

## Some New Voices in Mennonite Poetry: A Review Essay

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*A Cartography of Birds.* By J. L. Conrad. Baton Rouge, La: Louisiana State University Press. 2002. Pp. 58. \$16.95.

*Morning Song.* By Joanne Lehman. Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press. Wick Poetry Chapbook Series 3, no. 9. 2005. Pp. 38. \$6.

*Goldbeater's Skin.* By G. C. Waldrep. Fort Collins, Co.: Center for Literary Publishing. The Colorado Prize for Poetry. 2003. Pp. 96. \$16.95.

*Disclamor.* By G. C. Waldrep. Rochester, N.Y.: BOA Editions. 2007. Pp. 104. \$16.

Since the publication of *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry* (University of Iowa Press, 2003), I have often thought about what new poets might be added to an anthology of Mennonite writing if one were published now, some six years later. What images and themes might emerge? What cadences and approaches to language would manifest themselves? What might such volumes ask of their readers?

At least a dozen poets from Mennonite traditions in the United States have published books since the appearance of *A Cappella*. Cascadia Publishing, a publisher of Anabaptist-related books, has introduced a poetry series.<sup>1</sup> The “Mennonite/s Writing Across Borders” conference at Bluffton University in 2006 featured numerous readings, a sign that poetry is flourishing among writers from the Mennonite faith on both sides of the U.S. and Canadian border—many of them younger writers interested in grafting their voices onto this recently established tradition. Plenary poetry readings were also a highlight of the 2009 “Mennonite/s

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1. See “Recent Mennonite Poetry: A Review Essay” in *MQR*, January 2007, by Rhoda Janzen for a review of the first three books in the Cascadia poetry series, by Cheryl Denise, Shari Miller Wagner and Dallas Wiebe. Cascadia has since published books by Debra Gingerich, Helen Wade Alderfer and Leonard Neufeldt. All of these are first books, except for Neufeldt’s. Rhoda Janzen is the author of a new book of poetry, *Babel’s Stair* (Word Press, 2006), and a memoir, *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress* (New York: Henry Holt, 2009). Since 2003 the U.S. writers feature in *A Cappella* have been prolific: Jean Janzen, Jeff Gundy, and Todd David have each published two new books of poetry; Keith Ratzlaff has published one new book.

Writing: Manitoba and Beyond” conference at the University of Winnipeg.

A label such as “Mennonite poet” may suggest to those unfamiliar with the work a certain homogeneity of style—perhaps even decorum or piety. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is a tendency toward the liturgical, even an ecstatic vision of the luminescence of the created world, in many of these poems, as well as references to community, food, farming and music. But nonconformity to a particular aesthetic is the rule rather than the exception. The work of the three U.S. writers featured in this essay—Joanne Lehman, J. L. Conrad and G. C. Waldrep—suggests something of the range among these “new” voices, all of which have reached audiences and won acclaim, and frequently prizes, in literary communities.

### *Joanne Lehman*

Among this trio, Lehman is the poet whose work most overtly reflects Mennonite experience, and a deep acquaintance with contemporary Mennonite poets, both in imagery and theme. Her chapbook *Morning Song*, winner of the Wick Poetry prize from Kent State University Press in 2005, is a collection of lyric poems rooted in Mennonite tradition, interwoven with a contemporary sensibility. Lehman, who grew up on an Ohio farm in Holmes County and still lives in the area, is steeped in the rhythms of rural community and is also a member of a Mennonite congregation today.

*Morning Song* is divided into three sections. The poems of each section are clustered around a particular theme: elegies for family members and a past way of life, poems about Mennonite and Amish community, and meditations on present moments. Throughout, the metaphor of music—hymnody in particular—connects different generations of Mennonite experience.

Lehman’s ability to succinctly reveal the grafting of new thoughts and practices onto traditional roots is illustrated in “Morning Song,” the poem from which the collection derives its title. This poem references two hymns familiar to contemporary Mennonites: one, a familiar 1890 song, “I Owe the Lord a Morning Song” by Amos Herr, the other a contemporary hymn by John Bell, a member of the Scottish Iona community whose work has become popular in Mennonite congregations during the past decade and has been collected in the recent hymnals *Sing the Journey I* and *II*. Legend has it that Herr, snowed in from going to church on a sunny winter morning, wrote his hymn as his act of worship, to pay his “debt of gratitude and praise.” John Bell’s hymn, which begins with the same phrase, drops the economic reference to debt and replaces it with an image of union of Creator and creation, as

“all in all, and I am one with ev’rything.” In Lehman’s words, “the Scottish songwriter innocently/ handed our words back to us and/ told us about a God who loves/ enough to change.”

Lehman’s poems honor relationships with family and neighbors, as well as with theology and soil, sometimes all at once. In “Another Eve” Lehman portrays a memory of her mother killing a snake, wishing she could stay her mother’s hand and introduce her to the literary snakes of D. H. Lawrence, Wendell Berry, Mary Oliver. If poets can reinterpret cultural myths in ways that profoundly affect our attitudes and behavior, then perhaps poetry can also reinterpret faith traditions in renewing ways. Lehman’s chapbook, with its handful of poignant elegies, is both lament and anthem—remarking on the tradition, revealing the ways in which we graft the present onto the past to keep it vital. In choosing “Morning Song” as the title for her collection, Lehman invokes the cultural metaphor of life as a day, suggesting that the Mennonite tradition is still in its vibrant early years and will experience further changes as growth, rather than as a destruction of an old order, as has so often been feared. Lehman has recently completed a full-length poetry manuscript and an M.F.A. in poetry, and published a novel, *Kairos*, with Herald Press in 2005. Expect to hear more from her.

### *J. L. Conrad*

J. L. Conrad introduced herself to me in 2004 at an Associated Writers and Writing Program, a large annual convention of creative writers and teachers of creative writing, while I was sitting at the University of Iowa Press book table signing copies of *A Cappella*. Conrad had heard about the Mennonite anthology and had grown up Mennonite in Ohio. She asked if I would be interested in a book swap—a common practice among poets: a copy of her collection, *A Cartography of Birds*, in exchange for the anthology.

My meeting with Conrad illustrates how difficult it can be to locate contemporary poets with Mennonite roots; sometimes the poets have to seek out the anthologists, especially those poets who do not display recognizable cultural markers. Like Lehman, Conrad was born into an Ohio Mennonite family, but she did not attend a Mennonite college, and her surname is not immediately recognizable as ethnically Mennonite. She received an M.F.A. from American University in Washington, D.C. Yet like a number of other young writers who have developed a poetic career outside of Mennonite circles, Conrad was intrigued by signs of literary activity and connection among those who identify as Mennonite or who claim Mennonite heritage.

As the title of her poetry collection suggests, *A Cartography of Birds* is preoccupied with nature, responding to landscapes and family farming

heritage not unlike those portrayed in Lehman's poems. Her book, like Lehman's chapbook, is also divided into three sections. But the section titles—"Myths and Incantations," "Topographies" and "A Science of Ordinary Things"—suggest a preoccupation with how we see rather than with what we see. In Conrad's poems the "I" is muted; reference to common theology and community are minimal. Whereas Lehman's poems engage the reader in dialogue, assuming a platform of shared and shareable experience, Conrad's poetry offers us a lens—the sensation of entering a perceiving consciousness.

In a poem entitled "O Light Inaccessible" Conrad writes:

We move within residues,  
 the fine curtain  
 that is our entrance  
 to the world,  
 and are drawn back  
 to cavities  
 that we call self—

Her ecstatic, mystical descriptions of landscapes, both interior and exterior, suggest the ways that the body and the earth, that conscience and nature, mutually shape each other. In the poem "In Winter" she asks:

If I came back  
 to this table, this bed,  
 this river—  
 who would know my fingers?  
 Would I still read in face-lines  
 something of mountains  
 or palms?

Conrad invites readers to question the "grid" beneath the portraits of life that we paint with our eyes and our minds. Like Wallace Stevens, she is interested in the invisible relations between bodies, and between consciousness and memory. This is most playfully evident in the third section, "A Science of Ordinary Things," in which Conrad uses the grid of Frisbee golf to explore the trajectory of a relationship and the ways in which humans mark their presence in space and time.

Whereas Lehman uses vehicles such as a wagon or a Mapquest search to connect with her readers and invite them into an inquiry about the texture of their lives, Conrad's poetry interrogates readers' assumptions about perception and the self. These are two different approaches within the discourse of poetry itself.

## G. C. Waldrep

A third approach, radically exciting and possibly perplexing to those unfamiliar with the contemporary discourses of American poetry, is that of G. C. Waldrep, a prolific and award-winning contemporary poet who, as an adult, after an Ivy League education, has chosen membership in conservative Anabaptist groups—first the Mennonites, then the Amish and presently the Old Order River Brethren.<sup>2</sup>

Waldrep makes no claims that his poetry reflects his religious affiliation; he draws on a literary awareness and breathtaking lexical repertoire fueled by his wide reading in poetry, theology, musicology, history and philosophy. Thus his poetry is anything but plain style; it is certainly not reflective of Amish folk verse. But his commitment to the ecstasy of seeing the truth in language—playing with audience assumptions about discourse, narrative and received truths—expresses a spirit akin to that of radical Anabaptist reformers who challenged followers of Jesus to a new vision of an ancient practice clothed in worn dogmas.

His first collection, *Goldbeater's Skin*, opens with a poem, "Fatal Exception," that playfully probes narrative expectation and the powers of syntax to bend and shape reality. It compliments the epigraph from Julian of Norwich, offering a hermeneutic of sorts to Waldrep's cryptic poetry, signaling to readers that these verbal constructs honor mystical consciousness and reveal the distortions of simple narratives.

I do not want *story*. *Story* has had enough.  
 What happens next is an impossible preposition.  
 What happens next is where to put the clause  
 What happens next is my giving up.  
 What happens next is frost.  
 Outside what happens, nasturtiums still blaze.

The poem repeats this pattern of quatrains interspersed with individual lines. The quatrains are a series of "what happens next" phrases that make increasingly little narrative sense. The individual lines are concerned with "outside what happens." Thus the structure of the poem itself sets up a kind of verbal machine—a thought-processor gone awry. Like Conrad, Waldrep is obsessed with how we see—but also with the structures that make thought itself possible. He takes on thinkers, such as Augustine, who have shaped our cultural narratives. He is a collector of words that will send many readers to the dictionary. *Goldbeater's skin*, for instance, is the outer membrane of a calf's

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2. Currently an assistant professor of English at Bucknell University, Waldrep directs the Bucknell Seminar for Younger Poets.

intestine, used as a kind of parchment to beat gold to an “airy thinness,” to quote the sixteenth-century John Donne. It is also used in the repair of parchment and vellum.

Waldrep’s poems are surprising and beautifully textured—taking readers on an unexpected course of meditation and association. Titles can be playfully deceiving. For instance, “The Lone Amishman to the Missionary Woman,” a title that suggests a straightforward, if somewhat unusual, narrative will follow begins, “Wire me a warning, elaborate the circuitry/ of threat’s combustion, charged and channeled, map/ the veins of fire that flex within these plaster walls.” The flights of thought and ecstatic language are occasionally grounded in personal lyric moments, as in “What Begins Bitterly becomes another Love Poem.” In several poems, “Mucking Out” and “Valentine to Myself at 31,” Waldrep mentions his horse, a character also present in his second book, *Disclamor*, which seems to bring the poet back to earth.

*Disclamor* opens a verbal tapestry of interior monologue to reveal a socially engaged conscience that takes on the Anabaptist concerns of war, militarism and the spiritual value of each human life. The armature of this collection is a profoundly moving series of nine meditations on the culture of war and military monuments. First published as a chapbook in 2006 by New Michigan Press as “The Batteries,” these poems, each titled after one of nine former gun placements now part of Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, were also written on site. These poems invite readers into verbal spaces iconic of monuments. Perhaps because of their “plein air” genesis—that they reveal their moment of making in a particular space at a particular time—these poems are a felicitous marriage of Waldrep’s free flight associations with an ethical orientation. A fine place for Mennonite readers to begin a productive encounter with his work.

The other poems of *Disclamor* have the same touch of genius and mastery of those from *Goldbeater’s Skin*, but they seem more at ease with themselves, less deliberately postmodern and more deeply playful. His word play and humor effervesce to lighten the heavier batteries poems. Reading them is like watching the middle of a fine tennis match when the players break into a volley for the sheer joy of returning the ball. The reader’s imagination is engaged as a worthy partner here, rather than bombarded with erudition. Waldrep has not relinquished his frequent references to the artifacts of art, music, philosophy, science and technology, but they do not impede dialogue with the reader. Perhaps this is because, both in the batteries poems and in the rest of the volume, children are an important theme. How do children come to learn what they think they know about the world? How are the stories we tell

responsible for shaping them into soldiers or saints? As he writes in "Blood Ruminant": When one is a child one cannot tell

Calvary from cavalry, the hill  
for the horsemen. Each means your death.  
Letters are trees.  
Behind them something struggles. You strain to see  
just what sort of beast this is.  
Not a nice one, perhaps. Not like  
the sleeping kitten,  
or the Sunday school lambs.  
There may be an army in the forest  
and not kind at all.  
A nick in the lead-based paint.  
Or the soldiers themselves, soft & heavy.  
Something walks behind them  
and it might be language.

The focus on language and how we use it, what our culture-steeped minds do with words as we attempt to describe the world we live in so we can know it more consciously, can be viewed as a Reformation value. The Anabaptist movement, after all, was about reading the text—The Text—and about the reader's response to the written word. Ezra Pound charged poets in the beginning of the twentieth century to "make it new." In the beginning of the twenty-first, Waldrep takes the wrought iron of culture and beats it to transparency in his most successful poems, which richly reward successive readings. Like many newcomers to Anabaptist faith and practice, he challenges the traditionalists to renew the connection between word and deed.

Three poets writing at the beginning of a new millennium, each using the instruments of mind and voice to shape new songs of experience, each influenced by an Anabaptist heritage or practice. All three wed modern consciousness to cultural artifacts of faith and thought—offering fresh perspectives through the "I" or "eye." All three engage hymns, poetry, farming, saints, desire, the passing of generations, renunciation, silence and theology, but differ in the ways they probe readers' assumptions about language and invite them to become aware of their own particular capacity for making meaning out of words.