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Homesickness

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Homesickness

Hugh Cook

It is true that my father wasn't the usual Dutch-Canadian immigrant.

"Hey Hennie," he said to me one evening after supper, "want to go down and help me mount a bird I shot? A red-tailed hawk, you should see it."

My mother was not feeling well again and sat by the living room window in her stiff-bristled, maroon velour chair. Supper dishes were still on the table and I knew she would not be of a mind to get at them.

"I'd better do the dishes first," I told him, fiercely proud he had asked me, a girl, and not my older brothers.

"Leave them," he said, "I'll help you with them later," and I followed him downstairs.

He was an outdoorsman and spent days in the bush. Hunting deer with a rifle had become too easy, had lost its challenge for him so now he used a bow, a beautifully laminated recurve bow. I loved to run my fingers over its glass-like smoothness, the tips curved like miniature skis. The arrows were black which he had touched up with splotches of green for camouflage, and he pointed out to me how the feathers didn't run straight along the shaft but curved slightly so the arrow would rotate and fly true through the air. The tips were shaped like the head of a harpoon, the barbs sharp as razor blades. During hunting season he would leave for the bush wearing a buckskin coat and a leather glove with the first three fingers cut off so he could pull the bowstring, and I longed to go with him. I asked him how he hunted deer and he explained how he scouted them until he knew exactly where they bedded, where they fed, in what directions they moved, explained how he took a stand in a tree and when a deer got within range he would aim for the chest cavity and if he got in a good shot he tracked the blood spoor until he found the deer, dead from hemorrhage. He would not take any of us hunting with him, and although I understood the reason for this I was not content, already jealous that someday my brothers might but I would not.

On the wall of his den he had hung animals, all of which he'd mounted himself. "The trick is to give them *expression*, Hennie," he would tell me. "Anyone can stuff an animal, but it takes an *artist* to give them expression. Take those ptarmigan now, see how the one looks startled?" Two of them stood on a piece of wood, one pecking at the ground, the other indeed looking up as if frightened. "And that owl, what would you say he is?" A great horned owl stared down at me with black eyes peering from beneath beetled brows, two tufts of feathers on top of its head like cowlicks of hair that would not sit down. *Haughty* was the only word that came to me and when I told my father, hoping it was right, he seemed pleased. After that, the other animals were easy. On a branch sat a Swainson's hawk, beak curved and sharp as if

carved by knife, its head cocked to one side in curiosity. On another wall hung a bobcat, teeth bared in a snarl, beside it a wolf with similar expression, ears pulled back in ferocity.

My father picked up the red-tailed hawk, its head lolling, and placed it on its back. He separated the feathers on its breast just as I might part my hair; then he took a razor blade and cut the skin from the hawk's throat to its vent, and for the next hour I stood beside him watching his hands meticulously free the skin from the body until it was totally loose except for at the neck, hanging like a cape. Then came the part I found difficult to watch. He took his wire nippers, curved the blades around the hawk's neck, and squeezed hard with a *clip!*, cutting through the neck. He placed the headless body, glistening and pink and shockingly small, in a pail. Then with a piece of coat hanger he poked around inside the hawk's skull to remove the brain, the scratching sound raising goose pimples on my arms. The brain fell out like a ball of snot. Finally he popped out the hawk's eyes with a scalpel.

"Get me the excelsior, will you?" he said, and I went to the cardboard box full of wood shavings used to wrap our dishes when we came over from Holland. He would use the excelsior to fashion the hawk's new body. He began treating the bird with Borax, rubbing the powder into its skin and skull, while I looked for a pair of hawk eyes: on the workbench were a number of small plastic cases, like the ones fishhooks are kept in, labelled with animals' names and containing my father's collection of artificial eyes. I loved to look at them as if they might be precious stones, deer eyes murky brown fringed with black, an almost fluorescent blue line running through the pupil; pheasant eyes, the yellow iris speckled with darker orange; and wood duck, black pupil in the center of a crimson iris. My favorite one was the coyote's eyes, which had a yellow iris freckled with tiny brown spots like egg yolk sprinkled with paprika, and a black pupil with a bright blue dot in the center. In one box I found a pair of hawk eyes, shiny and pure, which my father would insert in the skull once he'd filled it with clay.

He would finish the hawk another time, and began to clean up. I walked to the geological survey maps he had cut and pasted to fit precisely together on a wall, forming a squiggly pattern of brown lines running over swirls of green, white and blue. He had shown me exactly where on the map our place was and when I looked at it I felt proud, as if the government had given our home official recognition.

We lived on four acres on a gravel logging road in the Fraser Valley miles north of the farms along the river, all around us coniferous forest. My father worked in a small sawmill. Twenty yards from our house stood a barn in which we kept a sorrel mare named Brandy which I rode around the pasture, and two milk cows named Wilhelmina and Flo. My father milked the cows every morning but afternoon milking was my brothers' chore. After the school bus dropped us off at the highway and we walked the gravel road to our place I changed into an old shirt and pair of pants, put on my black rubber boots, and waded through the snow in my brothers' footsteps to the barn where they would bury their faces into the cows' flanks as the first milk hit *psing! psing!* against the bottom of the pail. The barn was an old thing with dirt floors and cobwebbed walls. Perhaps because we had all witnessed the elemental processes of mating and birth here, the barn seemed the natural place for us to declare our secret feelings, some more openly than others, my oldest brother Leonard scribbling his message inside the door in white chalk: L.V. + A.S. while a contradictory warning was posted by Billy and Karl: PRIVATE GIRLS KEEP OUT. Upstairs in the hayloft I told my friend Audrey Osinga my secret loves.

Beside the barn stood a whitewashed shed in which my father kept chickens, a

dozen or so white Babcocks that provided our eggs. The animal we enjoyed most, however, was a young black and white goat we kept tethered in the front yard during the summer to nibble grass. He would jump onto our backs if we hunched down on all fours and had a habit of snuffling in our pockets to steal goodies, so we called him Dief, the Dutch word for "thief." The name was doubly appropriate, however, for even as a kid the goat resembled an old man with buck teeth, reminding us of Prime Minister Diefenbaker.

"Oh, that's terrible," my mother said when she heard of it. She thought it disrespectful to make fun of the government and still had a picture of the Dutch royal family on the buffet in the living room.

The outside of our house was covered with unpainted shingles weathered to a dark brown, and whenever my father had to replace one the new shingle stood out like a piece of skin that had not suntanned normally along with the rest. Against the north wall of the house, the front, my father stacked a pile of wood every fall, providing our winter fuel. One Christmas we had such a snowfall my father had to shovel it off the roof, and he proudly held up a shovelful while my mother took his picture. When he was done he did not need to climb back down the ladder but just jumped off the roof into the snow, burying himself up to his waist.

That same Christmas Oom Albert and Tante Truus from Abbotsford came to our place for the day. Oom Albert was my mother's brother and owned a small garage. They had a daughter my age named Ria, whom I was glad I did not have to see often.

I was only seven that Christmas, and several days later my father told my brothers they could burn the Christmas tree.

"Take Hennie along why don't you," my mother said.

"Aw, she's too small. We'll just have to wait for her, she's so slow."

But my mother persisted, because all of us gone would mean quiet in the house. "Hurry up, Hennie," she said, "put on your things. And don't forget your scarf."

My brothers were waiting for me outside. The air was cold, wet snow was falling, and I was glad for my mittens. I put my hands in my pockets and hunched my shoulders. Leonard, being the oldest, had the honour of carrying the tree. He hoisted the trunk and dragged the tree behind him as if he were a hunter hauling a dead lion by the tail. They started off.

"Hey, where are we going?" I asked.

"Just follow us," Leonard shouted.

I managed to keep up with them a while, but then the snow began to slow me down and I could feel the first bites of cold through my mittens. When my hands began to hurt I took off one mitten and put my fingers in my mouth, surprised at how cold my fingers tasted and how warm my hand felt in my mouth. I thought of the wood stove in the kitchen and how nice it would be to hold my hands to it.

"Hurry up, Hennie!" They stood ahead of me, waiting, the trees dark behind them. Both my hands felt numb.

"I'm cold. How much farther is it?"

"We're almost there, now come on. You shouldn't have come then!"

They started off again, me trailing them. They moved closer to the back of the pasture, then entered the gully where the bush began. The snow had stopped falling. In the trees it was suddenly dark. My pants were wet now just above my boots, the skin irritated where the top of the boot chafed against my leg.

By the time I reached my brothers they had the tree all arranged, pieces of newspaper stuffed under it. Then Leonard held a match to the paper and stepped back. I watched the paper turn brown where the little flame licked, then it caught the

first branch and sprang into flame. Immediately the whole tree was ablaze with a crackling roar. I took off my mittens and held out my hands to catch the heat. I could feel the warmth seeping through my pants. The flames spurted high, crackling sharply, the tinsel caught in the branches fluttering in the blaze.

As abruptly as it had roared to life the fire died down, the gully pitch dark with the flames gone. I did not see my brothers beside me and looked around wildly in alarm, all the weight of the tree's blackness suddenly upon me. Then I caught a glimpse of my brothers against the night sky as they disappeared over the top of the gully.

"Hey, hey wait for me!" I scrambled up the steep slope, snow chilling me as it entered my boots and sleeves, and when I reached the top I could see my brothers far ahead, running towards the lights of the house in the distance. I ran, then fell, stumbling to catch up to my brothers in the dark, not wanting them to hear me crying with rage.

Especially those first years my mother found it difficult to adjust to Canada, an ailment my father called by its Dutch name, *heimwee*, which meant longing for home. She would often tell me stories about Holland, about her childhood, how she had started work at sixteen, and how she'd met my father. Or she showed me photographs of relatives caught in still poses, and she would tell me about each one in soft voice: "That's your Oma, she's 84. And that one is Volkert, who was killed by the Nazis." And it all seemed like another world to me, for unlike my brothers I remembered nothing of Holland.

Because of her *heimwee*, she was unable to do a number of things. Whenever I was over at my friends' places their mothers made next day's lunches after supper, mixing the pat of orange powder through margarine to give it colour, then spreading it on piles of brown bread to be covered with Gouda cheese and Spam and *rookvlees*; they canned beans and apple sauce and peaches in the summer, the kitchen steaming with water boiling on the stove, the counter and plastic tablecloth littered with slimy fruit and vegetable pulp; they spent all day Monday pushing the wash, piece by piece, through a wringer washer, hanging the clothes on the line outside in summer and in a dank basement in winter, their hands wet and chapped and red. My mother felt paralyzed to do any of these things. My father and I made our lunches, talking softly if my mother had gone to bed, my brothers also strangely quiet, as if there had been a death in the house, we ate our fruit and vegetables from cans which we bought at the Red and White in town eight miles away, and a woman down the road, an immigrant like ourselves but from some Slavic country, came in once a week to do our wash. My mother had homesickness.

Even during her better periods she was able to do only minimal tasks at home, cooking simple and predictably similar meals, and keeping the house reasonably clean, clean enough to suit my father, brothers, and me, but far short of the ideal of order and cleanliness maintained, for instance, by my Tante Truus who, when she visited, seemed almost afraid to sit in a chair. When my mother felt better she sat at the kitchen table writing letters to relatives in Holland, her sharp, pointed handwriting filling the blue airmail paper which she then folded and licked shut to form a neat envelope. I wondered how she always made whatever she wanted to say fit into such prescribed length, but now I wonder even more just what the letters contained, what portion of those first years she chose to communicate to family back home.

When not writing letters she sat in her maroon velour chair reading one Dutch novel after another which she borrowed from the church's library, keeping the rest

of us waiting after the Sunday morning service while she traded in her books, I with my father in the cab of our pickup in deference to my being a girl, my brothers in the back. Occasionally, if my mother felt I would enjoy or profit from a particular novel, she would urge me to read it and I would dutifully begin, but by the end of the week I would not have gotten very far for the novels all seemed to me as drab as the brown shopping bag paper the enterprising church librarian wrapped them in, and I knew my mother would not have the patience to keep the book another week while I finished reading it.

During her worst periods she was depressed, sitting by the window for hours at a time simply staring at the trees surrounding our place, looking out at the bush as if it were an extension of her own mind, containing mysterious, shadowed places. Her eyes would not blink or move an inch for long periods of time, and even when some distraction in the room drew her attention she turned her head languorously and looked with eyes that were out of focus as if she were staring at something far beyond the walls of the room. She slept much of the day and went to bed shortly after supper.

I wondered at times whether something could be done to make her feel better; even, I was afraid, whether my father might consider returning to Holland for her sake. But then I heard a man tell my father that his relatives in Arnhem laughed at him when he returned for a visit because he was still wearing the same suit he wore when he left, and I knew we would stay in Canada. As for me, despite the unsettling effect upon us of my mother's illness, I was convinced we lived in the best of all possible places, and did not see how she could ever long for another, did not see why she could not force herself to feel at home where we lived.

The spring I was eleven she suffered a nervous breakdown. The winter had been unusually long and hard, with snowstorms cooping us up in the house for days. Finally in late March the snow began to melt, turning out dirt road to mud. People stomped their feet on the mat at the back door before taking off their boots. That Saturday was one of those days your body feels sure for the first time that spring has come. My mother had lain in bed for several days and at supper time I went to her bedroom to see if she wanted anything to eat, but she said nothing. At eight o'clock I went in again to see how she was; she lay on her side, her head under the blanket and her knees drawn up, and when I asked her if she wanted anything she did not respond. I touched her shoulder but she would not answer. The room had been dark for days. I went to tell my father.

"I wonder if something's wrong with Mother. I don't think she's sleeping, but she won't say anything."

My father went to the bedroom and turned on the little light by the bed. "Nel," he said, "Nel." My mother did not move. He lifted the top of the blanket but my mother's hand lay on her temple, shielding her eyes. My father stroked her back, then after some minutes he rose. "I'd better call Rev. Hordyk," he said outside the bedroom.

Rev. Hordyk was there half an hour later. I did not go into the bedroom with them and after a while I heard their voices low in the hall. Then my father called Dr. Weber, who also drove out. After the three of them had been in my mother's room for what seemed a long time I finally heard the door open and I saw my father with his arm around my mother, her suitcase in his hand. She was wearing her housecoat and slippers, taking small shuffling steps. By the door I almost told her she should put on her boots but then my father put down the suitcase and carried her to Dr. Weber's car. Then he came back and told us she would have to go to the hospital

and that we should not wait up for him. We all knew "the hospital" was Essendale, a mental institute. I watched the car's red lights go down the road until they were blocked by the trees. Afterwards my brothers and I sat around hardly talking, scared and bewildered by what had just happened. Finally Leonard said, "We'd better go to bed," and started turning off the lights. In my room I prayed for my mother in Essendale, and thought of the rhyme chanted mockingly by kids at school:

Rooty-toot-toot, rooty-toot-toot,
We're the boys from the Institute,
We're not from Harvard,
We're not from Yale,
We're the boys from Essendale!

I could not bear to think of that, and turned on my brothers' castoff radio for company in my loneliness, listening to music until late, the last thing I remembered the radio transmission broken by rhythmic waves of static. Next morning I woke to music that seemed almost sacrilegious for such a serious Sunday.

The next weeks we shared responsibilities in the house, my father doing the cooking every day after he came home from work so that we didn't eat until late, my brothers trying to be helpful by doing the dishes but having little feel for it, their hands clumsy handling plates and cups, the milk glasses coated with a dull grey film. My father was allowed to see my mother once a week but we were not permitted to come along, and when he came home and we asked whether she was feeling better he said only that Mother was very ill and that it would take her a long time to get well. When May passed, then most of June, I began to long for her to come home and wrote short get-well notes and drew pictures of the house and the barn and the animals for my father to give her. By the end of June school was over and Karl graduated from grade eight. I wondered what kind of a vacation I would have.

Leonard got his first job that summer, working on a farm, and my father made an arrangement with Billy and Karl that he would pay them so much each for doing odd jobs around the yard, sawing wood, weeding the garden, cleaning the chicken shed. I felt offended that he had not included me, for the jobs certainly did not seem like anything I could not handle just as well as they. He must have felt puzzled what to do with me, reluctant to let me have the run of the place with my mother gone.

The solution, from his point of view, came the day that Tante Truus was over to clean the house. She'd called every week or two to hear if there had been any news about my mother and during one conversation told my father she would drive to our house for a day to do some cleaning. I think my father resented the offer but protested only weakly, and several days later Tante Truus drove into our yard. From the trunk of her car she extracted brushes, a broom, several pails, and a handful of rags, as if such things were foreign to our house. I'd felt the weight of her coming, and not wanting her to find the house a total disgrace had spent the previous day straightening out closets and cupboards, and hiding in the basement the objects of certain embarrassment: pans with burnt bottoms, cups with ears broken off, the wooden kitchen chair with wobbly leg, but these things were only cosmetic, I knew, compared with the damage I could not hide—the top of the wood stove caked with black rings, the spilled raspberry juice in the bottom of the refrigerator, the linoleum floors sticky with dirt—which Tante Truus would attack, wondering all the while how things could possibly get so far. Indeed, she spent the day washing, scrubbing, scraping—I assume, for I did not want to be present to witness the humiliation and stayed outside in the yard, watching now and then as she heaved a pail of dirty

dordt college press



Sign of a Promise and Other Stories

by James Schaap

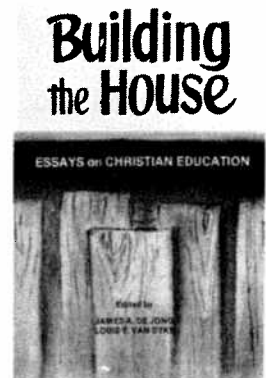
Sign of a Promise and Other Stories by James Schaap is a collection of short stories about first generation Dutch immigrants and their children on the American midlands—eastern Wisconsin through central South Dakota, areas which Dutch-Americans still populate. The stories take place in a time span from the mid 19th century to approximately 1920.

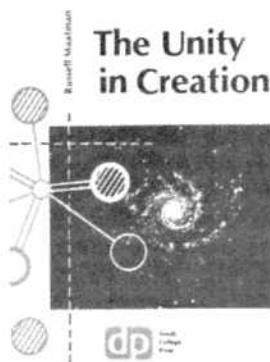
The stories included in *Sign of a Promise* are based on historical accounts printed in area histories or related to Schaap by people he has met. A variety of styles and stories are included—some humorous, some tragic, some sentimental. It records the failures and the triumphs which are a part of this nation's history.

Building the House

Edited by James De Jong and Louis Van Dyke

The chapters in this book, written by eight Dordt professors, consider some of the struggles and triumphs of the Christian education movement. They also confront such current problems as parochoiaid, the influence of world events and issues on Christian instruction, and the relation of the schools to the churches. They expose biblical concepts which are woven into the Reformed philosophy of Christian education, suggest something of the motivation of educators who teach in these schools, and treat curricular issues. Underlying the diversity in this collection is a deep, unified conviction that to educate the whole child in the fear of the Lord is both a glorious assignment and an awesome responsibility. The book is dedicated to Nick Van Til, and contains a chapter on his life and work.





The Unity in Creation

by Russell Maatman

A book about science written in plain talk, *The Unity in Creation*, addresses the question "Is there a Christian physical science?" The thesis of the book is that physical science is possible only because men know, even though they might suppress the idea, that God created the world and controls it.

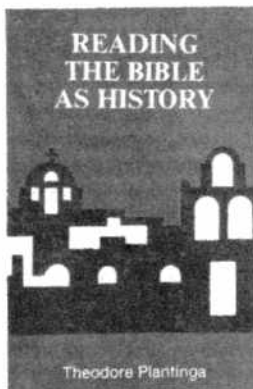
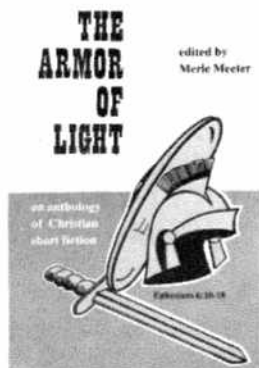
Dr. Maatman, Professor of Chemistry at Dordt College, designed *The Unity in Creation* to be useful to both the scientist and non-scientist. It is especially valuable as a resource book for Christian educators and teachers, college students, and serious readers with an interest in the sciences.

The Armor of Light

by Merle Meeter

What happens when Christians try to let their stories reflect their Christian faith? Many different kinds of stories appear, as is evident by the selections of Christian fiction included in this volume. Some stories, in one way or another, show a world in need of Christ the Savior. Others point more explicitly to people who found Christ as the answer to life's problems and riddles.

You will find stories by well-known Christian writers and stories by unknown Christian writers. But each, without being intrusive, reveals a faith both strong and true.



Reading the Bible as History

by Theodore Plantinga

There are many dimensions to Bible reading, and history is one of them. Yet history as presented in the Bible is more than facts and dates. It is first of all redemptive history, covenant history, the history of God's revelation of Himself.

This short, simply-written book explores the historical dimension of the Bible from many angles, including prophecy, the meaning of freedom, God's law, man's cultural calling, and eschatology. The author, who teaches philosophy at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, argues that the history recorded in Scripture is *our* history, for we, as twentieth-century Christians, are spiritual children of Abraham and therefore heirs to the promise he received.

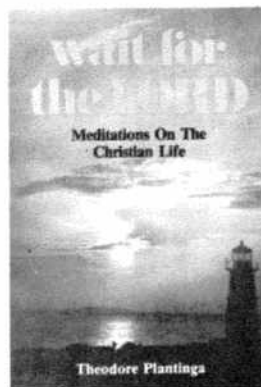
Wait for the Lord

by Theodore Plantinga

This book of meditations calls believers not to passive indifference in the face of events, but to *active expectation*. It is God who takes the lead and sets the pace, in human history as a whole as well as in the life of each of His children.

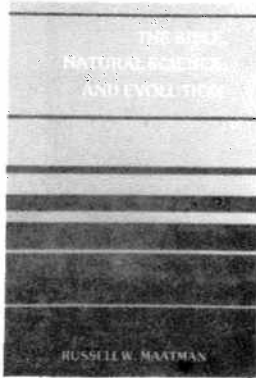
The God who reveals Himself in Scripture is a God of surprises. When we wait for the Lord, then we do not always know just what to expect.

These meditations touch on the spiritual pilgrimages of believers in biblical times and, in the process, they help to illumine our path as we wait for the Lord late in the twentieth century.



The Bible, Natural Science, and Evolution

by Russell Maatman



This book deals with a real and a difficult subject—the relation between natural science and the Christian faith. The author, a Professor of Chemistry at Dordt College holds that there are only two fundamental approaches to this question: that of the Christian and that of the non-Christian. The first part of the book is devoted largely to natural law and miracles, problems which non-Christians have with some recent scientific developments and popular misconceptions concerning natural science.

The ideas developed in the first part of the book contribute to the second part, where evolution is taken up. The author shows that any discussion of evolution must be divided into separate, but related, discussions of the several components of the evolutionary idea. The book written for Christian pastors, students, and scientists, will be a definite help for those who want insight into some of the controversial questions of our day.

International Politics and the Demand for Global Justice

by James Skillen

International affairs are no longer the private domain of foreign diplomats. Grain sales or embargoes vitally concern farmers. Auto imports or exports affect a large portion of the labour force. The politics of energy push every country into unwelcome corners of the global village. The threat of nuclear war hangs over the head of every citizen. Whether or not we are prepared to think about the complexities of international relations, those relations are already forcing us to change our lifestyles in dozens of ways.

The complexity of international issues today is almost overwhelming. The author points out that the Christian has a place and responsibility in determining global solutions.

This cannot be done haphazardly. The author, who is Adjunct Professor of Political Science at Dordt College, provides a thorough analysis and historical background to international problems in order that the reader may begin to formulate answers to questions like where are we? what should we do? and what responsibilities do we have in the global politics of today?

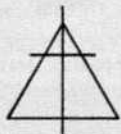
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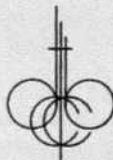
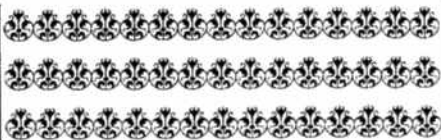
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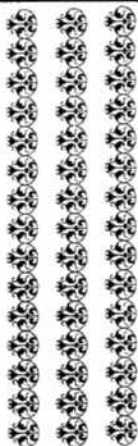
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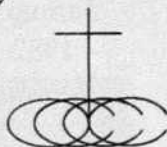
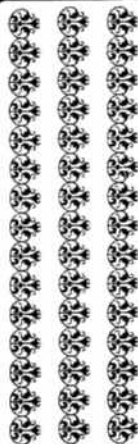


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CONCERT BAND

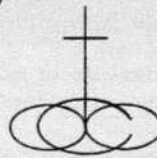
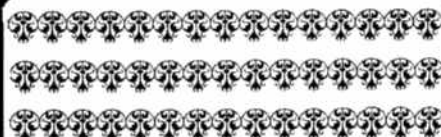


Be Thou Exalted, Lord is a series which will eventually result in a collection of each of the Psalms in the Psalter Hymnal. The performers are singers and instrumentalists from the Dordt College Music Department.

- Vol. I Psalms one to eighteen
- Vol. II Psalms eighteen to twenty-eight
- Vol. III Psalms twenty-nine to forty-six
- Vol. IV Psalms forty-seven to sixty-four



DORDT COLLEGE
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water into the grass from the back porch.

After supper my father called me into the house to explain that she had invited me to their place in Abbotsford to go berry picking with Ria, perhaps until my mother could come home.

"What do you think?" he said. "Want to?"

I did not feel much like going for I thought my mother might be well soon and didn't want to miss her coming home.

"I'd rather stay here," I said.

"Listen, I think it's better if you go. You'll be lonesome by yourself. Don't worry about us."

I knew what he meant when he said "by yourself," that it might not be pleasant for me to be the only girl among him and the boys. I wanted to tell him that this was nothing new for me but then, remembering how concerned I had been about the house before my aunt's coming, I was suddenly not sure whether that was the truth.

I packed my suitcase and left in the car with Tante Truus, feeling terribly betrayed by my father, and vowing to be back within two weeks.

It rained the first several days I was at my cousin Ria's, and we did not go berry picking. We hung around the house, talking in her bedroom. Her window looked out on a row of backyards filled with cedar fences soaking wet and swing sets dripping rain. Her bedroom was small and neat, like a motel room awaiting an occupant. She had hung a picture of Paul Anka above her bed and on a small table in the corner stood a fishbowl with two goldfish motionless in the water, their only movement the mechanical stirring of their fins.

Tante Truus was in the kitchen all day canning fruit, and for a while we helped her remove the pits from a crate of cherries. By late afternoon a batch of Mason jars stood on the counter and the air hung redolent with the sweet smell of sugared fruit juice.

At six o'clock Oom Albert came home from the garage. He took off his shirt at the kitchen sink and washed himself there, scrubbing Dutch Cleanser into his hands with a bristle brush. Suntan covered his face, his arms, and came down in a small V below his throat, the rest of his skin smooth and white like a boiled egg.

"You could leave me some room, Truus," he said in his high voice, removing from the sink some of the bowls my aunt had used in canning. Then he took off his socks and shoes, rolled up the bottom of his pants, and lifted one foot into the sink, washing it with a face cloth. When he finished washing his feet he dried them with a tea towel and sat down with the newspaper.

He'd hardly started reading when he snorted, "Hm, I see that Tommy Douglas is making an ass of himself again. Him and them socialists. What they need over there in Saskatchewan is a Social Credit government, Truus, like we got here. Bennett would straighten those farmers out pretty fast."

Tante Truus finished setting the table and called us to supper.

Oom Albert put down the paper with a loud rustle. "Come to think of it," he said rising from his chair, "that's the same place Diefenbaker's from. No wonder we got so much unemployment." He sat down. "Well, shall we start?"

I'd no sooner sat down than he began praying in Dutch, his voice a sing-song just like the one Rev. Hordyk used. He asked for a blessing on the food and that my mother be restored to good health and sound mind, then started to ladle steaming potatoes and beans onto his plate, mashing them all together with gravy, turning his plate with quick movements.

Tante Truus shoved a pan towards me. "Come on Hennie, help yourself,

meid." After a moment she spoke again. "I hope your father and the boys are all right out there all by themselves." I wondered what she thought went on at our house, "out there" sounding as if my father and brothers were camping out in the wilds.

"Ja," Oom Albert said, "no wonder Nel got lonely, *arme stakkerd*." It was a phrase I'd heard my father call animals in suffering. "Your father will have to move to town after this, Hennie, so your poor mother can have some company." And he began asking questions about our family, obviously prying in the hope that I would provide incriminating support for his conviction that my father was disgustingly unlike any other decent Dutch immigrant and that some pretty terrible things must therefore be going on at our house. And I, I lied unashamedly, describing how my mother baked pies, repainted our living room, and made clothes for me.

"Still," Oom Albert said, "I hope your father learns from this."

After supper Ria asked if I felt like reading comic books and I said all right, but the ones she took out of her closet were *True Romance* comic books about beautiful girls who always ended up being jilted, every story concluding with close-ups of their faces with huge tears spilling from the corners of their eyes.

"How old are you gonna be when you get married?" Ria asked me. I sensed by the urgency in her voice how important the question was to her and couldn't tell her I hadn't even thought about it.

"When I graduate from high school I'm gonna get a secretary's job in Vancouver and start saving for a hope chest right away," she said, her voice flat as if all the excitement of her future had been expended in dreaming it up and all that remained now was the mundane reality of fulfillment.

The next days turned hot with the previous days' humidity still heavy in the air and we went berry picking, getting up at 5:00 in the morning, reaching the field by 6:00, then crouching in the hot soil picking strawberries until late afternoon, my fingers stained a deep red and my back aching and sunburned. That first day I made three dollars, Ria five.

Tante Truus seemed to think we had done quite well. "Just think," she said, "after several weeks you'll be rich."

The truth was that after several weeks I was ready to go home. I longed for our own house, for the yard with Dief nibbling grass, for a ride through the pasture on Brandy, for my father and the smell of sawmill wood on his clothes, longed even for my brothers.

Then my father called one evening and I could tell from my aunt's response that my mother had been allowed to come home. Then Oom Albert talked to my father, saying "Sure, sure, that's fine." Finally the phone came around to me and my father confirmed that my mother had been released from the hospital. "But listen, Hen," he said, "I think it's better if you stay there a bit yet so it won't be too busy for her right away."

"How long?"

"Let's say a week or two."

"Two weeks!"

And then I was filled with resentment, resentment toward my father for the implication that it was my presence and not my brothers' that made it too busy for my mother, toward my uncle for his high, hectoring voice, my aunt for her cleanliness, toward Ria for her dullness, resentment toward all of them for standing around the phone so that I was prevented from saying how much I disliked it here and how desperately I longed to come home.

I spent the next few days scheming of ways I could create sympathy towards

myself and be allowed to come home. I could fake stomach cramps, have mysterious headaches, eat green apples and have diarrhea.

Then, as it turned out, it was a stupidity, my own dumb stupidity that allowed me to come home. One of the kids in the neighbourhood had a bow although without arrows, and I set out to teach Ria how to shoot. I cut a maple branch, peeled off the bark with a knife and whittled the head to a point, even made the slot in the tail for the string. I showed Ria how to rest the arrow lightly on her left hand, to pull back the bowstring with the first three fingers, then to release, but the arrow curved through the air, always veering past the target.

"That's one lousy arrow," Ria said.

"Yeah, and I know the reason. It's because it doesn't have any feathers."

But even if we found feathers, how to cut them and glue them to the arrow? It would have to be something other than feathers.

In the basement of Ria's house I found what we needed: pieces of roofing tin. Ria gave me Oom Albert's tin snips and I cut three little parallelograms of tin that, because of the sharpness of their edge, I would be able to push right into the arrow's shaft. The purist in me said I should paint one of the three pieces, just like the one green feather among the two white ones on my father's arrows, but now was no time for perfection. I fit the pieces of tin into the arrow's shaft.

"Let me shoot it first," Ria said.

"No, I'd better try it." I pointed the bow into the air, rested the arrow lightly on my left hand, and pulled back the string, dramatically lowering the bow until the arrow tip pointed at the target.

I did not even feel the tin slice through my hand. But suddenly the blood spurted, welling over my hand, and I felt my thumb hang loose.

Oom Albert raced me to emergency. Afterward he called my father and I was right about the sympathy part. As I was driven home that evening, my hand encased in stiff white bandage, I sat trying to summon whatever strength and bravery I could, strength and bravery I would need to face the certain scorn of my father and brothers toward something so dumb it could only have been done by a girl. Never mind. I was going home, home.

The next year my father sold our place and we moved to New Westminster so that my mother could be in the company of more Dutch people. She suffered another nervous breakdown five years later. My father still works in a sawmill on the Fraser River beneath the Queensborough Bridge.

And I have learned some things about myself since then. People often told me at the time that I looked exactly like my mother and this irritated me terribly, convinced as I was that the resemblance was more perceived than real and that people said this to me out of a widespread conspiracy that young girls *ought* to resemble their mothers. I did not wish to look like my mother. I did not like the way she dressed me Sundays in stiff dresses, the large hair ribbon which she liked to put on top of my head, and the old coat of hers from Holland which she had a tailor remodel to fit me. Looking at myself in the mirror now, however, I suspect that not only were people speaking the truth but that now I am beginning to resemble the person she once was, in outward appearance at least, even more. Now, capitulation has dulled her eyes, rounded and swollen her face, but when I look at photographs of her as she was in Holland, then I see I have her eyes, bulging slightly beneath eyebrows that seem permanently half-raised as if in constant surprise, eyes that pierce out like those of a startled bird. I have her hair, curly stuff that refuses to do what I want and to whose will I have had to learn to resign myself if I was to live with it at all. And I have the

angular features my mother had then, nose, mouth, chin, that suggest both our faces might have been whittled by a sharp knife.

I have never been back to Holland, and now, after twenty-three years, I have decided it is time I go. The travel agency in Vancouver has mailed me my ticket, my name and address neatly typed in black on the first page, in progressively fading red carbon through the ticket's waxy pages, pages filled with mysterious numbers and abbreviations I do not understand but which enable me to cross an ocean and, eight hours later, step off in the country which my mother so faithfully, so obsessively for twenty-three years, always considered home.

I am going in order to discover whether the stories she told me of Holland were embellished by time and distance, or whether they were true. I may discover something about her, about myself, and just how much of this story I have told you is, after all, true.