
Pro Rege

Volume 40
Number 2 *Fine Arts Issue 2011*

Article 26

December 2011

Of No Fixed Address

Bill Elgersma
Dordt College, bill.elgersma@dordt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Elgersma, Bill (2011) "Of No Fixed Address," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 40: No. 2, 32 - 35.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol40/iss2/26

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Of No Fixed Address

Bill Elgersma

“We have an American student living with us”—these words came as a shock to me, and I felt the instant need to correct. But I kept silent—they were spoken by my daughter’s host parents in the Netherlands, where I was a guest. No need to cross all the t’s and dot all the i’s. Interestingly, earlier that day at Schiphol, upon inquiring about the correct train to take, I heard something similar from the gentleman at the information booth directed toward me. There I did correct the country of origin with “well, Canadian actually; I have just lived in the States for 30 years.”

Only several months later did I realize the absurdity of the correction. Thirty years is long enough to have witnessed the explosion of Challenger, Chernobyl, the birth of new countries—in Canada’s case, a new province—the death of relatives, the marriage of children, and the gradual progression in age until we now look in the mirror and do not recognize the person staring back at us. The passage of time blurs lines, but as I consider my transition to the States, I do not see through the flag as lucidly as I once did. While I recognize the differences, and upon returning home, am reminded all too clearly, reflecting on the world of my migration and comparing it to that of my parents who relocated from the Netherlands, my children have little sense of what immigrating really is.

Growing up in Canada, the Niagara Peninsula to be specific, we didn’t think much about nationalities. Survival was the focal point. My parents had emigrated from the Netherlands early—which means prewar, as in the Second World War. They came to Canada to make a living, start a life, get away from a land that didn’t seem to want them.

Between the Depression and the war, there was not much left in the old country, and what was left went to the oldest child; so, most who immigrated during that time were younger siblings with essentially the clothes on their backs and a steamer trunk or two. In sum, we were a future-looking family who were poor. So were most of the rest who came over, but it didn’t matter.

We didn’t need to tell anyone we were Dutch. Tell them your last name and then proceed to spell it. Pin the tail on the country was a game that everyone played, and each country came with its classification. Being Dutch meant being cheap; it also meant doing business within its community. IGA may have had Gouda, but we bought it from the Dutch store. The accent of the owner aged the cheese and improved the flavor even if the price was outrageous. Our Polish neighbours worked hard attempting to coax a living from the land. At his wife’s funeral Victor gave her his ultimate compliment: “She was a hard worker.” The MacMillans flew a Scottish flag, and old man MacMillan’s shift work—including Sundays—at the steel plant in Hamilton was a foreign concept to us, as were the hard hat, safety glasses, and steel-toed boots that came with his employment. He drank hard, womanized, and swore. We stereotyped.

Only in retrospect do I realize the homogeneity we culturally embraced. A student recently explained to me that while America was a melting pot, Canada was a mosaic. Mosaic nothing. Arriving in the 1920 and ‘30s, my parents were simply happy to be here and willing to do whatever was necessary to exist. Although some who arrived in the sprawling expanse of this country with few canals and more forest than Holland could ever know sought to maintain a semblance of their past, we just tried

to fit in—live. The wooden shoes were gone as were the little Dutch curtains. No *mattenklopper*¹, rusk buns, *sneijboontjes*², or *komijnkeas*³; we lived and ate Canadian. In our house that meant vegetables, whatever would grow in our garden. The beans, beets, turnips, kale, and peas were boiled until they could be mashed into a creamy texture that blended well with the potatoes and gravy.

Again, in retrospect, what we ate reflected our parents' heritage. When the cauliflower was ripe, it went into the pot, the whole head, and when boiled to appropriately tender—mash-worthy—it was extracted, cut into pieces, and drowned in a white sauce. The white sauce was a mystery, some sort of thick, gelatinous substance that was dusted with paprika, which made the large oval dish of cauliflower scenic. Where that ooze completely blanketed the vegetable, the effect looked not unlike the Smoky Mountains—now that I know what the Smokies are. These veggies were not the Rockies; the extended boiling softened those sharp edges so that smoother ranges appeared on the platter, a sort of culinary erosion gently following the contours of the entrée to create valleys and rivers where the sauce pooled like a lava flow on the bottom of the plate. This was white food, and we worked hard enough not to worry about eating healthy.

The roast endured similar treatment, cooked until no two muscle fibers were conjoined. It fell apart. Well-done was the only done. We healed things that were pink, or else we called the vet—“rare” was not in our vocabulary. Spices and seasoning meant salt and pepper: no garlic, no onions, no peppers. An occasional bay leaf might float into the soup, but that was it. While we believed we were reasonably broad-minded about our culinary forays, my father drew the line at pizza, spaghetti, and macaroni, which in our home were known, ironically, as poor man's food.

I suppose one of the few family traditions that carried over from the old country was the celebration of birthdays and anniversaries. These events were cause for extended family gatherings, and since one of my uncles owned a Dutch bakery, *gebakjes*⁴ would arrive in a large rectangular box. Pastries bulging with real whipped cream and flakey crusts that explained the size of several of my aunts were a highlight of our year. My mother's frugality—based in part on her heritage and in part

from having nine children—meant that the *gebakjes* were cut in half. But half of bliss is still bliss, and we quietly went our way after a dutiful hello.

But more significant than the treats at special occasions was the genuine connection to family. Time stopped for relatives. Cards were out unless the relatives lived too far away to drop by. Weddings, anniversaries, and birthdays kept us connected, and handshakes and congratulations were in order. Uncles we saw on only those occasions would greet us with an outstretched hand and “Congratulations on your father's birthday”—only pronounced “Congradulaceonces on your fadder's burse day.” This salutation would continue until all in the family were met. (This often meant that aunts had to do the directing because they actually knew our names, sort of, as opposed to uncles, who viewed us as part of the livestock on the farm.) Weddings and anniversaries, particularly those anniversaries of note—25, 30, 35 and 40—required a major celebration that included either the church basement or a hall, if one was conveniently located, and the festivities went through the night.

All came dressed in Sunday best, but as the night progressed and the liquor flowed, the ties and lips loosened. Men we did not know talked across tables with little concern for our eavesdropping ears. No longer simply appendages to rotund aunts, these uncles, whom we referred to as Adolph or Joseph (we didn't know Mussolini's first name, so Uncle David was Mussolini) were the living, breathing Resistance—the Underground, who spoke of cutting telephone poles at night for firewood while knocking out the communications and power of the Germans who occupied their homes. Uncle Bass, a mysterious escapee from a concentration camp, talked of people and places none of us could comprehend and, when particularly bleary-eyed, lectured us on the value of land we inhabited and the sacrifices made to keep it free.

However, after the relatives left, we were back to being Canadians. The old country was simply that. When an aerogram arrived, with its foreign stamp and its blue envelope cleverly designed to double as writing paper, we were vaguely connected, but the MacMillans just down the road, the Direnzos near them, and the Placinis a mile east of us were equally important as family. Each and all of us contributed to the others' existence.

In the world of farming, silo-filling brought the neighbours together, complete with tractors and equipment. Each, in turn, traveled to the others' farms, a battered array of ancient equipment in tow. All of us had big families, and the boys came too, when school was over, to climb into the silo while it was being filled, to tramp silage, to shuttle wagons back and forth, and to load and unload corn onto the conveyor while the men ran the equipment and kept the belts on the pulleys driving the blowers. Mothers prayed for safety.

The equipment was old, cranky, and dangerous, but money was harder to come by than caution, so everyone was expected to understand safety and consequences. The shields to protect operators had either not been invented or long since been discarded as cumbersome. Existing also meant a certain level of excitement, and seeing what the day brought made it worth getting up for. One year, when Donny went through the beaters of the manure spreader in early December and was chewed up quite badly, farmers shook their heads—"but what kind of an idiot sleds behind a manure spreader while it is running?" Ralph died when the silage blower grabbed his arm as he removed a plug, but he knew better than to reach in, and Doug's brothers died in a whey pit after the pump failed and they were overcome by the toxic gases—"Never should have put the pigs on whey." That was the cost of life where we lived. We mourned and grieved and got back to work. Missing digits and limbs were reasonably common, and catching sight of someone on crutches at the feed mill meant we filled in for a neighbour who would be laid up for a while. Old timers limped, and canes were an essential appendage of their lives as bodies no longer bore up under the strain of eeking out an existence in a hostile environment. We didn't have much, but collectively we had enough to get by as we struggled under the flutter of the Maple leaf.

Thirty years later, that lifestyle is ancient history. Sitting in front of my computer 1200 miles away, I watch as Google Earth brings up the farm for me, but that farm is pretty much gone. The fence that lined the laneway, four boards high, reclaimed from a wooden silo we took down because of its disuse, is gone; the barn is tired, and the trees I planted to improve the place have either died or been cut down. It doesn't look like the going con-

cern that forced us out of bed early in the morning to milk cows or properly align the Case to the buzz saw so that the belt would stay on as we cut wood to feed the voracious wood furnace for the winter. The array of sheds—the chicken coop, the goat shed, the pump house, lean-to, milk house, implement shed—gone. A barn and a house, weary and haggard, remain. The stump fence that lined the fields, vertical spiders with legs reaching into the sky—eerie silhouettes at dusk—have been removed or burned, and nothing remains of the existence we attempted to hew from the land.

Just down the road new places have sprung up. I suppose 30 years is enough time for that to happen. The newer farms look much more like the area where I now live. The barns are fresh; the equipment is "shedded," and the houses are young and perky. Farmers are thriving even as they worry about the crops, rain, and price of grain. And here I sit looking at my screen as it looks at my past, which in many ways resembles my present.

In America, I am a Canadian. My green card says so even if the INS in Halifax detained me for two hours because the picture does not look like me. Thirty years of living will do that to a picture. The Port Huron authorities also challenged the card because it does not have an expiration date—something that suits me just fine. No renewing, no remembering. But in some ways I am the immigrant in America that my parents were in Canada. My parents spoke no Dutch in the house, and we learned no Dutch because they were Canadians. I only realized that English was their second language after my fiancé made the comment, "I didn't know your parents had accents."

While Canada does not speak another language for the most part, my accent is there. "Out, about, and house" tell on me. The more I think about speaking, the stronger the accent becomes. "Ahmen" and "aymen," "nyther" and "neether," "been" and "ben," "zed" and "zee"—some things don't change, and as I get older, the grade-school instruction seems to appear more easily—so much so that I no longer know which is which.

Other traditions exist, engrained from upbringing. Shoes come off at the door, even if we do live in town. Etiquette demands eating with a knife and fork; there is no edge on the side of a fork, no elbows on the table, and no smacking food when

eating. Hearing it does not make food taste better. But much like my parents north of the border 70 years ago, I have been forced by 30 years of living in America to acclimate. While I understand Canadian hostility and distrust of all things American, I no longer feel the need to be defensive about my place of residence and employment. Several years ago, a relative proceeded to generalize all of America into a particular category—something that writing classes call a fallacy of reasoning—and much to my surprise, I came to the defense of America—not something that happens often. I proceeded to use the skills I had honed from growing up with a mixture of Canadian and Dutch backgrounds and from the education and experience I have gleaned in the States, and verbally poked the person in the eye. Offense was taken, and I was dismissed as having been lost to the dark side. Candor and frankness comes as a merging of Dutch and Canadian culture. Mincing words or waffling leaves content open to interpretation, and if that is the intention, so be it. However, if the point needs to be made, heritage will make it clearly. For those offended, a thicker skin would help.

Unlike my parents, who were not concerned with the feelings of those around them, I have allowed diplomacy to make its way into my life—I think before I speak, weigh my words, and decide what has more value—truth or peace. Now as a guest north of the border, I acquiesce to the jabs that come from family. As I live in a country of 300 million people where lunacy is going to happen, the home country, with a population one tenth the size of the U. S., limits the likelihood of crazies. Sure the occasional freak will materialize, but like the rioting of the G-20 Summit of 2010 in Toronto, the problems in the homeland are attributed to other parts of the world.

And so, as odd as this sounds, the hosts in the Netherlands were right. My children are Americans. Although dual citizens, they have no ties to Canada and will not be moving there any time soon. But with the speed and luxury of technology, I do not endure the isolation and alienation that my parents' generation must have felt. An email, facebook, text away—that is our world. So I am no more or less disconnected than family members who live within two hours of each other and only gather at Christmas.

But even as I attempt to blur this border distinction, I must admit I am not changing my citizenship unless the cost of a green card becomes prohibitive. True, as I age, the distinctions between the two lessen. My parents moved because there was no farm to inherit; the jobs had vanished, and Canada looked like a land of opportunity. My situation is not the same. I did not feel forced to move; it happened almost out of convenience. The job opportunity or maybe the location arose, and I took it. Still, some things have changed—the traditions are all but gone. Few culinary delights vary between countries with the exception of Tim Horton's, white vinegar on French fries, and Bick's red relish. But I have noticed Tim Horton's branching out into the States; I found red relish in Michigan, and malt vinegar sort of works, so the grip keeps weakening as exclusivity diminishes. It seems that while I will not be an American, I cannot be a Canadian.

¹ *mattenklopper*—mat or rug beater

² *sneiboontjes*—green beans

³ *komijnekaas*—Dutch cheese with cumin in it

⁴ *gebakjes*—cream filled pastries