right spot, the herder moved back a few steps. The sow, surrounded on all sides by men and barriers, stood stock still, as if to stop and think through this puzzling situation. All the watchers observed a hushed silence, and I stopped breathing. This was the moment Uncle Pete had been watching for. He squeezed the trigger. The .22 rifle's report echoed through the barn. A small, V-shaped incision appeared exactly between the eyes. The sow sighed and the legs collapsed beneath her. The living pig had become meat.

No howls or screams or fuss, no splashing blood accompanied that transformation. The victim probably felt no pain. And yet, Uncle Pete got up silently, discharged the shell case, wrapped the gun in a canvas cover, and without turning to look back, carried the weapon to its secure hiding place in the house. The killing itself, it seemed, was his most difficult moment in the process.

Two of the other men quickly hoisted the carcass and hung it by its own Achilles tendons on steel hooks, slit the throat to drain the blood into a waiting bucket, and dipped the carcass into a barrel of boiling hot water. Ten years old or so, I was amazed at the men's teamwork in efficiently attacking the flesh. The bristles were scraped off with four-inch round scrapers. Slits were drawn in the belly with long, delicate butcher knives. The guts spilled out into metal pans. The limbs were severed with cuts at the joints and deft twists of the cutters' wrists. The head came off, the hocks, the hams.

The limbless torso and all the smaller pieces were carried from the barn to the shiny metal table in the summer kitchen attached to the side of the house. There, as the torso was further divided, the small parts were sorted and sent on to this group of women or that group of men to be worked on. The scraps and trimmings were all collected into a vat where they were rendered down into lard and cracklings. Everything in that pig's body from snout to hoofs to organs was useful—everything, that is, but the tail and the sphincter. Even the intestines, I discovered late in the day, were thoroughly scrubbed and became the casings for sausages.

Uncle Pete coordinated all these small crews at work, and did so with the briefest of instructions. "Trim the fat." "Into that kettle." "Go help Anna." When I asked how sausages were made, his answer was, "Here. Watch." So I did. Intently. I observed every detail of every step as he stuffed the intestines over the spout at the bottom of the press and as he cranked the cast iron handle to force the ground pork out into the casings, expanding them into full-sized sausages. But he explained nothing.

Uncle Pete was always laconic when he demonstrated or taught. Why use five words, he seemed to think, when you can say it in two? I have no memory of ever seeing him in a free and easy conversation with another person of his own age, let alone a child. That is why I am still haunted, a half-century later, by his choice of the absolutely right gift for me on that miraculous Christmas of all Christmases. I doubt it was just dumb luck. Possibly someone else picked out the gift for him. Or is it possible that he was a careful and astute observer of his tiny nephew's habits? In either case someone was watching me, paying attention, taking note. How else could he, or someone, have known to buy the gift that I needed and desired more than anything else? A gift I wanted so deeply that even I didn't know what it was.

The preparation for gift-giving was a systematic lottery in those days. It began at the Thanksgiving family reunion. Someone who had a clear and elegant handwriting—one of the younger women, I supposed—wrote down each person's name on a tiny slip of paper. Someone else would go in search of a man's hat—often my father's since he always wore hats. The little slips were stirred and shuffled inside the upside-down crown of the hat, and we had a jolly little ceremony of drawing a name from the hat and then smiling and acting mysterious. No matter how dismayed we were by the gift-buying problem chance had given us, we smiled benignly. If someone caught you off guard, as my sister often did, and asked, "Did you get my name?" you were expected to say, "No." Christmas secrets were sacred. This was the only time of the year in our Mennonite community when we were encouraged to lie.

As that special Christmas day wore on, we children wore out, as usual. The grownups would not be hurried along. The dishes had to be dried, the men's digesting had to be accomplished, and so the little flock of children subsided into stupor. Even eager anticipation cannot be sustained. I sat in a corner and brooded about what my present was going to be. Probably mittens. And of course we didn't dare go outside and play. The grownups might forget we were there and start giving out the presents without us. We watched the grownups for any signs of activity. No one moved. We waited.

About three o'clock, maybe later, a couple of the women who had finished in the kitchen drifted into the living room and sat down next to their husbands, one of whom woke up. "Oh," he said, "Is it time?"

"Pretty soon," she replied. "Go back to sleep."

"No! No!" we children wanted to cry out, though of course we didn't. We sat up straighter and watched more intensely.

Another woman came from the kitchen and then another and another, and everyone was there except Aunt Anna, who was still in the kitchen putting the last few pots and kettles away in the cupboards. "Why doesn't she come?" we children wondered. "Doesn't she realize what she's doing to us?" Five minutes passed, or six or seven. Finally, Aunt Anna arrived. She found a chair. The grownups looked at each other. All we heard was the sound of breathing. That was a good sign. No one had anything to say. It meant no one would start an interesting conversation and delay us for another half hour. "Well," someone finally said, "who wants to be Santa Claus?" It had begun.

This democratic choosing of a "Santa Claus" never surprised me then but it does now in retrospect. One would think Uncle Pete as patriarch would have passed out the gifts. He was the oldest, after all, and we were gathering in his house. It wasn't that he was shy, but he seemed to defer to the pleasure children got from the ceremony. So when he sensed that a child was ready to take a step forward, Uncle Pete would step back.

That's how he happened to give me a lesson in frying eggs. "I'll show you how to do it right," he said one day when the subject had come up in conversation. He began by stirring up the fires in the wood cookstove, making one side of the stove moderately hot and the other side much hotter. Using a black, cast-iron skillet, he started the eggs on the moderate side and kept them there until the egg-whites began to harden and the yolks were still soft and runny. Then he switched the skillet to the hot side, sprinkled a few drops of water into the hot skillet, and quickly clapped on a cover. The water instantly turned into hissing steam. After about thirty seconds he removed the cover. The steam escaped. The soft yolks were covered with a thin translucent skin. "Try those," he said. I did, and nodded my appreciation vigorously. Even that silent gesture of appreciation must have seemed excessive, for he turned my compliment aside by merely grunting. The success of the lesson, after all, spoke for itself.

So if Uncle Pete did not need compliments on his cooking, I suppose it's not surprising that he didn't need to play the patriarch. Better to let the children pass out the Christmas presents. And by this memorable Christmas it had become the custom for the youngest girl to get that job. Uncle Pete would sit back and smile at the pleasure my younger cousin was getting from this playful ceremony.

By the time she began her duties, it was about three-thirty, and I was permanently planted in a corner. My mind dwelt on things I didn't want but someone probably thought I needed—dark brown, useful woolen scarves and ugly red caps with earflaps. And as I watched the others, I saw no point in hoping. Young and old, uncles, aunts, boy cousins, girls, all were opening their wrapped gifts and smiling wanly at the giver and saying things like, "Oh, that's nice. Yes." Christmas was living up, or down, to its reputation.

My turn came. The package was brought to me. I laid it on my knees. Its weight told me it wasn't socks, or anything wearable. Too heavy. I'd run out of guesses. Like everyone else, I unwrapped slowly, delaying the moment when I'd have to say thank you for something I hadn't chosen and would never use. But the flimsy paper made the unwrapping go too fast.

For a moment I stared at the present, or rather, presents. There were two. Books. One was tan with light blue letters. *Five Little Peppers and How They Grew*. The second was red with black letters. *Robin Hood*. For a moment, unable to speak, I stared at the books, then dropped them to the floor, slid down off my chair, and with a fierce, open-mouthed scream raced across the room. Uncle Pete's eyes grew huge as he saw a tiny boy racing toward him, whooping all the way, then hurling himself into a bear hug and a slobbery kiss. When I slid to the floor again, Uncle Pete settled back with a self-satisfied grin. To this day I do not know who chose that Christmas present, but whoever it was, Uncle Pete believed for a moment he had done the shopping.

Before long I had slipped out of the family circle and witnessed no more of the gifting ceremony. The rest of the afternoon I spent devouring words. When it was time to go home and my mother came looking for me, I had finished the first half of *Robin Hood*. By the end of the next day I had finished both fat books. I probably never reread the story of the Pepper family, and only remember that it was about good people who did nice things. But I delved into Robin Hood again and again, and made the book come to life by organizing the neighbor boys into a band of roving archers. We called each other Will Scarlet or Friar Tuck or "Thou varlet!" Battling in the backyard with long staffs, sneakily outwitting the Sheriff of Nottingham, journeying days and nights through imaginary dense woods, we learned that we could become whatever we were able to name. We hid out in my father's arbor, a small, shady shelter covered with grape vines, and through the power of words and images it became Sherwood Forest. We became older or stronger or fatter, we were able to transport ourselves back a thousand years, because we had learned that we could become whatever we could say.

Uncle Pete gave me the book. But who chose that moment for the book to be given? I continue to ponder that mystery, and have as yet no answer. I am sure, however, that until the flimsy tissue paper fell away and revealed the red cover and the title, I did not know how desperately ready I was to receive that book and all that followed. Robin Hood became for a time my metaphor. That book became my door into the world of imagination. And once that door opens, as those who distrust and fear the imagination well know, it can never again be shut.

Christmas and the Rapture

Elmer Suderman

On Sunday mornings in our little country church the preacher, more often than was comfortable, at least for me, preached, certainly at Christmas, that Jesus was coming again—and soon—to rapture his washed-in-the-blood saints so Satan could be let loose to raise hell on earth without let or hindrance for seven years while we, the saints, that is, would eat the Lord's supper in heaven while God and his angels beat the hell out of the Devil and his angels and placed them in chains and sent them back where they came from so we could go back to the good old earth, and reign with God in peace and tranquility for a thousand years, I think it was, after which I was never quite sure what was supposed to happen, probably because it was going to be too good to describe; of course everybody acted like they wanted to be one of the saints and be raptured with Jesus when he appeared in the eastern skies at a most unexpected time like maybe when we were seeing a movie or playing cards or saying damn, or even heck, or playing softball in some secluded pasture on Sunday afternoon, all of which along with a lot of other things too fierce to mention were terribly sinful, and be lifted up to him which was a little too scary for me, because I had ridden an elevator and if that was scary, which it was, what would I feel like sailing who knows how many miles up in the sky for a seven year communion lunch which probably wouldn't taste nearly as good as fried chicken and mashed potatoes or home made ice cream (nothing in heaven or on earth could taste better than that) because communion would only be a piece of bread, stale probably, and a small glass of grape juice because we didn't even use wine, but, of course, I had to act like I was really looking forward to Christ's coming, but I wasn't, not really, because that would interfere with our Sunday afternoon softball game in someone's pasture where we would sometimes slide into what we thought was third base and have to clean up before we went home to eat the rolls, zwieback we called them, which our mothers always baked on Saturday and we ate with cheese from Cheese Schultz's grocery store in Isabella, which was sure better than communion bread and grape juice with Jesus somewhere so high in the Eastern sky that even an airplane couldn't reach it and where, I was sure, we'd be breathless and dizzy, and I was pretty sure that those who prayed the loudest "Komm bald Herr Jesu, Komm," weren't all that disappointed still to be in this vile and wretched world they wanted to leave, or so they said, and came to church and joined with our preacher to pray on yet another Sunday morning for Jesus to come again soon and take us to heaven leaving no one behind even if all they did after church was to go home to take a nap while we played another baseball game in Grunau's pasture, though I worried when mother and father or some of my brothers and sisters weren't around when I thought they should be because I was afraid the rapture had happened and I had been left behind which was scarier than taking the ride into the sky. Besides Jesus had come once, and I thought he got it right the first time.

Some Kind of Gods

Carla Reimer

Two weeks before Christmas
when every branch sagged
from the accumulation of snow,
my family traveled north
to the Forest Preserve near Nesbitt.
We never bought trees at Friesen's
Department Store. Lying flat
inside a wire pen, they looked
like caged animals.
Instead we plunged into the heart
of the forest, pungent air
brushing our cheeks,
blue spruce standing above,
some kind of gods.
Instinct told us to touch only one.

These days we think we are stronger
without such pagan rituals.
There is no tree; our gifts
are wrapped in recycled paper.
We do not want to be responsible
for depleting the ozone layer,
the earth, ourselves.
We have forgotten how
we were transformed
by the death of a single tree:
our carpet covered with needles,
air thick with the sweet
smell of resin.

Bread of Life: Diaries and Memories of a Dakota Family 1936-1945

Christmas Excerpts

by Marian Kleinsasser Towne

From the author's preface:

"I wrote *Bread of Life: Diaries and Memories of a Dakota Family* as a grateful response to my family and to the community of relatives and friends which nourished and sustained us following the death of our mother, Katherine Tieszen Kleinsasser, in 1937. . . .

"*Bread of Life* gives a semi-fictional response to factual occurrences, kneading story, vignette, biography, history, correspondence, and speeches into the loaf of diary entries to rise with the yeast of the reader's imagination. . . .

"The story takes place in a tightly-knit Hutterite Mennonite community north of Freeman, South Dakota. Its main character [the diarist whose portions are italicized] is Morgan (John Pierpont Kleinsasser, 1896-1984). He was a husband, father, farmer, rural school teacher, state legislator, ecologist, religious and civic leader, and perpetual student. As his youngest daughter, I wish to share his vision with a larger world."

Marian Kleinsasser Towne

Wednesday, December 21, 1938

Practice teachers put up our artificial Christmas tree this morning. Children made decorations for it. Marian was along.

After school she and I went to Tiahrts to pick up the nuts they had ordered from Kliewer relatives in California, but they had already brought the nuts down. We got 21 lbs. almonds and walnuts at 21¢ per lb. Marian stayed at Tiahrts.

Bought other Christmas goods at Gelfand's.

Thursday, December 22, 1938

Cal went to town to see a basketball game between Bethel College of Kansas and F.J.C. Freeman got badly beaten.

Ruth and I wrapped Christmas presents for the school children and practice teachers.

Friday, December 23, 1938

Morning practice teachers left at 10:15 after our little program. They had a program at the College.

Arnold Graber, a graduate of the State School for the Blind at Gary, gave us a very interesting talk about the work there. He wrote in Braille for most of the children.

I gave the practice teachers each a box of candy and the children a package of nuts and fruit and a book. I got 3 neckties.

Bethel College played Nettleton Commercial College of Sioux Falls. Nettleton had four Indians on their team. Bethel won 40 to 32.

Saturday, December 24, 1938

Deposited my Soil Conservation check for $210.21.

Had Christmas program in church. Pearl sang in the choir, and Ruth and Marian said pieces in English. Little girls got a dollar from Joe P. Glanzer.

Afterwards Pearl, Johnny Klein, Mary Klein and John P. Stahl went to Catholic mass in Marion. Mary came down from Spink and Johnny has been working here during his Christmas vacation.

Sunday, December 25, 1938

Very beautiful day. All in church. For

dinner we went to Peter G. Hofer, Sr. About 5 p.m. we came home, did chores and then went to Jacob L. Hofer, Sr.'s for their family Christmas. Marian got a toy drum and Ruth a checkered dress.

"Let's play Christmas program!" urged Vivian.

"I'll play my drum," volunteered Marian.

"No, I mean a church program. We can't have a drum in church. We can't have a tree either. No Christmas trees in church, only in school," said Lorraine.

"Why?" asked Merlin.

"Because Christmas trees are a pagan custom!" retorted Deloris.

"What's pagan?" asked Harvey.

"Heathen! What people did before they got converted."

"Oh."

First the Hofer children lined up all the chairs they could find in their grandparents' apartment for the congregation to sit in. Then they pulled blankets off beds to wrap around Mary and Joseph, who were played alternately by all willing participants. Harvey wanted to use his brother Delmar as the Baby Jesus, but Deloris said he might get hurt. So Vivian's new Christmas doll was commandeered instead.

The "Wise Men" brought fruit and nuts from the kitchen and everybody ended the program by sitting in a circle and eating. Finally, they were treated to angel food cake which Evelyn had decorated with colored sugar sprinkles.

Saturday, December 23, 1939

All in town in evening. Bought Christmas dresses for the girls and a $3.98 pair of shoes for myself.

Spoke to a few about coming out for Co. Sup. of Schools. Got some encouragement. Heard that Huebner of Menno might be a candidate. Atty. Henry L. Gross will again be a candidate for Co. Judge.

Sunday, December 24, 1939

Got up too late to go to Church. Cold but no snow.

Heard a Christmas program from Rome broadcast from the North American College. Also heard a man speaking from Berlin at 6:15 p.m. It was 1:15, Christmas Day, in Berlin.

Had Christmas program in church. Marian gave a German piece, Ruth a piece in English ("Why Do Bells on Christmas Ring?") Pearl and Cal were in the choir. They had to move the pulpit to accommodate everyone in the choir. Later the choir came to our place caroling. I recognized Johnny Klein as they sang at my window.

"Let's stop at Morgan's first," suggested Johnny.

"He'll still be up. If you want to surprise him, you'll have to catch him at the end of the tour. He'll be asleep by then, most likely," said Cal.

"Okay, we'll go to Jacob P. Maendl's first, then west and north toward Bridgewater, east to Dolton and then back south toward Freeman," said Jac. Mendel, their director.

The Hutterthal choir, bundled up against the cold, piled into cars and headed toward the Jacob Maendl farm southwest of the church. Through the window they could see the older couple sitting at the kitchen table, reading the Bible by kerosene lamp.

"*Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht*" the choir sang below their window. Mrs. Maendl paused in her reading, her hands folded over the Bible. A black flowered shawl covered her white hair.

When the choir had finished, Mrs. Maendl opened her door. "*Kommst herein*," she said.

"Thank you, but we're just starting out," said Jac.

"*Willst Kendy hob'n?*"

"Yeah!" came the chorus.

She passed among the carolers a bowl of peppermint candy. "*Fröhliche Weinachten!*" [sic] she said.

Back in the car, Pearl said, "She is the sweetest lady! She makes the best dill pickles, too. She makes some for us every summer."

"I know! She makes some for us too," said Grace, the preacher's daughter.

The carolers made their rounds, alternately freezing their toes and fingers, warming up under horsehide blankets. Near midnight, as they approached John J. B.'s near Dolton, Johnny Klein said, "I'll bet Aunt Katherine will have something warm for us."

John P. Kleinsasser, called "Morgan" in the story. Campaign photo for South Dakota House of Representatives 1936.

"At midnight?" asked Grace.

"Sure, she's prepared many a midnight lunch for us," said Pearl.

After singing "We Three Kings" and "O Come, All Ye Faithful," the choir was invited into the large and warm farm kitchen. "What do I smell?" asked Johnny as he hugged his aunt.

"I believe it's *Fleisch Wurst!*" suggested Pearl.

"You're right. I got sandwiches and cocoa for all of you. Come on in!"

As the group drove south on Highway 81 to Morgan's farm, there was hardly any traffic. Only an occasional kerosene or gas lamp was to be seen through a farmhouse window. "I'm sorry there was no snow this Christmas," said Grace. "Christmas is always more romantic with snow."

"Yeah, but we'd be tracking up everybody's house with snow on our galoshes," practical Pearl reminded her.

"Not to mention the danger of getting stuck!" said Johnny.

"We do have the moonlight, though," said Grace.

As they turned into Morgan's farmyard, only the glow of red coals in the hard coal burner could be seen through the parlor windows. "Everybody's asleep, even Pa," said Pearl.

John P. Kleinsasser (foreground) next to neighbor Jake M. Walter on the Walter farm yard north of Freeman, 1936.

"Let's go around to his bedroom window," said Johnny.

"Watch out so you don't stumble over the snow fencing," cautioned Cal. The group quietly made its way to the north side of the house protected by an embankment of packed straw. "Careful you don't snag your silk hose," cautioned Pearl to Grace.

"Quiet! Let's wake him up by caroling, not jabbering!" scolded Johnny.

Jac. Mendel led in singing "O, Little Town of Bethlehem." Suddenly two little faces appeared in the window west of Morgan's window. "We woke up Ruth and Marian," said Pearl, waving to her sisters.

After the choir sang "Joy to the World," Morgan appeared at the window in his pajamas. "Come to the front door and I'll give you some fruit and nuts." As the choir assembled around the entrance, Morgan started pitching apples, oranges and walnuts at individuals. "Here, catch!" he said. Then, seeing oranges elude grasps, he chided, "Some of you should have brought your catcher's mitts!"

Ruth and Marian in their pajamas watched the merriment. "Can we have an orange too?" asked Marian.

"Sure! Catch!" And Morgan sent an orange flying to each of them.

Pearl, shivering in the cold, decided to leave the carolers at this point to warm up before the parlor stove with its isinglass windows and then to climb into bed between her two little sisters. Cal and Johnny would continue to the end of the choir's tour.

Monday, December 25, 1939

Christmas Day. Beautiful day—no snow. After church we went to John J. B.'s for dinner and supper. Had Christmas gathering at Jake L.'s. All the children and partners were there except Smokey Joe and Viola of Onida. I got a Sheaffer pen and ink stand from my nephew, Paul L., in the gift exchange.

Tuesday, December 26, 1939

Had school. In the evening we went to grandparents. Benny Tschetter was along. Ruth and Marian got 50¢ for saying their pieces and the rest of us, including Benny, got $1.

Thursday, December 23, 1943

Took a load of Wisconsin 38 barley to town. It sold for $1.23 per bu. Bought 35 steel posts and some presents for the children. The stores were crowded with people.

A. T. Kaufman said he would pay $35 per ton for ground alfalfa.

Children had their school program this afternoon. They raffled off a box of chocolates. Miss Thomas has added a lot of music to the school.

With Luella Thomas at the piano the eight children in six grades faced their parents seated somewhat uncomfortably in their children's desks for the Christmas program.

In Part I they sang the familiar carols which they had learned in church and practiced in school: "O Little Town of Bethlehem," "Away in a Manger," and "We Three Kings of Orient Are." Janice read Luke 2 while the others acted out the nativity of Jesus in bathrobes. The pastel chenille robes which Pearl had sent Ruth and Marian from Irene last Christmas came in handy.

Part II was the secular portion of the program. The songs were "Up on the House Top Reindeer Pause," "Jolly Old Saint Nicholas," and "Deck the Halls." Playlets such as "Virginia's Surprise" and "Grandma Loses Her Knitting" brought applause from the audience. The climax of the program was a recitation of Clement Moore's "The Night Before Christmas" by the oldest male student, Orville.

After the gift exchange and raffle, in which Orville's older brother Gordon, a Freeman Academy student, won the chocolate-covered cherries, cookies were served. Then the "real" Christmas tree was undecorated and given to the family which otherwise would not have a tree.

It was an ecumenical meeting of the parents who, though living within a few miles of one another and all being Mennonite, went to different Mennonite churches in different Mennonite denominations: Silver Lake Mennonite Brethren Church, Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, and the Hutterthal Mennonite Church (General Conference).

Friday, December 24, 1943

The children put on a fairly good program this evening in church. Ruth gave a dramatic piece and Marian recited "Silent Night" in German before it was sung by the choir.

Saturday, December 25, 1943

All in church but Pearl, who is not home.

In the afternoon we went to P. P.'s. Edward was home on furlough from the

Army, stationed in Louisiana.

In the evening we went to grandparents. Dave J. R., Henry Tiahrt, Elmer Tiahrt, Arnold Tiahrt, Mrs. Marie Tiahrt, Mrs. Tina Tieszen and most of their families were there. Father-in-law gave each one a dollar bill. The children said their pieces.

Sunday, December 26, 1943

All in church again this morning. We had our Sunday School elections during the class period. I was elected to teach Class 3, a young boys' class.

Cal shot a pheasant and a jack rabbit.

"How's come they're called jack rabbits?" asked Marian as she watched Cal skin the rabbit in front of the kitchen stove.

"I don't know. Do you know, Pa?"

"I'm not sure, but Father said it was 'cause the ears looked like jackass ears. Used to call 'em jackass rabbits, and that got shortened to jack rabbits."

Saturday, December 23, 1944

Marian and I went to Sioux Falls to exchange some dresses.

Stopped in at Henry Tiahrts in the morning and evening. Had supper there. Anna shortened a dress for Marian.

Sunday, December 24, 1944

All in church this morning. Pearl and Peter were there too.

"Did you get the box we sent you for Christmas?" Marian asked Pearl after church in the churchyard.

"Yes, we got it. But the pictures were broken. You have to pack glass better than that," said Peter.

"But it was a nice idea. And I could tell from the pieces that they were pretty once," said Pearl.

"Where are you staying?"

"At Peter's folks."

"Did you get the box I sent you?" asked Pearl.

"Yeah! I like the friendship bracelet," said Marian.

"And the milk glass relish dish," said Ruth.

"Those dishes are precious things you'll want to be careful with and save for later—when you get married and establish your own homes. Would you like to visit us in the Black Hills? I could send you train tickets."

"Oh, yes!" they shouted in unison.

"Are you going to be at Grandpa and Grandma Tieszen's house tomorrow night?" asked Pearl.

"I think so."

"Well, we'll see you all there then. Good-bye! See you tomorrow!" said Peter, whisking Pearl off with his arm around her.

Monday, December 25, 1944

All in church. Went to John J. B.'s in the afternoon and to the grandparents in the evening. Cold but no snow.

Tuesday, December 26, 1944

All in church. Got coal from Freeman Lumber Co. Was elected secretary of our co-op telephone co. at a meeting at Nachtigals. Girls went along to play with Mary.

Wednesday, December 27, 1944

Baled our own straw. Got 268 bales from one stack and 81 from another. Ray Senner, Ben Ratzlaff, Melvin Tieszen, Alfred Hofer, Cal and I baled.

Dr. Saner was here to treat a calf with scours. Got a recipe for a calf diarrhea cure: 2 T. honey or syrup, 1 t. soda, t. salt, 1 pt. warm water. Mix into calf's milk. One quart is enough milk for a small calf.

Sunday, December 31, 1944

All in church in morning. Had Watch Night service in evening. Girls sang in an ensemble. They sang "Give Me My Roses While I Live." Sounded like a Del Rio, Texas, cowboy song.

In the churchyard after the service, Morgan's nephews, Jake L. and Paul L. huddled with him in the cold.

"Well, Morgan, *Wie geht's?*" asked Paul.

"*Es geht, aber es geht sehr schlecht,*" answered Morgan.

"Remember, 'the first hundred years are always the hardest'!" said Jake, quoting one of his uncle's favorite expressions.

"Yeah!" said Morgan, looking up at the stars, "it can only get better."

Ice

Jean Janzen

Mother, your hot flat-iron
sizzled a gothic arch through
the thick porch window ice

so I could watch the rink at recess—
the kids circling, falling.
My breath kept the glass

in a blurred thaw, and I saw
what I would become—one of them
with red mittens.

And are you now the one
looking through, you without breath?
O Mother, loosened from longing,

your lips frozen, your hands
still at last, I can't see in.
I want you hot again,

working through the icy layers
so my eyes can see yours,
clear blue with recognition.

Unidentified children, ca. 1880. Photo from Mrs. P. W. Penner (Mathilda Ensz) (1879-1961).

On Display

by Evelyn Miller

In mid-life I chose to go back to grad school and learn again by reading and writing in a structured setting. For a number of years I had written poetry but became discouraged with the realities of publishing. I began researching a historical novel and in the process of writing a first draft, found the courage to take seriously the creative within me that wanted space and a voice. Now I'm in a Ph. D. program (Creative Writing - Fiction) at Ohio University—a long way from the story I wrote when I was in the fifth grade at Kalona, Iowa about making the winning basket—and am delighted/stretched, both by what has been written and by what might be written. Evelyn Miller.

Thick snow covered the roofs of buildings on the Helmuth homestead. A rich, creamy layer of icing that concealed its coldness. Young evergreens formed an extra fence line for the horses and bent under the weight of the snow, their tops inverted, reaching toward the ground. Every time Viola walked to the horse barn that week with a pail of table scraps, the same words went through her head, "Frozen tundra, frozen tundra." She wasn't sure about the meaning of tundra, or why these words repeated themselves, only that the snow was definitely there to stay.

She dried her hands on the yellow and green-striped terrycloth towel attached to the refrigerator door handle and quickly tied the two loose strings of her white covering into a bow under her neck. Now the strands wouldn't flop, wouldn't dangle over the apples and her red-handled paring knife. She was twenty minutes behind—the phone call from Emma—and she couldn't afford another interruption with Floyd's pie, couldn't spend time brushing back covering strings of white linen from her eyes' path. She worked as her momma had taught her—with quick movements that allowed nothing to get in the way, nothing to be wasted.

Floyd liked the pie warm enough that a scoop of ice cream on top melted at the edges into little rivers of milk. Bluish-white milk blending into the brown juices of apple, cinnamon, and sugar. He would shake his head, "It doesn't matter," he'd say, but Viola knew better—knew the smile on his face when the pie was just right. In another hour he would be inside from tending the horses. What would he say about Shook Jerome? For one thing, he would start worrying again over Leonard.

By no vain stretch of the imagination would Viola Helmuth ever consider her life less than satisfactory. She lived in that daily expectation of routine, broken only by an infrequent ritual or an unpleasant tragedy. She and Floyd lived simply, but comfortably, and filled the church envelope with a tenth of their earnings every month. They agreed on nearly everything, except the Mentholatum and some uncertainties about funeral plans.

Viola's task was to help smooth the way for Floyd. Not that he was limited—he figured their income tax every year. But she helped him adjust to life's little insecurities. Shook Jerome's death would be one of these. She could

not imagine where a name like that came from—a family joke? a rhyme? This did not seem the time to inquire, unless, of course, Emma knew something. But the fact of Shook's untimely death pressed on Viola, distracted her again from the apples, made her stare out the window at young trees when there was no time for such. What was the meaning of a world where the young always seemed to suffer the most? And what thread made an eyeball see? Was it the connection to the brain or some other attachment? If Viola wasn't careful, she was going to get herself worked up like Floyd often did.

Floyd...nearing his fiftieth birthday and diseased with all his fretting. Her Floyd, honored by the mystery of this covering on her head, the symbol that the church asked of its women. Some people thought the prayer veiling odd, a peculiar adornment. "White caps"...that's what Emma's Clarabelle said people of the world called them. "Those quaint women who wear the white caps," she had said with a smile that Viola found troubling. Was there a hint of insecurity in Clarabelle's eyes, almost as if she were laughing, along with reporting on the world?

Let people of the world think what they wanted. Viola didn't need to explain anything—her devotion to Floyd or to her church. Viola had no time for people who came to stare and say, "Aren't they strange? Oh, and cute." The tourist business had developed into an unruly monster with people coming to gawk. It was hard to live a normal life. People came to Holmes County to take pictures of a horse and buggy as if they didn't know there were people riding inside, as if they were merely at the Cleveland Zoo, looking for a baboon with a pink behind.

No, she wasn't Amish, but it was too confusing to explain to an outsider exactly where her church was different and where they held to the same beliefs. Yes, she and Floyd had a car—a charcoal gray Ford with the extras removed. And yes, she had told Clarabelle to tell those people that she wore a blanket to bed, not her covering. The nerve of some people to ask, let alone think about a thing like that. It was another sign of how demented and perverse the world had become.

Emma's troubling call slowed Viola's hands ever so slightly. A reminder to take care. Not so much that a knife could slip and require extra time to bandage a finger, but news that Georgia's 20-year-old boy had been ripped apart. One eyeball—missing. A caution of what could happen if you moved too far away from where you began. Georgia—who had her hair cut and bobbed just like any other woman of the world—even though she started in the same Beaver Run Mennonite Church as Viola. The hints of Georgia's planned escape were present already in grade school; she had rolled her long brown stockings down to her ankles when she was away from home. And why had Georgia's parents given her that name?—as if she were important enough to be a whole state?

There. That was it: parents who coddled, indulged. Georgia always had the best of everything—a lunch box with compartments to keep cookies separate from her sandwich or fruit. And such a last name as Georgia had taken on as an adult. Better to have stayed a Kinsinger and not been confused about first and last. Georgia had married her way out of her beginnings by hooking up with the Jerome family—bankers in town and Methodists, definitely not known for their peculiar ways.

Viola had released her hold on her own son, Leonard, when he was still an infant, back when he spit up her milk for three days straight. She knew her place as agent of the Lord, nursing and providing sustenance for one of the tender lambs. With no other children possible for Viola—that's what the doctor had said, "Undue risk"—she had learned to hold Leonard lightly. Otherwise, children could break your heart. Her momma had told her that. Leonard's move to Philadelphia as a young adult three years ago, had tested their faith all over again, especially Floyd's. The horses had suffered neglect for more than a week.

"Do you think he's rejecting us?" Floyd had asked. "What did I do wrong?" Viola had quickly set him straight. Leonard just needed to explore on his own for awhile, get it out of his system. Children came back when they were ready. Three years was longer than Viola had expected it would take Leonard, but that just showed how unpredictable a child could be. Floyd should know the difference between good demons that came to convict about spiritual lukewarmness and bad demons that only sought to wreck the mind.

Eyeballs ripping, dangling, hanging. Or did they come out clean? Viola was afraid she would dream about eyeballs. Floyd's eyes had a bit of the jiggle in them sometimes; he said he could feel them jump right in front of him on a page of newspaper. Wouldn't an eyeball need to catch on something sharp—an iron pin in a mileage marker—to get ripped out? Emma had insisted that door handles, even window knobs, had been known to cause bodily damage when colliding fast enough or at the right angle. Would the undertaker put a wad of cotton in place, where the eyeball should be, so the eyelid wouldn't sink? And how was Georgia Jerome managing? Her only son laid out on a cold, enamel, embalming table: the victim of a late-night crash. Such a waste. And it could all have been prevented. Everyone knew what caused 2:00 a.m. crashes...well, nine times out of ten, Floyd would say.

Floyd, so cautious with others, so brutal with himself. Much too concerned with what others thought. Obsessed with the idea that people talked about him, he would report conversations to Viola, as if she could take them away. Someone had said, "Your Leonard moved away? You don't say!" Or another wondered, "How often does he get back? I suppose you've been out there to see him?" Floyd would confide about other terrors. "That new fence isn't straight. People will see...the stretch along the highway has a jag in it where I took my eyes off the far stake. Must have turned sideways when I drove the post." Viola did her best: the fence was fine; people had their minds on their own affairs when they drove by; if they didn't, they should.

She never felt completely satisfied about convincing him. He smoothed his hair that wouldn't lay down at the top of his head, he cleared his throat repeatedly, he scratched his side with his thumbnail. He became unreasonable about the Mentholatum in the winter. Every night after supper he greased his neck and placed a flannel cloth—warmed first on the heater—inside his vest tee shirt. He claimed it soothed his throat, comforted his skin where the wind had whipped at him that day. He offered no explanation for why the whistle in his nose stayed with him while he slept.

She could imagine his questions now, sharp as the wind's cut on his neck. "Do you suppose there was a second there, when Shook knew he was going to die? Do you suppose he had time?" What would she say to quiet him? She certainly could omit the part about the eyeballs. And what would he say about Georgia Jerome? No, he didn't like to talk about others; she would have to work that part out on her own, or with Emma.

Emma had become Viola's best friend, ever since Viola's Momma died. They talked on the phone, usually in the mornings, compared notes about liverwurst, and went to yard sales together. Now Emma said that Georgia and her family hadn't decided whether to show Shook or not. Emma said that's what Clarabelle had heard. The whole left side of his face...caved in...actually, missing. Had someone retrieved the eyeball or was it buried somewhere in a drift of snow, waiting for a farmer to do his spring plowing and find the pearl of great price?

Not that Viola wanted to make judgements...about Floyd or Georgia, or about Shook either, for that matter. It was better to occupy her mind with the ways of apples, wonder why the Golden Delicious weren't keeping well this winter. Their wrinkled yellow skins, cradled in Viola's hand, looked used. She whipped off another peeling with a flash of metal and swished the naked apple quarter through rinse water already clogged with rejected cores. The black spots troubled Viola—signs of the summer's humidity secretly at work or perhaps evidence of too much pesticide.

Bloom, grow, wither, die. Wasn't that the natural course? More natural even, than plucking a ripe apple from a tree? She shouldn't complain about apples not staying preserved in the root cellar; she needed to be more rigorous in using them before the black spots could turn the insides mealy. Floyd had studied up on apple tree care and never missed that crucial, first spray at bud stage. He couldn't really be blamed if it rained the next day; she surely wouldn't criticize his work. He had enough to think about this winter, promising his brother to repair the hay baler. Floyd kept as close as he could to the land; raised horses to sell to the Amish, tinkered with farm machinery. He would always be a farm boy, even though he had chosen not to take on the financial burdens of owning his own farm. It was better this way—with the eye condition and all. Yes, she would omit the part about the eyeballs.

Floyd would blame himself again over Leonard. "I should have kept the old Allis-Chalmers for him to practice on." And again, "I should have warned him about the lures of the city when he still liked putting hay out for the horses." Viola couldn't argue with him—that wasn't her place in the scheme of things—but she could keep the facts in front of him, help him know where to stop himself on the slippery slope of self-doubt. The church was right to teach against a person thinking too highly of himself, but still, Viola saw little point in giving in to worthlessness. As long as you were somewhere in between—not snooty and not groveling—you were on the right course.

Twice a year the Beaver Run Mennonites were reminded of the proper lowliness of heart. They held to the old way of observing footwashing along with communion. Just this past fall Viola had put away proud thoughts when she washed feet with Marinda Eash. It was possible to participate and be in an attitude of worship the whole time, without looking at the feet in front of you. Viola had swished warm water over the top of Marinda's foot and concentrated on not banging her crusty heel into the galvanized bucket. That way Viola never actually saw the stubbly, black hair on Marinda's legs or the oozing sore above the ankle. That was the point of the ceremony—learning humility, never stooping to think you were better than the other.

Viola glanced at the bronze, teapot-shaped kitchen clock and realized there wasn't time to attach a top crust. She cut the remaining rolled-out dough into strips and placed several in crisscrossed fashion on top of the apples. With flour-covered fingers she put the leftover scraps of dough on an extra baking tin and quickly sprinkled them with sugar and cinnamon. Floyd called them pie-cookies. "Make it do; wear it out; use it up; do without." She had heard the words so often as a child, applied to scraps of cloth material and leftovers in the refrigerator. She was old enough to need the protection of a cape dress to cover her developing body before she realized that the words, "Use it up" didn't originate in the Bible.

Viola slipped the pie and leftover dough in the oven. Yes, it wasn't surprising to hear that Georgia was taking it hard. Viola would have guessed as much. Of course, an accident could happen to anyone—Floyd had bent a fender with the horse trailer once. But the Jeromes fit Viola's idea of the hazards associated with being well-to-do. The more the assets, the more the grief. The more you owned, the more could go wrong. That was her private assessment; all she said to Floyd was, "Keep the Ford another year; one less object to go before a fall."

It wasn't just the oversized, late model cars that the rich drove. Viola had seen the look of wealth and ease on Georgia's face at other times. Georgia...at her oldest daughter's piano recital; Georgia with the newspaperman, looking at her day lilies. Life had a way of removing self-satisfied, smug looks, although it did seem unreasonably harsh that on Wednesday Viola would see Georgia at her son's funeral.

Part of the goodness of middle-age maturity was the chance to let go of past events, no longer needing to feel

inferior to Georgia. Viola remembered how Georgia had climbed backwards up the playground slide, reached the top and turned to Viola, still slipping with her slick soles, "Veeola, Veeola," she had sung. Viola had gripped the sides of the slide and stuck out her tongue, a forbidden act, at hearing Georgia's, "Bet you don't even know what a real viola looks like; bet you never heard one." Viola had turned, sat herself down, and slid away. She had learned from her momma, not to retort. She had kicked at loose gravel, but she had not honored Georgia with a reply. No, she hadn't known what a viola was, nor would she show that she cared.

She had her own life as an adult and Georgia had hers. They could make their own decisions and need not compare notes, except that Georgia had a dead son. Viola wanted to call Leonard, but he lived way out East, and the weather map showed it had been snowing there all week; she couldn't just pick up the phone and call in the middle of the day for no reason at all.

No, Viola wouldn't ever say, "I told you so," but she wouldn't argue with the evidence either. Georgia and her two surviving daughters could wear all the foxy clothes they wanted to the funeral. Poor dears—victims of their parents' untamed desires—left crying without a brother, too young to understand how this had all come about. Of course, it was none of her business, but Viola wondered if Georgia had let Shook have a life of his own. Up until 2:00 a.m. last night, for all anyone knew, Georgia had the perfect son. High school valedictorian, college—was it Minnesota or Michigan? And now this. But the signs had all been there—Viola was sure of it—if Georgia only would have paid attention. Just like the black spots on apples.

She could hear him banging the heels of his boots together at the back door, could picture tiny spirals of iced snow and dried mud flying through the air.

"Uhm, smells good. Apple fritters?" he asked.

"No, just a pie. Some scraps left on the pan over there."

Floyd returned from the bathroom, smelling of soap, and broke off flat pieces of baked pie dough as Viola ladled rabbit stew into the ceramic bowls Leonard had sent last Christmas.

"Maybe the vet was right. Charlie's hoof looks better today—not nearly so lame."

"Charlie? Oh...the new calf. Emma called."

"Yeah, the light brown one. Had the infection in his right foot. Right front. Picked up a fungus, the vet said. How a fungus survived in this frozen ground is a mystery." Floyd chuckled, rubbing his hands together.

"Emma said the roads might have been bad last night," Viola said.

"Wind's sure picked up. Feels like Siberia."

Floyd had, of course, never been to Siberia but it was one of his favorite expressions. He reached his right hand deep inside the back of his shirt and steadied his scratching with his left hand clamped to his hoisted biceps. Viola noticed that ever since he had gotten a back scratcher, he said his back itched more often. Scratch an itch and it just attacked a different spot...the same principle as wealth and success spreading their desire for more.

Floyd went on, "Supposed to get down to zero tonight. More snow tomorrow."

Viola realized that Floyd could be content to talk for the whole meal about horses and weather. She would have to lay it out directly. The rabbit stew was ruined and they hadn't even begun eating.

"You, go ahead. Pray. And then I have to tell you some bad news," Viola said.

Floyd stopped rubbing his hands. "Bad? How bad?"

"Just go on," Viola said. "Pray the regular."

Floyd cleared his throat and mumbled a quick grace with "Help us, Lord" at the end. When Viola slowly lifted her head, like an unwilling pump handle, Floyd's eyes were on hers, demanding.

"It's not what you think. It's Georgia's boy, Shook. Came to that tee at the end of Sargo Road. Never slowed. Plowed right through the ditch, fence posts, whatnot. Everything." Floyd's silence waited. "This morning. Dead. Two in the morning."

Floyd's utensils lay flat on the table, as if they were of no use to him.

"He surely knew the road," Viola added. "Go on. Eat. It won't change anything. This is the rabbit you shot before Christmas."

"Do you want to call Leonard?"

"No, no," she said. "Whatever for? They didn't know each other that well. Leonard was two years ahead of Shook."

"No...I mean," Floyd didn't finish. He repeatedly cleared his throat, the sound across the table like a balky engine that wouldn't start. He neither ate, nor spoke.

"It needs more pepper," Emma said. "Don't you think? Try it. The salt is fine. But the pepper....There's bread." She pushed the loaf toward Floyd. Its twist tie stayed tightly secured.

"When's the funeral?" he asked.

"Wednesday at 1:00. Will you go along? Guess they figured they didn't need a night funeral to get a crowd like the Becklers did...with the death...unexpected and all. Quite a spectacle, I'm afraid. Well?"

"We'll see," he said. "He's the one organized that newspaper drive, back before the city started recycling."

"Could be. Aren't you going to eat? I don't remember about newspapers," Viola said. "Yes, the pepper helps. Maybe I forgot."

"Where did they go?" Floyd asked.

"The newspapers? Oh, you mean, which funeral director? You're clearing your throat a lot. Does it help? Aren't you going to eat?" Viola rarely mentioned his habit of throat clearing, but now that she had started, she gave herself permission to be perfectly clear. "If spitting did some good, then you could stop; but since you have to keep on, why do you start?"

Floyd put his hand like a fist over his mouth, his thumb raised like the flag on the mailbox. He stared at his stew.

Viola went on. "The viewing is at Borden-Tucks...whatever all those names are."

Floyd's lips opened slightly between his thumb and forefinger as he mumbled, "Good. At least he'll get a decent ending."

"You really don't like Finley's, do you? I don't know what's decent about this ending, no matter who the undertaker is." Viola pictured the eyeball, buried in the snow.

Floyd stopped himself, halfway through clearing more mucous. He stared out the window above the sink, as if he could hear Charlie whining.

Viola continued. "Shook's body took a beating. That's what Emma said. They might not be able to show him. Remember that brother of Tony's...burned so bad they couldn't open the casket."

"No, I don't like Finley Funeral Home. I've seen Mel Finley's work. Pumps bodies too full. Or else it's cheap fluid. Either way. The results are bad."

"He wouldn't cheat. Not Mr. Finley. Ever since Joe Glick didn't look natural, you won't have anything to do with Finley's. Anyone can make a mistake, can't they? You surprise me sometimes, the way you hold grudges."

Floyd began eating his stew as if he and the spoon were at odds. "Joe Glick looked like a dark raisin, scrunched down in a box." He ate viciously, the spoon clattering on his teeth. "No excuse for that kind of work."

"Do you like it? The stew. Put some pepper on. Those men at Borden-Tucks-and Hammermill—is there a Rudolph there?—no, I guess he's the one who left. If they want to be a law firm, why don't they go back to school instead of just trying to sound important? My momma said never to trust anyone with more than one middle name. It meant the parents had lofty designs and the child was destined for a life of disappointment and misery. If not ruin," she added, more loudly than she intended. Floyd kept on eating, as if he could not hear. "Mr. Finley cares about the bereaved family, not just about setting up a body. You can tell...the way his lips have the start of a smile. Not all locked up, with the key thrown away, like that what's-his-name Hammermill. When Mr. Finley opened up Sarah Swantz's casket at the funeral, you could see the love in his labor, the way he unfolded those little ledges at the head end, undid the tucks just right."

Floyd's left hand hit the formica table top with the palm flat. The unused knife jumped, rattled weakly, and lay askew. "Be quiet, will you?" His hand shook as he put down his spoon in the bowl and turned in his chair away from her.

"Certainly, Floyd. I didn't mean to upset you. Whatever you want. I suppose it's the sudden death and...and all." She stopped, unsure whether to continue. "I just think..." she paused, giving Floyd a chance to stop her. Then seeing his silence as a sign, she added, "We should be able...the two of us...to agree about a funeral director. Sometime." She started removing dishes to the sink, rinsing them carefully. "Oh, the pie. I almost forgot the pie. Isn't that a note? Here I baked this fresh pie and forgot to serve it. And I didn't put pepper in the stew."

"Maybe later," Floyd said.

"What?" She was already bringing clean dessert plates and forks to the table. "The pie...it's still warm." Floyd got up from the table. She could hear him sink into the dead springs of the living room couch.

Baskets of flowers draped the front of the church. Viola wondered if that spray of red roses and pink-shaded lilies came from the bank. There was an excitement mixed with solemnity, a small curl of anticipation: "Dearly beloved...we are gathered...departed brother...one so young." The Methodists even had a pipe organ. Viola shifted her folded hands to check her watch. She liked funerals. Such a pity it was so hard to get a crowd out, even for a tragedy. This was the least you could do for another human being. The least Viola could expect for her own parting. She could imagine no more final insult than to have only twenty-five mourners show up to sing "Rock of Ages" for her.

People used to be quick to show their respect; but now they said they had too many irons in the fire. Even Floyd claimed he couldn't spare an hour, plus the time it would take to get cleaned up. Viola contented herself sitting with Emma. And today, Clarabelle had come also. The waiting seemed long but they had come early so they wouldn't get stuck way in the back or off in a corner. They wanted to be respectable without being nosy. Viola's shoes pinched on both sides again; she always felt betrayed when new shoes felt differently as soon as she got them home, felt tighter than in the store.

The truth was that mourning made Floyd anxious. He picked at the loose skin around his fingernails. He could be such an exasperation. He had no heart, even for his own death, and dismissed the thought of being remembered. "I'll be lucky to get my name in the newspaper," he would say. "The day I die is the week the paper will forget to run the obituaries." Viola thought he almost looked pleased at the thought. He could be so nonchalant about all the wrong things. Viola was sure that Floyd's appointed time would come before hers and there she'd be—the chief mourner, a nearly-empty church house, and the wrong funeral director. Of course. Leonard would come. Well, more than likely, Leonard would come.

A man, tall and lean-looking, with ordinary brown hair seated himself at the organ. With the least effort his long fingers moved on the keys; rich notes responded willingly and rolled out to those gathered. Viola had never understood how an organ, played with so much tenderness, could make her cry, but it happened every time. At Viola's church, of course, they didn't believe in fancy organs; the human voice, plain and unadorned, was sufficient for any occasion. Viola thought how out-of-place Georgia would look some day when she had to return to Beaver Run for the funeral of her aging parents. Would she wear a black hat with a large bow? Would all the bankers be there too?

Viola couldn't understand people's lack of interest in a good funeral. Crowds of people would go to Forest View Mall and think nothing of it, take their time ambling around, sort through racks of blouses, only to sigh, "Nothing here." Or they would troop to a high school basketball game to watch the locals get their chins smacked. At least going to a funeral had a known end product. On the way home Viola would know she had done something worth-

while, had given a bruised soul the comfort of her presence. Georgia might not notice she had come today but it didn't matter. It was the right thing to do. Not a social obligation, a final act of respect.

She distracted herself from dwelling on eternal possibilities by guessing whether Mr. Borden or Mr. Tucks or the other man would enter soon. Did the family know who they were going to get? Had Georgia made a request? Was Mr. Borden better than Mr. Hammermill with, say, reshaping facial tissue? And how did his name get to be first in line? Did they draw straws? Viola wanted to be embalmed by someone who knew her. Otherwise, some stranger like Joe Tucks might do the front wave of her hair all wrong or put color on her lips.

The organ got quieter, as if sensing that Joe Tucks and his assistant were rolling the casket down the center aisle. There came Georgia—navy blue suit, no hat—and her family. The survivors. The organ barely breathed its hymn as the undertaker reached the front of the aisle and moved the casket off to the right. He waited for his assistant and they walked together, like a married couple, to the back of the church. The casket had not been opened; it sat off to the side, crying out for mourners to notice, for someone to care. Viola hugged her purse closer to her body. Emma crossed her legs away from Clarabelle.

How was anyone to know that the right body was in that coffin? A fancy enough box of mahogany wood—what a banker might pick for a son—but who knew for sure what was inside? Viola had heard of babies being switched at birth in a hospital nursery. What was to keep all those people employed at Borden and company from getting confused burying the wrong body in someone else's casket? She shuddered at the thought of Floyd, ending up in the wrong cemetery with a tombstone that said "Toho" or "Splatnost." There were good reasons for a family to insist on an open casket.

Viola tried to listen as scriptures were read and words said by the minister who looked like Easter had come early with his purple stole and white robe. A beaming lady sang "The Lord is My Shepherd" as if confused, thinking this a joyous occasion with listeners who might clap. The slow truth sank in: Viola would never know how Georgia's Shook looked, would never know if Clarabelle's information was reliable. It was anybody's guess.

And there was Joe Tucks, whisking down the aisle again. Such a brief remembrance. Yes, Shook's life had been short, but wasn't there more to say? Viola's stash of tissues stayed unused in her purse. Something was desperately wrong.

There went the casket, pushed to the back of the church. How odd. And Georgia followed—back erect, eyes straight forward. Viola couldn't tell that Georgia had even been mourning. How peculiar. Was there no remorse? No sorrow? No regret for the things left undone? Just zip in and zip back out. Why even bother? Viola wasn't sure how she expected a rich person to cry. Perhaps they only dabbed at their eyes with a handkerchief. Perhaps a person of Georgia's social stature could not be expected to sob over cold hands. Or stumble while clutching her husband's arm. Still, it was a disappointment. Did no one need to be brave anymore?

And what would Viola tell Floyd when she got home? What could she say to explain the icy composure? Georgia would soon be sitting on a robed chair surrounded by the funeral director's artificial green turf, watching the final descent of her son's body into the cold ground. Watching with a stiff resistance, a heart harder than frozen earth.

Viola turned into her driveway and heard the squeaking crunch of cold tires on packed snow. She didn't know what she would say to Floyd. She had nothing to report about Joe Tucks, couldn't remember what the daughters wore. If Floyd wanted to phone Leonard, it was all right with her. She couldn't remember feeling this baffled before, this much at loose ends with herself. To think that she had imagined being in Georgia's place, on display, with Leonard replacing Shook. Almost as if she had wished for it.

Viola walked past the quart of yellow ground cherries she had set out of the freezer in the morning—cherries that had volunteered last summer and needed to be used. Now she had no desire to bake a warm cobbler for Floyd. She sank into the couch and rubbed her eyes, the knuckles of her index fingers moving back and forth. Darkness slipped into the room and Viola did not notice.

Clarion Voices

Janice Waltner Sevilla

The bells sound crisp on frigid winter days
and resonate from ancient, distant hills
where clarion voices chorused hymns of praise

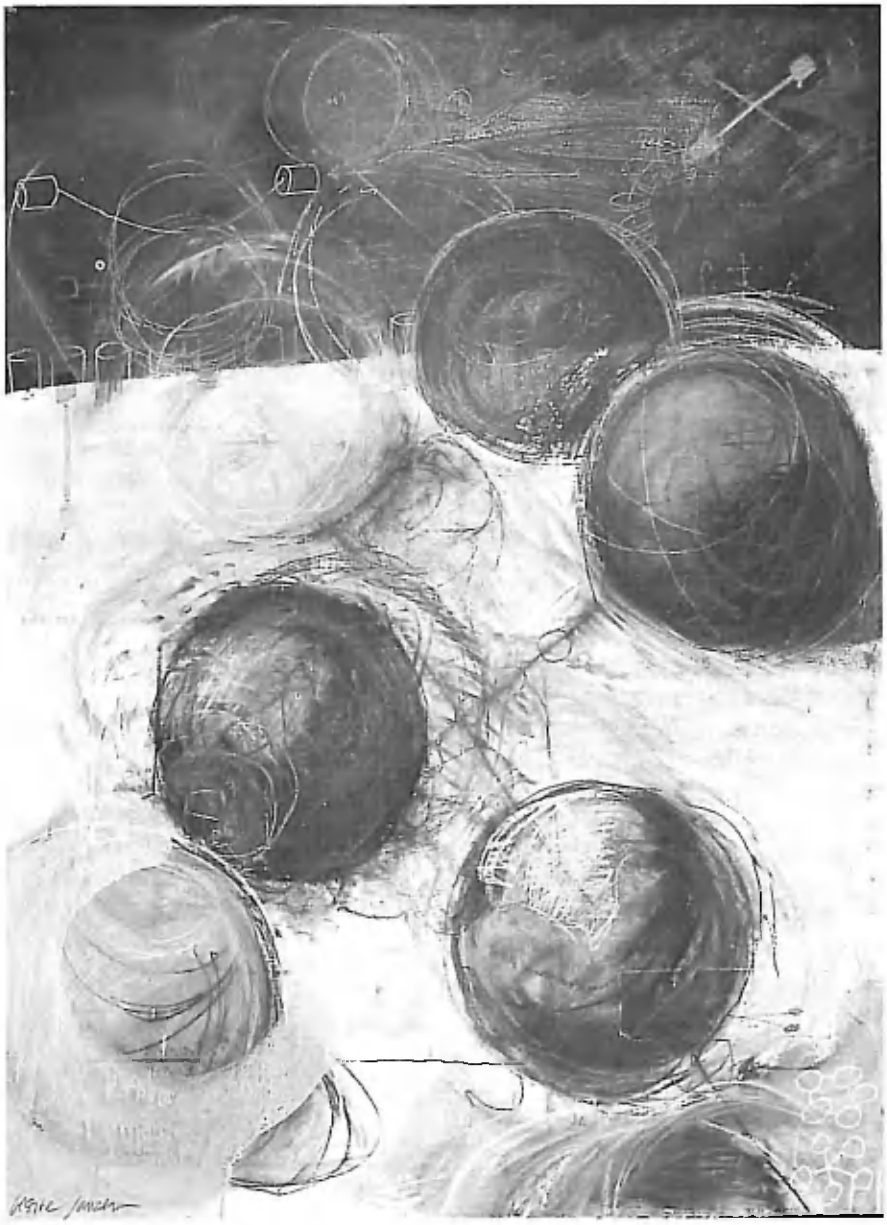
to awestruck shepherds leading flocks to graze.
Remembering Judea's sounds and stills
the bells sound crisp on frigid winter days.

Came wise men over eastern long highways
led by a star, a promise old fulfilled,
where clarion voices chorused hymns of praise.

An oxen's manger is where Mary lays
her firstborn, swaddled in a stable's chill.
The bells sound crisp on frigid winter days

as modern pilgrims celebrate in ways
unknown in old Judea's far off hills
where clarion voices chorused hymns of praise.

The story old continues to amaze
reverberating year on year and still
the bells sound crisp on frigid winter days
while clarion voices chorus hymns of praise.



Atoms
Gesine Janzen
Mixed media
50 1/2" x 58"

The spherical forms in *Atoms*
are based on toy beads
I played with as a child.
The beads take on
a magical presence
as they roll and float about
in an imaginary landscape.
Diagrams and symbols
seen in the background
and in underlayers
represent related toys and games
from my childhood.

Christmas, 1964

Dallas Wiebe

Light tingles of a morning
when the frost is on the holly
and the knife is in the groin.
We fold our minds for prayer
while dawn twits across the snow
and the hale winds of piety blow.

Christmas and the whirling dark lucubrate
to celebrate the holy green whim.
How nice if it could seem
the steaming punch of dreams.

Knock, the black cat, crawls
on the bleak snow,
Kills the cold rat
with domestic claw.
He eats the gray digger,
marrow and fat,
With growling joy
and uncanny wit.
When his meal is done
he licks his shining fur,
Preens the viscera from his jaw,
Knock, the black cat, gleams,
burns in the red snow.

Day comes on to joy.
Prayers end.
Wrath bends
in the oral wind.
The earth tips back,
For He is kind
Who spins the Christmas
wound.

Flying West: Christmas, 1987

Dallas Wiebe

After de-icing,
The great Delta craft
  lifts through the snow
  to brilliant sun.
The dark pilot says,
  "One flap jammed by ice."
My heart flutters
  until the cockpit light expires
  and we hover over the Green Mountains.

It is the sun that breaks
  that heats and heals
  the metal wing.
It is the light that breaks
  that swings the new year.
It is the thought that breaks
  that moves the hand.

Flying west out of creation.
Flying west to setting time.
Flying west to empty pages.

Lord, guide my hand
  across this page.
Lord, fill my journey
  with your word.
Lord, bring that sun along.

The snow is falling
  where we'll land.

Our Last Neighborhood

Julia Kasdorf

They said the only way to fit in
is get pregnant or speak Italian.
Failing both, it took me a year-and-a-half
to realize the brown-robed men in gardens
are not Josephs to accompany all the Marys
but Saint Anthony of Padua, patron
of barren women and all things lost
except lost causes, which are the purview
of Jude. Lily stalk in one arm, the child
I mistook for our savior in the other,
Anthony met Francis himself in Sicily
which explains why he fits so well here
among plum tomato vines and fig trees
that old men prune and wrap in cotton batting
each fall like armless Venuses bound
for museums. As long as they're faithful,
these trees will keep putting out
exotic leaves, plumping their sweet fruits
in the sun which darkens the faces and arms
of longshoremen and garbage men and men
of no certain vocation who sit in tee shirts
on kitchen chairs outside social clubs
on Court Street. If you have to sell fast,
bury Saint Joseph upside down in the back
garden, they told us, then gave us one.
Just in case, I forced his porcelain
shoulders into the fine dirt between hostas
and faded impatience. It's safe
they said, a good neighborhood, meaning
you can turn a corner of shaded brownstones
and meet your husband of many years.
His face will appear younger, a smile breaking
so easily it will neatly erase all the effort
it takes to keep a household between you.
Neighbors decorate lawns with music and light
the whole dim season, Halloween to Easter,
but chiefly at Christmas, when a virgin
who never stopped being a virgin
even after she bore other children,
gave birth. Her miraculous gift is enacted
each time the subway crowns the tunnel
at Carroll Street to climb the culvert
between Mary Star of the Sea Convent
and the inky water of the Gowanus Canal,
which was the first piece of Brooklyn
the Indians lost to the Dutch.

Pieces of Home
Marcia Rempel
Watercolor, tissue paper collage
9 1/2" x 7 1/2"

Pieces of Home is a watercolor with tissue paper pieces washed on with a slight glue and water mixture. During the past two years I have experienced uncertainty about where "home" is, as my parents have accepted an assignment to serve in Botswana with Commission on Overseas Missions and Mennonite Central Committee. It is somewhat a fragmented design, indicating unsettledness. A dreamy aura surrounds the house-like structure as the watercolor and tissue paper blend and bleed to create an illusion, something almost unattainable and perhaps, undesirable.

Bowling

Jeff Gundy

I've made it to March without a bad fall,
just a few slips and one awkward tumble.
We've made it through the wolf moon,
the hunger moon, nothing broken,
the dogwood buds still waiting, the lilacs
hard and tight. The bowling alley's packed
and smoky. So I forgot the reading.
So I can't remember what I said I'd do
before sundown. Let the moon shrink to nothing,
let my friend come by coaxing her dog
in a high pure voice she's never used
with any man or child. It's a day
to run off without the ashes, to come back
with the goods. We'll be happy yet.
The cease-fires are almost holding,
the committee ponders how to make bowling
more fun. We need prizes for the best
and the worst, a feather for one
gentlest with the pins, a ring
for the one who hits nothing at all.
We need good shoes and good feet
for winter, sharp eyes and sand
for the sidewalks where the ice clings,
tough and slick as a street kid.
Under the wolf moon, under the hunger moon
we gather to cheer ourselves,
we find the place and sing. We gather
so carefully, not to fall.

How I Was Moving Then

Jeff Gundy

A gloomy Saturday, my wife
cleaning, me grading, the kids

grousing at their chores,
all of us complaining

about each other, who's lazy
who's compulsive who's blind

to the grim demands of dirt.
I know better but drank coffee

at five, it was there in the pot.
I slept and woke and saw myself

moving like a dark lizard, quick,
furtive, over a black plain

with no end or feature. How long
the road, how low to the ground

I was, catching the hard floor
with toes and fingers, pushing

it back, pushing, and each time
it pulls again, it pulls me down

and basketballs and paper scraps
and the jazzy winter sky and

never mind the money, I'll cross
any space to find a bed,

just hold me, hold me cold
and safe, oh the night is deep.

Amos E. Kreider reading Dickens' "Christmas Carol" for a campus community group, Bethel College, Goerz Hall, Christmas 1937.

Christmas Dinner

Raylene Hinz-Penner

If once a Widdow, ever I be Wife. --Hamlet

Our mothers have been dealt the widow's hand—
three of them by this year; we can't ask
that they prepare the Christmas feast; they dress

as guests, in metallic jewelry
and silver hair, bright-paint their nails, polish
their leather pumps. And loudly insist

on filling the water, carrying hot bowls,
arranging pickles and apple rings, calling
the rest from t.v.—trained geishas, bowing

hostesses we honor for old services,
we daughters so solicitous—all cluck
and strut and pat and bustle to assuage

our guilt—our intact lives, our children's
breathless joy. We must protect the old
from the lure of life, quick-dab our eyes

after grace, one linen swipe, all of us
undone by the son-in-law who remembers
aloud some receding memory

like a hairline we've tried to comb over.
We rush to pass food, ask artful questions,
insist that they prove that the present is all.

Book Reviews

Louise Stoltzfus, *Amish Women: Lives and Stories*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1994. Pp 123. ($14.95) ISBN 1-56148-129-7

Handsomely designed with line drawings by Florence Starr Taylor, this book is bound to appeal to tourists and general readers who are curious about the Amish. For those with scholarly interests, it offers possibilities for consideration as an example of autobiographical writing by a female author positioned on the margins of a traditional community. Moreover, it points to the specific difficulties that an insider/outsider faces in writing about the Amish. While her position may have given her unusual access to the stories and lives she relates, Stoltzfus's ties to that world may have bound her (consciously or not) within the community's conventions of oral and written discourse.

By now it is almost a cliche to bring up "plain style" when discussing the work of Amish and Mennonite authors, yet the straight-forward syntax of Stoltzfus's writing is noteworthy. At its best, her simple prose richly enacts the linguistic reality of the culture she describes. There is little pause for elaboration, reflection or conjecture in this slim volume that offers surprising glimpses into the lives of ten women, including the author's mother and grandmothers. Sketches of Stoltzfus's personal friends and acquaintances from the Lancaster County community touch on many important aspects of Amish existence: weddings and courtship, life as a single person, child birth, health care and old age, death and grief, relations with tourists, and resettlement. That we see these events through women's eyes and hear them described in their own voices is especially commendable. Yet the choice to include so many in one book necessarily limits how much can be gathered from each narrator, and Stoltzfus offers little interpretation herself.

At its worst, "plain style" becomes limited by cultural norms, in danger of sounding simplistic or approaching a kind of spareness that borders on silence. For example, the boundaries of conventional discourse in this community surface when individuals speak about difficult childhoods "only rarely and with halting words of compassion and longing" (14) or with "a profound reluctance to talk about how it felt" (100). Though the narrators seem willing enough to share their stories, the book feels constrained when meager language cannot carry complex and powerful meanings. The women's colloquial narratives and author's descriptions are often interrupted by double-spaced lists, for instance, such as this one describing Rebecca, an Amish woman who works as a medical assistant:

> She is independent.
>
> Determined.
>
> Outspoken.
>
> Intense. (87)

In the end, such spare, impressionistic fragments reveal little, though they attempt to tell a great deal. It is as though meaning were meant to resonate in the blank spaces—as meaning often blossoms in the silence between individuals in Amish discourse. Yet without a context of shared understandings and set of common references, these words are unable to bear their full freight.

Often I wondered what had been left unwritten (if not unsaid) in the abundant blank space on these pages. This is particularly true of the author's own story. Born and raised in an Old Order Amish family, Stoltzfus is now an editor for Good Books and director of The People's Place Gallery at Intercourse, PA. It seems she may have been speaking for herself when she described one of the narrators who "like most Amish women...lives in the present, not in the past or even the future" (57). While she begins the book with an intriguing statement, "I was once Amish," she does not explain why she abandoned her religious community nor does she fully explore her own feelings of ambivalence and loss in working on the project, which expresses genuine appreciation for her background. After four Good Books cookbooks and a vol-

ume on folk art, her first attempt at personal narrative leaves me curious to hear more of her voice, and I hope she will continue to test it in this genre.

Julia Kasdorf
Brooklyn, NY

Pamela Klassen. *Going by the Moon and the Stars: Stories of Two Russian Mennonite Women*. Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994. Pp. 151. ($6.95 paperback) ISBN 0-88920-244-3

This study, based on the stories of two Russian Mennonite women who emigrated to Canada after fleeing from the Soviet Union during World War II, allows us to hear words that are sometimes new and often awakening. Their voices "speak through the silence" of women's untold stories.

Pamela Klassen approached her study with a twofold purpose: "to present the stories of Agatha and Katja, paying particular attention to their religion, and to ask why their stories are not part of a collective Mennonite consciousness." She admits that the act of turning stories into text can be deeply disturbing to both tellers and listeners as they make the private public, generating "anxiety and exhilaration," and that "disclosure provokes vulnerability as well as connection." I am grateful to the author and to the two women for risking such disturbance, and for the enlarging experience it has been for me.

The introduction sets a clear framework with descriptions of Agatha and Katja in first meeting, a brief history of the Russian Mennonites, and statements of the theoretical bases of approach, such as feminism, the terms of religion, and writing about war. This is followed by five divisions: the stories in the women's own words, stories of marriage and motherhood, of war, of being Mennonite, and concluding reflections on theory and methods as related to this study.

The conversations edited from video tapes make up the most vivid and poignant section of this study as we enter the lives of these women through the details, the pauses, the horror, and the survival. Klassen has chosen well, presenting the spoken sense of their telling, and pacing the material to allow us to hear. With a few sentences, the door opens to the terror of starvation, of losses and violence, and to the power of hope. Agatha's description of the woman with covered face leaving bread at the door, and of the reading of Psalm 71 in the terrifying flight were particularly moving. And Katja's tramp through deep snow with no direction except "the moon and the stars," then crawling in exhaustion to come upon a man stunned over the bloody mass of his family. Dilemmas and choices are simply told, in bold strokes. And throughout the telling, prayer is the rope of survival and courage.

Klassen's discussions and retellings are richly textured as she draws parallels and makes comparisons in the two women's stories. In marriage and motherhood, with the "unexpected plot" of one of the women, she examines the experiences particularly in light of their relationship to their mothers and to faith. The complications of hasty war marriages, the losses, and the subsequent adjustments these women made, and are making, in Canada, are heartwrenching and instructive revelations.

War as central story dominates the study and offered me new light on the sense of woman as victim, as gaining power to survive, and as one who receives ambivalent responses to her story. The author's sense of reverence guides her to interpret the painful events with deep sympathy and a careful retelling of the difficultchoices these women made for survival.

It is in the "Being Mennonite" chapter that I found the most surprise and disappointment, surprise as I read how Agatha interpreted the meaning of obedience by being willing to preach and at Katja's willingness to become a Mennonite after first refusals to baptize her, disappointment in the silencing that happened in their first real church experience in Canada. Being Mennonite for these women continues to be shaped by their earlier experiences, but it is evident that the present patriarchal structures determine their behavior, even as a personal faith is vital.

It is Klassen's concern with religious belief that is the driving force in this study. Her care to define religion as related to story and life experience joins the spiritual and physical in ways which ring true for me. *Going by the Moon and the Stars* becomes a real title and not just a poignant quote from Katja. As these chapters unfold, the somewhat mystical phrase, which was first literally true—a search for direction—becomes abandonment to God, but always in context of experience.

With this book Klassen demonstrates her definition of religion as "a process of living and remembering in terms of traditional myths and family and personal history, connecting with and differentiating from others—both humans and spirits—and institutions, and acting out, through structured ritual or informal daily life, fundamental values." (p. 126) Her retelling of these personal histories is an important contribution to our collective Mennonite consciousness, and just in time, as our sources for these stories are diminishing. She has filled some of the silent space in a way that fortifies integrity, cultivates faith, and allows beauty in spite of tragedy.

Jean Janzen
Fresno, California

Joseph Funk and Sons. *The Harmonia Sacra, a Compilation of Genuine Church Music. Comprising a Great Variety of Metres, Harmonized for Four Voices: Together with a Copious Explication of The Principles of Vocal Music. Exemplified and Illustrated with Tables, in a Plain and Comprehensive Manner*. Twenty-fifth Edition. Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1993. Pp. 398. ($19.95) ISBN 1-56148-104-1

The fact that this is the twenty-fifth edition of *Harmonia Sacra* confirms both its historical significance and its continuing use. This remarkable hymnbook is still used at *Harmonia Sacra* singing events and other special

occasions, particularly in Virginia. We commend the editor, James Nelson Gingerich, and those who assisted him, for the preparation of this edition. Special thanks go to Eastern Mennonite University for financial support, and to Good Books for publishing this hymnbook.

The first edition, then named *Genuine Church Music*, was published in 1832 by Joseph Funk, a music leader among the Mennonites in Virginia. It resembled many other books of that period, oblong in format, and including material for teaching the rudiments of music and singing with the use of shaped notes. These books served as textbooks for the singing-school movement of the early nineteenth century. The hymns were written in three parts with a separate score for each part. In the fifth edition (1851) the name changed to *Harmonia Sacra*, and in the twelfth edition (1867) a fourth part was added, with the melody appearing in the tenor voice. After the seventeenth edition (1878) the rudiments of music section was omitted.

The most unusual edition in this century was the twenty-fourth (1980), by Legacy Book Publishers, named *New Harmonia Sacra*. They rescored the hymns into traditional four-part format on two scores, similar to standard hymnbooks, with the texts between the scores, in order to enhance the reading of both the music and texts.

The twenty-fifth edition restores the standard oblong format. The two most significant features are the return of the section "Rudiments and Elucidation of Vocal Music," and the inclusion of twenty-seven three-voice hymns from the first and second editions. The "Rudiments" section has been absent for over 100 years, and provides a fascinating insight into the teaching methods of the early nineteenth century. We can thank the singing-school tradition for restoring and strengthening the use of three- and four-part singing, by training several generations of singers to become secure note readers with the use of shaped notes.

Perhaps the greatest value in including the three-part hymns is to reintroduce some tunes which have disappeared from general use. This section also gives opportunity to learn the four-shape, four-syllable system, which was used in the first four editions.

This new edition includes the three basic indexes: tune, metrical and first line. This should be adequate for general use.

Finally, we commend the editors for the wonderful front cover, typical of many early nineteenth century books, lavish with words and variety of typographical styles and sizes. Here we have fifteen lines of information about the book, including a scripture passage from Isaiah.

We recommend this book for church and school libraries and the many individuals who treasure this rich heritage of hymnody.

J. Harold Moyer
North Newton, Kansas

Leonard Neufeldt. *Car Failure North of Nimes*. Windsor, Ontario: Black Moss Press, 1994. Pp. 61. ($14.95 paperback) ISBN 0-88753-249-7

Car Failure North of Nimes is not about mechanical difficulties; it is about human transience—the striving, faltering, ending of self-consciousness. The setting of the title poem, the last poem in the collection, is a time after all words have been spoken, after the shrine of the Virgin "is quiet . . ., a long prayer ended somewhere/ in the past" (60), is in a place "Where this unlit street ends secretly" (60) and becomes a wilderness of grass, rock, tree, wind. And the "I" of the poem has "forgotten the ruptured gas line" (60) and has become "the field the wind is blowing upon" (60).

But one needs no car to traverse the short movement recounted in these poems. In the first poem Jacob Peter Neufeldt sits at a table one evening in 1890, not like a jar in Tennessee, but more like an old Ulysses, stricken with age and disease but "still the first to reach for knife and fork" (6). He "centered" the particulars of history, faith, family, flora, fauna, and evening that surrounded him, but he also centers the collection of poems with his awareness that

> things
> are going to be abandoned, living things
> that one's grateful for—eldest son and daughter,
> land, political calm, tubercular wife,
> the young calf asleep in the orchard shade,
> twitching a fly from its ears. (6)

But "Jacob Neufeldt needs more than the simple glory/ of what will be abandoned" (8). The list of his needs at the end of the poem, culminates in these lines:

> He needs
> to restore the shape of some things within,
> their vengefully quiet outlines, sharper joys.
> He needs to change the shape of things beyond
> healing,
> to understand the moments
> coming, the moments when we faltered. (8)

The "we" of the last line catches us up in the question, "When who faltered?" He? His senses? His family? Living persons? If the moments are "coming," why is "faltered" in the past tense? However we read the lines, we readers feel the complicity and vulnerability of "something familiar" (10), "something within" (38), "something... about to happen" (28). That "something" is an "end." The word recurs like a knell in poem after poem amidst "particulars betrayed" (19). Jacob Neufeldt's awareness of and need "to understand the moments/ coming" when words end and selves separate from themselves is our need, a human need.

Leonard Neufeldt's poems in this collection may do much more, but I keep being drawn back to the contemplation of these "moments coming" that shade all else.

The second person pronouns in "The Antelope Hunter" merge all the actors in one moment of "Something familiar":

What you call
and another word dying as easily as you,
comforted by the smallness
of soul-destroying echoes farther and farther
to the end. You uncoiling slowly,
already dead, moving away from yourself
and the wonder of the red sand
darkening forever ahead. (10-11)

Question, word, he—you—we, end: these are the motifs of the poems. Time and freedom, "For What?" (15). And the word, the "good word," the "dying word," "words like 'fear,'" "severed words I can feel/but not see," "small words," "Words your mother ruined," "Words flowing from stone walls," "Words that close the blue eyes of the dead," "Words resentful of repetition," what of these? Exactly at the middle of the collection, serving perhaps as the fulcrum of the work, are these words:

I make this confession; it might be used
by cunning people—I make it nonetheless.
When the last word encores only itself,
and the great silence deep inside these mountains
rises up with an endless forest,
every word will have been like others. (30)

The "witness" speaking the last lines of the final poem promises to give

exact accounts
of the end of a day,
of the end of a city,
of a darkness surer than I am,
of the wind, the ongoing,
grass pitching in the night, rolling,
the motion, the world's motion. (60-61)

These "exact accounts" will not be in words of poetry or for human eyes or ears.

The poetic accounts of end and darkness in Neufeldt's collection merge the animal, vegetable, mineral, human worlds in particular images, feeling, thoughts, relationships, events, places. The words on the back cover say that "Leonard Neufeldt writes about what he knows, his surrounding, his family, his everyday life." I do not challenge the statement, for the volume does have a regional, personal flavor to it. However, I value the collection for Neufeldt's ability to write about what he cannot know but needs to understand—"the shape of things beyond healing" (8), the "morning darkness" (14).

In the opening poem the speaker imagines Jacob Neufeldt shouting from the roof of his barn where other workers have refused to go, "Danger can be/ a kind of faith, even if it doesn't better you" (7). I find the poems of Neufeldt in this collection to have much in common with the words of the Preacher in Ecclesiastes, providing a daunting perspective on existence: one with always a little sand in the eye, hoarseness in the voice, irony in the awareness, loss in the memory; one with a need to confront "the moment of severing" (40) and the absence/silence/nothing after the last word; one that tries to conceive of "exact accounts" seen only by the wind, told only by the plain.

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Merle Good, *Going Places*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1994. Pp. 93. ($6.95 paperback) ISBN 1-56148-135-1

Dallas Wiebe, *Skyblue's Essays*. Providence: Burning Deck, 1995. Pp. 153. ($15.00 signed) ISBN 1-88622-403-X

An abundance of imaginative writing by writers who are Mennonites or of Mennonite origin has appeared during the past three or four miraculous decades. Poets, fiction writers, literary essayists, and even some screen writers have addressed issues important to Mennonites or have viewed the world through a Mennonite sensibility, and in the process have achieved some celebrity or notoriety and have picked up a few awards. This outpouring has been especially strong in Canada, where the government has generously supported ethnic artistic efforts, including those of Mennonites. Indeed, one could say that the Canadian Mennonite writers comprise a literary movement, which by now has been well-studied and organized through anthologies, conferences, a Mennonite book club, and critical essays. We all owe a debt of gratitude to Al Reimer, Harry Loewen, Hildi Froese Tiessen, and others, whose countless hours of thankless editorial tasks have created a semblance of unity among the "liars and rascals" (in Tiessen's apt epithet), who come up with the ideas and do the writing.

But in the United States we lack the literary editors and impresarios dedicated to compiling and promoting. The U.S. Mennonite writers resemble a band of amateur weekend dirt-bikers revving our engines, scurrying around a vacant field, racing off in different directions, churning up a lot of noise and dust but no forward movement. What does all our sound and fury signify? What, if anything, do Julia Kasdorf and Elmer Suderman and Keith Ratzlaff and Jean Janzen and Jeff Gundy have in common? Is there a common core of beliefs and experiences? If so, can this sensibility be translated into a literature that carries us forward in a period of rapidly changing mores, technology, and communications?

The coincidence of the publication of two new works by widely known Mennonite writers has created a literary event of sorts, suggesting two diametrically opposed ways in which a Mennonite sensibility can be turned into art. Merle Good—playwright, screenwriter, novelist, publisher, and producer of events catering to the Lancaster County tourist industry—has published *Going Places*, a three-act play about the falling away of three generations of the Zimmerman family on a Pennsylvania farm. Dallas Wiebe—poet, fiction writer, editor, and professor in the English Department of the University of Cincinnati—has published *Skyblue's Essays*, ostensibly non-fiction pieces by a fictional character, Peter Solomon Seiltanzer, first introduced in 1969 in Wiebe's first novel and used subsequently in other works—hence, Skyblue the long-term alter ego.

Going Places covers twenty years of the Zimmerman family's life on the

farm, which nurtured rural piety in past generations. But the old ways are not adequate to deal with the moral dilemmas of the Vietnam War (Act One), the Three Mile Island disaster (Act Two), and the politics of abortion and other women's issues (Act Three). Though the patriarch, David Zimmerman, tries to maintain his traditional no-resistance during the war, his stance embitters one of his sons. The matriarch, Susan, maintains her faith to the end—("We just wanted to farm—and follow God")—but her effort to hold the family together fails. The eldest son, Mervin, by becoming an ultra-conservative Mennonite, becomes a divisive presence. The liberal second son, Jake, becomes a writer with a confused and complicated personal life. The third son, Franklin, becoming a fundamentalist and a right-wing politician, is shown in the third act to be more than a little hypocritical. The one daughter, Rhoda, after becoming liberalized by Mennonite Central Committee relief work in Africa, ends up a feminist and unmarried, and thus the object of criticism.

The playwright's prognosis is not optimistic. He has depicted a process in which each succeeding generation finds it harder to reconcile its Mennonite heritage with the rapidly changing, urbanizing world surrounding the community. Mervin's family hangs on to the faith by becoming plainer and more severe, and thus more isolated. The other two sons plunge in and swim with whatever tides they find. Rhoda finds a fruitful compromise, but she is ineffective in communicating it.

This pessimistic forecast may be the result of the way this play was written. One cannot help feeling that Good began with a list of the "hot topics" Mennonites must face, then created characters that are not fully developed persons but mouthpieces uttering clichés calculated to set off predictable audience reactions. *Going Places* is not based on a truly dramatic action or on sympathetic or compelling characters, but on demographics. As the play progresses from act to act, the issues overpower the play writing. By the third act, huge plot and character developments have to be disposed of in a single sentence, while the playwright bombards us with yet another crop of "hot topics." The play devolves into a discussion-starter, a parade of "viewpoints to consider."

Dallas Wiebe's *Skyblue's Essays*, on the other hand, considers a plethora of sublime and ridiculous topics, but does so from a unified sensibility firmly rooted in traditions both old and ancient. The essay topics range from mundane (putting new shoelaces in your shoes) to corporeal (mucus) to abstruse (gobules) to academic (German literature), and in most cases the technique is parody or burlesque or satire or outrageous wordplay. What unifies the book is Wiebe's devout respect for the language and truth-telling and emotional clarity and simplicity.

In the "Essay on Ph. D," for example, Skyblue rips into the pretentiousness of academia, using verbal sequences based on the letters "p," "h," and "d," but the book as a whole concludes with the "Essay on German Hymns," a pious, direct translation of "So nimm denn meine Hände" from *Gesangbuch mit Noten*. In "Essay on Confession," a ludicrous tale of an English professor who becomes the Ohio State Shepherd, the motive is stated simply: "I want to sit on the ground, watch my flocks by night and wait for the glory of the Lord to come upon me." By attacking fiercely in "Essay on Literary Scholarship," Wiebe clears out the underbrush and prepares the way for the whimsical adoration of the divine purpose in creating beauty in the "Second Essay on Mozart."

Some readers will find Skyblue's essays hard going, and most readers will find a few pieces vulgar. Perhaps the tastelessness is inevitable, for Wiebe has committed the ultimate creative act: setting loose his imagination to explore the language and work and the body and the soul indiscriminately. The result is not only what the preface proposes ("to clear the air by asking basic questions...to begin again in fundamental truths"), but an energetic romp through the many layers of human life, rooted in the rhythms of the King James Bible, ancient epics, straightforward plain speech, and hymn-singing.

If Wiebe's writing can be regarded as avant-garde (and perhaps that's what it is), it is nevertheless solidly based on traditions which he has re-examined and reshaped and stretched in order to connect us with our recent and ancient past. Good, on the other hand, has presented a tradition so intractable that it cannot cope with a changing world. Wiebe's fundamental medium is language, which moves agilely from theme to theme to create relationships. Good's medium is ideological rhetoric, which by its nature must clash and divide. If we are indeed developing a Mennonite literary movement in this country, Merle Good is our soap opera scenario writer: Dallas Wiebe is our James Joyce.

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Merle Good. *Today Pop Goes Home*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1993. Pp. 93. ($6.95 paperback) ISBN 1-56148-098-3

In many Eastern cultures, the older people get, the more they are revered. In North American culture, however, where money, youth, and beauty are the commonly accepted emblems of success, older citizens often feel powerless, unappreciated, and marginalized. Many of us are able to deny the effects of aging through our twenties and thirties. But old age confronts us directly at mid-life as we witness first-hand the experiences our parents face as they grow old. In our forties and fifties, we see life "in all directions," as the middle-aged woman in Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women* observes. She states that mid-life is "the only time you get a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view."[1] From this panoramic perspective, members of a youth-worshiping culture get a stark preview of our own aging in the lives of our parents.

Merle Good takes on the theme of aging in his play, *Today Pop Goes Home*. The protagonist of the drama, Lewis Snavely, is a middle-aged busi-

nessman, who must decide how to deal with his aging father, Charles, who lives with his family in the "grandparent's side" of their Pennsylvania farmhouse. Esther Snavely, Lewis's wife, is an emotionally fragile woman, who spends her days in the house with Charles, or Pop as he is called by family members. Lewis is concerned that life with Charles is more than Esther can handle. Her struggle with depression has led to several stays in a psychiatric hospital, and being responsible for Charles seems to aggravate her condition. While Lewis sees the need to relieve Esther's stress, he feels obligated to provide a home for his father.

In Lewis Snavely, Good has created a protagonist for whom the panoramic view at mid-life provides precious little scenic beauty. Lewis has invested much of his life in the family's farm equipment business, Horning and Snavely. However, the payback on his efforts is minimal since the Snavely's own just 10% share of the business. He sees the toll his frequent sales trips have taken on Esther's sense of security in their marriage, and he wants desperately to pare back his work responsibilities so he can manage his home life more effectively. Thus he negotiates the sale of Horning and Snavely, considers the sale of the family farmland for commercial development, and initiates the process of moving Pop to a retirement home. In each of these decisions, Lewis finds himself caught between expectations to carry on the traditions of the past and the desire to make the necessary changes to ensure a better future.

In the first act, we witness the strained relationship between Esther and Charles, each of whom resent the other for weaknesses beyond their control. Charles criticizes Esther for neglecting her duties as a wife and mother as she struggles with depression. Esther criticizes Charles for not facing up to the limitations that old age has placed on him. Both are caught in a pattern of resentment and reproach that makes their life together unbearable. Furthermore, both seem to experience a deep sense of personal failure in their inability to resolve their conflict effectively as "peace-making people" should.

The second scene opens with Lewis and Esther sorting through the options for next steps once the sale of Horning and Snavely is final. While both are uncomfortable with having Charles continue to live with their family, they are unable to agree on a suitable alternative. Though Esther finds life with Pop intolerable, she resists Lewis' suggestion that Pop move to the new West Wing of the Golden Hills retirement home. She asks, "can't we just make it work?" But for Lewis "it's a choice between [Esther] and Pop" and "there's only one choice to be made" (p. 42). Though Lewis is firm about his decision to move Pop out of the house, his means of accomplishing this goal are tentative and ungainly. Throughout the rest of the play, Lewis encounters resistance on a variety of fronts, which only compounds his self-doubt about the wisdom of his decision.

Lewis feels pressure from within himself and from other family members to adhere to family tradition. When Esther asks Lewis if he really intends to sell the land, Lewis responds, "Oh, I don't know. It would be very hard. Snavelys have been here for generations. No one else has farmed this land" (p. 32). Later Esther admonishes him, "Pop has always lived here. You'd be pulling him up by his roots, like a tree that still has a lot of life in it" (p. 40). His younger brother, Warren, disparages Lewis' proposal. Warren tells Pop, "Snavelys don't go to old people's homes. They take care of their own, just like you took care of your parents and Grandpap took care of his" (p. 70). When Lewis asks, "Why don't you try to stand in my shoes for one moment, Warren?" his brother responds, referring to Pop, "He did! And he stood up like a man and took care of his parents when they were old!" (p. 75) And of course, Charles, who spent his productive years building the family business and farming the land, dreads the prospect of turning it all over to strangers and moving out of the family home. The talk of these changes only reminds him, as do his "fading spells" and his deteriorating driving skills, that his years of productivity are waning. Clearly, Lewis faces a staunch sentiment against moving Pop out of the house—a sentiment that is sustained by a deeply rooted family ethic.

At the same time, Lewis' memories of his own childhood experience quicken his desire to find another home for Pop. Lewis expresses his resentment at having to spend much of his adolescence caring for his aged grandparents, and he hopes to preclude the possibility of burdening his oldest son, Arnie, with similar responsibilities. In Lewis' relationships to Charles and to Arnie, we see how the events of the past can shape the future. At mid-life, Lewis is in the position to exert significant influence on his family's future.

The most outspoken opponent of Pop's move is Lewis' brother, Warren. In the second act, after the arrangements for Pop's move to Golden Hills have been finalized, Warren arrives from Ft. Wayne, Indiana and tries to circumvent Pop's move. His maneuvering is largely ineffective, however. Pop, though unhappy about the move, is resigned to it, and Warren, for all his blustering about moving Pop to Ft. Wayne with his family, proves unable to even broach the subject with his wife.

As the drama proceeds we come to understand that though Warren is the one who is openly critical, the entire family, including Lewis, is unhappy with the situation. Still, all seem helpless to offer any preferable alternatives. Even Lewis' son, Arnie, acknowledges his discomfort with his grandfather's move to Golden Hills. On the eve of Pop's moving day, Arnie frankly expresses his desire just to get beyond the pain of this transition. He says, "Thank God, it's almost over." Lewis' response, while typically self-flagellating, reveals a deeper wisdom about the challenge of dealing with aging that faces us all. He tells Arnie, "It's never going to be over, Arnie, as long as we live. We won't even fully understand it when we ourselves are dying" (p.77-78).

In the second scene of Act II, Warren attempts to understand Lewis' motivations for moving Pop out of the house. When Warren presses him to disclose more particulars about Esther's difficulty in dealing with Charles, Lewis

reveals that Esther is grappling with deep-seated resentments toward her own father, who had an extramarital affair when she was a teenager. Esther was the only one in the family who knew about the affair, and she could never bring herself to confront her father or to inform her mother. Years of embittered feelings towards her father have contributed to a resentful attitude towards Charles and a mistrust of men in general. Warren responds with characteristic inelegance when he observes, "Sad thing is that our father has to pay the price for her Dad's transgression." (p. 85) Yet, his statement has an important kernel of truth. Charles is absolutely helpless to deal with Esther's disappointments because she never openly reveals them to him. Indeed, the whole family could benefit from a healthy dose of assertiveness training. What makes this transition so difficult for everyone involved is that with all their concerns about appearances and obligations, family members are largely unable to state clearly what they really feel.

Ultimately, Good's play is as much about a family's inability to communicate as it is about the theme of aging. Though the promotional materials for the drama do not forthrightly acknowledge it, a strong undercurrent of *Today Pop Goes Home* is the inability of Mennonite families to communicate openly about difficult issues. References in the play to names like Snavely, Burkholder, Gehman, and Miller, denote a European Mennonite context for the action of the drama. This family has been socialized in a community that eschews conflict, sometimes to the point of compromising personal integrity. Lewis agonizes over whether or not to ask his father to move to a retirement home, and much of the agony has to do with his inability to express what he really feels. Lewis employs a variety of maneuvers to avoid revealing his true feelings. First Lewis confronts Charles with the prospect of selling the farm, "trying to scare Pop away," as Esther puts it, by pretending to sell the farm (p. 33). Later Lewis questions his widowed father about whether he intends to marry Sally, a woman Charles has been seeing. Of course, if Charles would move in with Sally, Lewis would be relieved of the uncomfortable task of openly having to ask his father to leave.

Lewis is indirect with his brother, Warren, as well. Lewis tells Esther that he regrets the childhood opportunities he missed because as the oldest son he was required to care for his aging grandparents. Yet he never tells Warren, who would no doubt benefit from this insight to his older brother's experience.

Warren is another example of circuitous discourse. He criticizes Lewis for suggesting that Pop's side of the house be converted into an office for selling antiques, declaring "You seem to like old things, but you sure don't like old people" (p. 74). Yet his own discomfort with providing alternative arrangements for Pop suggests that his anger arises out of feelings of guilt at having done so little to provide care for his aging father over the years. He spouts off about the importance of families taking care of their own, but his job has taken him to another state, enabling him to escape from the responsibilities for Pop's care.

The few attempts in the drama to cut through all the misguided muttering invariably meet with failure. The following dialogue between Lewis and Charles is a fitting example.

> Charles: Why can't you just be honest with me?
> Lewis: *(with exasperation)* I wish to God it were possible to be honest with everybody about everything every day of the year.
> Charles: Try.
> Lewis: *(chuckling with frustration)* It's so hard. Pop, I don't want Esther to have to leave me and the children again, it's that simple.
> Charles: If you want me to go to a home, why don't you just say so?
> Lewis: *(after a beat)* Maybe it's a good idea.
> Charles: What!
> Lewis: Maybe we should go have a look at several—and consider it.
> Charles: Are you serious?
> Lewis: You asked for honesty.
> Charles: I bet you've already been to a bunch of them, haven't you, Lewis?
> Lewis: Now, Pop, take it easy.
> Charles: Answer me, haven't you?
> Lewis: I think we better talk about this some other time (pp. 57-58).

These two have talked passed each other for so many years that complete honesty is virtually impossible. Though Charles asks for the truth, he only wants to hear it if it suits him.

In the end, this family's inability to communicate impedes the feeling of movement in the play. The characters are so entrenched in a sense of guilt and obligation that they are unable to achieve any new self-awareness. Once the audience discovers the central problem, there is little to propel the drama forward. Perhaps the revelation of Esther's father's affair in Act II is designed to bolster our interest, but it seems contrived and out of place and is a poor substitute for true dramatic action. I simply grew weary of the characters' apparent incapacity for focused action.

In the final scene, as Pop is about to leave for Golden Hills, there is an outpouring of objections from virtually everyone in the family. But Pop quells their protests with a healthy dose of reality. "Let's get hold of ourselves. This is not a tragedy—we're all going to be happy." Then he offers the most succinct piece of advice in the entire drama, "Now let's all shut up, help carry things, and get in the car. Come on let's go" (p. 90). In light of Pop's obvious willingness to adapt to life at Golden Hills, the agony and meddling over the decision to move him out appears to have been more intense than the situation merited. The Snavelys could have handled the transition more constructively had they just shut up about superfluous matters and spoken candidly. In so doing, they truly could have helped each other in making difficult decisions and effectively have gotten on with their lives.

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[1]Edward Albee, *Three Tall Women* (New York: Dutton, 1994), 109.

Dallas Wiebe, *Skyblue's Essays*. Providence: Burning Deck, 1995. Pp. 153. ($15.00 signed) ISBN 1-88622-403-X

"Dang me if your words don't just run around" (114), complains a character in Dallas Wiebe's *Skyblue's Essays*. Readers of this collection may well share this sentiment while negotiating its labyrinthine course through materials at turns nonsensical and serious, irreverent and sacred, bawdy and soulful. Yet in the guise of Skyblue, the fictive creator of this literary maze, Wiebe seems to know all along where he's headed, toward his final chapter, a straight translation of a German hymn: "Take my hands and lead me, / To my blessed ending and for all eternity" (152). Skyblue the Badass—the authorial persona's full name—turns out to be quite tame.

Skyblue's "Preface" typifies the book's frequent resistance to a straightforward reading. Beginning with promises to propound fundamental truths, the preface soon unravels from high seriousness into ironic play. Spoofing a literary tradition, Skyblue soberly lists the names of his many influential predecessors—philosophers, religious thinkers, literary giants—but undercuts these acknowledgments with a debunking final remark: "(fill in any name here)."

Choosing to miss the joke, and thus to play the role of the pedantic Ph.D. targeted by one of the essays, this reviewer would fill in the name of Thomas Carlyle, whose nineteenth-century essay collection *Sartor Resartus* might serve as a literary progenitor to Wiebe's book. Wiebe's collection, like Carlyle's, is a generic miscellany that defies categorization, incorporating satire, veiled autobiography, parody, and pamphleteering. Skyblue seems a literary cousin to Carlyle's Diogenes Teufelsdrockh, both sharing, for instance, disgust for the university, religious doubt, and an exuberant prose style. And while one finds in *Sartor Resartus* traces of the Scottish Presbyterianism Carlyle tried to shed, readers might see beneath Skyblue's outrageous ensemble a Wiebe clad in the simple cloak of a central Kansas Mennonite ethic. That Skyblue's only living relative is the "town drunk in Newton" (17), that he has made a difficult you-can't-go-home-again trek to Halstead, and that he loves Kansas songbirds are details that invite such a reading, yet the book's occasional counter-cultural prophetic tone is not exclusively Anabaptist, nor is its crescendo toward and its culmination with the German hymn exclusively Mennonite. The work's pointing toward eternity bears just as much influence of Emily Dickinson, the subject of two essays.

To focus exclusively on the sublime finale, however, is to disregard much of what gets one there—life along the way. When focusing on such life, Wiebe's essays are frequently satirical, including, for example, outdated political barbs against Ronald Reagan and George Bush that illustrate one problem with collecting essays written over a span of years. Other passages avoid all pretense of importance and meditate on the absurd, on globules, nozzles, and mucus, for example. Skyblue's ramblings can be about the mundane—chairs and dogs. Yet they also delight in the vulgar (chairs stacked together "like copulating dogs" [57]), and the bawdy (wordplay on "rub" that generates an entire essay of sexual innuendo). Elsewhere Skyblue strikes a serious tone of moral outrage. He condemns, for instance, the evil done in the name of doctrinal purity, and in the spirit of Matthew 25.35-46, calls Christians "to meet the Greyhound bus from Death Valley and greet the bowlegged Messiah and kiss him on both of his god-damned cheeks" (42).

However bewildering the shifts in tone and subject matter of this collection, the one constant in this wilderness is Wiebe's attention to language. "Language is a gas," says Skyblue. "Pay attention to the language that is as fleeting as the lives whose ending it describes" (114, 144). And to heed Wiebe's language is to recognize his attempt to redeem human life, at once both earthy and sublime. Wiebe aspires to be like the house wren Skyblue so admires, of the family Troglodytidae, a "songbird from a hole in the ground." Not all readers will find in this book's cacophony the redeeming beauty that Skyblue finds in song, but this attests not to Wiebe's creative shortcomings, but rather to the nature of his composition. It's not easy being both Badass and Skyblue, trying to be like the wren whose tail "[points] to heaven to remind us of the connection between mercy and a hole" (141).

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Jean Janzen, *Snake in the Parsonage*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1995. ($9.95 paperback) ISBN 1-56148-177-7

Snake in the Parsonage, Jean Janzen's most recent book of poetry, traces a young woman's search for her own voice within Mennonite cultural practices and histories. Janzen uses the personal voicing of poetry as a vehicle to explore the tensions of personal identity within a communal cultural history. Far from seeking any simple unity, or any assimilation of her voice to a Mennonite chorus, Janzen consistently and unsentimentally probes the complexities of a self not wholly contained by her culture.

"Facets" describes the thirteen-year-old narrator's experience of living with her family in a men's dorm. She has trouble distinguishing her own emphatically multiple "din of voices" from the sounds of college students who "shout and gallop/ on the stairs." The later poems show Janzen's development of an adult self that is no less plural, particularly in terms of her complex relationship to Mennonite cultural tradition. This idea comes to something of a crisis in "Floodtides of Poland," where the narrator visits Poland, her family's homeland. In this intimate encounter with ancestral Mennonite history, she risks seeing herself simply as a repository of the past. In this poem, floodtides are the forces of centuries of history as well as a recent natural phenomenon: both have left a partially-obscured, sedimental woman's face on

a gravestone in a cemetery Janzen visited (a photograph of this gravestone image is on the cover of the collection). This image of "a young woman's face, classic / on a nearly buried stone" occurs in the fourth of the series of stanzas that are presented as isolated units, posing the tensions of an individual self and an accumulative tradition. It is against this image of the self buried in the ancestral homeland that Janzen proposes a more viable conception of the self in relation to a communal history. Janzen describes a statue of Copernicus holding the sun's sphere "like a thought, freed / from the spinning orbit of the self."

This notion of the self as a "spinning orbit" is a culmination of Janzen's narrative of the growth of her selfhood and poetic voice. Her poetry is deeply and profoundly searching for a self grounded in an ethnic and religious heritage informed by the past but not limited to a static conception of the self in that past. Thus, many of her poems take up the idea of a self in motion. The title poem retells the speaker's discovery of a snake in their parsonage when she was a child. The idea of this haunting presence hints that something might be wrong at the core of her religious tradition, but instead of dwelling upon that critique, the poem looks toward an alternative creation story:

> And now we were back to the beginning,
> One family in a desert
> With a serpent, even before
> the Garden, when creation
> had barely begun.

The poem then ends with the idea that everything was then "waiting to begin," and sure enough, the next poem, "Chicken Guts," offers a vision of an alternative life. In this poem about the process of canning chickens, the speaker sees her cultural life as potentially canned as well; organizing one's family around the canning jar becomes the Mennonite equivalent of living in a fishbowl. Janzen presents the metaphor of life under glass as a static "chorus line / of chicken legs, caught in the kick," and has her narrator momentarily envision dancing "among / the festival of wild grass and flowers" and thus romantically integrating self and nature through uninhibited movement.

Janzen also brings her emphasis on movement to her poems placing the self in history. She emphasizes the effects of migration upon selfhood in "New Country," a poem describing the arrival of Janzen's family in this country in 1939. Appropriately for a book so committed to tracing the complexities of developing self and voice, this poem reflects a loss of self in migration. The young narrator remembers memorizing the Pledge of Allegiance and reciting it one night while sleepwalking:

> My sisters raised their heads
> from their pillows, startled
> by my small, speaking figure,
> hand over my heart, giving myself
> to whatever would have me—
> the window, the wet breeze, the stars
> as they drowned in the growing light of day.

Janzen's linkage of sleepwalking and reciting powerfully represents the wrenching displacements of self and community as they are expressed in new and required discursive practices. She hints as well at the ability of ideology to occupy and displace the self; in reciting a national document the child indeed gives herself over, although not necessarily to the nation, but, as in "Chicken Guts," to a nature she hopes waits to receive her.

Jean Janzen's poetry vibrantly contributes to the project of "putting culture into motion," in the words of anthropologist Renato Rosaldo. Her poetry reflects both her restlessness within a cultural tradition that she perceives as confining in some ways and her sense of its—and her own—ongoing transformation.

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Unidentified Christmas scene, ca. 1890

Winter
blessings
to you
and yours!