Book Reviews

Reviews of Fiction and Poetry

Joanne Epp, *Eigenheim*. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2015. Pp. 109. Softcover, $17.00.

For centuries, Mennonites have often been afflicted by a dissonance of simultaneously belonging and not belonging; of loving the land upon which they live and yet feeling that – in the words of a well-known hymn – "this world is not my home." Joanne Epp's book of poetry, *Eigenheim*, captures this dissonance in words of haunting beauty. Currently living in Winnipeg, Epp has family roots in the Mennonite church community of Eigenheim, in Rosthern, Saskatchewan. Since "Eigenheim" translates roughly as "one's own home," the book's title is both appropriate and ironic: Epp's poems weave an uncertain pattern between a longing for home and a compelling need to leave it.

The book is divided into eight sections, each a series of poems in its own right, but also part of an arc of thought and feeling that extends from cover to cover. The first section, "Catherine," may be the most "literary" of the eight, sometimes obscure, sometimes easily accessible, but always inviting the reader to decipher its underlying poetic and spiritual sense. From the start, the mood is dark; the darkness is broken from time to time, but Epp's primary impulse seems to be the examination – sometimes cerebral, often heartrending – of loss. The very first poem is a meditation on "names on stones," presumably grave markers:

She knows they are nothing: no bones,
no blood, only voices thin and shimmering
as spiderwebs. She knows how easily
they disperse, like dandelion fluff,
like feathers in the wind.
Their names are all that holds them here.

Throughout this section, a mysterious character, Catherine, moves through a dream-like world where nothing seems solid or permanent. She returns home only to find "strangers at her table, drinking her coffee." She visits a woman in a rocking chair where the silence is so deep that "They listen to the flies banging the window screens,/ each waiting for the other to speak." She writes postcards to herself and to her aunts that will arrive several months later: "she'll think she is reading someone else's words." And Catherine's travels do not end with any sense of ease: in the section's final poem, "Coming back," she stands at the door to a room which may or may not unveil the secrets of her life. She flees down the stairs, feeling relieved "because she almost went inside."

The next two sections comprise a partial break in the book's sense of unease. A series of poems entitled "This stone, and this" reflect on Epp's Mennonite past, and are imbued with a nostalgia for a time in which life seemed to be less complicated. The tone is intimate; the style, accessible. In "Elizabeth," a superb poem of five short snippets, Joanne Epp pays tribute to a woman who lived with quiet dignity:

... But that night I saw her
in a dream, walking through a wide room
like the kitchen in a church basement
with the same erect bearing, the same grace,
unnoticed by the other women, busy
making coffee, slicing buns, counting pies –
she walked through. That was all.

And the next series of poems, "The known world," continues the dip into "innocence" with its remembrance of things past, of childhood. Many of these relatively uncomplicated poems sketch moments in the life of a young girl: playing games; savouring her grandmother's stories; evangelistic conversions that "don't take"; puberty. "School followed summer followed school./ It would be like this forever." But even the bright days of childhood are interrupted by the disappearance and death of a young girl well-known in the community.

The last five series of poems in *Eigenheim* return to Epp's meditation on transience and restlessness, on her lingering sense of homelessness. The title of the section, "We're in a foreign country," perfectly encapsulates the prose-poems that follow. We live, Epp seems to be saying, in a world that is always just out of reach. "She looked at me through the Merlot and said: *You know, this is what God is like. A good wine, the kind you dance around with adjectives but never quite describe*. It was the only thing she said all evening." In the series, "Quietly but much too near," a world out of reach somehow draws too close for comfort, taking on a menacing quality:

> Faint cat-scratch, wanting out
> or wanting in. A shadow flits
> across the wallpaper. Something
> passed the front door.
> Someone outside just spoke.

The next section of the book, "Listen," is lighter in tone, referencing the classical music about which the author is clearly passionate. It includes the wonderful title poem, "Listen," in which Epp affirms a moment of cosmic unity: "How far can a whisper carry?/ How soft must our voices be/ to reach across the ocean?" The series, "Things I can't get rid of," deals with those menacing things that may weigh us down: cancer, miscarriage, abortion, suicide, abandonment, loss: "And for all my looking I can't find, anywhere,/ the last thing you said."

The final series of poems, "Desire and distance," chronicles a disquieting mix of restlessness and hope. The poet is in the grip of a desire to pursue a God who seems permanently beyond her grasp: "I'm chasing a glimpse of God/ that's always farther down the road." But here, as throughout this excellent book of poetry, Epp's intimations of incompleteness are suspended in moments of peace. Peering out from a rooftop at a land and sky that "erased" the ones who settled there, Epp writes,

> ... Even here
> on the sun-warm shingles,
> sheltered from wind, the world is too large.
> I'm afraid to move or look over
> the edge, but still – how easy
> to breathe up here.

Robert Martens
Abbotsford, British Columbia