

On Homes, Apocalypses, Weed Witches, Beautiful Errors, and Phantom Powers

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What does it mean to belong, to feel at home? In a time when climate change and wars large and small have created millions of refugees, a sense of exile and displacement is nearly epidemic. Mennonite history is itself full of displacements and migrations; among Canadian Mennonites the break event that sent often-traumatized Mennonites out of Ukraine remains a central historical and, often deeply personal, set of memories. And recent renewed attention to the Doctrine of Discovery has reminded privileged white North Americans, Mennonite or not, that however deep and sentimental our own attachments to place may feel, their foundation lies on the displacement and near-extinction of the native peoples who for centuries and millennia made their own homes in the prairies and forests of the continent.¹

My own Amish and Mennonite ancestors mostly made their way from Swiss villages to what is now south Germany before crossing the water in the early nineteenth century, driven by a mix of economic and religious pressures. They arrived in central Illinois just after the native tribes had been pushed off the prairies and not long before the Cherokee were driven through on the Trail of Tears, not far to the south of them. But the Gundys and Strubhars and others scraped together the money to buy prairie land; they dug in, worked hard, were mostly lucky and sober, and prospered in their modest way.²

Growing up in that gridded, domesticated prairie, I never doubted that it was home, though I found our village a somewhat dull and drab place. The occasional arrowheads we found in the black soil let us remember that

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¹ Among numerous recent treatments of the Doctrine of Discovery and its implications, two excellent starting points from Mennonite perspectives are Sarah Augustine and Sheri Hostetler, *So We and Our Children May Live: Following Jesus in Confronting the Climate Crisis* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2023), and Raylene Hinz-Penner, *East of Liberal: Notes on the Land* (Telford, PA: DreamSeeker, 2022).

² I wrote about some of these ancestors in *A Community of Memory: My Days with George and Clara* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1996), and *Scattering Point: The World in a Mennonite Eye* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003).

the fields had not always been plowed and cultivated, but the Indians I learned about in school, on TV, and in the movies were mostly caricatures, either bloodthirsty heathens or noble savages, who lived in vanished, mythical landscapes. I escaped to college as soon as I could—a maneuver made possible by the good black soil; the big cage house my parents built, full of laying hens; and the hard, careful work of generations of farmers, with the aid of the steel plow, the displacement of the Illinois tribes, and the generally unseen protection of the American military. By then books like *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* and *The White Man's Indian* were beginning to complicate my naive views of local and national history, but the great Kickapoo village that once existed an hour's drive south of the homeplace was still unknown to me.

My father's father was a hatchery man, closely tied to the farm life his father had lived before becoming a pastor, but my father was the only one of my grandfather's seven children to take up the farm life, and he married into it. My mother's father and grandfather had both farmed on the section where I grew up, and by the 1950s her family farmed most of that section; her brother's and sister's families had their own farms within a mile of ours. No one was rich, but it was a steady and stable life, aside from the distant but still dangerous realm of Vietnam and the rattling of nuclear warheads. At church and in school, farm families were the norm, with some teachers, preachers, shopkeepers, and doctors salted in. Most of the women did not have outside jobs, unless they taught school, though farmwives like my mother were often full partners in the complex enterprise of running even a modest farm. Almost everybody was white and Christian; diversity meant Methodists, Lutherans, and Catholics in the desks around me. The Mennonites in the area had Amish roots, but anti-German backlash during World War I had convinced them to give up speaking German, and the plain dress common in the East had never really taken hold on the prairie. Pacifism was the main thing that set us apart.

I never felt myself an exile except in some vague, self-pitying, existential sense. The farmland of my youth and the villages around, sparse and parched as they are, still register in my deep self as where I came into my essential being, though I moved away as soon as I could and never thought seriously of moving back. I ended up in a town only slightly larger than Flanagan, Illinois, but with a college to complicate its demographics and culture.

Among all the minority narratives, then, one more: I was a boy who grew up among others not so different, whose clothes did not set me apart from my peers, though my beliefs sometimes did. The homeplace is still there, thriving under my brother's care, the wind turbines spinning steadily above it, though when he's ready to retire things will surely change.

We go home three or four times a year to see his family and my mother, still living on her own four miles away in town.

In college I read Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, the saga of Isaac McCaslin, a southern child of privilege who discovers the terrible things his father and grandfather did to those they kept as slaves, who learns that the land that makes him wealthy was stolen, and then decides he must relinquish, give it all up, do penance for the sins of his fathers. It was years later that I began to understand that while we had no slaves, our land was similarly stolen, our privilege built on settler myths of virgin lands and Manifest Destiny that might well undermine our comfortable notions of the land being ours. But however important that story is, I have another one in mind.

HOMES AND FEELINGS

I think of Mennonite writing as a longing for the house of the Father that has burst the bonds of discipline. I sense a desire for Heaven that has become a desire for a language that has made itself heard and a people who are still there. This is a need for shelter that is a shelter. You weep for home and in the end your weeping becomes your house.³

The Anabaptist Vision became an unwitting stepping stone in a process of alienation from the deep grammar of the Christian faith. . . . the denial or denigrating of the subjective meaning and power of the Christian faith ultimately meant that many of the key symbols of the faith lost their potency in the experiential life of individuals. If personal spiritual experience is denied a vital place in the life of faith, we may remember the words for a while but we soon forget the tune.⁴

The sweeping claims Sofia Samatar makes about Mennonite writing in her recent memoir *The White Mosque* are nearly irresistible to this Mennonite writer in their eloquence and resonance, their extravagance duly tempered by their subjective rendering ("I think of," "I sense"). And yet the more I try to follow their progression, the more I hesitate. Can all Mennonite writing somehow orbit around a peculiar version of yearning for an elusive paradise, part heaven, part text, part house? Is this *our* story, but (of course I must ask) who are *we* anyway?

As I pondered all this, I found myself remembering another, very different set of claims about Mennonite thought and practice. Thirty years or so ago, Stephen Dintaman raised eyebrows, especially among the peace-and-justice warriors of the day, with his complaint that the

³ Sofia Samatar, *The White Mosque* (New York: Catapult, 2022), 139.

⁴ Stephen F. Dintaman, "The Pastoral Significance of the Anabaptist Vision," *MQR* 59, no. 3 (July 1995), 307–22.

“spiritual poverty” of Harold Bender’s influential version of the “Anabaptist Vision” abandoned human subjectivity and the direct experience of the Spirit for “the merely ethical categories of means and ends.”⁵ I recall appreciating Dintaman’s suspicion of Bender’s vision and the Yoderian “Politics of Jesus,” with its heavy emphasis on ethics, which had taken hold by the late 1970s, while not entirely sharing his nostalgia for his version of subjectivity, which he seems to understand mainly in evangelical terms of emotional conversion experiences. Dintaman recognizes the damage sometimes done by the “manipulative emotional side of revivalism”—and yet he seems to yearn for it anyway. Having experienced such manipulation, I was not sad to be relieved of it when I went off to Goshen College, arriving from the western province of central Illinois just a year after Dintaman had arrived as a student, climbing out of the gravity well of eastern Pennsylvania.⁶ Poets, of course, must cultivate inwardness, but my explorations have led me in other directions than the conventional piety that Dintaman suggests will somehow set us free.

Two decades ago I found myself researching depression for a C. Henry Smith Lecture. In doing so I read widely in scholarship and first-person accounts and interviewed a number of Mennonites, including some relatives. Often I heard from Mennonites that their people were especially prone to melancholy, depression, and other psychological troubles, often poorly diagnosed, stigmatized, and covered up. I also read of many Catholics, Jews, and others saying exactly the same things about their own religious or ethnic groups—some variant of “Oh, we’re all depressed! We just don’t talk about it.”⁷

Might this sense of displacement, this yearning for heaven or a homeland or at least a language that will allow a sense of safety and belonging, be both distinctly Mennonite and something more universal? Can it, and should it, be disentangled from Dintaman’s theological and historical categories, and Samatar’s writerly concerns, which elsewhere she connects closely to questions of identity and marginality (she has written extensively, in *White Mosque* and elsewhere, about her own subject position as a displaced and visibly other Mennonite). My own Mennonite lineage is less complicated, though my paternal grandmother was a

⁵ Stephen F. Dintaman, “The Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 10 (Spring 1992), 205–18.

⁶ At nearly the same time, a nontraditional student from Somalia named Said Samatar arrived at Goshen with his wife, a Mennonite woman from North Dakota. Their daughter Sofia was born while Said, Steve Dintaman, and I were all Goshen students.

⁷ See “Scatter Plots: Depression, Silence, and Mennonite Margins” in Gundy, *Scattering Point*, 87–116. For a recent set of fascinating essays, poems, and reflections in response to the Anabaptist Vision, see Lauren Friesen and Dennis Koehn, eds., *Anabaptist ReMix: Varieties of Cultural Engagement in North America* (Lausanne: Peter Lang, 2022).

German Catholic. I have long been a Mennonite insider in most respects, educated at one Mennonite college and tenured at another, though I have published in *Mennonot* and surrealist journals like *Exquisite Corpse* as well as in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* and *Mennonite Life*.

As these biographical and categorical issues multiply, rather than anxiously debating them, I propose to explore longing, the meaning of home, and related questions in the context of my own work and ongoing ruminations, wandering in and out of Mennonite and other texts and writers in the process.

I think first of one of my own touchstone poems, Robert Hass's (decidedly non-Mennonite) "Meditation at Lagunitas," and the way its crafty opening lines first invite and then deny a particular variety of self-pity: "All the new thinking is about loss. / In this it resembles all the old thinking." "Longing, we say," the poem continues, "because desire is full of endless distances."⁸ Even more broadly and carefully, Julia Kristeva argues in *Black Sun*, her book-length study of depression and literature, that this indistinct but powerful sense of loss, this desire to recover something that eludes our naming, is something close to a universal human experience:

[T]he depressed person has the impression of having been deprived of an unnameable, supreme good, of something unrepresentable, that perhaps only devouring might represent, or an *invocation* might point out, but no word could signify.⁹

Depression is one name for this feeling—although *feeling* is not a strong enough word. I have never experienced its clinical, terrifying extremities, but I can testify that even a birthright, white-bread Mennonite like me, who has never more than peeked over the edge into the abyss of real depression, who can follow my family tree back for generations without discovering anyone not Swiss-German except the aforementioned Catholic grandmother, and whose ancestors have inhabited the same prairie landscapes for centuries, may still feel that deep sense of existential exile, of an unnamable sort of loss. *Melancholy* is another, older word, a better fit for me somehow, for when I am lucky my own melancholy sometimes finds its way into language.

⁸ Robert Hass, "Meditation at Lagunitas," <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47553/meditation-at-lagunitas>.

⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, reprint 1992), 13.

APOCALYPTIC DISPLACEMENT

Samatar's *The White Mosque* is shaped around her journey with a guided tour group to the area in central Asia where Claas Epp Jr. led a group of Mennonites from Ukraine in the nineteenth century, convinced the second coming of Jesus was at hand. Epp's vision, Samatar writes, was,

Woe, woe, woe! His prophecies would have come true, but only the part about the tribulation, which is always true, always coming true somewhere. Taken together, predictions of the end times add up to a vast cry, less like prophecy than recognition: the world is ending every day. (155)

Don't we all vibrate along with such words? Yes, the world is always ending, always full of disaster. If there's a day with no spectacular crisis, no bombing or school shooting or plumes of wildfire smoke keeping us inside, there are still people dying everywhere, in stochastic but reliable numbers, and all the other species dwindling or vanishing for good as the oceans warm and the glaciers melt, whether we notice or not. Some nights in my nervous childhood I contemplated the news of nuclear tests and fallout and godless Communists, and even on the open prairie I felt far from safe—we were only a hundred miles from Chicago, after all. Nowhere would be safe, at least according to the novels and near-panicky magazine articles I devoured in horrified fascination. And some say we remain in constant, acute nuclear peril, though that worry barely makes it into the top six these days.

Claas Epp convinced hundreds to follow him on his long trek, driven, it seems, by a blend of piety, anxiety, fear, and conviction that drew them to believe that even this wild effort was better than just staying put. Their journey involved years of wandering, frustration, occasional kindness, all the usual tropes. Some peeled off along the way, and when Jesus did not descend in glory, many more left for their old homes or the New World. But others stayed and established a colony that lasted for half a century, living more or less comfortably in their new locale and forming friendly bonds with their new neighbors before the Russian Revolution disrupted everything again.

Samatar's fascination with this story stems not from a direct connection, but from a parallel sense of displacement—her Somali father and Mennonite mother met when he came to learn English at the mission school in Somalia where she was teaching. Though Sofia grew up in the United States, she and her husband lived for years in Africa, working for church agencies as her mother had. *The White Mosque* (the local term for the lost church Epp's followers built in what is now Uzbekistan) expands the definition of memoir: it is really an extensive exploration and meditation on identity, and especially the problems of mixed social and racial

identity. Visibly different from the American Mennonites she grew up among, Samatar not only describes her journey to Asia, but offers extensive detail on many people connected to the Epp expedition, and narrates and muses at length on her “mulatta existence”¹⁰ and her relation to Mennonites, both as church and as ethnicity.

These themes are timely, and the warm reception of *White Mosque* is both well-deserved and inseparable from our social moment, when once-marginal voices are belatedly being heard and celebrated. Samatar also muses a good deal on Mennonite writing; I was surprised to find, just a page after the passage with which the previous section of this essay begins, a single line from my work, in a cluster of brief quotes from Mennonite poets: “This note of loss reverberates through Mennonite poetry,” Samatar writes.

Jeff Gundy confesses I am a native but not exactly at home, Sarah Klassen murmurs Evenings you will dream of the Lost Paradise, Jean Janzen watches her father weeping not for home but for lack of it, Patrick Friesen’s tormented hero asks but how do I come back?¹¹

The speedy deployment of these quotes makes a plausible point, but it also blurs their biographical and literary contexts. I can testify, for starters, that my “note of loss” comes from a very different history than the others’. My Mennonite forebears crossed the ocean in the early nineteenth century and for nearly two centuries have been mainly settled on the Illinois prairie. Klassen, Janzen, and Friesen are all Russian Mennonites, with the “lost paradise” of prosperous colonies in Ukraine and the arduous trials of displacement and migration in their much more recent history. My considerably more settled family history is quite different—and when placed back into context, the line from my poem is an even more awkward fit with the others. While I have no real quarrel with Samatar’s broad claims about Mennonite yearnings, and no desire to overemphasize this brief passage within her larger purposes, I do propose to offer a deeper exploration of my own, quite different sense of home.¹²

WEED WITCHES AND OTHER MATTERS

My confession occurs near the end of a meditative poem set in the lovely, 1,100-acre Glen Helen Nature Preserve in Yellow Springs, Ohio, two hours south of the house where I have lived for forty years:

¹⁰ Samatar, *White Mosque*, 19.

¹¹ Samatar, *White Mosque*, 140.

¹² I take permission from comments that quickly follow in Samatar’s text: “I will tell you how to come back. You will come back through writing” (140).

The Song of the Weed Witch*No ideas but . . .*

—William Carlos Williams

I could walk up or down the creek, but I stop. So little time.
 Here's the strainer someone left on the rocks, the air
 so damp it's one degree from fog. Here's the weed
 rooted somehow in the mossy boulder, almost ready to seed.
 Despite much instruction, I've never mastered the simple
 clear explanation. I've never figured out how to put ideas
 in things. In this simple, indescribably deep forest,
 I remember last night when we were suddenly talking
 about what might survive our bodies, and my new friend said,
I could go to church if I didn't have to believe all that stuff,
 and I said I knew what she meant. But the beer was gone,
 and we were tired. I got in the car, and the singer sang
Three crosses in a copse of trees, a long way from Calvary,
 and I found my room, slept, woke into another
 irrevocable and precious day and put not one idea
 into a thing. I spoke mostly to the one inside who listens darkly
 to my obnoxious supplementary monologues, the one
 who says very little beyond *walk, then* and *sit here*
 and *listen* and *wait*. There are many things—the mossy boulder,
 a dead leaf sprawled on it, some wispy grass, lichens,
 a foot-tall weed, almost ready to seed—and not an idea
 in the whole passel. Where the creek turns, a mist rose or lowered
 or gathered. The whole forest spun without moving
 and hummed without noise, simple and clear and enormous.
 All these adjectives must die, I know, and be flung
 on a heap like the honeysuckle that the weed witch is clearing
 to let the natives flourish—skunk cabbage, spicebush,
 jack-in-the-pulpit. I am a native but not exactly at home,
 so I listened to the nearby water and the distant water,
 and a drop fell on my shoulder like a reason to turn.¹³

¹³ Jeff Gundy, *Spoken among the Trees* (Akron, OH: Akron University Press, 2007), 56–57. Reprinted with permission from publishers.

As the epigraph suggests, the poem picks a little quarrel with modernist orthodoxy about poetics—"no ideas but in things" is a famous and useful slogan, but pretty much impossible to practice, and one Williams himself often ignored. My relation to that long-running discussion is really intellectual, even playful, though long ago I chose the Romantics over the modernists, William Blake and Walt Whitman over Williams and Ezra Pound, as my most trusted guides to poetry and other matters. Anyway, what life is that for a poet—stuffing ideas into things, day after day?

More saliently, this particular poem is hardly nostalgic for home as some sort of lost paradise, a settlement or dwelling place. Here it seems worth noting, at least in passing, that even in the Russian Mennonite context from which Samatar draws the examples above, iconic texts like Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962), Di Brandt's *Questions I Asked My Mother* (1987), and Miriam Toews's *A Complicated Kindness* (2004) and *Women Talking* (2018) focus primarily not on the traumas of displacement but on oppressive, stultifying home communities that are the source of intense conflicts and trauma rather than providing any sort of solution.

My birth community in central Illinois and the small college town of Bluffton, Ohio, have proved less oppressive to me than those Wiebe, Brandt, and Toews describe; the churches I have been part of have been less patriarchal and rigid, and of course I have encountered them as a privileged straight white male. But throughout these years in a place that I have found relatively safe and secure but not exactly full of excitement and stimulation, I have frequently found myself drawn to explore other places, and to write poems sharpened and stirred by the sometimes challenging but often exhilarating feel of moving around in spaces that to me are fresh and new.

On fortunate travels like the one that occasioned this poem—actually getting paid to hang out with other poets and writers, imagine that!—I have often seized the chance to get out into new-to-me woods, streets, and coffeehouses, to indulge in what long ago I took to calling poem hunting. Happy to belong in only a transient way, freed from my usual work and family schedule and duties, I can talk to new people, soak up fresh images and ideas, then sneak away to sit quietly and invite some new words into my head and onto the page. To be not exactly at home is a gift in such circumstances, one I accept gratefully and recognize as a great privilege.

The new friend in the middle of the poem was in my poetry workshop, a smart, thoughtful college student. I was pleased that she felt easy enough to offer such a confession—and while my own trajectory has somehow kept me within a church community, I understood her from sympathy at once, as William Stafford used to say. Strangely, once we had arrived at that moment of sudden, barely spoken understanding, it seemed there was

little more to say. Maybe we were tired enough, after a long day of conferencing, to speak what seemed like truth but not to go on about it for long.

The next move, to the song about the crosses “in a copse of trees,”¹⁴ goes further into the tension between the sort of religious conviction that erects crosses along highways and the many things of the world that persist and thrive without human ideas or categories, but with intricate harmonies and processes of their own. Somewhere behind is the contrast between the brutal symmetry of the crosses and the very different geometries of the forest. “Nature is wiggly,” Alan Watts used to say.

Looking again at the brief interlude bringing the poem back to the present of its writing, what catches my eye is the lines “I spoke mostly to the one inside who listens darkly / to my obnoxious supplementary monologues.” Even before I paid any serious attention to Jung, I was writing about more than one being inhabiting my inner landscape, the “I” who might be something like the ego, and the listener, a more shadowy figure, though not exactly what Jung describes as “the shadow,” at least as I understand him.

I hope the sturdy, white-haired woman I met briefly that day will take the term “weed witch” in the friendly way I meant it, if she ever encounters this poem. Gloved and booted, clearing invasive plants, she looked up when I said something vaguely complimentary about the work she was doing. She wiped her brow, showing no actual signs of supernatural powers, and we talked a bit about the species she was pulling and the native plants she hoped would replace them.¹⁵

Then the poem shifts toward the natural world, so intensely, complexly present, so indifferent to human language. Among the breathing things of the glen, the old Romantic mood came over me, the urge to claim some language, as a being among others on their own journeys through space and time, whatever their awareness of their passages. That certain kind of attention that allows new, unanticipated words and phrases to enter the world—it’s hard to say where the words come from, when you find it.

¹⁴ The song is “Highway 95” by Canadian singer-songwriter David Francey.

¹⁵ Side note: At the 2022 Goshen conference, more than once I heard something along the lines of, “I think Mennonite writers need to be witches!” I thought of the moment in *Schitt’s Creek* when the ditzzy daughter says, “We might have to circle back and get more of these peanut butter things from those old farm witches!,” and her brother answers, “They were Mennonites!” Second side note: In a tribute to Nick Lindsay, who was also my first poetic mentor, Sofia Samatar reflects on his teaching: “But I think now that what Nick was trying to show us, in his fantastic and off-beat way, is that nature *is* culture, that all gods are wild ghost-gods, and that all who would be poets must also be witches” (*White Mosque*, 323). Though I have surely failed to become a “wild ghost-god” or a witch, he did his best to nudge me in that direction. See “The Centaur’s Recipe,” in Friesen and Koehn, eds., *Anabaptist ReMix*, 317–23.

The poem ends not with some kind of belief statement, but with an image that gestures toward that old, much-contested Romantic idea that the physical world might have some form of consciousness.¹⁶ It's phrased as simile, not a full claim; poet-mentors like William Stafford, not to mention modernist suspicion of the Romantics, convinced me long to adopt a certain diffidence about such matters, and so the poem claims only a tenuous connection to this new place, the drop on the shoulder that is the quietest, least certain of signals. But the gentlest touch is still a touch.

Some of my poet friends might use more God-language here. Mostly I shy away from such talk; in poems like this I sense a God too wild and strange and other to write about directly, a God to be found in hints and misdirections and odd little chance happenings. A God who dwells in the breathing world, stealthy and shy as the wildest creature, but sometimes perhaps willing to be glimpsed.

Surely, then, if my yearning for home is part of some communal Mennonite chorus, it is at a considerable distance, even further than my voice trying to find the tenor line from the balcony when there's nobody in the benches around. It has more to do with my local, personal, arguably spiritual desire for closer communion with the physical world than with Mennonite history. There is no weeping for some lost *Heimat* here; the poem is all about trying to settle into a particular, lovely, complicated place in a particular moment. Its trees, rocks, and waters, and the little mental drama that happens among them, are more Jungian than baptismal—though it does occur to me, belatedly, that a drop on the shoulder is not far from the sprinkling I received during my own baptism as a perplexed teenager. That drama also is far in the background, as the poem steps quite deliberately away from worries about belief and church and crosses and into a very different sort of presence.

David Abram writes in *The Spell of the Sensuous*¹⁷ of shamans and witches as people who live on the edge of the human world, in the border area, and function, among other things, as intermediaries between our culture and the natural world. I am no shaman, but I love to wander those borderlands, and I have written many poems attempting to explore that territory and the phantom powers that move and breathe there. I visit those places always as a visitor, a traveler who will pass through and sleep

¹⁶ For an extended treatment of this subject, my favorite text remains Robert Bly's *News of the Universe: Poems of Twofold Consciousness* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1980), an anthology built around a bold, probably overstated but brilliant treatment of poetry as a struggle between an "Old Position" emphasizing human and masculine superiority and a "New Position" replacing those hierarchies with deep awareness of and integration with the natural world. Bly's ideas and poems have deeply influenced my own thinking.

¹⁷ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 6–11.

somewhere else. Often I have only an hour or less, a sense of haste tugging against the need to slow down. How far should I walk, and which way? Where is there a good rock or log, maybe by the water? Are there people, and will they talk to me a little and then leave me alone? When I settle, will I be able to settle my mind, open up enough to let the place seep into me?

These are the things that I think about. These are the things that make me a native but not exactly at home.

GETTING IT WRONG

And how I love their wrongness. Their beautiful error. The collapse of their intent. It's failure that saves these wanderers from the old lines, the known gestures, the missionary effect. Every new story happens by accident.¹⁸

Samatar writes extensively and sympathetically of the "beautiful error" of Claus Epp and his followers, and of the human capacity for first blundering badly and then, somehow, finding unexpected rewards and consolations in the process that follows. After mucking up an evening poetry walk at a workshop in Cuyahoga Valley National Park, I wrote this poem recounting that experience, which ended better than I feared it would.

Where Water Finds an Edge

-Blue Hen Falls, June 2004

Nothing like a careful, thorough plan with one large error.
Too dark under the trees, too many roots —

we must turn back. Rocks piled around like bad excuses,
like my father's brow as he gently explains

just how deep and wide my screw-up is. I stumble
for a place to sit, break through a thin sheet of shale.

Even the skin of the earth can't be trusted.
Every splash is a sign; not one is a word.

But we know the light was hiding all these stars.
We need the dark because it makes us clumsy,

because it makes us forget the banks
we are rushing between, muttering about hymns

and women while the falls spill out before us.
We will not need to be ready to tumble down.

¹⁸ Samatar, *White Mosque*, 297.

We will shine and shout, and all the damage
 will be forgotten soon. The water is not wounded
 by its breathless journey, it bears its troubles lightly,
 it does not falter as the full night arrives.
 And the hard ledges glow, long after all else is lost.¹⁹

Like “The Song of the Weed Witch,” this poem is only marginally Mennonite, but it’s certainly in the long tradition of poems that attempt to evoke a sense of wonder, and to find their way into what might be sacred space. There’s no church here, no Father, heavenly or otherwise, but there is that reference to hymns, and the churchy language of “tumble down” and “shine and shout.” “We” here is the small tribe gathered for the week’s workshop, where nobody but me was Mennonite; I’m sure some were believers, but we hadn’t talked about it. Yet as I sat by the waterfall in the darkness, others around me also scrawling as best they could in their notebooks, it felt like we had somehow entered a more-than-ordinary place together.

This is very much *my* version of that evening, shaped and inflected at every step. But how does that being operate in such moments? As a tentative Jungian, I might claim something like this: as I began to write, the part of myself I have started calling Singer shook herself out of the daze that allows her to survive the mundane days and began to listen and to speak. What Singer heard, I think now, is the call of transformation, of flinging ourselves into the rushing water and accepting whatever happens. Paradise or annihilation—who knows? An eternity of punishment for our many transgressions—maybe, but maybe not, and never mind anyway! The poem dreams of giving up shelter, even the shelter of language, diving into a different medium, transforming our inelegant bodies into something shiny and fluid as water, being carried away by a force that might be gravity but might have other names as well. And while it is very much in my head, the others around me, the rushing water, the rocks, the trail behind us—all of these were very much entangled in the words that came to me.

Reading back into this poem, I revel in that first surge of energy, the words unspooling without effort, the shifts of focus and gathering sense of something opening, some door or window. The ending still seems to me a gift, and like some of the better gifts, it is small and so can be carried away.

Consider this passage from theologian and activist Dorothee Soelle:

Mystical experience is bliss and simultaneously it makes one homeless. It takes people out of the home they have furnished for

¹⁹ Gundy, *Spoken among the Trees*, 25. Reprinted with permission from publishers.

themselves into homelessness, as it did to young Gautama, known later as the Buddha.²⁰

These poems of mine do not describe what we usually think of as mystical experiences, but I think the journey they make is akin to those that Soelle (and others) describe. The poems go through stages of observation and ego-driven worry, and description of the sort Soelle calls “amazement,” before moving toward what she refers to as “letting go” or “leaving oneself”²¹ to listen, to allow something beyond my usual language to enter.

I think now that poems may be spaces that create their own homes, little dwellings made of words that both poet and reader might step into, settle for a while, find some nourishment and rest. They may be temporary and fragile as the little huts, their roofs branches with gaps for the stars to shine in at night, that Jews put up for Sukkot, the holy days remembering the long journey of the Israelites in the wilderness. We cannot stay in any one for too long, but we may come back over and over.

The next day, back inside, I apologized to the group for having miscalculated, for putting them at risk for sprained ankles or worse, for making them adjust on the fly. When I finished, a woman near me in the circle, one I hadn’t really met, turned and said, so softly I had to ask her to repeat it, “Thank you for your error.”

AND ONE MORE TURN

Looking back on my old poems, I found this one, half-forgotten, from *Deerflies*:²²

Morning Song from Oneonta

So far east, so far from home,
 the dark came on early
 but the dawn seems truly new

 at the window of my east-facing room.
 The goose protests with all he has
 and two crows instruct the world

 on what matters and what doesn’t.
 The yellow slash of a goldfinch
 in the high pine. No wind at all.

²⁰ Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, trans. Barbara Rumscheidt and Martin Rumscheidt, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 196.

²¹ Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, 90, 91.

²² Jeff Gundy, *Deerflies* (Cincinnati, OH: Wordtech Communications). Reprinted with permission from publishers.

How late was I awake?
 I can barely move, hardly think.
 I want the goldfinch to come closer,
 the haze to clear. In the perfect world
 surely I am asleep and dreaming
 of the blessed hills, the blind river
 that feels its way between them.
 But in this huge and hazy morning
 the poplar and the pine
 sway and beckon, the hills soften
 and glow as they will
 A pair of swifts fly close, then part,
 and I am awake, tired, filled
 with my own sudden fire—
 as if a quiet voice has whispered,
 See that orange roof,
 the house with the little spire?
 If you want it, it's yours.

Another conference poem, this one written in upstate New York. My room had one huge window. To keep it cool I had to keep the curtains open and run the fan, and the sun rose like a floodlight, very early. Every morning, I would realize my sleeping was done, sigh, pull on some clothes, and wander out into the hilly campus, hoping for a poem to compensate for my lost slumber. What was offered this day was a fantasy of home, of a home gifted to me, not a mansion in glory but what seemed, from a distance, a cozy, tidy little place, one that among all the other houses somehow caught my eye and mind. I can still glimpse it, barely, the memory gone hazy with time—a real house, but one I never entered, and only claimed in the phantom realm of the poem. It is not mine, it will never be mine, and yet in a small way it is.