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SOPHIA

W I S D O M

*Say to Wisdom, "You are my sister."
Proverbs 7:4a*



*Celebrating
The Gift of Writing*

VOLUME 10 ■ NUMBER 1

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SOPHIA

A Greek feminine noun associated with the biblical wisdom tradition, translated "wisdom" and personified in the book of Proverbs; equivalent in the New Testament to *logos*, the creative word that was with God in the beginning, creating and giving life to the world.

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SOPHIA Mission Statement

Sophia offers a forum for Christian women to speak to one another about the joys and challenges of living faithfully in an uncertain, changing world. Its pages give voice to women's stories - their experiences in church and society, family and workplace, their aspirations and disappointments, their successes and failures. It invites expressions of joy and sorrow, concern and outrage. In doing so it hopes to affirm women in their quest for spiritual, emotional and physical wholeness and for the full expression of their gifts in all spheres of life.

Sophia was conceived and brought to birth by Mennonite Brethren women and celebrates Christian sisterhood. Its desire is to welcome differing voices. It hopes to challenge women and men of all ages as they live together in Christian community. The name SOPHIA (wisdom) expresses our desire to search and know the wisdom of God through the Scriptures and our experience as followers of Jesus Christ.

Sophia acknowledges the authority of God, the giver of wisdom, and of the sacred Scriptures, the story of God's dealings with women and men. "Oh the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" (Romans 11:33).

On the Cover: Artwork on the front cover is *Kampala Carver* by Ray Dirks.



The Wonder of Words

by Lori Matties

My mother sometimes reminds me that one of her favourite poems is the one I wrote when I was eleven or twelve years old, about a seed in the ground, dreaming of new growth and bearing fruit. I am glad that she, and my teacher, affirmed my creative attempt to express an idea. The wonder of words, both my own and those of others, has been a great gift to me. I now watch my own eleven-year-old daughter writing short stories for her teacher, and I am grateful that she too has the opportunity to learn the discipline of expressing her thoughts through the written word.

From *Sophia's* inception we have wanted to celebrate the creative writing of women of faith in a "literary" issue. And so, it is with great pleasure that at the beginning of our tenth year of publication we offer this special edition of poems, short fiction and life writing. The stories and poems here are offered for the sheer delight of words ordered in new and startling ways, but they are also mirrors of ourselves. In them we see our own hope and despair, our anger and our humour, our dreams for the future, our understanding of the present and the past. These are the stories of who we are; through them we enrich one another with both our uniqueness and our commonality. Through them we once again share the wisdom God has given us.

I want to thank Sarah Klassen who has helped with choosing the writers and their work. Of course, the selection has been limited by space, and we hope in the future to include more poems, short stories and creative non-fiction. Submissions are welcome.

In our last issue we invited all of you to a meeting to discuss the future of *Sophia*. Thanks to those of you who responded both in person and by mail. The meeting was an affirmation of *Sophia's* direction and goals, and also a challenge to keep on providing a place to try out our ideas, to push the edges, to explore new ideas. *Sophia* has a will to survive. We are still in need of people to help on the board, with promotion and with editorial work. You are invited to keep on sharing your ideas about what you'd like to see in the magazine. Let's keep in touch.

And finally, an offering of my own, from a series of poems I have been working on, about my trip to India in 1997:

India Poems

1

country of a thousand names 900 million faces
too many divisions, seething brown soil
saffron and red chilies heaping amid garbage
and shanty

markets vibrate with shouting desperate bodies
spill over with precious metals, worthless
trinkets, silk and handloomed cotton saris
stacked ceiling high

trains taxis rickshaws scooters always honking
– 3 million in delhi alone – choke the air while
exotic trees bravely flower

naked sadhus, petal-strewn pallets parade the gods
competing, contentious, to the buddha,
to the hours of prayer
to the one god

and everywhere, colour

spice is one more excess that leaves one
gasping for anything cool
and dark
and spacious

3

i stand on the roof
watching
through the morning's haze, i am
burdened neither with speed
nor dignity
only with slow lessons
about the colour of my skin
my gender, my wealth
my rage and yes
fear

i am alien

Sophia's "gentler" approach

The issue on volunteering was wonderfully affirming to me. At the ripe old age of 30, I have spent much more time volunteering than I have in the paid workforce. After earning an honours B.A. in Economics from the U of Alberta I volunteered as office manager for Habitat for Humanity Edmonton until my first daughter was born. Since then I've been a stay-at-home mom, Habitat volunteer, church volunteer and MCC service worker in Swaziland. Since returning to Canada last May, I've been volunteering in various areas again.

My husband and I both have a lot of experience and giftedness in Christian ministry. The MB Conference position on women in ministry is one of the chief impediments to our pursuing Christian ministry as a career. Dave's flippant answer to suggestions that he attend seminary is "I wouldn't make a good husband to a pastor's wife."

Sometimes when I am asked to serve, I feel like a "two for one special" – young and a woman. It seems that any committee or board with me on it can never be accused of being sexist or ageist. Is my input valued, or just my symbolic presence?

I would welcome the opportunity to be part of a sisterhood of women who are mature in faith and whose principal aim is to support each other, rather than to teach anyone a lesson or otherwise be militant. The telling of stories is such a powerful tool. I wholly affirm *Sophia's* "gentler" approach. Your target audience is made up of those who are already convinced that God gifts and affirms women for ministry.

Thanks for your hard work on *Sophia*. It is very meaningful to me that *Sophia* is the voice of MB women who have chosen to have a voice, rather than being some mandated women's thing handed down from the Conference.

Carolyn Wagner, Edmonton

Not always gentle

I am the Family Life Pastor at Lincoln Glen MB Church in San Jose, California. I have been subscribing to *Sophia* since hearing about it from our senior pastor and his wife, Travis and Lois Reimer. For the last six years, I have served as the counselling

pastor at Lincoln Glen as a volunteer. I am licensed in this congregation.

I have appreciated the gentleness of your publication that you mentioned in the recent volunteer issue. Most of my life I have served in volunteer capacities. As a pastor and counsellor, wife, mother and grandmother, I have found that life for Christian women is not always gentle. My husband and I raised our own three children and an adopted son from Mexico. I have struggled in my own calling to ministry. This is an area in which I have felt very alone as a woman in the MB church. I would like to share and hear from other women on this issue. I have some background in nursing and am now completing my Masters Degree in Marriage and Family Therapy. God seems to be moving me into the area of serving women whose husbands are addicted to pornography or other forms of sexual addiction. I know this is a topic that is difficult to discuss and read about, but it is a reality for thousands.

Virginia E. Schneider, San Jose, California

Volunteering is giving

While flying home from Mexico, I read my cherished *Sophia*. I'd saved it for this occasion – and it did not disappoint. It is good to know that some men, and many women are still volunteering.

Jesus taught that it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35b). Volunteering is really giving of yourself. In life's different stages we need to share the things that are relevant in the space that we occupy.

When our children were little it was assumed that mothers cared for their own children in the church nursery. I often bristled at the noisy chatter that prevented me from hearing the main points of the minister's sermon. However, I learned a lot of tips on childcare. I was a new mom, while other mothers had experience and wisdom gleaned from raising half a dozen or more babies. Now I try not to be too condescending when I pass on these practical tips to our daughters-in-law.

On February 13th we celebrated my mother's one-hundredth birthday. I'd like to tell you a little of her lifelong satisfaction in giving. She used to share baking, garden produce, homemade butter, handmade

items, patterns, poems, etc., throughout her busy years. We assumed that when she reached her ninth decade this would have to stop. We were wrong.

At first, after her move to a senior care home, she was able to have a tiny fridge and could continue as a gracious hostess, doling out drinks and treats. But when regulations no longer allowed that, she came up with new ways to share. Almost any gift we give her will inevitably find someone who needs it more or whose life will be enriched by it. She assumes that all her cards, papers and correspondence are really meant for sharing, both to celebrate joyous news and to pray for the aching. When Mrs. Dyck down the hall received a special picture quilt, she wanted to display it, so Mother escorted us to her. Mrs. Dyck proudly showed us her prized possession and glowed with the satisfaction of sharing.

In the late nineties, Mother's vision dimmed, but it encouraged her to memorize special songs and verses. These she willingly recites when requested to do so. An optimistic outlook helps Mom give a pleasant greeting and kindly word to all callers. Although hard of hearing, she is a caring listener, giving heed to other's needs. She uplifts and encourages and so blesses the recipient and herself.

That is what *Sophia* always does for me, and I hope for you, too.

Hilda J., Born, B.C., via email

Exclusive language

In the issue on volunteering, I very much appreciated the recognition that women have gifts to offer the church and the community, and that the development of those gifts is a Divine intention. It was a bit of a shock, therefore, to read in "From the Source" the *New International Version's* translation of Romans 12:6-8, in which the gifts, which belong to all of us in verse 5, are attached specifically to "a man" in the next sentence, with the masculine pronouns "him" and "his" used exclusively thereafter.

I rushed to look up other translations. *The Jerusalem Bible*, a respected study Bible that pre-dates the NIV by a few years, is gender-neutral. It says, "our gifts differ ... if your gift is prophecy..." and continues to

Continued on page 23 ►

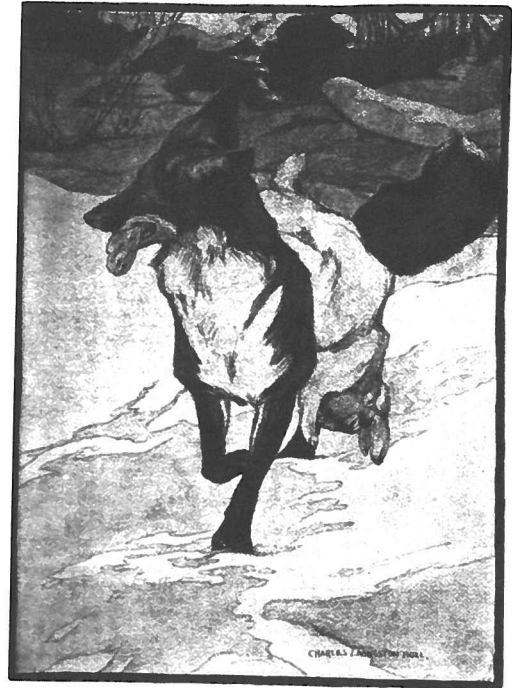
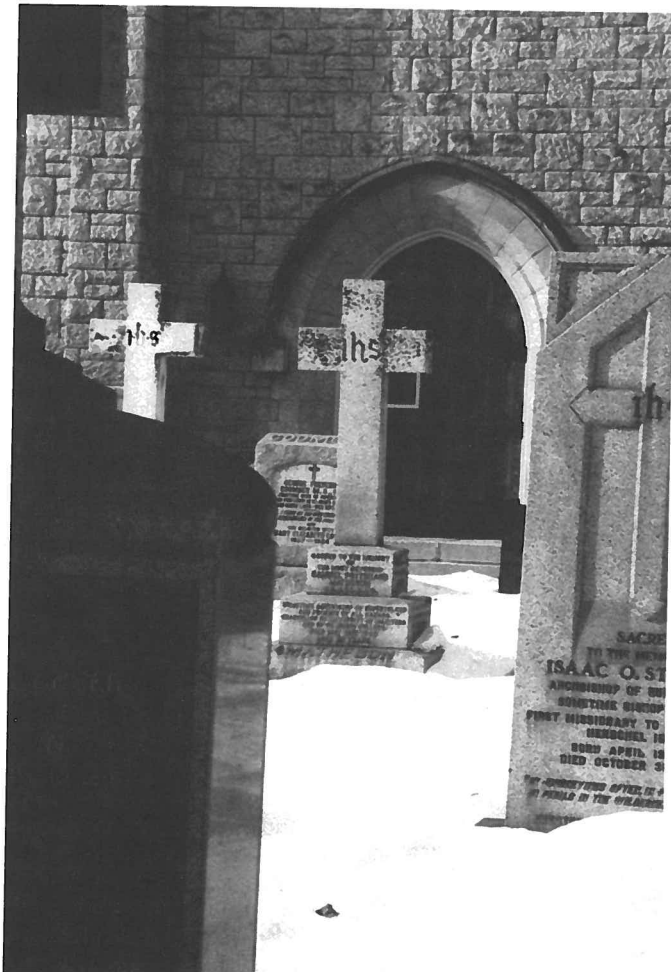
Prayer for the End of the World

by Raylene Hinz-Penner

Not as they promised us it would be in the Rapture – two to a plow but only one taken; the other shaken but left on soggy earth to watch the bottomsides of the righteous as they ascended, sucked up to God, arms skewered, narrow feet dangling.

Let us rather be summoned by geese – the earth aflutter with the bywinds of their liftoff – drawn from our beds, our fragmented dreams by myriad flocks feeling their way to formation, straggling southbound V's. We would come then, *called*, not running from frantic houses as if from the first atomic bursts to hide in holes of concrete, thin sweaters huddled against the wall.

Give us a cool blue dawn, awaken us with a moon too bright to bear and the float of heavy bodies as they take the air, primordial guides true to some sensual knowledge.



Audacious

by Raylene Hinz-Penner

Grateful for luck in this life
we all know we can't afford
cataclysmic highs – just occasional
surprise to make the muscles leap;
inside, some chemical collision
to force us to deeper breathing:
the red fox circling a plot
in the sunshine of Greenwood Cemetery
sniffing out traces of an afterlife.

.....
Raylene Hinz Penner taught at Bethel Mennonite College in Newton, Kansas, for nineteen years before moving into the College's Advancement Office, where she now works. She is a member of the Bethel College Mennonite Church. Writing, she says, keeps her renewed with its startling spiritual discoveries.

My name is Mary-Anne Klassen, and when I was nine years old I almost decoded a message from Schwester Wiens, the Prophetess. She phoned one Saturday morning when my parents were out and I was taking care of my baby brother, Joey. I recognized her voice immediately, the same voice I heard every Sunday during *Gebetsstunde*, the hour of prayer, when we were supposed to keep our heads bowed and our eyes closed. I'd sneak a glance at her, a tiny woman in a black shawl.

People said Schwester Wiens's house was littered to the ceiling with tattered and yellowed newspapers that she used to decipher the signs of the times. She had a special interest in the return of the Messiah and shared her prophecies freely. My father, the Sunday school superintendent, was one of the few men in the church who did not hang up on her.

"Father is not here," I told her in my most grown-up voice that Saturday morning. "Can I take a message?"

"Ya," Schwester Wiens said. "A message from God."

God had a message for Father, and he was not at the phone to receive it. Schwester Wiens's every word and breath and pause held deep meaning. "Messiah. Very early morning. Flesh." All the knobby pieces of the puzzle were there, ready to be fit together. I only lacked the adult understanding to pass her message on.

Tante Gatsche will know what to do, I thought. She was the leader of the *Willige Helfer Verein* and twice the size of Schwester Wiens. The two women sat together in the front pew every Sunday, and when the service dragged into its second hour Tante Gatsche would pull out a great white handkerchief. She'd wipe the perspiration from her face and then stuff the moist cloth down the front of her dress where it rested on her abundant bosom.

I put on my red woollen tam and took a moment to adjust the angle. Then I zipped my little brother Joey into his outdoor corduroy suit, buckled him into the stroller and wheeled toward Tante Gatsche's house. She lived right next door, but I took the long way around the block, past Cousin Julie's house. I could hear Aunt Margaret belting out "Showers of Blessings" from the backyard. She was bent over the rich black soil of her garden, transferring tomato seedlings from cut down milk cartons she used as starter boxes. She waved me towards the house without missing a beat of her song. I left Joey and the stroller outside.

Cousin Julie was on her knees beside her scrub bucket, sloshing soapy water across the kitchen floor. It was lucky I'd completed my Saturday chores before Schwester Wiens called or I wouldn't have been so free to focus on getting the message out. Julie refused to come with me to Tante Gatsche's. "Schwester Wiens makes that



Getting the Message

by Dorothy Friesen

stuff up for attention. Don't worry, Mary-Anne, nothing's going to happen," she said. "And why are you wearing your Sunday tam?"

I threw back my shoulders and marched out to the street to complete my mission, with or without my cousin. But when I reached the caragana hedge near Tante Gatsche's driveway I stopped to double-check the zipper on Joey's jacket. Why did Julie have to be so uncooperative? Delivering an important message to someone like Tante Gatsche required at least two witnesses.

Every Thursday evening, Tante Gatsche organized the ladies around the quilting frame in the church basement and then read aloud from her Bible while their fingers dipped and picked the needles through the stiff material. Mother attended regularly, but if someone was absent, Tante Gatsche handed the Bible to her assistant and went out into the night air to demand an accounting from the missing woman. I know, because she barged through Aunt Margaret's front door when I was there playing with Cousin Julie one Thursday. For weeks after, I had dreams about monster shadows invading my bedroom to rebuke and admonish me.

I ran my fingers over the soft woollen tam and then inched past the hedge toward Tante Gatsche's sidewalk. Schwester Wiens had not described exactly how the Messiah would return. A few days earlier I'd been lying on the grass watching cloud shapes and suddenly a tiny head like Tante Gatsche's with coiled braids formed between the larger billowing clouds. I pointed out the sky picture to Father who was working in the garden. He agreed with me – the cloud really looked like Tante Gatsche's head. Perhaps that's how Jesus would re-appear, a head peeping through a small space first and then in slow motion an entire body revealed.

On the way up Tante Gatsche's stone steps, I mentioned this possibility to Joey. My little brother could only say hi, bye and mama, but he was a good listener. I was about to knock at the window, but Tante Gatsche must have seen me because she called for us to walk in, the door was open. She was seated in a velvet chair with a high back, her Bible lay open on her lap and her shoeless feet, swollen and red, were propped on a hassock.

I took a deep breath and concentrated solely on my mission. "Jesus is returning early Sunday morning, before Sunday school, and Schwester Wiens says we have to prepare."

Tante Gatsche shook her head and lifted the Bible to her nose.

"Aren't you going to get ready?" I asked.

"I am ready," she said.

Joey was gurgling and stretching at the stroller belt.

"Run along now," Tante Gatsche said. "You take care of Joey."

But I felt the awesome responsibility of Schwester Wiens's message and remained rooted to my spot on the worn Persian rug. I stared at the mole on Tante Gatsche's chin and imagined it disappearing into her husband's face as their heads sealed together, like clouds billowing into each other.

"There's more," I said.

Tante Gatsche peered out over the Bible.

I shifted my feet further apart. "All flesh shall seal together."

"Did Schwester Wiens tell you that?" she said sternly, and pulled her handkerchief from her bosom.

"Yes," I said. "Well, maybe not exactly. But it was something about 'become one flesh.'"

"Are you sure?" Tante Gatsche removed her feet from the hassock and was feeling around for her shoes.

I should have rehearsed Schwester Wiens's message with Julie before I tried to deliver it to Tante Gatsche. I tried as best I could to remember the exact words, but they

were already mixed up with last Sunday's choir anthem, listed as "The Messiah" in the church bulletin. They'd repeated one phrase over and over and my head bounced back and forth, watching the choir loft, wondering which section would open their mouths next and how many times they would sing, "At the last trumpet sound, all fle-e-sh shall se-e-al toge-ether."

"It definitely has something to do with flesh," I said.

"That's enough."

With considerable effort, Tante Gatsche laced her shoes and made her way to the little table in the hall. As I swung Joey's stroller towards the front door, I heard her say to someone on the phone. "She has to stop making these calls to children."

I pushed Joey around the block several times and explained about the Messiah and the sealing flesh. He smiled and waved his hands and said, "Bye, bye," but I was painfully aware I had not delivered the message where it counted. Father was too busy preparing for Sunday school classes to hear me out that evening, and Mother told me to hang up if Schwester Wiens ever called again. I watched the clouds from my bedroom window until I was too tired to hold up my head.

Nothing extraordinary happened on Sunday morning just as Cousin Julie had predicted. After Sunday school, Schwester Wiens placed herself in front of Mother on the women's side of the church vestibule. "Tell your husband. It's not God's fault. I mixed up the day and the hour."

Mother whisked me towards the sanctuary before Schwester Wiens could reach out to pat my head. I trailed my hand behind my back and wiggled my fingers, hoping she could tell I was waving. I felt Schwester Wiens and I were co-conspirators, but I had been the weak link. I hadn't completed my part. That's why the message did not bear fruit. Schwester Wiens would have to carry it by herself.

After Mother returned from the *Willige Helfer Verein* on Thursday evening, I overheard her in the kitchen. She told Father that before Tante Gatsche could open her Bible, Schwester Wiens climbed on a chair and began shouting, "You must prepare, everyone of you." Then she pointed her quilting needle high in the air and proclaimed, "The Messiah will return – and it could be next month."

.....
*Dorothy Friesen grew up in Winnipeg and now lives in Chicago. She is the author of a non-fiction book, **Critical Choices: A Journey with the Filipino People** (Eerdmans 1988), and a romance novel entitled **Stormy Ties** (Avalon Books 1997).*

Back in the 1950s our college lit teacher introduced us to a way of reading poetry. She called it the "poem experience." She encouraged us to "get into" a poem and move around in it through the touchstone of experience – both our own and the poet's. The formula went something like this: the poet's experience + the printed poem + the reader's experience = the "poem experience."

Recently, while I was reading Psalm 27, a poem of desire for intimacy with God, I thought about my approach to poetry and to God. I knew that I always felt such powerful emotions while reading the psalms and I could not fully explain, let alone analyse, the source of these emotions.

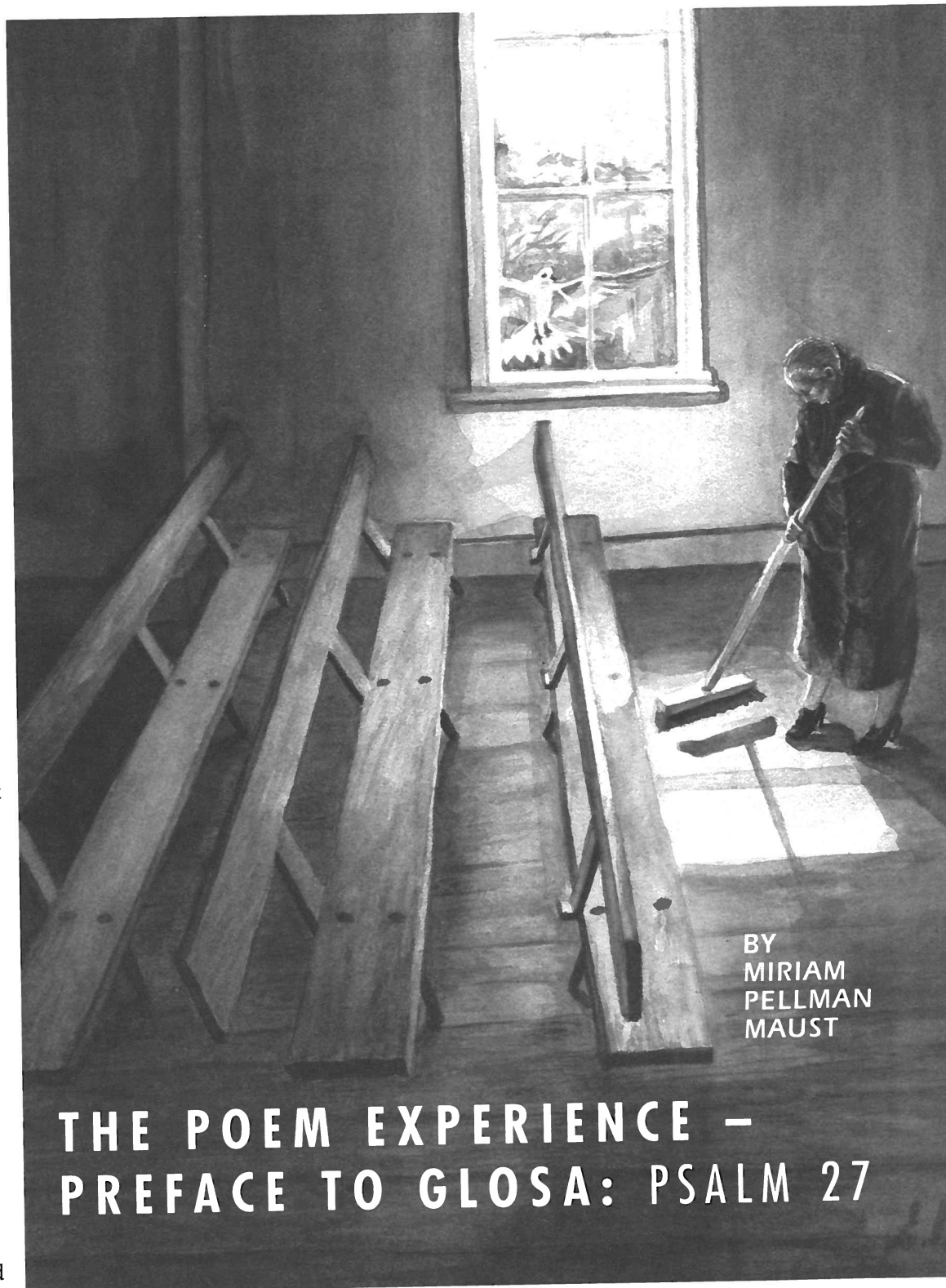
What could I imagine of the poet's experience within house and temple? Did he walk through the stone-floored palace as the compelling words formed in his mind? Was he thinking of his own four walls as the prototypical residence of God? Or was he meandering under the olive trees outside the temple? And whose godly face had he seen to imagine the face of God?

"House": such a general term. And what varied meanings it has – a building, a shelter, a celestial sphere, a religious residence, a legislative assembly, a family community, a place of the self.

Of the many houses I've lived in, all contain memories of special times with friends and family around the table, usually after dark. The table's circle of light

expands outward from the faces into the further reaches of the room, light being cast over other objects of comfort. The friendly conversation of children and adults mingling face to face after their meal, their comfortable silences between stories, reminds me of the ultimate intimacy of desire meeting the desired.

The eye houses so many memories. I retrieve a memory of the time my mother lost eyesight in one eye.



BY
MIRIAM
PELLMAN
MAUST

THE POEM EXPERIENCE – PREFACE TO GLOSA: PSALM 27

I felt alarm when I saw her eye losing its outward vitality after surgery to reduce built-up pressure. All the descriptions we use to convey coldness are associated with blindness. "Turning a blind eye" implies not knowing, not wanting to know. Then again, the not-seeing look of blindness places the seat of perception elsewhere. As my mother's eye flattened in appearance, her spirit seemed to find a new dimension, a rounded, inward look. A look not unlike those icons of Mary whose flat eye gazes at the beauty of the infant Lord she bears.

Mary. The one who belongs to a house. The house of Jacob and David. The one who houses the long-expected Jesus in her womb. The one who runs to the house of Zacharias and Elisabeth. Who returns to her own house waiting.

One cold, barely spring day I am waiting for someone outside the bank in my car. Along the street comes a young mother pulling her young child by the hand, that dragging along of a dreamy child we mothers doing important errands easily recognize. She looking straight ahead; he looking all around. He spies me in the car and, being pulled alongside me, he peers directly into my eyes and throws me a smiling kiss with his flat little hand. I am overcome with this gift, and I tell others about it for days, my voice always breaking. The child sought me. I'm the temple of the revelatory experiences that touch my life.

*Now about the printed poem. I needed a form to tie down my floating images with the ribbon of the Psalm. I happened onto P.K. Page's book of poetry, **Hologram - A Book of Glosas**. (The glosa is a 14th century poetic form favoured by the Spanish court: The opening quatrain, written by another poet, is followed by four ten-line stanzas, in each stanza the concluding lines taken consecutively from the quatrain, and the sixth and ninth lines rhyming with the borrowed tenth.) In reading these glosas I found a way to "marry" (Page's term) the psalmist's words and emotions to my own. More and more I see my desire for greater intimacy with*

God through everyday images - a lamp-lit room, an altered eye, a child's thrown kiss. Thanks be to God.

.....
Miriam Pellman Maust has just retired from teaching and is faced with the delectable difficulty of choosing among many vocations.

GLOSA: PSALM 27

*One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek -
 That I may dwell in the house of the Lord
 all the days of my life*

*To gaze upon the beauty of the Lord
 And to inquire in his temple.*

King David

No one, but no one, ever accuses me
 of settling for less than I want.

I know the hound of heaven;

I pursue and am pursued.

I shall test my words with my feet
 and run to the one
 who seeks me.

I tell you I am not going to be meek;

One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek -

A home. The draperies and cushions
 of intimate time. Art
 from which to picture life. Rest
 in the everlasting arms.
 Rooms well proportioned and long lived in,
 filled with song, and rife
 with laughter. I want the routine days
 of meals around lamplight,
 a gathering free of strife,
*That I may dwell in the house of the Lord
 all the days of my life*

When I look at a face I see eyes;
 there is where I look for love.

One day out of the blue,
 hanging out the sheets to dry,
 my mother saw black specks.

Before she knew, looking toward
 the sun, her eye was flat with blindness.
 To me, her face was full of loving sight;
 I saw, in her, Mary, who could afford
To gaze upon the beauty of the Lord

I am looking at Filippino Lippi's
 red-haired madonna and child -
 she with the domed hands of heaven
 and he, eyes locked in hers, throwing
 kisses to her and to strangers.
 I know these two of the simple heart
 (I the mother, I the child);
 in such a gaze all shame within me
 melts away...away...like residual snow
 in the gullies of April. Theirs the example,
 I, too, desire to inquire in his temple.

Surprise

by Sarah Klassen

Erica's colleagues at North-East Life Assurance would be astonished to see her down on all fours in torn jeans, her brown hair in disarray, fingernails dirty.

"That's not like Erica," they might say, and add, facetiously, "Is she praying?"

Someone else would venture, "Need a hand up, Erica?"

But of course, none of her colleagues are anywhere near. At five o'clock they tidied their desks, and on the elevator down reminded each other of urgent messages to be sent first thing in the morning, potential contacts to be tracked down, deadlines to be met. Everything connected somehow with insuring or assuring life.

Insuring life is far from Erica's mind, though her cell phone is jammed into her jeans pocket. Nor is she looking for a hand up. She is kneeling in her garden a few feet from the six tomato plants she set out last week and somewhat farther

from the poppies that have begun the transformation from tight green buds to audacious orange blooms. Although her position might suggest humility and petition, Erica is not praying. She is running her slender, manicured fingers back and forth, back and forth through the black soil looking for a cutworm.

Her bent knees flank a cucumber seedling splayed on the sun-baked earth. Just yesterday – newly planted,

fertilized, watered – it stood as upright and green as its three sister seedlings. Today Erica found it sheared off just below the soil, the leaves limp and losing colour. When she finds the culprit responsible for this devastation she will kill it. Then she will return to the house, where her daughter has upped the volume on her CD player so the beat of the Backstreet Boys pounds in every room.

"Turn that down," she'll yell.

Diane, at thirteen, has turned sullenness into a strategy that she hones through constant practise. Music provides the cover. She turned up the Backstreet Boys to annoy her mother, though it wasn't music they disagreed about today, but the movie *Drives*. Diane's friends are going after supper, why can't she?

"Over my dead body," Erica said, and Diane shot back with: "It's the mind that dies first." She will not come

out of her room or turn down the volume until she is good and ready.

She is lying on her bed, staring at the ceiling. When that becomes tedious, she scans the walls. Amidst posters of the Spice Girls, Keannu Reeves, in-your-face slogans, her eyes come to rest on a modest incongruity, almost lost in the collage of colour and gloss and celebrity. A cross-stitched motto in a narrow frame announces: "I am the Resurrection and the Life." It was a birthday gift from her grandmother, two years ago. Not a gift she received with much enthusiasm then, nor one she particularly prizes now. Whenever Gigi or Aynsley or Judy enter the room Diane gets nervous and hopes they won't notice it. It would be so embarrassing. Once she took it down and hid it, but afterwards she returned it to its place.

She scrutinizes the exquisite stitching and the ornate cross superimposed on the "I." Her grandmother who made those perfect stitches has become an old, helpless woman. Diane can't imagine ever being so motionless. She wonders if her grandmother was ever as unreasonable as her mother has become.

The Backstreet Boys blare into her ear.

Erica is determined to find the cutworm. And later this evening she will visit her mother in Resthaven. She'll bring a bunch of poppies, a guilt offering for not coming oftener. The poppies are amazing. When it's the season for blooming, nothing can stop them. At North-East Life Assurance everything depends on human effort; here in the garden, growth happens almost in spite of it.

Erica experienced her first cutworm in her mother's garden, when she was younger than Diane is now. "Just move the earth around the fallen plant, gently," her mother instructed. "Likely the worm's overstuffed from chomping through the stem and can't move far." Sure enough, the worm was easily found and destroyed, though it was her mother, not Erica, who killed that first one, demonstrating how it was done.

Erica keeps looking.

Two nurses are bent over a thin old woman curled tight and motionless in her white bed, her eyes closed, her breathing almost imperceptible.

"You grab the top, I'll get the bottom," one of them says.

"Poor old thing," the other replies. They take hold of shoulders and buttocks, turning the old woman, gently, onto her other side. They tug at the bed clothes, try to rearrange the stiff limbs.

The muted tones and sounds of the garden give way to vivid colours and music of startling clarity. Everything around and inside the old woman vibrates with light.

"Pain, Granny?" They hover uncertainly over the bed.

The slight motion of the woman's head could be yes, could be no.

"Bye then, Sweetheart." They hurry off.

The fetal woman is not the oldest in the nursing home, but perhaps the most pathetic. Her muscles have atrophied; she needs help with everything. Every movement is painful and speaking is such a huge effort, she seldom attempts it. Sometimes the nurses assume, mistakenly, that there's as little activity in the mind as in the body.

The woman, cocooned in bedsheets and pain, is imagining the world beyond this small white room. That world is hazy, as if someone has pulled a veil over it. Or as if it is receding, and she sees it from a distance. She is vaguely aware that it's spring, and the grey winter trees have taken on the pale green of the season.

She has known for some time now that she's no longer necessary. Spring will pass without her seeing it. But her daughter will see it. And her granddaughter. She pictures them in a garden, surrounded by flowering shrubs and birdsong, breathing in the scent of lilies and mock orange. The wind ruffles their hair; they lift their faces to the sun. They turn to each other and smile and the old woman's face, too, twists into a kind of smile.

And then the muted tones and sounds of the garden give way to vivid colours and music of startling clarity. Everything around and inside the old woman vibrates with light. And with anticipation. Her limbs begin unfolding and she is amazed to find herself growing, not larger, but lighter. And free of pain. Any minute now she will rise like the fluffy seed of cottonwood that in June floats on the air and is carried by the wind's breath to every corner of the garden.

"Looked like she was smiling," one nurse observed, afterwards.

"Surprised," the other thought.

Just when Erica is ready to give up on the cutworm, there it is. An inch long, thick, and the colour of earth. Gorged with chewed cucumber stem, it lies inert, stretched out to its full stubby length. There is no curling up for protection. No hint of resistance. Erica is caught off guard, as though she has come upon something quite unexpected. She is surprised by its utter helplessness, momentarily distracted, but not deterred from taking the creature to the sidewalk, and stomping down on it, hard, with the heel of her Reebok.

"They're tough," her mother used to say. "If you don't do a good job on them, they'll recover. They'll kill more of your plants. They'll spin a cocoon and become a moth and

come next spring – the whole business all over again."

Erica has no time to ponder the unstoppable urge to keep on being and growing, evident everywhere in her garden. Before she returns to the house, to her adolescent daughter and the blaring CD, she surveys once more the six sturdy tomato plants and the three remaining cucumber seedlings. Then she strides, purposefully, toward the unbri-dled orange poppies.

Diane is considering whether her life will be worth living, or even possible, if she doesn't get to see *Drives*. What will she tell Gigi, Aynsley, Judy? So embarrassing to have a dull, narrow-minded mother. The afternoon sun pours into her room. She is bored and hungry. She reaches over to turn down the Backstreet Boys.

When she enters the kitchen, heading for the fridge, her mother is there in front of it, half-hidden behind a shocking orange blaze.



"Oh my God," Diane gasps.

"I'm taking them to Granny's, right after supper," Erica says. "Want to come?"

Diane stares at the orange blaze that fills the kitchen, demanding her attention, crowding out every other sensation. She considers her mother's invitation, considers rejecting it because she's going to a movie, but her eyes are fixed on the poppies, their brilliant authority.

"Why not." She shrugs. "Granny will sure be surprised."

Erica is about to agree but her cell phone rings and her free hand, recently in contact with black soil and with a worm's skin, reaches quickly for it.

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Sarah Klassen's most recent books of poetry are: *Simone Weil: Songs of Hunger and Love* (Wolsak and Wynn, 1999) and *Dangerous Elements* (Quarry Press, 1998). She is a member of the River East MB Church in Winnipeg.

Rooms

by Jean Janzen

Rooms everywhere holding
our bodies, our memories,
walls and ceilings floating

around us in a balance
of matter and air.
Our mothers walking in

as we sleep. Emily
walking up the stairs
from the kitchen,

her hands white with flour.
The bundles of poems,
each one a mansion

of rooms. The meadow's
blue ceiling, sunflower's
treasury packed tight.

The pain inside the oak.
The rain unlocking
the mountain.



Listening for the News

by Jean Janzen

Here in the west our news
comes from the Sierra,
as it did for the settlers last century
who galloped for an hour,
then found no one home,
the mountains their steadiest neighbours.
An isolation and distance
that gathers this summer morning
into a huge stillness.

What we learn is to wait,
knowing that the snow collected
on the high ridges will finally
give up to the sun and come down,
thrumping through the city in deep
canals. The children, unaware,
spill outdoors calling to each other.
They build teepees under dusty oaks,
and dig among the roots.

But the mothers sit motionless
with coffee cups, listening.
And at evening when they call
their children home, their voices echo
with a vibrating timbre, the news
of a distant roar, of scoured rocks,
and the loneliness of trees,
a calling which cuts into the hazy dusk
of the street and hovers there.

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collections of poetry are
Words for the Silence,
Three Mennonite
Poets, The Upside-
Down Tree, Snake in
the Parsonage and
Tasting the Dust.*

Letter to a Grandmother Long Dead

by Leona Dueck Penner

Grandmother, once again, I imagine the day of your dying:

The main room (or the *grotte Shtov* as we used to call it), of the old farm house, is darkening gradually. The long shadows move slowly but steadily out of the high-ceilinged corners above the metal-framed bed on which you lie, threatening to crowd out the pale autumn light which filters through the narrow space between the partially-drawn curtains of the single long window.

But surprisingly, the meager light persists, struggling against the approaching darkness throughout the long hours of the afternoon.

On the bed, surrounded by your grieving sons and daughters, you lie motionless, hands crossed on your stomach, contours of your body hardly lifting the sheet. Grey hair, usually caught in a braided bun, now fans outwards on a white pillow, while your thin face catches and reflects the light and the shadow of the room: dark hollows around the eyes, raised glow of a brow, jutting nose and sharp jaw.

All is quiet in the room. Only an occasional snuffle or a whisper from one of the watchers as the door opens and another relative enters to join the vigil.

Then, suddenly, you speak. A mere trickle of sound but enough to jerk the watchers into action. They hurry towards the head of your bed, bend over to catch your words. But you lift your frail hand and wave them away.

"Maarie," you say. "I want Maarie," your voice growing stronger.

A woman rises from a high-backed chair near the window, her swollen body outlined briefly in the fading light. Heavily she moves towards the bed, reaches out to touch your hand.

"Maarie," you say again, glancing at her body with a sigh. "So many children already... And doesn't one of them have a birthday soon? Is it Leona?" Your voice seems weaker now.

"Yes, yes, Leona," my mother says. "But don't you worry about that. Save your strength. Get better..."

"No," you say with returning vigour. "She has to have a present. All children need to be remembered. Especially when there are so many."

She raises herself slightly as she gestures towards the bed-side table. "Give me that basket. I'll send her a piece of

fruit so she'll know I thought of her on her birthday."

My mother, still protesting, hands you the fruit basket and your thin pale hand hovers over the oranges, the apples, the grapes, then touches the only pear. "That's the one," you say as you pick it up and carefully place it into my mother's hand. "Give her the pear," you say with satisfaction. "Maybe she's never had one before."

Your hand falls back on the sheet...

Later that day, when the vigil is over, my weeping mother returns to our home and somewhere in the course of her crying, remembers to give me that pear.

As she kneels before me, she places the warm golden fruit carefully into my hand and wraps my fingers around it. "There", she says, her eyes bright with tears, "A birthday pear from your grandmother."

Grandmother, more than fifty years after your dying, and many imaginings later, I want to thank you for that pear. It was the best gift I ever had. For, even as a five-year-old, I knew that to be remembered by someone on their deathbed made you special. And, being a middling child in a family that grew to eleven, I didn't get to feel special that often so it meant a great deal to me.

Besides, you were right; I'd never had my very own pear before. It tasted delicious: so soft and so sweet.

Looking back on that experience, I don't believe it is coincidental that my mother now says I'm quite a bit like my grandmother in my mannerisms, my character and in my somewhat quiet expression of faith; clearly, some of that "sincere faith of mothers and grandmothers which first lived in her," and which the New Testament speaks about, was passed on to me, when she gave me that gift of love before she died. In a way, it seems to me now as though part of her body and her being became part of my body and my being as I ate that delicious fruit so many years ago.

*The long shadows
move slowly but
steadily out of
the high-ceilinged
corners above
the metal-framed
bed on which
you lie.*

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First published as part of a larger piece, "Growing Up Mennonite," in Stories in My Neighbour's Faith: Narratives from World Religions in Canada, collected and edited by Susan L. Scott, published by United Church Publishing House, Toronto, 1999. 184pp. Leona Dueck Penner now lives in Winnipeg with her husband, Peter. Currently she is involved in long-distance grand-parenting, reading and writing, spending time with her elderly mothers and other friends, leading worship and occasional retreats, cooking, cleaning and gardening.

Crucifix on the Road to Gnadenheim:

A Short Story

by Dora Dueck

Elinor discovers the crucifix in the *supermercado* while she is looking for soap powder.

It stands on the shelf of souvenirs for tourists, towering – perhaps 25 to 30 centimeters high – over a dusty assortment of decorative wooden bowls and coasters, tooled leather bookmarks and wallets, key chains, and plaques with bottle trees or oxen painted onto them. These objects, piled haphazardly, look shabby and abandoned, like secondhand merchandise. The *palosanto* crucifix, however, gleams. Its green and bronze lines shimmer, freshly carved, freshly polished.

So powerful is the impression of its newness, in fact, that Elinor jerks her head toward the aisle, half-expecting to catch a glimpse of someone with a whittling tool darting away. She sees no one, and shakes her head, confused. She turns her attention back to the crucifix.

The hung Christ shudders; he curves into the wood. He is dying right in front of her. He slumps as gravity demands: his arms distend, his dark head and legs cave downwards, sideways. Then he hangs still, weighted with blood and flesh which has given up.

The paler lines of the wood's grain, sand-coloured, happen upon the folds of the cloth over his loins. It makes them ripple a little, as if a chilly wind has begun to blow. On his head the plait of thorns, cut of some contrasting wood, appears to have lifted slightly. It seems as light and painless as straw.

But the body may still be warm.

Elinor looks around her. The girls at the checkout tills are busy with customers. Her mother-in-law is at the butcher shop. "I'll meet you at the truck," she said. Elinor hears the distant whine of a motorcycle and the faint, steady hum of the building's air conditioner, but she is alone and unobserved.

She wraps her left hand around the dead man's chest and lifts him down. With her right hand, she cradles the cross. She brings the prone body carefully to her nose. She inhales.

The strong fragrance of *palosanto* rushes into her nostrils.

It rushes in, that sweet brown smell, to comfort her. It makes her think of a mound of ashes bubbling with heat, branches bending low enough to sweep the ground, the shadows of the washhouse at dusk. Elinor closes her eyes. She was dreaming a lovely dream once, wasn't she? If she could only remember it, she would know why she was happy then.

Elinor's hands begin to tremble. Her eyes fly open and with a movement as reckless as the others were

tender, she thrusts the crucifix back to its place. She rushes away from it down the aisle to find the soap and glares fiercely at all the boxes and bottles until she recollects which brand she uses.

Oh, she groans, why did I notice, why did I stop, why did I touch it? Is this the way of divine assistance? Or is it the fine art of the devil?

But after she has purchased her jar of yogurt, her cheese and brown sugar and laundry powder, she is unable to stop herself from circling around to the crucifix once more. This time she picks it up with the disinterested mannerisms of a casual shopper. She needs to know the price.

The crucifix is expensive. It would be far too much. Elinor hurries away a second time, ashamed.

She stops the truck in front of her mother-in-law's house. She carries in the other woman's groceries. When she steps into the kitchen, she feels its coolness. It seems completely detached from the midday heat.

Elinor's hands begin to tremble. Her eyes fly open and with a movement as reckless as the others were tender, she thrusts the crucifix back to its place.

Peter's mother hurries into her bedroom to change clothes. "Have you seen how full the lemon tree is?" she calls from around the corner. "Peter loves lemon juice. Especially when it's fresh."

Peter's mother emerges in a clean, faded home dress of light brown cotton. She is a plump, energetic woman with soft grey hair. "We should work in the garden this afternoon," she says, tying an apron around her waist.

Elinor smiles her acquiescence, because that's what she did in the beginning, when she wanted so badly to learn. She has not been able to stop answering this way, even though each smile is using up her life, as breathing uses air. She wishes she could lie down on the table in her mother-in-law's kitchen, on the calm blue oilcloth with the white sailboats floating across it in prim, even rows. But she smiles and nods, and Peter's mother says, "We'll see you later then."

Elinor drives the truck several hundred feet further, parks beside the old house where she and Peter live. When they married, they built a house for his mother in a corner of the *hof* close to the street. The mother's house is small, but in the manner of the newer homes, has a wide verandah and modern conveniences – an indoor toilet, a gas stove, glass windows, kitchen cupboards. Elinor's house strives to keep up-to-date through her constant scrubbing, but it is a battle which cannot be won; hers is a house mutinous with ancient construction and fundamental inefficiencies.

Elinor puts the provisions away. She writes down, in Peter's accounting book, the sum she spent. Peter is at their pastureland and will not be home for dinner, so she undresses without eating and lies down on her bed for siesta. The shutters are closed; the room is dark and hot and airless. She doesn't have strength, though, to get up and turn on the oscillating fan.

The desperation is with her again: the familiar and painful desperation. How to describe it, even to herself, this sense that she is disappearing, that she is drying and cracking? It isn't the weather, not a lack of physical health, but some other seepage she cannot plug.

She came from the other side of Paraguay to marry Peter, to live with him here on the farm, in the farming village of Gnadenheim. She came across the river, leaving father and mother, brothers, sisters, friends. She was converted for him. She unpacked herself for him as a box. She yielded herself as a garden does to the plow, to seed and sun and rain.

She did not know what it would cost her to be a stranger. She did not know how difficult and dangerous it would be. She had boldly seized the words of Ruth for her own – *Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge.*



Your people, my people. Your God...

But these words no longer travel through her mind in sentences. They are hard, separate entities now – *where*, and *you*, and *I*, and *go*, and *lodge* – not fluid as before, not linked to pull her from peril.

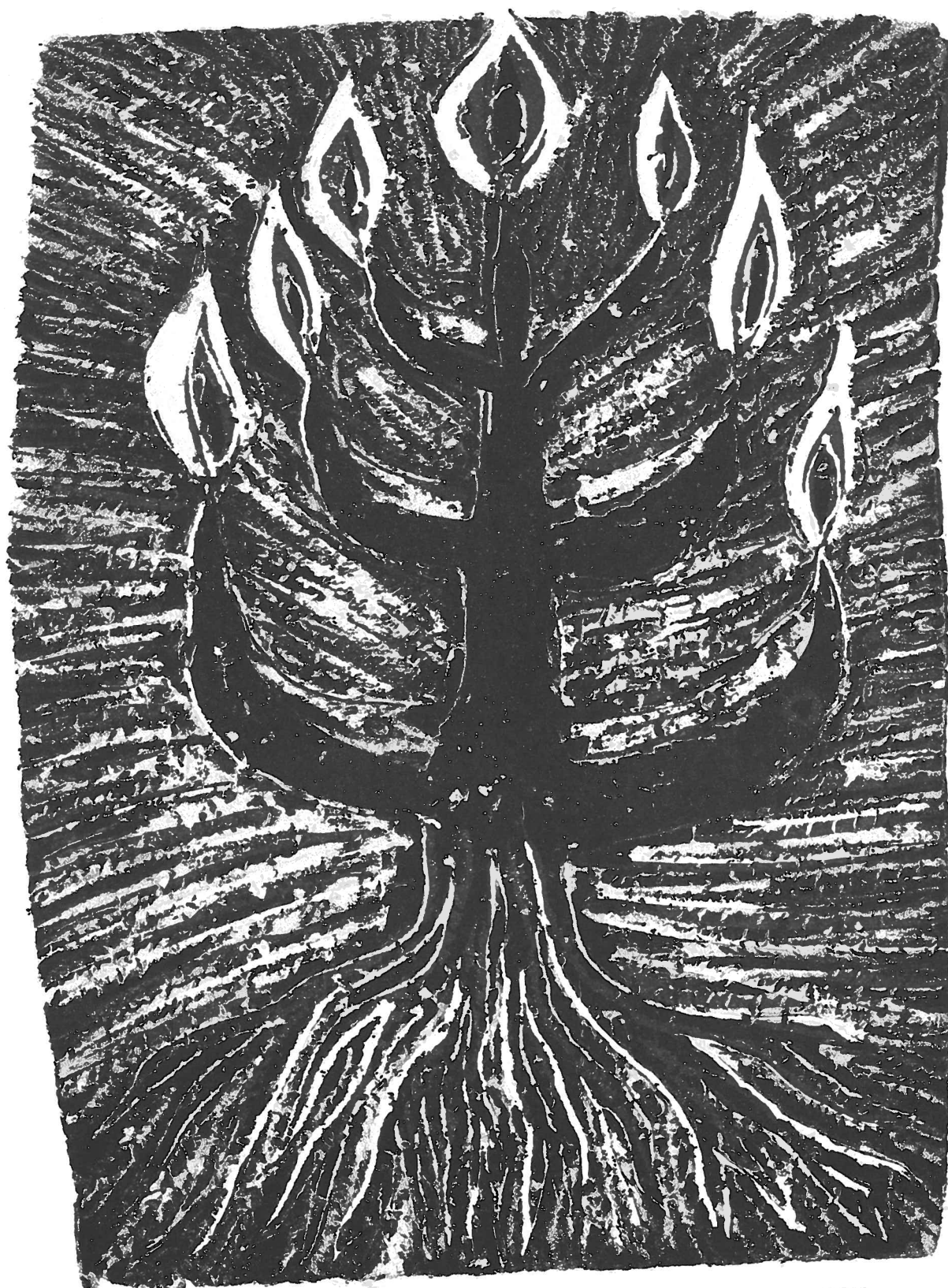
Nor can she make Peter comprehend her despair. People are amazed how well you fit in, he replies affably, how hard you work; and isn't everyone very nice, trying their best? One should not mind what people think, he says, and when Elinor assures him this is not the problem, he looks victorious, as if that's exactly what he wanted her to get the knack of. One day he reveals he's been grateful she's quiet: two talkative women on one *hof* would be too much for any man, he says, but he offers this sheepishly, like a basket of grapefruit stolen from a neighbour's tree.

All Elinor has to offer is herself, whenever he wants her. She thinks that if they had a child she would feel better, but this hasn't happened yet. She clings to Peter long after he falls asleep, tearfully stroking his rough, sun-red-dened face.

In spite of everything, Elinor is alert to omens of rescue. The crucifix asserts itself in her mind, unrelentingly, as such a sign. She begins to calculate, secretly, how many eggs she will have to sell, how many weeks it will take. She investigates the house and barn for a hiding place.

On the next week's trip into town, Elinor wanders to the tourist shelf, to strengthen the hopes she is weaving together. The crucifix is gone.

The souvenirs are as dishevelled and untended as before, all of them bleating *Recuerdo del Paraguay* from gold-ink lettering under a fine layer of dust. Souvenirs of Paraguay, indeed. But the crucifix is not there.



THE TREE OF LIGHT, KARIN CORNELIUS

Elinor has been outwitted. Had she dared to imagine it would wait for her? That it would repeat *INRI* – Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews – with its quiet assurance and strength to other customers until she was ready to take it home? Just because there were not many tourists visiting the Chaco, just because Mennonites do not use crucifixes, just because the Catholic Indians are very poor?

How foolish she was, how naive, to suppose it (so beautiful!) would not be snatched away. To suppose it was safe. Intended for her!

She slouches away from the gaping shelf, disappointment dropping into her stomach like a stone.

The following week, Elinor notices that one of the telephone posts along the road to Gnadenheim resembles, from a distance, a crucifix.

Peter is driving – he needed to pick up some tractor parts – and he and his mother are discussing the crops. The peanuts are stronger than the castor-oil plants, he says; he might have proportioned the land a little differently, instead of half and half, but still, they're all looking good enough so far and he's satisfied. He's certainly not sorry he dropped cotton. The crucial factor, of course, is rain. If the fields don't get rain, a thorough rain, within a week for sure, the damage will be severe.

Elinor spots the crucifix just past the bend in the road – the place a mile or so from the village where Peter says the horses start to gallop home in earnest. (The expression comes from his late father, from the days of wagons and buggies.) This crucifix is rather approximate, but once Elinor has seen it, it is irrefutable. The unlikely shape is possible because the Chaco does not have trees tall and straight enough to serve as posts for the telephone lines. The best of the yellow *quebracho* trunks, crooked as they are, must be used – two of them fastened together with a metal girth to form one pole.

In the bottom trunk Elinor sees the heavy, downwardly-curved shape of the crucified legs; in the upper, the torso. The cross beam with its bracing suggests the strung arms. A huge bird's nest woven over the top forms the head and crown of thorns.

For the first time in many months Elinor comes close to laughing. For a moment, she catches the irony, that she has been reduced to sustenance from such crude and patched-together gestures, that in this community she is allowed only icons of nature, those formed of coincidences, of the necessities of survival in

desolate places and the whims of a colony of birds.

By the time the truck stops, her amusement has vanished; the crucifix she was given on the road has solidified. Coming into the kitchen, she is startled by a man's voice. A preacher is calling. "Bring all of your sins and your burdens! Bring them all to the foot of the cross!"

Peter left the radio on again.

Everyone is waiting for rain. Everyone watches the sky, and the life is disappearing from Elinor's body. She cannot convince Peter she is afraid. She is sure she has spoken plainly more than once, but her statements, it seems, are particular to her alone; why else do they not alarm him?

Elinor has wrestled with her new life a long time, but now she is mortally weary; she wishes to surrender. She feels her efforts slacken, preparing to yield.

No rain has fallen, the crops are suffering, Peter is angry. Elinor's mother-in-law is ill with a flu. She hands Elinor her grocery list and says, "I know I'd recover if the weather would turn."

Elinor sets out for town, alone in the old red truck. It is a bright, nearly white day, and very hot. A car passes her, churning up dust, but Elinor drives into the billows of fine grey sand without slowing. The crucifix is still there, looming before her, the body sagging into its end, the head and crown undisturbed. She keeps her eyes fixed on it. She pushes harder

on the gas pedal, reminds herself that *quebracho* is nearly indestructible.

At the point where she will lose the crucifix, where it will vanish as an image of consolation, become, again, post and nest, she veers sharply. With all her strength she presses on the accelerator and aims for the place where the Christ-legs cross, where the nails hold him fast.

The truck hits the post; metal and wood meet with a crack, an anguished cry. Elinor's head strikes the windshield and then the falling upper post. In a second it is finished. Her body falls back onto the seat, her head comes to rest over her right arm. Blood gathers in a pool on the red vinyl seat; it finds its way around the mess of glass and drips onto the floor.

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Dora Dueck is the author of the novel Under the Still Standing Sun and several short stories and poems. "Crucifix on the Road to Gnadenheim" was first published in the Journal of Mennonite Studies, Volume 14, 1996. Used by permission. Dora and her family attend Jubilee Mennonite Church in Winnipeg.

I stare at an icicle. Its bulged crystalline roots grow around the edges of the eave just outside the hospital window, as the sun draws out beads of water that slip and then trickle into brilliant blue air. I want to behead the thing and stop its laborious morning melt. I want to snap this clear carrot off the eave and hold the cold in my hand till my skin aches. I want to see sharp chips of ice fly, leaving behind a defined edge to this protrusion that hangs and drips incessantly. Meanwhile I want to throw up, but the wrenching of my back and abdomen keep me from opening up my stomach. My throat stretches and I heave a long dry ache. I turn back to the icicle, and now the window reframes it into a transparent, slippery and miraculous piece of beauty displayed against the backdrop of an unblemished blue and held in place with a majestic flow of clear full roots entangled around the window's eave. *I've become fickle*, I think.

Minutes ago, while walking through a contraction around the hospital hallway, I felt the same controlled confidence I'd felt doing pushups during my athletic years. The pain, during these walks, was controlled and contained, much like the stress of a muscle as it releases lactic acid. I felt strong and focused when all concentration shifted, crumbled into rivets of pain. Long, hard, aching wedges thrust their way into my legs, my count broke into a cry and my face fell into Mark's shoulder as he walked me to this bed.

Now, the excruciating pain plays tricks on me. The icicle, that I saw first as an annoying protrusion, and then as beauty, is now a cold swimming pool in Puerto Vallarta where I swam every morning for one week last winter. To keep me there, I lie on my side and kick my left leg and arm in a breast stroking motion while Mark rubs my head and Geralyn, our *dula*, strokes my belly in the rhythm of my swim. I swim through another agonizing thrust and another but need more to keep me in the pool; a cold cloth. The next deep searing ache that shivers its way into my thighs gets a drink of water. The next one a suck on ice

cubes. With the next one I pull off my shirt, watch water slip then drip from the icicle, and my breast stroke begins to feel like a panicked dog paddle. I can't get into the water. The pulses of pain double one on top of another and then through another and the wave is gone. There is no reprieve. How do I get back to the rhythm of cold words where the pain slid through water and ice? It seems impossible since these relentless spasms race through and I can't offer them a path. I fasten my eyes on the icicle again as

my vision grabs for the shine of water. My legs and arms kick and punch out a breast stroke, in Puerto Vallarta again, but this time my swimming pool caves in and I am crushed into a pain ocean that spreads deep into my bones, its currents rush into the layers of my back. Mark tries to rub the pain out and I hurl sharp words his way: "No pressure, Mark, this isn't a back ache."

His hands become feathers blessing the small of my back. Relief. Time shivers into pain again. I want to throw up, but that is going against the flow and this brief thought shifts my attention to Geralyn's chant: "You're opening up, opening up, opening up for this baby."

She's caught me. I'm opening up, opening up. I don't hear baby. "Damn it," I yell, "I can't do this all afternoon. Why doesn't my body give me a break? Transition contractions have breaks

don't they, Garalyn – these just come one on top of another – where's the break?"

"You're doing a lot of work in a short time. Contractions are coming fast and furious. You're giving in to them wonderfully, Bonnie," she says, while I see the cold cloth in my hand flail against the metal side table.

My body is going downhill with brake failure and I can't do a damn thing to stop the agonizing momentum that spreads like a fire viscous enough to lick its way through a living tree. The veins and nerve endings within my back and legs, like the vascular system of a tree, abandon their sap to the burning suck of the fire. The wild pain burns its way into each dark layer of muscle, through bone,

Birth in February

by Bonnie Loewen



I fasten my eyes on the icicle again as my vision grabs for the shine of water. My legs and arms kick and punch out a breast stroke.

down into my legs straight into the tender sciatic nerve, up into the nerve endings of the spinal cord, spreading anguish into every muscle of my back. I rage at its wild intentions and yell at Geralyn, "I can't do this all afternoon."

I hear Mark breathing in the rhythm of his hand. "You probably won't," she says while her hand strokes the tight drum of my stomach. "I'd better not," I say to the window and see the icicle puncture the bowl of the sky.

In that split second, the fire is snuffed out by a bowl just as large as the sky as it sits on the rubber floor between my legs. The floor feels like a trampoline stretching in the direction of the bottom of this bowl. I need to go to the bathroom and something falls through but the bowl keeps expanding and pushing. The floor opens and I want it to, surprised that it shifts on its own. "Geralyn, I want to push and I can't stop it. My body wants to push."

"Bonnie, you're nine centimeters dilated. I see the crown of your baby's head, you've done it, Bonnie. My hand's on your perineum, so go ahead and push."

My body pushes at a speed I can touch and as I feel its direction I see a wide road and feel powerful muscles around its shoulders. I bellow my power into the strength of my muscles. I holler. I howl like a mother bear as everything in my world pushes. "You're pushing just the right amount. Bonnie, you're doing so well. You're pushing at a good, slow, stretching pace."

I hear Geralyn's words and am puzzled. Is it me? The me who raged at icicles and pain, who walked to numbers during early contractions? The me who wrote pages in my journal, who unravelled during coffees with friends, who saw a counsellor with Mark about how I was going to remain sane with another baby? The me who dragged the baby crib down from the attic, who pulled out from green garbage bags and folded once again the sleepers, receiving blankets, booties, bibs and undershirts?

In this moment of birth, this epiphany, when my body speaks a language that transcends every living and dying boundary, I see that I am my own stranger; a stranger exhilarated and frightened by my beauty and brilliance as the perfect entanglement of muscle, bone and blood creates a miracle of instinct and momentum. I give one last push and my body gushes out another body.

I cup his wet head and feel an ache press against bruised muscles. The thick bag of blood that fed and held this baby slips out, and somewhere I shiver another ripple of pain as my boy's precious red lips latch around the nipple of my heavy breast.

.....
This piece inspired a creative life-writing project Bonnie Loewen has been working on, with the support and guidance of Sarah Klassen, for two-and-a-half years. She is a mother of three children and lives on a turkey, grain, sheep and laying-hen farm in Southeastern Manitoba.



Saturday night, & my mother

touches the windchimes twice
 at the foot of the stairs –
 I in my bedroom sleeping
 or so she thinks
 she touches the windchimes, they tinkle
 some kind of message
 up to me at the top of the stairs
 in my bed, huddled &
 hurling away the old
 houses of memory that she brings –
 of me small, a child, & always afraid –
mama, I whisper into the dark, into the light, *mama*
 I eat your food, I taste once more the sweetness
 of your everlasting arms; you tell me
 this time might be the last
 (the bright wings of cancer folding around you);
 & the magic fails me, the words refuse to come &
 tonight it's just me in this bed under a quilted spread
 & my mother whose body made me, playing
 some unknown melody at the top of the stairs

by Melody Goetz

.....
*Melody Goetz is a Saskatchewan-born writer who now lives in Yarrow, BC. She works as an administrator at a facility for elderly people. Her poetry and short fiction have appeared in numerous Canadian literary journals. "Saturday night and my mother" was first published in *Prairie Fire*. Her first chapbook, *train to Mombasa*, was published in February.*

The Visit

by Talia Pura

As my van pulls to a stop at the front curb, I see Grandma jump up from her place in the circle of endlessly waiting elderly women occupying the overstuffed chairs in the lobby. Grandma is all smiles as she opens the door wide, in spite of the mid March chill in the night air. She calls her great-granddaughters by name, informing the lady stooped over her cane in the elevator that she has company. When we reach the third floor, the door opens onto a common room. The large puzzle on the table is barely begun. Grandma is already heading down the hall.

"Some of the people like to do such. I never figured it out."

I remember her years on the farm, no running water and over an acre of garden out back. Cows to milk, chickens and pigs to feed. She turns her key in the lock and we enter her spotless apartment.

No, she tells us, no one helps her clean it, that she can manage by herself. Her furniture is as familiar and comforting as the smell of the pie on the kitchen counter, with every available surface home to a photograph. The black velvet painting above the couch is the same one that hung in the village home she shared with Grandpa before his death twenty-three years ago. I glance at her clear brown eyes, remembering the horrible black circles that had graced them at his funeral. They were courtesy of her contact with the dashboard when Grandpa had a heart attack at the wheel while crossing the bridge at Plum Creek. She maintained consciousness after the car cleared the rails and plunged to the embankment twelve feet below. She implored him to wake up.

He never did. Instead, she experienced the grief of a widow, as had countless generations of Mennonite women before her. One week was spent greeting family and friends at the funeral home. At the funeral, viewing took place in the entrance of the church upon arrival, before the solicitous young undertaker slowly, respectfully lowered the casket lid. The family followed the casket down the center aisle of the large church, its unadorned windows and polished wooden pews a testament to a people who put devotion to God above earthly possessions and outward adornments. Once the casket reached its destination at the foot of the pulpit, the lid was opened once again. The sad purpose of the service would not be lost in the exhalations

of life everlasting and joyful release of another soul from the toil of this earthy life.

After the parade to the cemetery was complete and the casket lay supported by the poles that would lower it to its final rest, Grandma looked one last time at the man who had spent more than fifty years by her side. Did she even recognize the waxlike perfection that was passing itself off as my grandfather? I had not really been convinced that it was him until I saw his carefully folded hands. An encounter with a primitive saw blade long ago had severed the middle finger on his right hand. When I saw that finger the loss of his life became real for the first time. It engulfed me like a hot wave of stale air, as if the earth had shifted and let out a sigh.

My grandmother sits across from me in a kitchen chair. Her back is straight, her feet, crossed at the ankles, barely touching the floor. She wears her ninety-one years more lightly than most people wear seventy-five.

Yes, she had said on the phone when I had called the week

before, she could talk to me about her life, but she didn't really have any stories. Then she started to explain how she had brought some of the produce from her garden to the village general store in the thirties. She used it as trade for coffee, sugar and other staples that the earth could not provide.

They never starved, but never had any money, either. There had been precious little grain in the wagon for faithful old Prince to haul to the elevator a mile and a half away.

Her hands are clasped in her lap, thumbs slowly circling. She crocheted a tablecloth last Christmas. There is obvious relief in telling us that her elbow had allowed it, in spite of injuring it in the blackout and subsequent fall that prompted my uncle casually to offer to park her car for the winter.

My daughters, Natalie and Amy, shuffle in their shared spot in the large armchair. Had she received a wedding ring when she married, Amy wants to know. Grandma goes in search of it and returns in a moment with a gold signet ring.

"It cost Grandpa \$1.75," she says. "I bought him one for \$4.50." The initial is almost illegible, the gold worn smooth by years of handling gardening tools and hands submerged in laundry tubs made sudsy by homemade lye soap.

Grandma settles back in her chair. I have never seen her sit still for so long in her own home. For years she

My grandmother sits across from me in a kitchen chair. She wears her ninety-one years more lightly than most people wear seventy-five.

didn't even set a place for herself at the table. The bowls of chicken noodle soup wanted constant replenishing. The adults at their table were content to allow her to do so. Could they stop her? Why bother helping? She enjoyed serving everyone, didn't she?

Grandma quit school at thirteen-and-a-half, right after grade seven. She loved school, she tells us, as we pore over her carefully penned German script. The notebook is brown with age, but the pride of the writer remains undiminished by time.

"I had to wash diapers," she states bluntly. Someone had to do it. She always knew it would be her. She never questioned it. Just as no one questioned why girls should wear their dresses when they helped the men and boys stook the wheat in the fields at harvest time. It's just the way things were; but oh, did it burn when she gingerly washed her legs each night, the scratches tracing a map of the day's labour over her skin.

"What would you have become if you could have stayed in school?" I ask.

"A nurse." The reply comes without a moment's hesitation.

Dreams like that could only be realized by the youngest siblings. The ones who didn't have to learn early that their place was to serve.

"I was seventeen-and-a-half when Grandpa started to court me," Grandma continues, "I was allowed to see him, but not to leave the yard. It was always on a Sunday."

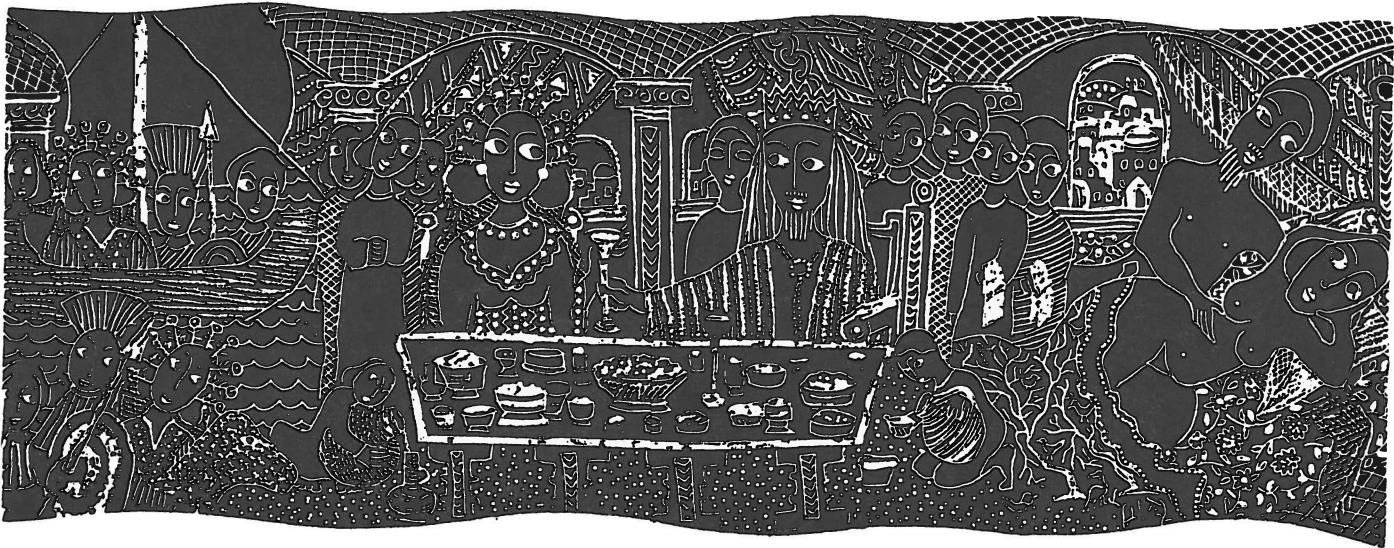
They visited in her room until the broom handle thumped on the ceiling at exactly ten o'clock. If Grandma's parents had visitors, she would leave him and go down to

prepare a supper that neither of them would eat. When my husband started attending Christmas dinner at Grandma's house, he thought he would starve. Where were the turkey, potatoes smothered in gravy and mounds of vegetables? How could anyone call chicken noodle soup a holiday dinner?

I had often watched her roll out the dough on the table in her large farm kitchen. Vast quantities of long narrow worms laid out to dry. Other holidays would have other soups, or cottage cheese-filled *verenike*, but Christmas was left pure. Noodle soup was followed by Christmas treats, Japanese oranges, popcorn sugar-coated pink, cookies and pies. After the tables were cleared, the crokinole board would come out with noisy round-robin tournaments taking up the afternoon. The best part of the day was the peanuts in their shells. The shells were allowed to go on the floor at Christmas. By the time the tables were set for *faspa*, my cousins and I were shuffling through fox and goose trails across the linoleum.

I catch Amy in a yawn and see the clock on the wall reach 10:45. It really is time to go, but first, there is pie.

.....
Talia Pura grew up in Manitoba's Red River Valley. She now resides in Winnipeg with her husband and three teenaged children. She works as a freelance writer and actor, teaches theatre at the University of Winnipeg and coordinates a student foreign exchange program. She is a member of the River East MB church.



"Saba's Journey" by Karen Cornelius. The queen of Sheba is an important figure in the Christian history of Ethiopia and surrounding countries. In this print she is depicted on the left journeying to Israel to visit Solomon, in the centre feasting with him and on the right in an intimate embrace with him.



God's grace: a dance lesson

by Diane L. Tucker

Resurrection

by Marianne Jones

the finest steps should appear
to require from the dancer no effort
a simple emanation from the body
mere kinetic surrender

but costumed in welts
branches and blood
in a *pâs de quatre* with three stout nails
you can see the sweat, if you look again
the quivering calves
a tautness in the face

for though, in his landless leap,
his limbs look light as leaves
though he flow like water

how costly comes this grace

.....
Diane Tucker lives in Burnaby with her husband and two children. As well as a writer she's a homemaker, a maker of candles, a sometime singer and performer and is on the executive of the Burnaby Writers' Society. Her most recent publications include poems in Descant, TickleAce and the Danforth Review, an on-line literary journal. She attends St. John's Shaughnessy Anglican Church in Vancouver.

white waves on the lawn recede,
revealing flotsam:
black leaves glued to petrified earth,
scattered hulls
strewn by grosbeaks and whiskey jacks,
branches from last fall's storm.
Grass reappears in patches.
Plants fight their way surfaceward
fragile-seeming, but toughened by
northern winters.

I am coming to life
after months of pills to stop the crying,
doctor's checklists: do I sleep?
how is my appetite? sex drive?
Shifting in counsellors' offices,
probing frozen, rigid parts,
raking choking debris,
burning off residue of past seasons
in God's bonfire.

.....
Marianne Jones is a writer, children's choir director and actor who lives with her husband and her mother at One Island Lake, Ontario. She attends Redwood Park Alliance Church in Thunder Bay.

Recent Poetry Collections by Mennonite Women: An Annotated List

1. Diane Driedger, *The Mennonite Madonna*, (Charlottetown, PEI: Gynergy Books, 1999) Soft cover, 89pp. \$10.95.

Beginning with her grandfather's 1908 exclusion from the Mennonite church, Driedger explores justice issues, complexities in relationships, and what it means to be Mennonite.

2. Bernice Friesen, *Sex, Death, and Naked Men* (Regina, SK: Coteau Books, 1998) soft cover, 86pp. \$8.95.

As the title suggests, this is a ribald foray into places proper Mennonites might rather not go in public. Clever and lively.

3. Jean Janzen, *Tasting the Dust* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2000) soft cover, 73 pp. \$9.95 US.

A new collection, due out in April, that explores our connections to this earth, both its dust and our own. The two poems in this

issue are a taste of what's in it.

4. Julia Kasdorf, *Eve's Striptease*, (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998). Hard cover, 86pp.

With mature vision and poetic skill, Kasdorf illuminates for the reader familiar passages in a woman's life: search for independence, first love, loss of innocence, marriage, relocation.

5. Sarah Klassen, *Dangerous Elements*, (Kingston, ON: Quarry Press, 1998) Soft cover, 119 pp. \$14.95.

The book begins with water birds, moves to scenes from Lithuania and ends with portraits of sixteenth century Anabaptist martyrs.

6. Sarah Klassen, *Simone Weil: Songs of Hunger and Love* (Toronto: Wolsak and Wynn, 1999) soft cover, 81pp. \$12.00.

In her latest book, Klassen enters the mind and life of the controversial French/Jewish thinker, mystic and activist, Simone Weil.

7. Barbara Nickel, *The Gladys Elegies*, (Regina, SK: Coteau Press, 1997) Soft cover, 81pp. \$10.95

Exploring subjects that range from New

York socialites to Mennonite immigrant life to music-making, Nickel makes an impressive poetic debut.

8. Naomi Reimer, *The Taken* (Custer, WA: Birch Bay Books, 1997) Soft cover, 71 pp. \$12.00.

The title refers to the millions, including Mennonites, exiled under Stalin. Reimer presents their plight, and also more personal family stories with compassion and respect.

9. Audrey Poetker, *Making strange to yourself* (Winnipeg, MB: Turnstone Press, 1999) Soft cover, 67 pp. \$10.95.

In her third collection, Poetker writes lyrically and sensitively about marriage to an older husband, the inability to have children, and the scars left by loss.

Letters

Continued from page 4

include women as well as men by use of the second-person pronoun. The *New Revised Standard Version*, which was published twelve years after the *NIV*, uses the term "we" throughout. The scholars who translated the revised *NIV*, published by Hodder and Stoughton (England, Australia and New Zealand, 1995, 1996) worked very hard at gender-accuracy, reflecting distinctions that are apparently clear in the Greek. It uses "we" in verses 5 and 6, and switches to "your" in the following imperatives.

If we want to understand our Kingdom responsibilities in clear New Testament ways, we would do well to use gender-accurate translations.

Donna Stewart, Vancouver, BC

Ed. Sorry, we goofed! *Sophia's* editorial policy has always been to use gender-inclusive language. Somehow this one just slipped past our watchful editorial eyes...

Donna writes again...

Stimulated by your article and your invitation, I have been thinking about the term "pastor couple." I agreed with Edith Dyck ("What is a *Pastor Couple*?") that the intention is probably to honour the offering made by the unpaid partner of a ministry team, but there are jokes among pastors that the term "pastor couple" really says, "We expect two for the price of one." I think there is a trap in the term because it implies an unstated job description that has nothing to do with the unpaid partner's gifts, interests, family responsibilities or employment, but rather with needs the church expects the partner to fill. The choice implicit in the term "volunteer" has been eliminated. Whenever there are expectations that are not clearly understood by both parties, there is a potential for trouble in the life of the congregation or in the family life of the pastor.

I once participated in a Bible study group for pastors' wives. Almost all the women had small children, and almost all felt weighed-down by congregational expectations. Somebody should do some

research on depression and burnout among pastors' wives!

I know of one case where the "pastor couple" was two pastors job-sharing. The hiring committee understood that, but the term "pastor couple" obscured it for the congregation. When the wife preached half the time, albeit excellently, the congregation felt they'd been hoodwinked. The posting ended uncomfortably on all sides.

It's wonderful that churches want to recognize the ministry contributions of the clergy partner, but the term "pastor couple" won't quite do it. It's more respectful to treat the partner like any other member of the congregation, with freedom to respond to God's direction in areas of service and amount of time commitment.

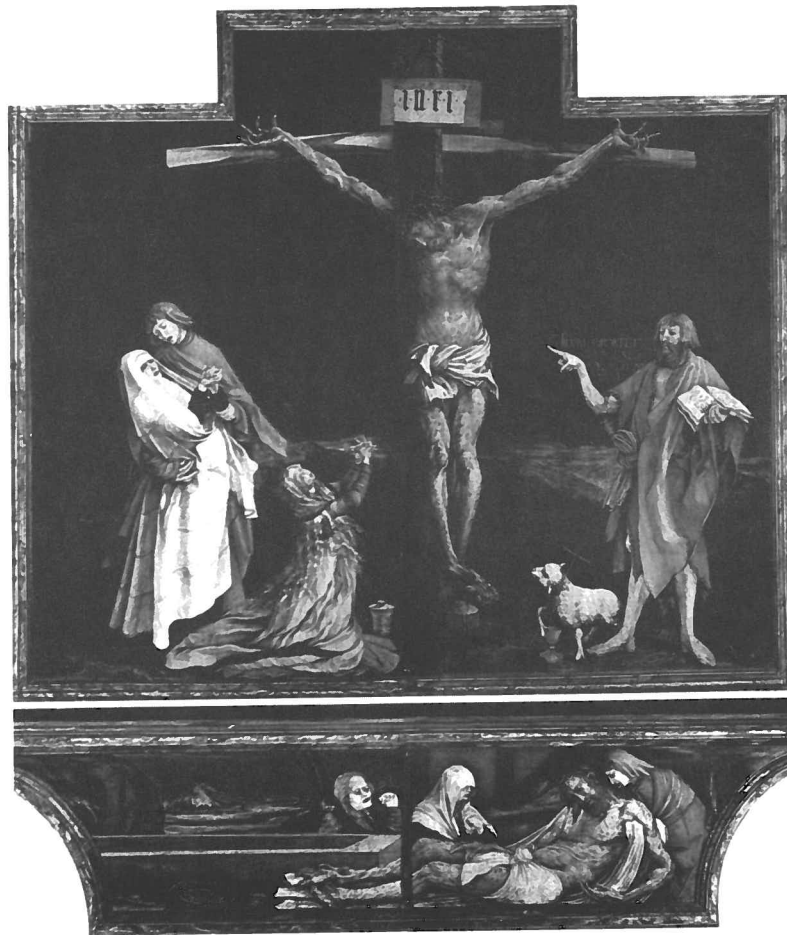
Ed. Thanks to all of you for your responses and suggestions for topics. We welcome Your opinions and suggestions. Address them to: *Sophia*, Box 28062, 1795 Henderson Hwy, Winnipeg, MB, R3G 4L9, fax 204 668-2527 or email lmatties@escape.ca.

Art for the Sick: The Altarpiece at Isenheim

by Raylene Hinz-Penner

Those with St. Anthony's Fire – poisoned by rye,
limbs blackened – came to lie, they say, before
Grünewald's pocked Christ, his legs twisted round
the rough beam, palms bolted, brown fingers curling
toward the skies: this Jesus stretched by God, his cross
like the yoke of an ox. How did Grünewald know color saves
dying eyes, know to paint the Virgin's arms held high
by St. John the Evangelist in a gown of scarlet claret?

If Death's moment is at all like verging toward sleep
as we know it here while we're alive, then it blurs
our vision, swirls to a haze whatever colours we have
before us, say petals, spewed red on pink and white
until we bathe in their lustrous bloodroots, our dying
faces tinged with holy painterly lights.



The Isenheim Altarpiece by Grünewald is part of an 11 foot high and 19 foot wide, multi-panelled shrine at the Antonite Monastery at Isenheim, Alsace. The crucifixion scene was often used in the healing efforts of the monastery. At other times patients would see the inner panels, which contrasted the Crucifixion by their vivid colours in scenes depicting the Annunciation of Mary, the Nativity and the Resurrection.