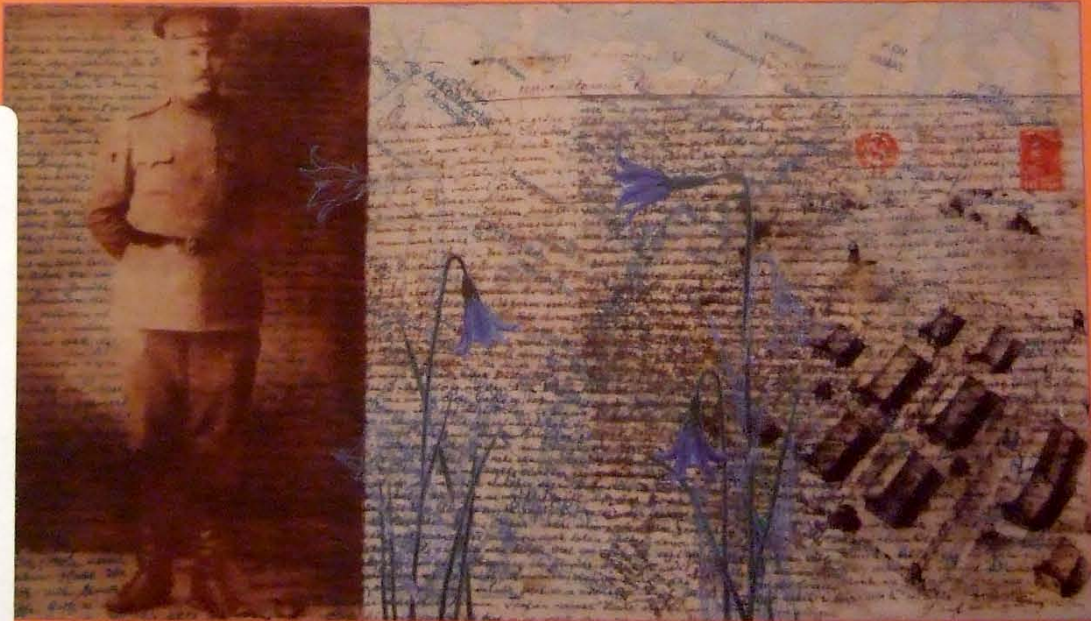


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Mennonites on the edge

Excommunication

Creative non-fiction by Michelle Winegar

It's the second day of the all-star Mennonite bus tour and I cover my head to stifle my parents' chipper morning chit-chat. My fingers feel for the stitches on the underside of the motel quilt, but it is only a picture printed on synthetic fabric and I can't feel a thing.

Forty-eight hours ago, thirty members of my family packed the coach with vinyl suitcases, made a quick stop at the duty-free for staples, and headed here—to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania—the place where our Swiss-German ancestors first landed at the beginning of the eighteenth century. On our journey, my aunts and uncles took turns reading long passages of family history over the bus loudspeaker. Between the teenagers at the back and the twosomes at the front, I questioned my decision again and again though there's not a thing I can do about it now.

First on today's packed itinerary is an all-you-can-eat breakfast buffet. Family members line up for pork sausages and sticky buns, small talk between sips of tea sweetened with Splenda. They all talk at once, a symphony of clucking chickens.

I pour black coffee into Styrofoam, burn my mouth on the way out to the parking lot as I swallow the last Tylenol 3. I bum a cigarette from the rock-on bus driver, take baby-steps away as he talks about a shooting somewhere nearby, the high price of gasoline, yada yada. The cigarette turns out to be menthol. I smoke it anyway.

After breakfast, the bus is barreling down a dirt road and my aunt passes out a Mennonite-themed word search she has carefully prepared for the trip. The first one to find all the hidden words will win an Amish keychain. Behind me, teenagers snigger as we pass Intercourse, Pennsylvania, and couples at the front work on the word search as if they had one brain between the two of them: "I found Anabaptist." "Now all we need is meetinghouse."

As it turns out, there is a long tradition of talkers in my lineage. It goes all the way back to Benjamin Eby, third-generation American, the one who came to Canada by horse, travelling to Waterloo County where most of my family still lives today. He rocked the boat by building a meetinghouse, instead of worshipping in the privacy and safety of one's home. Many in his community were opposed to the idea, but

he convinced enough people otherwise, and in 1813 a log church was erected. Naturally, he was the first one to preach.

I know this Ben like I know the timbre of my mother's voice. It wasn't that he wanted a public place to worship, but he, like my loquacious relatives, was a social bee. He wanted a roomful of people, the sound of his own voice echoing, and I am nothing like him. I sit here in perfect silence. So still no one can tell that blood is seeping through my layers. No one knows anything about me. I barely even exhale.

From my moving window, newly harvested fields rise and fall like bleached sheets on a clothesline.

Eventually, the bus pulls into a driveway and the announcement sounds like lyrics through a waxed comb. If it wasn't for the other tour buses, this could be any Amish farm. The power lines run straight to the barn. The house is modest and plain.

Inside it, morning light illuminates Sarah, mother of six, sitting next to the propane-powered refrigerator and weaving a small tight stitch. She tells us how long it will take her to make the quilt and how she will prick herself many times before its completion. "Sometimes," she says, "I get a single drop of blood on the fabric. There is nothing I can do about it." After that, she doesn't say anything more.

We file down a steep staircase and enter an underground department store, a Disneyland in the desert. Fluorescent lights, carved animals, stuffed Santas and hundreds of quilts, machine-made with brand new material.

The cash registers begin to cha-ching as my grey uncles and I wait outside by the vacant swing set.

Afterward, we pick up our tour guide Helen, an ex-Amish woman wearing wobbly heels, blue eyeshadow and no wedding ring. After being excommunicated by her family, her community and her church, Helen opened her very first bank account at the age of 28 and joined the tourism industry.

As we drive past impeccable farms, she tells us Amish weddings are held after harvest and will probably start this Tuesday or Wednesday. Young

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women will exchange white bonnets for blue ones, move to their husband's farm, bear children, work. They will work in the kitchen, in the garden and in the barn. "The Amish believe the Bible is literal so there are strict rules about how to behave. Recipes are made the same way every time because pride in being different is a sin."

I concentrate on what she says, wonder if she was married and if she has any children, if she left them behind, too.

For lunch, the restaurant is a large red barn. On the gambrel roof, The Heart of Amish Country blinks in pink.

We sit at a long table covered in a plastic checked tablecloth, pass massive bowls of potatoes, rolls, sliced ham and peas. My uncle complains between chews. "Someone needs to take that microphone from your aunt soon. I'm getting a headache." I nod and leave the table. In the restaurant washroom, I shake with alarm. The blood pours from me, the water turns bright red. It has soaked through all my layers again and I consider the real possibility that I may be hemorrhaging. I study all of my options then return to the bus and sit on a magazine.

In the afternoon, we park in the empty lot outside the Pennsylvania State Wax Museum. I press buttons to hear a history of savages and pilgrims that would get me expelled from university. Abe Lincoln is missing a finger, his nose is a ledge for dust.

My favourite is an exhibit titled On the History of Corn Soup, that consists of a recipe and a few plastic bowls filled with creamed corn and shellac. I laugh

Garry Enns Associates

Community and Organizational Development
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You are invited to help him support writers, artists and performers by contributing generously to the MLS and **Rhubarb**. If you want to find out more about the Mennonite Literary Society and *Rhubarb*, contact Garry by calling him at (204) 882-2481 or emailing him at garryenns@genesisnetworks.ca.

unexpected and loud, my voice an abrupt stranger. I cough, swallow hard and rejoin the group for the short film on barn raising.

The museum is exhausted in an hour and after that is the beloved Bird-in-Hand strip mall where quilts hang on walls and candles poison the air if you light them.

I'm desperate for a smoke. I would like to roll one of these useless quilts, set fire to all of my history.

No one explains how we went from buggies to BB Bargoons, or which distant relative is responsible for our evolution away from the Old Order, to hairspray, to forgotten birth control pills. Whoever they were, I wonder if it was a choice or if they had to go. Now, instead of farmers, we are pipe fitters, computer engineers, clerks and bakers. We live in semi-detached houses and apartment buildings and shared accommodations.

While others shop, I stand on the soft shoulder of the highway, erasing horse hoof prints with my heel. An Amish girl whizzes by on a scooter. My jacket rattles in the wind.

In early evening, after leaving the mall, the bus pulls over at the side of the road and everyone, including the bus driver gets out. Finally, there is a moment of silence, a capsule to hold my grief.

I look at my hands. They hold nothing. I watch my family wade into a farm field, feet sinking into the muddy rows as they go. Above them, grey sky kneels on the red earth. The air presses down.

There is nothing at all to do, so I glance at the word search on the seat beside me and meetinghouse is suddenly visible in the mess. I stand and leave and follow them, up the hill to a tiny cemetery at the top where the bones of our ancestors rest. I cannot read the worn stones so I trace the pitted grooves with my fingers. The stone is rough and cold to the touch and no one says a single word.

Instead, my aunts form a circle and begin to sing a hymn that I remember from church as a girl. The men and teens stand outside the circle, hands in pockets, feet planted in the earth. I scan waves of soil churned by a horse-drawn plough, see my history here and here, the remains of summer, the nameless dead. When my feet root and I rise, the circle of women opens to make more room. Together we mourn the dust and blood of you, of relatives we never knew. In unison, with voices similar to my own, I open my mouth and sing. **R**