Eric Rensberger was raised on a farm a few miles east of Goshen, Indiana. He received his B.A. in English Literature from Michigan State University in 1974, and an M.S. in Counselling from Indiana University in 1981. He currently makes his living as a mental health counselor in Bloomington, Indiana. Rensberger writes about his background: "My ancestry is thoroughly Mennonite: originally from Pennsylvania and Maryland, my forebears moved to Elkhart County, Indiana, in the 1840s."

Contention Against Shunning

I rage with you, Menno Simons for the cruelty of your shunning: to set table at a distance from hunger to pull flesh from flesh to deny the kiss of peace and the kiss of the whole mouth From the mystery of your hiding you come at me implacable against all sense parting me from the world thrusting my pallor from you as though chilled "Body dismissing a member": you would cut me off as if a man should put his belly from him say no more will I fill you I will live on the fat of my pleadings and mouth the names of my food
Directions Home

I warn you, such a man dies raving
of lack at butchering time; having
no substance wherewith to get,
   begs not to give offense
by the compulsion he names as
   necessity’s, not his own

Menno
corpulent man with twisted face
I will settle this with you
I will throw myself on you
and wrestle you to earth with embraces

Directions Home

turn left at the Y
go slowly down the straight stretch
the blacksmith is still
striking sparks by the pasture

the young horse canters through thistles
and the slight fear you feel
is the same as his
taste of metal
feet riding on nails
soon he will be on
the road itself
and when wind twitches
its fingers in the grass
he is bewitched
thinks of wolves
come out of the North

he shies
the journey stops
panic
stumbles in his chest
he jumps and twists his head
and notices as though for the first time
the weight dragging behind
the men shouting
straps in their hands

someone must put blinders on him
must narrow his vision
to the road itself
he will never get anywhere without them
**Judas is in Hell**

our child-life with its magical intents
and outcomes opening to love
the way we used to be in the world
abundant life
glory
and generosity
recognizing even a traitor’s right
to a place in the scheme of things

**Eschatology**

The day I thought the world was coming to an end
people stepped out of doors calling
"see you" to the dark interiors.
Everything seemed for a moment
lightened.

I was caught up in the perfection of that instant,
a bubble in clear glass,
while dissolving rain
looked to fall.

To live without breathing!
Our gestures to become the ellipses of planets!
And to fall happily into an Earth complete enough for all
her children!

In a flash of time I knew
the blessedness of those who will never
have to worry about the righteousness of anything again!

**In the Township of Survivors**

Whether catastrophe or mere hazard
comes up the lane or across the fields
and quietly over the back fence
whether he arrives before or after sundown

it is always the same:
the front door is unlocked
there is an extra place at the table
and plenty of everything
The smiles for the visitant
are relaxed, full of the pleasure
of welcoming
and the aprons and the men’s quiet hands
are full of good surprises

For they know it all
the disaster of birth for instance
how it wrecks one world
in making another
Thrust by pain into
passion, hunger, breathlessness
we learn to crawl, to open and close
our hands, to take first separation
and then absolute loss

and see how worlds are wrecked all the time
and the new ones can be not better but
drier and more dangerous

and still the houses must be blocks
of what can be given up
with no doors that cannot be unlocked
and food stocked against the chance
of a stranger coming
very hungry

**Saturday Market**

The Amishman has a line
in front of his stand
They want his sugar snaps
because the peas are fatter
than other farmers’ and because
he piles them up with a free hand

He heaps them so high
the people wonder but you
can see by his satisfied eyes
giving a good deal
still makes a buck
His fingers are fat with muscle
and blunt callouses
You could hide
pennies in the lines around his mouth
his eyebrows have flourished
and the tender hairs vine
on each other

When I take my bag of peas
I make sure my boney fingers
touch his and I bounce the bag
from my hand to show how full
and happy our deal makes me and I
look quickly to catch the color of his eyes
dark like mine

Re-Baptism

with these leaves of mint
crushed till their bruises
pour back light through the skin

and with this water dipped
from the tank in the wellhouse
famous for its mineral cold

and with these hands that are like
other hands — you could name
their fingers one by one

and with each name say
I am going backward
and forward in the curved

space between arms —
with all these and the house
you came here in

I bless the quick angles of your thought
I bless every act of your hands
I bless every inward and outward movement of your heart

I send you
to the world
your last self
Close Call

Uniformed and well-armed bullies surrounded the car. Here, where his well-known piety and reliance on higher powers should have sustained him, M the cripple was secretly ashamed that he could only maintain his calm by an act of vanity, the desire not to act in any way other than what would be expected of the notorious M. His pale companions seemed relieved as he stepped out of the car to face the brute police. No doubt they anticipated a miracle, or at least heroic defiance and death. But M was terrified and feared his bowels would loosen. He was too frightened to speak, which gave him the appearance of dignified silence. The chief officer, looking stupid and mean, approached him where he stood by the door of the car. “Is M the cripple in that car?” M had to fight both tears and a giggle. “No, on my honor, no he’s not.” The officer looked suspiciously within and repeated his question. M leaned on his good leg, trying to appear casual. Satisfied by the answers of the trembling riders, the officer left. M the cripple sighed. He could feel his piety returning.

M the Murderer

That man locked in an argument with his wife, the young girl screaming at her parents, the youth looking enviously at his friend’s lover — how could they not understand they were murderers? M the cripple knew how many people he had killed, mentally, and he felt the murders hanging from his curved shoulders like ragged clothing. His famous refusal of violence was the natural result of his understanding of his murderousness. He held conversation with other killers every day, and none of them seemed to comprehend that he was in on the secret. A nation, a world of butchers, he thought to himself, and I, by giving away my apron, my sledgehammer, and my long sharp knife, have become the least-known one, the most secretive . . .
Men

The sale barn: sweat, cigars,
sawdust, four or five kinds
of manure. In the tight amphitheatre
of rising benches, I stand next to my father,
not knowing any other place to be
and not wanting to be young enough
to be seen holding his hand.
This is where the men are,
with the animals. They march them
through the ring — sheep, pigs, cows —
and the auctioneer’s “down biddadown”
sings dispassionately from behind a counter
set high so he can see everything.
His microphone is condensed
lightening, his messengers and bid-takers
run about the room, and at his right hand
sits a man with glasses, keeping accounts.
Above, the big blades of the ceiling fan
split the air into four parts. There are men
with long beards, men with smoking mouths,
men with wrists thick as my leg. I take
it all in, through my eyes, my nose,
I think I even take it in through my skin.