

## Three Women Poets and the Beginnings of Mennonite Poetry in the U.S: Anna Ruth Ediger Baehr, Jane Rohrer, Jean Janzen

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*Abstract:* This paper explores from a cultural studies perspective the pioneering contributions of three women poets—Anna Ruth Ediger Baehr, Jane Rohrer, and Jean Janzen—to a growing twentieth-century body of U.S. literature by writers from Mennonite traditions. Baehr, Rohrer, and Janzen were among the first U.S. Mennonite poets to publish work in major literary venues. All three poets began publishing poetry in later middle age as their children were grown and their desire to write led them to cultivate themselves as poets through reading, workshops, and in one case an MFA program. This essay explores poems in which these writers express their personal narrative of “coming into voice” as poets from a culture in which such voices were rarely, if ever, heard. It also explores the ways in which the materials of experience—especially of marriage, family, and loss—were transposed into art in their poems.

In his poem “A Noiseless Patient Spider” Walt Whitman sets forth a theory of literary production concerning the lyric poem. A spider hanging from a lonely promontory spins her thread, casting outwards for a foothold on which to anchor the other end of her silk. Whitman compares his soul to the spider, ever casting out thread in hopes of finding a receptive surface on which it will catch hold. While editing *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry*, I found in Whitman’s spider an image of the first Mennonite poets who worked without a literary tradition or context in the Mennonite community. As I decided on a chronological (by date of birth) order for the anthology, I discovered three women poets who were among the first Mennonite writers to find a literary venue for their work outside of Mennonite circles. Anna Ruth Ediger Baehr, Jane Rohrer and Jean Janzen—connected only by their solitary endeavors as poets (they did not know each other personally)—emerged as some of the first U.S. poets to do significant literary publishing.<sup>1</sup> Their poems appeared in the late 1970s and early 1980s in

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1. Jane Rohrer published poetry in *The American Poetry Review* beginning in 1977, and some of these poems are anthologized in *The Body Electric: 25 Years of the American Poetry Review* (New York: Norton, 2000). Although she has written and published over a thirty-year period, her first book was just recently published.—*Life After Death* (Riverdale-on-Hudson, NY: Sheep Meadow Press, 2002). Anna Ruth Ediger Baehr’s first volume of poetry

such journals such as *American Poetry Review*, *Poetry* and *The American Scholar*. All of these poets were deeply shaped by the Mennonite community, but as adults they wrote without an awareness of a literary community among Mennonites.

A narrative of Mennonite literary production and context has gradually emerged since the publication of Rudy Wiebe's first novel *Peace Shall Destroy Many* in 1962.<sup>2</sup> During the late 1970s and the 1980s a Canadian literary arts community developed among writers from Mennonite origins, primarily in Winnipeg, and this Mennonite literary network was strengthened and fostered through three Mennonite/s Writing conferences sponsored by the University of Waterloo and Goshen College in 1990, 1997 and 2002.<sup>3</sup>

Mennonite writing in the United States did not become visible to mainstream American culture until nearly three decades after Wiebe's first novel, when Julia Kasdorf's award-winning volume *Sleeping Preacher* was awarded the Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize and was published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in 1991. Her book was preceded by the publication of four poems in *The New Yorker*, a coveted honor and an unprecedented one for a Mennonite poet. *Sleeping Preacher* not only brought a representation of Mennonite consciousness and community to the attention of the U.S. literary community, but its explicit Mennonite and Amish subject matter attracted the attention of Mennonite readers as well, and many of her poems have also appeared in Mennonite publications or have been set to music by Mennonite composers.

Kasdorf's success and sudden visibility at the beginning of the 1990s has done much to spark an awareness of Mennonite poets in the United States. But like Alice Walker, whose essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" details her search for Zora Neale Hurston and the expression of an artistic legacy among her mother's generation, Kasdorf was also in search of literary forbears (she has written a biography of fellow Big

*Moonflowers at Dusk* (Northport, NY: Birnham Wood Graphics, 1996), was published in 1996 shortly before her death at the age of 80. Jean Janzen, whose first literary publication was in 1983, the year after she received an M.A. in creative writing, has published over 100 poems and five collections of poetry, most recently *Tasting the Dust* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2000). Her new manuscript *Piano in the Vineyard* is forthcoming.

2. For a narrative of Mennonite literary community, see Ervin Beck, "A Reader's Guide to Mennonite Literature," *The Mennonite*, October 1997. See also Ann Hostetler, introduction and afterword to *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry* (Iowa City: U. of Iowa Press, 2003).

3. "Mennonite/s Writing in Canada," held at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, Canada, 1991. "Mennonite/s Writing in the U.S.," held at Goshen College, Oct. 23-26, 1997. "Mennonite/s Writing: An International Conference," held at Goshen College and co-sponsored by Conrad Grebel University College, Oct. 24-27, 2002.

Valley, Pennsylvania writer Joseph W. Yoder) and literary contemporaries among Mennonites.

The three women in this essay published work too close in time to Kasdorf's to serve as "forbears." Since their earliest publications in literary journals predate Kasdorf's by only a few years, they are close to being her contemporaries in terms of publishing, even though they hail from previous generations. Baehr came of age during the Depression, Rohrer during World War II and Janzen just after the war—all from a time when Mennonite communities were still largely rural and more contained.<sup>4</sup> Kasdorf, on the other hand, came of age during the era of Vietnam protest, when Mennonites were becoming more urban and involving themselves in collaboration with diverse groups beyond their own denomination. Baehr, Rohrer and Janzen also reached adulthood at a time when roles and opportunities for women in both the church and the larger society were far more limited. But when their primary obligations to childrearing were fulfilled, all three of these women engaged in the craft of poetry in an intentional way through study, reading, community and publishing.

As a student at New York University living at Mennohouse in New York, Kasdorf read Anna Ruth Ediger Baehr's award-winning poem "I am Dancing with My Mennonite Father" and wrote to the older poet to ask permission to reprint it in Mennohouse's newsletter, which she was editing at the time. When visiting her husband's family in Fresno, California in the late 1980s, Kasdorf also initiated a meeting with Jean Janzen. Thus, the fabric of Mennonite literary history is more densely woven than the independent careers of its few widely recognized figures might suggest.

As Kasdorf was working on the poems for *Sleeping Preacher*, these three women from an earlier generation were simultaneously finding their voices as poets in literary circles and discovering affirmation for their work in literary publication. Instead of focusing on Kasdorf's more visible career in this essay, I will explore the careers and work of these three female contemporaries from an earlier generation. My intent is not to dispute Kasdorf's position in Mennonite literature, but rather to explore common threads in the lives of three Mennonite women writers working in the genre of lyric poetry during roughly the same time period. Thus I take both a women's studies approach to literary

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4. I use the age of 14 as a marker of "coming of age." Baehr, who was born in 1916, would have been 14 in 1930. Rohrer, born in 1928, would have been 14 in 1942. And Janzen, born in 1932, would have been 14 in 1946. Kasdorf, born in 1962, would have been 14 in 1976.

production in the lives of three women poets who shared many similar circumstances and a cultural studies approach to literary production among members of a distinct cultural and ethnic group.

The fact that Mennonite poets suddenly began to emerge during the 1980s suggests that these writers benefited from a cultural climate conducive to the writing of ethnic literature for an audience beyond its group of origination. The fact that a significant number of the poets were women suggests a unique place for the female voice in Mennonite culture, which traditionally limited women's participation in leadership and ministry but appeared to welcome women as writers of fiction and poetry within the denomination even before literary publication became a goal.<sup>5</sup>

Baehr, Rohrer, Janzen and Kasdorf all come from distinctly different Mennonite groups, which suggests that factors other than a particular branch of Mennonite heritage are responsible for producing poets. Baehr grew up as a General Conference Mennonite, Rohrer grew up in the Virginia Conference of the Mennonite Church, and Jean Janzen grew up in the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church and has been a member of the Mennonite Brethren church for her entire adult life. Kasdorf is from a group of Amish-derived Mennonites in Big Valley, Pennsylvania, whose traditional ways and isolated location have fostered an intensely local culture. Because of the diversity of their Mennonite contexts, each poet is not only independent of the others' influence but also expresses a different Mennonite sensibility and explores a different landscape. Like Kasdorf, each of these poets experienced geographical dislocation from

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5. Certainly not all U.S. Mennonite poets are women; nor is this an essay about Mennonite women's literature, although women have played a prominent role in the creation of contemporary Mennonite literature. Contemporary U.S. Mennonite literature cannot be studied without the consideration of Jeff Gundy, whose career parallels that of Kasdorf in terms of publication dates and reflects similar interests in the relationship of poetry to history, community and the essay. Gundy has also done much to chronicle and critique the emergence of Mennonite literature and to bring new voices to a broader audience. Likewise, award-winning poet Keith Ratzlaff merits attention in a full exploration of literary publishing and Mennonite poetry. Dallas Wiebe, Elmer Suderman and Warren Kliewer all published poetry in the 1960s and 1970s, but are best known as writers of fiction, creative nonfiction and drama respectively. Dallas Wiebe, as the editor of the *Cincinnati Review* for over twenty years, deserves a special place in a full discussion of Mennonite literary publishing. Likewise, a number of Mennonite women poets, such as Lorie C. Gooding, Miriam Lind, Helen Good Brenneman and Helen Alderfer, all wrote prolifically for a largely Mennonite audience, compared to the poets considered in this essay. In fact, among Mennonites in the twentieth century there were many female writers of fiction and poetry, although this work was aimed at a primarily Mennonite audience. Men, who dominated the fields of theology and history among Mennonites, may have been more inhibited in their attempts to find an outlet in the less "serious" and "theological" genres of fiction and poetry.

the Mennonite communities of their origin, and each used her early experiences with the Mennonite community as material for poetry. Unlike Kasdorf, who is a full generation or two younger, Baehr, Rohrer and Janzen began writing poetry for publication in middle age or later.

What conditions gave rise to literary production for each of them? What circumstances did their lives have in common that might have prompted them to become serious poets? What features, if any, do their poems share? Biographically, they bear striking resemblances to each other. All were married, had children, studied poetry with significant poets, traveled extensively and began publishing their work at midlife or later. Baehr and Rohrer did not belong to Mennonite congregations as adults, but sought to preserve ties to the Mennonite community through visits, through fellowship with others from Mennonite contexts, and by working out Mennonite values in their art and life. All have spent time away from the Mennonite community, have experienced uprooting from their communities of origin and, as adults, have traveled extensively. Each has received some of her education at a Mennonite college, but none studied exclusively at a Mennonite college—which is also true of Julia Kasdorf, who spent two years at Goshen College before transferring to New York University.<sup>6</sup> All three of these poets are part of the first generation of American Mennonites to take art seriously. All grew up in rural settings; two were the daughters of ministers.

In terms of the broader American culture, these poets also reached midlife at the time when the women's movement was questioning traditional gender roles and offering new models and possibilities. Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath were considered major American poets, but the reputations of the latter two were shadowed by their highly publicized suicides. With the publication of Adrienne Rich's *Diving Into the Wreck* in the early 1970s, the status of women poets was confirmed and strengthened, and with the explosion of interest in the diversity and particularity of American experiences through the fiction and poetry of the 1970s and 1980s, the stage was set for a more positive reception of Mennonite poets. By the time Baehr, Rohrer and Janzen published their work, the reading public was well prepared not only to hear women's voices but to hear poetry that resonated with the experience of particular ethnicities.

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6. Baehr attended Bethel College but finished her degree later at Hofstra University on Long Island. Rohrer attended Eastern Mennonite University but took further courses in poetry-writing at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. Janzen studied at Tabor College, among other places, but finished her degree at California State University at Fresno.

Unlike some of their counterparts in women's poetry, Ediger Baehr, Rohrer and Janzen each lived lives that appear on the surface to be traditional. Each has participated in what Carolyn Heilbrun has called, in *Writing a Woman's Life*, "The Marriage Plot," the expectation that the culmination of a woman's life is in a marriage partnership that includes the raising of children. While fulfilling this role with dedication, each has also moved outside of its conventional parameters to create her own literary identity and voice. Through the lyric mode each poet creates a vocabulary of images and allusions, a personal myth, a perspective on lived experience from a location in time, space and community.

Each has written what might be interpreted as a manifesto of voice. However, these poems are more than declarations of the validity of female perspective. They are also poems that liberate and license the lyric voice from the corporate voices of Mennonite communal life. The interiority of the poems, the relational personas that emerge from the first-person voice, the deliberate subjectivity of the writing—all stand in contrast to the official languages of the Mennonite church (sermons, theology, sociology and history) that speak of objective truths and endorse corporate submission. While the "official" voices of Mennonite culture tend to define the members of the Mennonite corporate body as mutually accountable and submissive to each other, these women's poems celebrate the individual mind and voice, the pleasures of the sentient being who possesses her own body and consciousness. The work of these poets shows how one might transcend the confines of official bodies by revealing the experience of a particular body shaped but not ultimately defined by the larger denominational body.

#### ANNA RUTH EDIGER BAEHR

Leafing through the *American Scholar* in 1985, I was startled to see a poem entitled "I am Dancing With My Mennonite Father."<sup>7</sup> Mennonites I knew who danced did so against their fathers' wills—certainly not *with* their fathers. I felt a surge of envy for the accomplishment of Anne-Ruth Ediger Baehr,<sup>8</sup> apparently a young Mennonite woman somewhere in an M.F.A. program, and I certainly expected that I would be reading more of her work soon. Fifteen years later, when I tracked down Ediger Baehr for the anthology, I discovered that she had written the poem in her late sixties, about the time that her writing career took center stage in her life.

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7. *American Scholar* 54 (Summer 1985), 326-27.

8. Throughout her life, Anna Ruth Ediger Baehr used different forms of her name: Anne, Anne-Ruth and Anna Ruth.

"We dance a carnival ride," the poet begins, evoking a youthful image of her father offering something he had forbidden her in childhood. "Under trellises we dance the leaves / I pinned on my friends' costumes / in third grade . . .," she imagines, rescripting an event in which it seems her father forbade her to participate in a school pageant. In the fantasy, he approves her desire to participate in the world through dance, through art. "It is all right,' you say, / and I see how young you are, / how your damp hair curls." But the poem moves beyond this imagined permission to explore her artistic self to an imagined affirmation for her woman's body as the poet brings her adult self and consciousness into the poem:

But this is my fantasy. I should  
tell you it is all right now.  
I am no longer eight years old  
in my modest dress watching you  
in your black suit at the classroom  
door tell the teacher I am not  
allowed to dance.

You move back to see my silhouette  
against the light. "It is all right,"  
I say, wind moving the sheer, forbidden  
gown—all right to look at the outlines  
of my body, to tell me by your smile  
that other men will find me beautiful.

At the heart of Baehr's odyssey as a poet is the need to articulate a thoroughly sexualized mature voice. More than Rohrer and Janzen, Baehr integrates visions of female psychology and feminist critiques of patriarchy into her poetry. She is committed to gender equality, but also to articulating a strongly female aesthetic.<sup>9</sup> Thus the argument with her father implied throughout the poem becomes a cultural argument, even a theological argument, which we will see is continued into the very last poem she wrote, "Christina." The body has proved to be a rich subject for women poets. In exploring embodied presence in their poetry, Mennonite women can draw upon the added emphasis of their tradition on honoring the sacred nature of the body through dress regulations and

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9. Baehr's library was filled with books, articles and clippings on feminist criticism, Jungian psychology and explorations of the Goddess. Her papers are at the Archives of the Mennonite Church USA-Goshen located at Goshen College.

prohibitions on dancing and even prohibitions on athletics or contact sports. In "I am Dancing with My Mennonite Father" Baehr does more than explore a particular father/daughter relationship; she creates a metaphor for the coming into body and voice—the embodied voice—of the Mennonite woman poet, and expresses the desire for such a coming of age to be affirmed by a male gaze:

We dance all gossamer things,  
 not even trying to keep our feet  
 on the ground. You whisper now,  
 as you never did, "You're lovely,  
 and strong." Spin me down patio steps  
 to the path, and let me go.

Fathers figure in the work of the three women poets in this paper, but are most prominent in the work of Baehr and Janzen, whose fathers were ministers. In their work, in particular, a connection to the image of a father becomes an empowering metaphor for voice. As we will see in a later section, Janzen's approach is far less confrontational but no less powerful.

Born in 1916 in Clinton, Oklahoma to General Conference Mennonite missionaries, Anna Ruth spent her first eighteen years among the Southern Cheyenne, a connection she maintained throughout her adult life, even after moves to Chicago and Long Island, New York.<sup>10</sup> Characterized by her daughter as a lover of words who used to recite poetry to herself as she was milking, Anna Ruth was allowed access to her missionary father's library, a special privilege. She published verse and even a short story during high school, but her father did not allow her to accept a scholarship from a local women's organization to study science at a state university. He felt that her health was too fragile to enable her to attend college, but after a year at home he allowed her to attend his alma mater, Bethel College in Kansas, which her older sister was attending. After three years at Bethel, Anna Ruth married Karl Baehr and moved with him to Chicago, where he attended divinity school and their first child was born. At this point, the Baehrs began worshipping with the United Church of Christ, the denomination in

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10. Because she died in 1998, I was not able to interview Baehr for this essay, but I have spoken extensively with her daughter and her granddaughter. She was also the subject of my 2003 C. Henry Smith Peace Lecture, "Mennonites, Indians, Poetry and Peace: Anna Ruth Ediger Baehr and the Southern Cheyenne," for which I conducted archival research and interviews. The information I have gathered here was gleaned from interviews and unpublished writings.

which Karl was ordained, because they felt that Mennonites were too restrictive and narrow. Karl's job with the American Christian Palestine Committee brought them to Long Island, where they lived for the rest of their lives. They maintained contact with Mennonites, however, through annual trips to Oklahoma and Kansas and passed on many Mennonite values to their children. Like Janzen and Rohrer, Baehr completed her education as an adult.

When Karl's diabetes left him blind, Anna Ruth became the major breadwinner for the family through her work as an elementary school teacher. She also served as the amanuensis for all of Karl's writing; he seems to have suffered from a mild form of dyslexia. At the same time, he was very supportive of her writing, even though his own career had diminished because of his health. He was a willing student to her feminist teachings, and their relationship was based on deep and intensive communication on many topics. But upon her retirement from teaching at the age of 62, Anna Ruth announced that her time had come to use her voice and put her needs as a writer first in her life, and she actively pursued her poetry through involvement in several writers' circles in Long Island, through her work as an editor of the literary journal *Xanadu*, and in numerous writing workshops. Her poems seem to be powered by the youthful energy of a poet in the ecstasy of discovering her voice. But underneath is the wisdom of experience and the passion and purpose of a woman artist newly liberated from a lifetime of caretaking duties.

Anna Ruth's Mennonite upbringing as a missionary child, as well as her close connection to the Cheyenne, infuse her poetry. She was planning a book-length cycle of poems on the Cheyenne when she discovered at eighty that she had breast cancer and assembled her single volume *Moonflowers at Dusk* from her sickbed. She was also a long-term member of an ecumenical women's support group—combining Jews, Unitarians and Christians—that came together for intellectual conversation and emotional nurturance. In a talk written for the Garden City Jewish Center, "One Woman's Spiritual Quest," she discusses the interweaving of Mennonite, Cheyenne, Unitarian and Jewish influences in her life. And during the last decade of her life, she subscribed to every Mennonite periodical in print.

Anna Ruth's journey outward from Mennonite community shows how the shaping experience of community is far more profound than the simple marker of church membership. "For their whole lives being Mennonite was the basic truth of who they were—their ethnicity, the foundation of their being," her daughter Beth Bullard said of both her

parents. While Baehr did not live among Mennonites, clearly Mennonite upbringing and values left their imprint on her psyche. In fact, her early upbringing as a missionary child among the Cheyenne gave her a model for being a Mennonite among “others.” In this context, her claim to being a Mennonite, although she did not live in a Mennonite community, does not seem so odd. Her annual visits to Clinton, Oklahoma and North Newton were much like those of a missionary on furlough to a home congregation. And the multiple communities of place, people and discourse she inhabited informed her poetry in complex ways.

Anna Ruth’s last poem revisits her identity as a missionary child and her determination to articulate a spiritual alternative to his heavy-handed view of faith. Its title “Christina” makes a connection between the female child speaker of the poem and the Christ Child.<sup>11</sup> In this poem the conception of God, portrayed to the child through her father’s teachings and also through his behaviors, is ultimately rejected. This poem can be viewed as her “portrait of the artist as a young woman”:

She knows about  
 God,  
 how he was lonely so he made people  
 who look like him. He insists  
 we have to love him even if we  
 don’t like him. He is like  
 a father  
 who holds you on his lap and tells you  
 to pray and when you refuse  
 he puts you facedown on his fat knees  
 and hits you and makes you drop your doll.

Again, in the poem’s structure we can see the poet using the body as a place of resistance to the father. He may strike her and cause her to drop her doll because she will not pray, but her body will become a site of silent retreat nonetheless. She may not be able to speak her thoughts as a child, but she retains the use of her eyes and ears, and the ability to interpret what her senses reveal. At the end, the wisdom of her body—and the idea from somewhere that God can be a still, small voice within—are what save her:

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11. This poem, unpublished during Baehr’s lifetime, was printed on the program at her memorial service. It appears in *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry*, ed. Ann Hostetler (Iowa City, IA: U. of Iowa Press, 2003), 6.

God talks to some people, but not  
to Christina, and that makes her mad.  
God should be at least as loud  
as a giant, as  
her father  
when he yells. When she  
complains, someone tells her about  
the still, small voice.  
Nobody could ever be quieter than  
Christina when she really tries.  
She sits with her hands folded in her lap,  
eyes closed, listening.  
She hears  
the tick of a grandfather clock,  
her mother humming,  
and—through an open window—a distant  
train and a song sparrow.

The ending of the poem shows the young poet attending to the “still, small voice” as well as to the world around her. Her composure recalls a fragment of verse from Emerson entitled “Self-Reliance” in which he writes of the “little bird” within him who “remembereth his note” and who serves as a guide when the poet is attuned to his voice.<sup>12</sup> Ediger Baehr’s poem refers to the multiplicity of stories—fairy tales, Greek myths, Bible stories—that feeds the poet’s imagination. And it shows both the necessity of reinventing and redeeming a faith so harshly imposed, and the means of discovering a different kind of faith rooted in one’s own body and soul through listening—to her mother’s humming, the whistle of the train that will one day take her away, and the bird’s song in flight. In its opening lines the poem refers to the story of Daedalus and Icarus, in which a son disobeys his artist-father and perishes as a result. But this daughter is planning her flight more carefully, inventing her own pair of wings.

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12. Rpt. in *The Longman Anthology of American Poetry*, ed. Hilary Russell (New York: Longman, 1992), 35.

## JANE ROHRER

Jane Rohrer's poem "In the Kitchen Before Dinner" appeared on the back cover of the *American Poetry Review* in 1977.<sup>13</sup> To my knowledge, it is the first poem by a contemporary Mennonite writer to appear in a major literary journal. The poem is addressed to an unidentified "you." In it the speaker describes the view from her kitchen window in language that is both intensely visual and deliberately abstract. The poem juxtaposes the view outside the window—"The winter sky past the feeder, / Beyond the wood of straight trees / And the field rising to the edge"—with the view inside of gloves on a chair. The speaker has looked from this window for a long time: "Years, years, and years I've looked out / From this window stirring," and yet she also received revelation from this particular stance, this ritual:

Straight out of the sun  
 a cardinal swoops to the feeder,  
 his sweep, not his shape,  
 the unstrokeable wing of art.  
 Seeing that,  
 I want to tell you:  
 The sun of poems is on the snow  
 on the slope past the wood  
 to the pond. What I see at 5:00.  
 It marries the music from my living room.  
 It is not that simple.  
 I cannot explain it.

But even as she attempts to express the ineffable—the gesture of the bird, the marriage of light and music—she returns to the objects of the material world that hold her attention:

I'm grounded by attachment, I'm rapacious  
 For facts: That bowl.  
 His gloves on the chair  
 holding each other.  
 These I can explain.

In their placement in the poem the gloves "holding each other" take on a weight that is nearly palpable. They feel animated and life-like, invested with the wearer's warmth as well as the deep attachment of the

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13. *American Poetry Review* 6 (Sept./Oct. 1977); rpt. in *A Cappella*, 10.

speaker to the absent “he.” The technique in this poem is infused with the intensity of imagism, guided by William Carlos Williams’ dictum, “No ideas but in things.”

Shortly after reading this poem (Rohrer’s poem was published the year after I graduated from college), I was introduced to the poet some months later, not as a poet but as an acquaintance of my parents at a dinner party. Although there was no official Mennonite literary network at the time, it was at a gathering of artists from the Philadelphia area, all of whom had been shaped by the Mennonite church. Before we arrived at the dinner, my mother told me what she remembered of Jane: she was extremely creative and an excellent seamstress. We all knew Jane’s husband Warren Rohrer, a well-known color field painter who was a professor at the Philadelphia College of Art (now the University of the Arts), but my mother wanted me to know Jane in her own right. She had been so impressed with a winter coat Jane had tailored in the early years of her marriage to Warren that she had carried around the memory for over twenty years. When my mother asked her about the sewing, Jane shrugged it off, saying she hadn’t sewn for years. “I’m writing poetry now.” And suddenly I realized that this was the Jane Rohrer who was engaging audiences on the Philadelphia poetry circuit.

Jane Turner was born in 1928 in Broadway, Virginia, the second child and first daughter of six children. She grew up on a large farm where her father raised Tennessee Walking Horses, for which he was well known. Although her father had a somewhat tempestuous relationship to the church, her mother was a devout member.

The Mennonites of Virginia Conference were of Swiss Mennonite origin and more conservative in terms of dress, church services and “separation from the world” than some other Swiss Mennonite groups. Unlike the General Conference or Mennonite Brethren, they did not allow pianos or organs into their churches until the late 1960s, so Jane—unlike Jean Janzen or Anna Ruth Ediger Baehr, both of whom were trained to play keyboard instruments in church—grew up with no musical or artistic expression, beyond a cappella singing and sermons in her home congregation.

The constraints required for community conformity, as well as the tension between her parents, is reflected in her poem “Mennonite Funeral in the Shenandoah Valley.”<sup>14</sup> The funeral is her mother’s and the place is no longer accessible to the poem’s speaker, except through memory. The poem’s epigraph, from Proverbs 22:6, reminds the reader

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14. Rpt. in *A Cappella*, 11.

that a properly trained child will not depart from "the way he should go." Clearly the poet has departed from the strictures of those ways as she joins her father among the "unforgiven" at the funeral:

I could never reach this place  
 But for a memory of Christmas that plays  
 At the edge of the winter in my mind.  
 Beside me in the long hallway my father chokes softly.  
 He's down, now from the black horse  
 and back from the worldly track he rode  
 in widening circles away from her.  
 In the front parlor she has drawn her circle around her.  
 Still and unreachable she receives the favored.  
 "So nice of you to come."

In this poem the poet's dead mother takes the formal center stage in the family, for once subduing the father and the rest of the family into the decorous behavior she wished them to display during her lifetime. "We, the uneven hem of her earthly garment / are pleased to fit the front short pew." The funeral procession takes on something of the character of the Last Judgement as the favored are separated from the damned. "I hear the vanished pulpit say, 'Dearly Beloved, / and you who have left the faith, and this saint.'" The poet's voice and consciousness hovers around the scene as though from above. It is located outside the poem and enters the scene only with the greatest psychological effort: "I could never reach this place / but for a memory of Christmas that plays / at the edge of the winter in my mind." The single memory is the point of the compass with which she firmly describes the arc of the circle that both distances her from and connects her to the maternal subject. Her mother's is a role she clearly rejects; the penitent grieving father seems closer to the speaker than the cold, unreachable mother whose presence requires a decorum that makes intimacy an impossibility. But with her clear and distancing eye the speaker also rejects her father's penitent stance.

Jane Turner met Warren Rohrer at Eastern Mennonite College (now University) and they married after Jane's junior year. Warren had planned to become a minister, but when he began studying art his life's vocation changed, prompting a dramatic pioneering move away from his Mennonite path that ultimately led to his becoming a nationally renowned color field painter. Jane left college to support the couple, in a move common for the late 1940s, working in the Dean's office at EMU

until Warren finished his art studies at James Madison University. After Warren's graduation the Rohrers moved to Philadelphia, where Warren first studied art at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and then became a professor at Philadelphia College of Art, now the University of the Arts. After their move to Philadelphia, Jane says that she and Warren simply drifted away from the church, that "art and family became the center of our lives."

Their backgrounds in Mennonite community and rural landscapes continued to shape them in a number of ways, however. Warren's paintings were inspired by his boyhood years plowing fields, and the Rohrers attempted to preserve some elements of their rural backgrounds by buying a farm about an hour outside of the city, where Warren painted and Jane gardened. "I grew everything we ate," she told me. "It was our chance to do the Mennonite thing over again on our own terms," she added, "living close to the land and raising our family in that context." As she described her marriage, Jane conveyed a relationship that was mutually enriching—both in an emotional and an aesthetic sense. Her poetry celebrates an enduring sexual intensity as well. "If men are trees / he is the complete orchard: / Smokehouse, Stayman, / State, Delicious" she writes in "Apple."<sup>15</sup> Marriage has also been a significant part of Janzen's and Baehr's lives as well, but for Rohrer it came closer to being a confluence of two energies devoted to one goal—living a life devoted to art and family. She took great interest and delight in Warren's work as a painter and developed a keen sense of appreciation for painting. Her work was making a home for their two sons, both of whom have also become artists, and serving as a passionate advocate for Warren's career.

When their sons went away to college, Jane turned to poetry in a serious and focused way. She told me that Warren asked her what she wanted for Christmas that year, and she said, "Every issue of *The American Poetry Review*." The promised bundle of papers arrived for Christmas and she spent the next year reading them. Rohrer also studied poetry with Steve Berg, editor of the *American Poetry Review*, at the University of the Arts, and with Thomas Kinsella at Temple University. The poems she published in the late 1970s are influenced by a modernist aesthetic informed by both poetic and painterly notions of expression. In these poems the arrangement of words becomes an arrangement of images, creating something of a Zen sense of "presence" and intensity. But underneath the spare imagery of the poem one senses

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15. Jane Rohrer, *Life After Death* (Riverdale-on-Hudson: Sheep Meadow Press, 2002).

a speaker who is intensely involved in her observation of the world. In a number of poems about marriage, a sensual intensity burns beneath the surface of the polished, well-chosen words. The feast of a sexually satisfying marriage is one of Rohrer's most potent subjects. The other is loss, made more poignant by the poet's keen awareness of the pleasures of the flesh.

After Warren was diagnosed with leukemia in 1979, Jane wrote less, although a second batch of her poems was published in *The American Poetry Review* in 1985, ten years before Warren's death. After several years of intense mourning, Rohrer turned again to her writing, even as she devoted her energy to a retrospective of Warren's work at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Rohrer's renewed commitment to poetry produced a book *Life After Death*, published by Stanley Moss's Sheep Meadow press in the fall of 2002. Working with poet Moss on her book provided Jane with a new experience of growth as a poet. Its title suggests something of the way in which poetry has served her, as a substitute for the loss of an intimate human connection, whether in the natural departure of her sons for independent lives or in the death of her husband. Her recent work explores grief but also expands her deeply imagistic style with a stronger sense of a speaking voice.

Jane's spare, visual, intense poems reflect an aesthetic that she shared with her husband and that stemmed from their Mennonite roots in the land and an ethic of simplicity and truth. But even though she focuses on object and images, her subject is relationship, the meditative moments when a solitary self reflects on the electric connections it shares with another self. "The Consolation of Cathedrals" hints at a sense of voice that communes with other voices in art.<sup>16</sup> As is often the case in Rohrer's poems the speaker is an observer, here gazing on a funeral—not a Mennonite funeral from her past, but the funeral of someone unknown to her in the Cathedral of Milan. The position of the speaker on the cathedral's dome looking down towards the sanctuary echoes the speaker's stance in "Mennonite Funeral in the Shenandoah Valley," which also seems to be from a high and distant place:

I fit my face into a small broken pane on the dome.  
 So far below as to appear toy-like,  
 the pieces of the tableau:  
 The coffin, draped in silk and gravity,  
 mourner-trailed,

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16. Rohrer, *Life After Death*, 77.

appeared so easily lifted as to be empty.

From the sanctuary below, first incense, then the organ and the “full-throated” chorus rise to include her in waves of scent and sound:

A pale column of frankincense  
spiraled genie-like into the vault, and  
then the organ, all its stops out,  
and the chorus, fullthroated,  
released Mozart’s Requiem Mass, the Lacrimosa  
up and over me and it rose and spread, a protest  
against the most sad state,  
into the sky.

Rohrer joins this image with another from a cathedral in Martinique, the day before Easter, suggesting that the ritual of art, repeated in different times and places, performs the same function of joining listeners to something larger than themselves. The voices of the sopranos that she overhears mingle with her own desire to be enfolded in a music that lifts her to a new place by expressing what she can’t, alone, express. In this way the poem suggests how the artist’s voice is informed by the work of other artists and the longing for transcendence. In fact, in her marriage Rohrer’s voice was informed by the work of her artist husband’s. But paradoxically, she only came into the fullness of her personal artistic achievement with the loss of that communion. An inaccessible Eden both haunts and invigorates her work as she strives to voice alone the paradise she once found in concert with another.

#### JEAN JANZEN

Jean Janzen’s poetry, like Jane Rohrer’s, is infused with a sense of the arts as necessary to human spirit. Janzen also shares Rohrer’s celebration of the sensual, including the physical communion of marriage. Unlike Rohrer, however, Janzen experienced the arts as part of her Mennonite upbringing. She learned to play the piano, which was as integral as the sermon to Mennonite Brethren worship services. While Anna Ruth Ediger Baehr resented the role of woman as organist in the General Conference church of her upbringing, and refused to play a keyboard instrument after she left home, Jean Janzen embraced the piano, studied music in college and has taught piano for many years. As an adult she has also developed a profound love of the visual arts and has found herself drawn to the painting of Vermeer, whose work was produced during the time when Janzen’s Anabaptist ancestors thrived in Holland.

The most prolific of these three poets, Janzen shares many life realities with them but was able to publish her books at an earlier stage in her career. Her poems delve into the senses, open the body with a surgeon's precision, explore painting and gardening and mortality and the pleasure of marriage as well as the journeys of her Mennonite ancestors.

The title of her first volume *Words for the Silence*, later reprinted as part of *Three Mennonite Poets*, is also the title of a poem that serves as her manifesto of voice.<sup>17</sup> *Words for the Silence* is based on the story of her father's mother, a suicide of whom he never spoke. Based in a Russian Mennonite context, the poem speaks beyond the Mennonite community on behalf of those touched by silence and suicide. In this poem she imagines the Russian grandmother she never knew, a woman who loved and played music, whose once resonant voice was stilled by illness or despair or both. While images of a guitar, a hand-made violin, hints of music are scattered throughout the poem, no music accompanies the funeral of the suicide, who is buried outside the gates of the town, isolated as though her body contained some dread contagious plague. Perhaps because music was not enough, was not commensurate to the experience, Janzen is pushed to words as she explores an artistic as well as physical kinship with this ancestor she never knew. As she boldly recognizes herself in the dead woman's features, she forms words for the grandmother who could not speak them:

The ministers brought shoes for the children,  
flour for your bin. But you were silent,  
your eyes empty, your mouth still.

The photograph tells me that I have eyes and hands like yours  
and a mouth with a heavy lower lip.

Look, I am shaping it for words,  
making sounds for you. I am speaking  
the syllables you couldn't say.

See my breath is pushing away the cold.

The physical feature of a heavy lower lip takes on the significance of both a burden and a gift, a lip pregnant with a language that may be offered or silenced. And in her suicide the nameless woman, Jean's grandmother, loses all voice. In the imperative "See my breath is pushing away the cold" Janzen suggests that artistic expression, the use

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17. Jean Janzen, *Words for the Silence* (Fresno, CA: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1984); Jean Janzen, Yorifumi Yaguchi, David Waltner-Toews, *Three Mennonite Poets* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1986), 89.

of voice, may in fact save a life. The poet's articulation of a dreadful silence can also help to release the survivors from its chill.

In the most devastating part of the poem, Janzen portrays the suicide of her father's mother through the lens of his ten-year-old consciousness:

. . . . My father,  
ten years old, had found you  
in the barn, your body  
a still dark strip, your face  
swollen and purple. And by that grave  
he could not sing for you;  
he did not speak of you.  
He sealed his mouth shut with a heavy stone  
and walked away.  
And when he held me in his arms  
he spoke of rivers  
and a black crow against the sky.

Buried without a song, the speaker's grandmother, whom she calls "Helen of darkness," is invoked as the audience for her granddaughter's song:

Helen of darkness,  
I sing you a song.  
It is like water from a clear stream,  
like a white linen dress.  
I take you down, wash you  
and comb your hair.  
I lay you down beside the man you loved.

But when the poet makes a pilgrimage to the grave, she does not hear a sound. The only voice remaining is that of the poet empowered to tell the story of a silenced woman whose terrible death also silenced others:

. . . I have come  
with my passport, my photograph  
and my name to stand on the unmarked dust  
of your body, and there is no sound  
but the dry leaves stirring in the alders,  
the groaning of roots, and these words  
breathing on a page.

Janzen was born Jean Wiebe, the seventh of eight children, in Saskatchewan in 1933. The family moved to Mountain Lake, Minnesota in 1939 and later to Kansas (Hillsboro and Meade) when her pastor father decided to become a teacher. During her formative years Jean absorbed the landscape, her father's sermons, her mother's love of music and the stories of her Russian Mennonite past. Art, history, spirituality, family, geography and the earth are important elements of her poems. The landscapes she evokes range from those of Europe and the steppes of Russia to the prairies of her childhood and the central California mountains and farmland of her adult life, where she lives with her husband Louis Janzen, a pediatrician, and raised their four children.

Janzen taught piano for many years before turning to poetry as her primary artistic focus. As her children grew up, Janzen returned to school for an M.A. in creative writing and English from California State University at Fresno in 1982, where she studied with Peter Everwine and Philip Levine. She also counts Mennonite novelist Rudy Wiebe as an important mentor and influence on her career as a writer.

Beginning with her first literary publication in *Poet Lore* in 1983, Janzen has published over one hundred poems in a wide range of literary and religious periodicals, from *Poetry*, *Prairie Schooner* and the *Gettysburg Review* to *Image*, *Christian Century* and *Mennonite Life*. Since the publication of her chapbook *Words for the Silence* in 1984, she has published three individual collections: *The Upside-Down Tree*, *The Snake in the Parsonage* and *Claiming the Dust*.<sup>18</sup> In 1995 Janzen won a Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. She has taught creative writing at both Eastern Mennonite University and Fresno Pacific University. Her work moves from an appreciation of the individual story as it is entwined in the narrative of the community to the precious gifts of sentience and sensuality, the presence of spirit in the flesh.

Of the role her Mennonite heritage plays in her art, Janzen says, "It has provided a narrative, a construct, for many early poems, and a way to see, which continues."<sup>19</sup> She has retraced through travel the paths of Mennonite migration from Russia and Holland to the U.S. and Canada. Her father was a Mennonite immigrant to Canada from Russia; both of her grandfathers were ministers in the Mennonite Church, as were her fathers, uncles and brothers. A significant number were also musicians

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18. *The Upside-Down Tree* (Winnipeg: Windflower Books, 1992); *The Snake in the Parsonage* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1995); *Claiming the Dust* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2002).

19. Information provided by Janzen on an author questionnaire for *A Cappella*.

in the church. She attends College Community Mennonite Brethren Church in Clovis, California, of which she is a founding member. For Janzen, this congregation "has fostered creativity in worship and living throughout my involvement, as it does now, and has honored artistic gifts in its members."

The compatibility of the arts and worship in Janzen's Mennonite Brethren tradition has been reflected in her adult career, which seems to move fluidly between church and secular literary settings. Just as she pursued her love of the piano beyond its Sunday morning ritual function, so she has also found many ways to use her gifts as a poet within the church as an educator, as a writer for hymn lyrics and as a guest lecturer. She is the Mennonite poet whose work is most often set to music. But her poetry also shows the ways in which the oratorical tradition of her father's roles as preacher and teacher infused her sense of the poet's voice. In "Order" Janzen meditates on her father's sermon-writing.<sup>20</sup> But in "Learning to Sing in Parts" it is in his role as a teacher, and his use of part singing as a tool for resolving conflict, that we see how he could serve as the midwife for a young poet's talents:<sup>21</sup>

After the quarrelling at recess  
my father teaches his students  
to listen, to hold a pitch and hum it,  
his head close to the small child.

And the child listens and seeks  
for the tone, sliding into a float  
of singing, the whole room of children  
riding out now on one note.

But then two, three, even four tones  
at once, my father sorting and joining  
their varied voice into a rich and layered  
flow. How to hold against the other pitches?

This is the world's secret, he confides,  
to enter and be close, yet separate. . . .

The father, in Janzen's poetry, becomes a model to emulate, an example on which to improvise, rather than an authority to resist. He, in turn, has learned this gentle authority through his own father's example:

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20. *Snake in the Parsonage* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1995), 22.

21. *Christian Century*, Jan. 16-23, 2002, 15.

. . . How patiently  
his own father taught him, held him close,  
his voice vibrating light and low under  
the wavering melody, a duet  
that hovers over the stony fields.

In the work of these three women poets, the legacies of human relations are just as powerful, if not more so, than the theologies one attempts to pass on to one's children. Janzen's poems about the generations are complemented by those in which she explores the sensual spark that animates all of our loves—those of others, those of the world. Like Rohrer, she is a celebrant of the communion of marriage, and in her later work she also becomes an elegist of its passing. The title poem of her most recent volume "Tasting the Dust" is a love poem for both her husband and the earth on which they dwell together. The garden, which is both his pleasure and his cure, echoes another garden, and the California dust gently brushes the reader with an awareness of the dust for which all mortal flesh is destined. More than Rohrer's or Baehr's poems about sexual love, Janzen's are fused with a deeply held belief in the incarnation, the indwelling of the spirit in all flesh. Perhaps this is in part the legacy of her Mennonite Brethren theology, influenced by Pietism. But Janzen's skill as an artist keeps her from overpowering the reader with theology. Its undercurrent is there for those who are attuned to a belief in the indwelling of the spirit in the flesh, but it recedes for those who are not, because the poems are so faithful to the details of creation that they can stand on their own as transcendent descriptions of the world.

#### CONCLUSION

Each one of these women has created her poetry in the context of a full life whose primary commitments are to relationships and the welfare of others: each has raised children and stood by a husband through a devastating illness. There is honor in such a life, but these women have also done something remarkable in that context—which is to nurture and shape a distinctive voice in highly crafted poetry that has found affirmation among readers far beyond the reach of the embodied community. What is more, they have taken the materials of a life lived in communion, as well as in tension, with intimate others and turned it into art. These three women sing the "body electric." Because they came into their poetic voices in their maturity—as women who had experienced the pleasures of the marriage bed, the complexity of family life, the pain and healing of imperfect relationships—these experiences are reflected in

their poetry. While connection with a father-figure seems an important ingredient in the formation of the poet's development, a mature sexuality ultimately authorizes her artistic voice.

Carolyn Heilbrun notes in *Writing a Woman's Life*<sup>22</sup> that women define themselves in terms of their relationships, rather than in terms of their own achievements. For these three writers it is not an either/or proposition. Their fluid roles as mothers, teachers and writers of literature—as well their positions as complex subjects in multiply intersecting worlds of discourse—enabled these women to enter new avenues of expression closed to Mennonites who were more centrally connected to their communities and official channels of public discourse (open primarily to males) that might otherwise have silenced their literary voices. While in some senses their status as married women and mothers who played strong supporting roles to their husbands curbed their ability to write; in other senses it freed them, once the demands of primary relationships lessened, to experiment with poetry. Nor did they have to face one of the struggles that many talented Mennonite men of their generation did: for men to choose creative writing was to put art ahead of the obligation to serve the church. Since women's participation in leadership and the ministry was extremely limited at this time, this was a non-issue for women. Thus it appears that both gender and marginality were actually conditions that made the breakthrough into literary sites of production possible for these writers. As leadership roles for women become greater in the Mennonite church, one wonders whether poets will be drawn to the pulpit. Such is the case for at least one Mennonite poet Sheri Hostetler, who is now the pastor of First Mennonite Church in San Francisco. But with the increasing number of educated Mennonites and greatly enhanced opportunities for contact with various communities, including the literary one, one hopes for a continued achievement in the literary arts as well.

One might also ask, Why do U.S. Mennonite women writers tend to be poets rather than fiction writers? Certainly in the lives of these women poetry had the advantage, for while poetry-writing takes great concentration and craft, it can be done in short bursts of time. Lyric poems are akin to brief but intense meditations. In many short periods of writing one can accumulate a series of poems, but they are not usually connected by the kind of sustained narrative that a work of fiction requires. This is not to say that Baehr, Janzen and Rohrer did not take

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22. Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Norton, 1988).

their writing careers seriously. Quite the contrary. Once they committed themselves to the art, it became a central defining feature of their lives.

Theoretically speaking, the lyric poem authorizes the personal, invites the contemplation of the ordinary, and offers a genre in which the speaker can weave together through analogy the various strands of perception and experience. Pragmatically speaking, lyric poems, once published, often “hide” in small magazines with limited circulation, so there is the possibility of making bold experiments in poetry without announcing them to many people. Finally, lyric poems attempt to “tell the truth” of lived experience—and a commitment to accuracy in language, rooted in body and voice, experience and memory, undergirds the work of all three writers. This commitment to accurate description is in harmony with a Mennonite heritage in which honesty and lived experience are primary forms of imitating the example of Christ.

And the focus of lyric poetry on the created world and human relationships provides a natural medium through which to explore a theology of incarnation. At the heart of Mennonite teaching is a belief in the goodness of creation and a blessing for sexual union in marriage. Unlike many other Christian denominations, Mennonites have no theology of original sin. While Mennonites have, in certain times and places, restricted the body through regulations on clothing, this is more because the body is considered sacred than because it is considered evil. The sexual maturity and the frank celebration of sensual pleasures in the poetry of Baehr, Rohrer and Janzen seem to reflect this often unarticulated legacy from Mennonite culture. This positive attitude towards sexuality is also a strong current in the poetry of Julia Kasdorf who, in her poem “Eve’s Striptease,” refers to her mother’s teachings for her wedding night, giving her permission to enjoy “all the pleasures a body can hold.”<sup>23</sup>

From the lives of the poets examined here, it appears that exposure to multiple communities and places, and even a dissonance between community and self are necessary conditions of their role as pioneering Mennonite poets. But Jean Janzen’s example shows that estrangement from Mennonite community is not. While both Anna Ruth Ediger Baehr and Jane Rohrer traveled outside of Mennonite circles and eventually relinquished active involvement with the church, their upbringing and education as Mennonites is registered in their poetry. Both continued informal contacts with Mennonites through family, friends and literature over the years.

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23. Julia Kasdorf, *Eve’s Striptease* (Pittsburgh, PA: U. of Pittsburgh Press, 1998), 21-22.

As the poets spin webs to join the disparate strands of their lives, the threads they have gleaned from their Mennonite heritages are woven into a larger pattern, enabling readers from many perspectives and communities to relate to universal themes through the particular images of their poems. In this work they recall the figure of Grandmother Spider, whom the Anasazi peoples of the Southwestern United States believe weaves the thoughts that connect us to the world and to each other. The wisdom reflected in such poetry offers us "words for the silence" that separates us from each other, connecting readers in an intimacy of language that challenges us to look more deeply at the world around us and at each other.

