Clarise Foster, ed., *29 Mennonite Poets.* Winnipeg: Mennonite Literary Society, 2016. Pp. 168. Softcover, $25.00

"We've been Mennonites for centuries," writes Kevin Spenst at the conclusion of his sonnet, "Among the Chosen (Oh Yeah!)," in *29 Mennonite Poets.* In the previous 13 lines he has given us a picture of complacent Mennonite life, with an implication that Mennonites might have some uncomfortable similarities to the Jim Jones suicide cult. That last, surprising confession, then, is both ironic dig and historical declaration, and encapsulates the reasons for this volume as a welcome update on the state of Mennonite poetry.

In editing the collection, Clarise Foster is less concerned with trying to find an immutable Mennonite identity than in flinging a net wide enough to catch as many styles and sensibilities as she can. The collection aims to reflect "range rather than homogeneity," she writes in the introduction, and to "illuminate a revolving spectrum." And it is the joy of this anthology that we get that wide range by putting "preeminent" (Foster's word) poets in conversation with younger poets; mixing rural with urban; coupling belief with doubt. We go from past to present, Texas to Winnipeg, Plautdietsch to dada.

Foster gets range (and continuity) by first giving us a wide selection from multiple books by poets familiar to many of us: Di Brandt, Patrick Friesen, Barbara Nickel, Carla Funk, Sarah Klassen, Jean Janzen, Jeff Gundy, and Julia Spicher Kasdorf. (How good to be reminded of the early Brandt poems about family now 30 years old, or Gundy's lyrical "rhapsodies" from 25 years ago.) Let the final 3 stanzas of Sarah Klassen's more recent lyric poem, "In Translation," stand for the context Foster gives us. Klassen's speaker is caught between generations and languages, trying to capture her mother's prairie experience. "I wanted to write a poem…./ in two languages, one voice," she says.

> But how do I translate
> *rauschen* into English?
> The wind blows where it chooses.
> You hear its high-pitched wail, its rising
> crescendo, cringe from its cold fury,
> its burning summer breath. When it abates
> you say: it is dying down. Now
> there is silence so startling
> the poem is held suspended
> in the satin air. Now
> it needs no foreign or familiar words,
> couldn't care less for the pleasure
> of text in accurate translation.

The process, the language pulls Klassen through. In the end, the poem – and poetry itself – is the answer to translation and continuity.

The anthology's breadth also comes from selections of two to four poems by 21 other poets. Again, some of these will be familiar: Leonard Neufeldt, Victor Enns (Foster credits Enns "for the vision behind" *29 Mennonite Poets*) and David Waltner-Toews among them; but to a reviewer from the U.S. side of the border, there were some delightfully unfamiliar voices in conversation with old

favourites—and it's this dialogue that gives the anthology its energy. Since the poets are arranged alphabetically by province and country, Albertan Nathan Dueck's funny/serious parodies open the book, followed by Nikki Reimer's "latter-day Psalms." Here's the first of three:

> Shit hastens
> slit chastens
> divinations by gronk skronk moonshine
> seppuku by design
> inspiration by jesus
> transubstantiation by candlelight
> this is my blood this is my body
> it will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be
> glenlivet
> (destination eurasia)
> a gracious host, swallowed whole
> a diffidence engine.

That's lyric, but in a different way than Sarah Klassen. The tone is knife-edged, and the poem is (literally and figuratively) drunk on sound. I could have picked work by a dozen other poets—Spenst from British Columbia; Audrey Poetker, Maurice Mierau and Katherina Vermette from Manitoba; Abigail Carl-Klassen from Texas—that surprised and challenged me, that "illuminated" and expanded my sense of Mennonite art in this new-ish century.

But Foster also says that there is a Mennonite literary "legacy." This can be a slippery idea if indeed you see your task as "to dispel the expectation that aesthetically, Mennonite poetry remains inextricably preoccupied with certain prerequisite questions about identity, religiosity, and culturally requisite isolation." Two thoughts, then, on what might be these 29 poets' legacy, what might link them when separated from the burgeoning poetry scenes of both countries.

First, language—or rather an appropriation of language—from the church. Nearly every poet in the anthology quotes a hymn ("Praise God from whom all blessings flow"—what I know as the doxology—is a favourite), quotes or echoes the Bible (see Reimer's "this is my blood this is my body" above, or Mierau's numbered stanzas that read like scripture) or finds themselves, either seriously or ironically, in the attitude of prayer (see Funk's "Hymn for the Night," Spenst's "Abram," Janzen's "Summer in the Dark: 1944," Brandt's "Mennonitische geistliche Lieder." I could go on and on.) For those of us who grew up Mennonite, it's a code we all

know, a signal that links the language of holiness and prayer to poetry.

Second, family. Joan Didion, in her 1967 essay, "On Going Home," imagines hers as "the last generation to carry the burden of 'home,' to find in family life the source of all tension and drama." If so, she wasn't born Mennonite. *29 Mennonite Poets* is filled with the negotiations of family life: parents and children, uncles and aunts, grandparents, great-grandparents, family both living and dead. Whether it was intentional or not, Foster has included a number of poems about family funerals, those gatherings where we focus the microscope on the extended family, the deceased, our own place in the generations, our own mortality. Most notable here, but too long to quote, is Julia Spicher Kasdorf's beautiful and moving tribute, "Rachel on the Threshing Floor," which ends the book. But the ending of Joanne Epp's "Eigenheim," set in August in a hot, rural country cemetery, perhaps finds the heart of both language and family, and may serve as an invitation to this welcome update to the North American Mennonite poetry scene:

> These handshakes, this embrace and kiss
> of aunts from far way. This hymn,
> my voice faltering on the refrain.
> And after,
> this path from front steps to graveyard,
> these hands holding, this roar
> of passing pickup on the highway,
> these strawberry leaves among the stones.
> This raw earth enclosing my uncle's body.
> Our family's name on the stone, and this.

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