

SIDE BY SIDE BY

1. *Still Life with Menno*

2. *No Stone*

Magdalene Falk Redekop and Elizabeth Falk

1. *Still Life with Menno*

THE PICTURE HAS ALWAYS BEEN SO vivid in my mind's eye that I am surprised to see how fragile it really is. I peel it carefully from the sticky yellowing surface of the photo album. I must have done this before because there is already a small rip on one edge. The paper seems dangerously thin, not like the stuff now used by Kodak. I turn it over. On the back, in a round, childish hand, is pencilled: "On this picture I and my sister are side by side by brother Mano who died."

His name was really Menno. My adolescent self must have cringed seeing this spelling error. I'm surprised that I haven't erased it. *Mano* is the flat Low German way of saying Menno, the way that gives you away, for sure, as being a *Mannonite*. It is rare, in any case, for Mennonites to name their sons after Menno Simons. Would my parents, I wonder, have chosen a different name had the child been born alive?

"Brother Mano who died." What was I thinking of? Man? Oh? He would have been Brother Falk if he had lived to be part of the brotherhood of *die Stillen im Lande*. Right away I start to give him an argument. To begin with, he wasn't "brother Mano who died": he was born dead. Stillborn. I used to wonder about that word when my mother spoke, with a certain pride, of the noise that she always made when she was in labour. Could they hear her all through the hospital or was this a still one? *Doutgeboere*: the Low German word is more brutally correct. Birth and death organized life on our farm in southern Manitoba but here it was a death before birth that challenged all our orders. My mother's womb was his first burial place. His last one, in the cemetery in Altona, is marked with a stone. I haven't been back there in years, but I think I remember the words on the stone: *Der Herr hat's gegeben; der Herr hat's genommen*. This was a puzzle. How could the Lord

take back what he had not yet given? The words were carved on the stone by my mother's brother, but they are a duplicate of other words on other tombstones. In Altona, Prussia, in Altona, Russia, in Altona, Manitoba — you can hear the echo, always with the same end: *Gesegnet sei der Name des Herren*.

I cannot read those words without hearing the deep voice of my father, who was a preacher. My father could make the *s* in *Gesegnet* vibrate; he could make the *m* in *Name* hum; he could make the *r*'s in *Herren* roll so that the sheer richness of his voice drowned all questions. But they always came back. How could brother Menno be in heaven before he had fallen on earth? This Menno was surely no anabaptist. How could he be born again before he was born? And how, above all, could we praise either the name of the Lord or the name of brother Menno?

And praise him we did. He was, after all, part of the Falk family and family pride was quite capable of turning the death itself into a kind of cosmic compliment. The babies that died were the ones that were too good to be true. They were always the most beautiful, spiritually and physically. The family consensus was that Menno was a handsome child. If you look at the picture for evidence of this it is hard to see anything at all in the screwed-up face. Life is in the eyes, they say, and the eyes that greet you are the eyes of "I and my sister" — the sad eyes of my sister Elizabeth and my own eyes, so flooded with *angst* that there is no space left for sadness.

My teacher would have corrected me and told me to say "on either side of" rather than "side by side by." Was it the photographer who made the decision about where to put the coffin? Teacher, father, preacher, photographer — all authorities seem to agree that it is a simple matter. From my pencilled caption, however, you can tell that for me there are still matters left over. What I felt — what I feel most right now — is the impossibility of dealing with them without my sister by my side. In actual fact, of course, she is on the other side of the coffin. The coffin could be a barrier or it could be a bridge. That depends on how the story is told.

WE SIT, MY SISTER AND I, ON OUR TOY CHAIRS, WITH OUR HANDS IN OUR LAPS — clenched as tightly closed as the eyes of the baby in the coffin. We might be playing with a doll. "She's a doll" they now say of such little girls. Menno's death fixed me, permanently, as the baby in the family. When I was an adolescent I would squirm in an agony of embarrassment when my parents announced me to guests as their baby. Maybe it was because I was the last of a dozen that my mother was so urgent about wanting me to reproduce. She began by giving me dolls. If I wanted to escape being the baby, I could play at being a mother. I did so with a vengeance, fiercely hoarding my large collection.

I remember the last doll my mother ever gave me. It was always her custom to come into our room first thing on the morning of our birthday and, when we were still half asleep, surprise us by producing the present, unwrapped, from behind her back. This doll was as big, she told me, as I had been when I was born. But for its exceptional size, the doll was like all my other dolls: an image of a baby. Not for me the fancy bride dolls or grown-up dress-me dolls. Perhaps because of the strict injunction against graven images, I did not name any of them. It was enough that some of them could cry and some could even wet their diapers.

I should have named my last doll. It was certainly the most realistic doll I had ever had. It even wore a real baby's woollen cap. Many years later, after I had left home and after dozens of grandchildren had played with it, the soft pink plastic of the legs and arms began to disintegrate and eventually even the face was deformed. I try to imagine my mother's feelings on the day when she was finally moved to throw the doll into the garbage. I should have done that myself. How it must have pained her to do so before I had produced a grandchild. Birth control she must have seen as an interference with what the Lord giveth. We did not talk about it. Much later, after my mother died, it became a problem of infertility and I wondered if she would have understood that better. The Lord taking away before he had given, that was easier for the mother of Menno than us choosing to take matters into our own hands. Punishment for having dared to control — that was even easier. We did not speak of these things but my mother did give me the woollen cap that my last doll had worn. I still have it but I was not tempted to use it when I became a mother.

Like my last baby doll, Menno is wearing a woollen cap, presumably in preparation for a winter grave. My sister and I are dressed for the warmth of the house in identical dark plaid dresses made by my mother. Who made the woollen cap? Could it be one that I wore when I was a baby? I have looked often at the toddlers in the picture, looked with the paralyzed eyes of nostalgia at our compressed lips, our haunted eyes, at our unbraided hair, at our rumpled stockings. My high shoes mark me as the younger of the two girls but I am, for once, not the baby in this picture. I remember looking at the picture, but what do I remember of that day? How curious that we remember almost nothing of our early, most formative years. We have no choice but to live according to some version of those early years handed to us by our elders. I must trust somebody's memory or live with a blank.

I do remember a brief glimpse of an older sister walking up the stairs with our pink enamel baby bathtub — the one we later used for years to wash our feet before bedtime. I think I remember thinking that it was mine and that, besides, it was the wrong colour, but maybe I am making that up. Years later, even my father used that bathtub. He was a big, strong man but he used to quote, with apparent pleasure, his mother's comment that his skin would always be like baby skin. When he wounded himself on some farm implement, we would fetch camomile plants

from the ditch while our mother prepared hot water in the pink bathtub. Night after night he would bathe his wound. Sometimes I wondered if it would ever get better.

On this night, however, the night before Menno's burial, the pink bathtub was filled not with hot water but with ice. I know this for a fact. And yet I cannot remember whether I actually saw the ice or the body. I do not remember, and yet I know that we were not allowed to go into my father's *staefche*, the tiny upstairs room in which he prepared his sermons. This place of stillness had temporarily been turned into a place for the preparation of the dead, a place to read sermons in stones.

Is that what my father said in his sermon on that day? My memories cannot be kept apart from what I have read in the more than forty years since that day, from what I have seen and heard and from what others in the family make up or remember. To the Mennonite gaze the open coffin is a familiar object, a family possession, not an obscenity or an object of horror. It is as richly familiar and as empty as those chests which came from Russia, once containing all the earthly belongings of an escaping family. I have seen them, over and over in many photo albums: pictures of babies in small, plain boxes; of patriarchal features displayed in long, narrow boxes against a whiteness which could be either Russian snow or Canadian snow. Often there is somebody leaning over the coffin crying or trying hard not to cry.

The figure I see clearly is my father, William, standing beside the coffin that contains his first wife Sarah. His clenched right fist is held to his eye as if holding up his head, which falls forward limply like the head of a rag doll, too large for the body. The snow on the picture looks dirty, the way it would in spring, but that must be the earth from the grave, or perhaps just the muddy look of spreading sepia. My father's first wife died on Christmas Eve; the snow in southern Manitoba would have been clean and the ground hard as a rock. Still, there was new life then too. The Lord had taken and given, sending my sister Sarah as a Christmas gift as He took her mother Sarah to heaven.

Some time later the Lord gave in another way (with a little help from my father) when Elisabeth Schellenberg, who had worked as my father's maid, took the name Falk and came to be a stepmother to the six children of Sarah who had once been Friesen. This was no collection of dolls but my mother was young, energetic, an expert already at milking cows and changing diapers. Besides, she had help. The oldest stepdaughter was as old as the stepmother. I was married myself before I saw an actual photograph of William and Sarah and their six children. What I remember most is not pictures but my mother trying desperately, often clumsily, to do honour to the memory of that other mother. The history of that first family seems to exist on another level, apart from what I know, and yet it is at the same time part of my own world. Here too there were infant deaths. The Lord gave and

took a William, then gave another William. The Lord gave and took an Anna. This family picture lies under the one of William and Elisabeth and their six plus six children. Minus the four, altogether, who died. It is not a double exposure without pain.

FOR SO MANY DEATHS, how can there ever be enough tears? The only person I remember crying at my brother Menno's funeral is my sister Mary. There had been another Mary who died of pneumonia at the age of ten months and there is still another photograph. Although that picture, too, was taken before my birth, I see it now superimposed on the picture of brother Menno. That picture was underexposed and there is no sepia here; not yet. It is all in black and white. The double negative shows my mother as a tall, slender figure hovering like a shadow over the box that is propped up against a predictable pile of snow. The very snow seems more black than white. The wall of the house behind it is unpainted, grey. My mother's hands are clutching the collar of her black coat. Her face is lost in the shadow of her black hat. It wasn't supposed to matter what pain was on the face hidden in this mocking chiaroscuro. My mother's Lord knew best and he soon sent another baby as a replacement for the one he had taken away. On her birth certificate she is registered as Maria but we have always called her Mary.

That's the Mary I mean — the Mary that cried at Menno's funeral. I don't actually remember her crying. What I remember is that her nose was running. Like the first Mary, she often had a cold and when she got pneumonia you can believe that she had special care. My mother would squeeze fresh orange juice which Mary drank from a special cup lavishly decorated with tiny red roses and rimmed with shining gold. We were kneeling side by side, I and my sister Mary, kneeling at our chairs while our earthly father prayed — a typically long, long, long prayer — to our Heavenly Father. What I remember — surely I could not be making this up — is that her mucous formed a thread from her nose down to the seat of her chair. Perhaps I remember this because I felt guilty for not having my eyes closed. Mary herself remembers feeling that she should not get up to fetch a handkerchief during a prayer.

I did not understand why Mary was crying, nor do I remember crying myself. What I do remember is that my mother and older sisters told me, again and again in the years after Menno's funeral, the story of how I demanded at breakfast to have *Mama-biet*, when I meant marmalade. *Eck vell Mama-biet*. I still puzzle over whether or not there is a Low German word for marmalade. It seems such an English kind of food and the marmalade we ate was made of rhubarb. In the mother tongue my demand came out as: I want a bit of Momma, or I want to bite

Momma. This amused the sisters taking care of me since our mother was absent. I have heard the story so often that I feel as if I remember saying it. I liked to imagine my mother afterwards comforted with this story, reminded that she still did have a baby after all.

My mother is not in the picture. She was still in the hospital on the day of the funeral, hovering between life and death. The baby had been almost a month overdue. Later I imagined the monstrous dead body of Menno and wondered how it could have come out of her without tearing her apart. Reading about the grandmother who emerged from a wolf, I might have been able to understand a knife, but how could this happen in nature? Afterwards my mother often told the story but she never did answer that question. What she told was a story that was both an accusation and a celebration. She told of how she was assumed to be unconscious and how she heard the doctor speaking angrily to the nurse: "Why did you give her that pill?" She told of how she heard heavenly choirs and felt her soul leaving her body behind, of how she was disappointed to be returned to life on earth. Never again would she fear death. On the contrary, she looked forward to it. She longed for it as a release.

A release from what? From me? From us? Did she not want the family of real dolls that she so urgently wished upon me? I cannot look at this picture without thinking of my mother wanting to die. This is not a picture of my dead brother at all. This is a picture of my absent mother. It is a motherless arrangement of chairs and a table and a box — rectangles and squares and circles in an abstract pattern. At the moment the picture was snapped, the God that took away what he had given in Menno had still to decide whether or not he would take my mother. The picture waits, in suspension, for a meaning that never comes. As it turned out, my mother did live to tell the tale but what difference does that make when the tale she told was a death wish?

That way nothingness lies. The comfort of Mamabiet is snatched away. Meaning drains from the composition like flour through a sieve, making it impossible any longer to sustain nostalgia. I look at my eyes in the picture as they gaze into the eye of the camera and I am dazed at the thought of all that I did not see. Missing my mother I missed it all, aware only of the eye of the camera and of that other Eye that hung on the wall, embroidered in swirling floral designs and saying: "Thou God Seest Me."

In the picture our eyes are averted from the coffin. We look obediently at the camera eye. With my double vision now I can be outside as well as inside and look through the mechanical eye, notice the layers and layers of filters. It is my mother's absence, her death, that makes it possible for me to do this. In my way of seeing I am invaded by other images and stories and happenings, most of all by the fact that I am now a mother, that I now reproduce the mother's role, play doll with a joyful vengeance once again. To the child in the picture the objects are so familiar

that she does not see them. To the mother looking through the camera eye now, the images are estranged, almost electrically charged with visibility, as if they have undergone some magical process of distillation.

What is it that makes me see my self in this picture at all? The chair. That's it. My mother gave me one and I still have it, still enjoy the crimson colour that my mother painted it before she died. My two children are nearing the age that "I and my sister" are in the picture and they take turns using it. I have a son and I have a daughter. Both adopted. Both too good to be true. At the same time that they bring me joy that feels like a flame burning inside my body, my children make it possible to imagine the pain of loss as more than arithmetic in the Eye of God.

MY SISTER, ELIZABETH, the one who is named after my mother, Elisabeth (with the difference of one letter), she who sits side by side with me, she too had a son who was too good to be true. Her story breathes warm life into mine. If this were her telling of the story, the baby might be called Michelangelo. That is the name her son Darcy playfully bestowed on the memory of his stillborn uncle. What was he thinking of? Michael? Angel? O? We will never know because Darcy, you see, is dead. Those were the only three words my sister could bring herself to say when she phoned me in the middle of the night: Darcy is dead. Even now, four years later, any words beyond those words that describe what actually happened, always seem made up, like some bad dream too overdone to be believable. Looking at his face in the coffin I thought of Michelangelo of those figures in Florence that seem to be coming out of the stone. But nobody made Darcy up. I remember that other phone call, sixteen years earlier, to say that he was born. I don't just remember, I feel at this moment, the love that Darcy's special character drew from me. What she misses most, my sister told me once, is watching him grow. All that ended when a train smashed into a car at Newton Siding, Manitoba, in October of 1984. It must have been a noisy death but we did not hear it. We fought against the stillness, I and my sister, by quarrelling noisily in the dark after the accident.

DO YOU OR DO YOU NOT BELIEVE IN THE RESURRECTION, MY SISTER DEMANDED.
I HAVE TO KNOW?

I do not remember what answer I gave although I do remember that we were comforted by seeing the crossing as a cross. It wasn't Good Friday though. It was Thanksgiving, a golden balmy day in fall when I watched my sister agonize over the obituary. Only minutes remained before we would have to leave for the funeral. My sister went to take a shower while I finished typing up the bits and pieces we had put together. I thought she might want to be alone so I let her howl for a while

before I went in. I THINK THIS IS HELL, I SAID, AS WE LOOKED AT THE BROKEN LINOLEUM OF HER BATHROOM.

And then Menno fell out of heaven again, where we had shelved him on that winter day long ago. It was my sister who urged me, some time later, to take the picture out for another look. With the clairvoyance that sometimes comes with intense grief she saw that Menno was the baby I had never had. I saw only the babies that I had chosen, that were far lovelier than any baby that the Lord could give or take from me. I did not want to look for the Hand of God. I saw only that the family pattern was broken, that the tombstones were tumbling down like dominoes. My son was born just days after my sister's son died, but the Lord who had taken Darcy had not given another Darcy and on this matter I and my sister were agreed.

I RESPECT THE WOMEN in whose bodies my children were conceived, the women I have never met and who lead lives apart from mine, the women who have names for my children that are different from the names I chose. Their grief is real but it is not like my mother's grief after Menno's stillbirth and not like my sister's grief after Darcy's death. These children are alive; their noses are running at this minute. We all, we who care for them, celebrate their lives. The pattern of substitutions is shattered, leaving difference. Except to those who bore the names, the old pattern was once rather quaint — a William for a William, a Sarah for a Sarah, a Menno for a Menno. My mother once told me that they had considered naming me Anna, after another dead baby, the one born to my father's first wife. Luckily my mother thought of yet another Mary and asserted her right to join in the act of naming. I was relieved to be Magdalene. With a Maria for a Mary, an Elizabeth for an Elisabeth you can see the pattern showing cracks. We now insist on these cracks. When we were little, people sometimes mistook us for triplets since my mother dressed us in identical clothes. In the mother tongue our names were different enough: Marieche, Liesabet, Maglena. Out of our very differences we made a trio: the Falk Sisters. We even made a record which bore the title *Sing Unto the Lord* — the same Lord, presumably, that gives and takes. We still find joy in our mergings as much as in our differences, but so great is the bond forged by mutual fear that Elizabeth and I have sometimes had to work to keep the edges from blurring. We rehearse this motto: *Eck see eck en dü best dü*. I am I and you are you.

Sometimes we still play, and listen: we can still harmonize. When my son was born, my sister sent a present. I imagined her having eliminated various choices (toy trains, for example, are no longer toy trains for either of us) and I knew that she knew that any presents would remind us both of the absence of Darcy. Her

choice was a stroke of genius. She sent a clown with shiny colourful red costume and a painted face that could be either weeping or laughing. I named him Michelangelo. It seemed to me that Darcy had the right idea. As a poet he knew the importance of the act of naming. Perhaps I was also influenced by what I had learned in Japan about the uses of dolls. I wanted the doll to carry the burden of the old pattern, to bring it into play so that it could change. But this business of grieving is not child's play and the patterns do come back. There is more than one way of being the baby in the family. I work hard at playing with names because I have seen how the pattern of identical names leading up to *THE NAME* can do violence. It's a question of survival. Once I thought that being a mother would be a rejoicing in shared identity. I now see that a mother must protect a space for difference. I am appalled at the slightest suggestion that any of this could be the design of the Lord. The pattern once seemed innocent. Now it threatens to do violence to the very life of my child and the life of my sister's child.

But my sister makes me think. The pink bathtub is long since sold at an auction, and still I seek for ways to avoid throwing out the baby with the bath. I have chosen, yes, but what about the parts I have not chosen? I did not choose infertility. The women who bore my children did not choose fertility. We speak of birth control but what about the births that we do not control? What pattern is knitting itself in and out of the choices we make?

You see the sort of thing we struggle with, side by side. We have not sung together for years and yet we still listen for each other's voices. Even as we feel the pain of our differences, we also learn to share the body of the mother, host to the growing body of the child. When my sister lost her son, she began to tell her version of the story of Menno. One of our older sisters tried to comfort her by telling her that when Menno died, she (Elizabeth) asked at breakfast for *Mama-biet* when she meant marmalade. Childishly I clutched my bit of story to myself. Hadn't mother herself told me this? I feel the pain of loss again but only if I try to take the story and run. I must stay here with my sister — side by side by. There is plenty of *Mama-biet* to go around. *Mutt je turns nehme*, Mother used to say.

Even taking turns is not enough. There are so many stories untold — so much that is not in the picture. It is the picture of Mennonite family history forever unwritten. Church history the men write, yes, but this, this is what hysterical women do. How can I presume to write any of these stories? I cannot speak for my mother, for my father, for my sister, for Darcy, and certainly not for Menno. There are stories of uncles and aunts, brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces — all clamouring like tyrannical toddlers for equal time with the mother. It seems impossible to tell them all and yet — here is the contradiction — absolutely necessary. The stories urgently demand to be told side by side, lovingly, because only this love prevents the body of the mother from being torn apart. It is only on those rare occasions when toddlers are busy loving each other that they forget about fighting for their

piece of the mother. Side by side by my sister I can respect my mother's absence from all my reconstructions of this picture. I respect her difference.

How inadequate the picture is and yet how eloquent in its blatant inadequacy. Behind us hangs a blanket, like a temporary stage curtain hiding the machinery. Whose story is hidden behind that blanket? Next to that blanket is a closed door which, I remember, led to the bedroom where Menno was conceived. On a small table stand two flowering plants potted in tins. They look like lilies but it was gloxinia that I remember my mother growing. She loved them for their velvety textures and rich colours. Although right for the symbolism, the white lilies are wrong for the place and I can't make them fit. On the tins you can just discern bees and a beehive.

Who ate the honey? Who made the marmalade? Who killed cock robin? Whose hands prepared the body for burial? Who cut branches of fern from my mother's favourite plant and put them on the body? Who was digging the grave in the frozen ground while this picture was being posed? Who arranged the picture? Where was Mary? Where were my other sisters: Martha and Sarah and Susie and Justina? Where were my brothers: David and John and Henry and Peter and William? Who trimmed the edges of this photograph? Whose child is this? Where was my father? Who took the picture? Whose camera was it? Whose story is this anyway?

As the questions feed each other and grow, I feel myself nearing the hub of a spinning wheel, a still point in a world that was and is turning. I remember or I make up a memory of the bustle of activity around the house, all surrounding the motionless body of a baby. I do not remember and yet I can smell the percolating coffee; I can feel the smooth curve of the funeral buns and smell their delicate yeasty fragrance; I can taste the rough disintegrating edges of the sugar cubes, dipped in coffee. Around Menno move these details of life as we knew it. Some are petty details. Some are sentimental. There is confusion, but there is also a reaching for a ceremony of innocence. The picture (worth more than a thousand words) can become an excuse to resist the telling of all those other stories. To tell Menno's story, the story that is not, is to resist this multiplication of stillborn stories, stories that are like a collection of battered dolls. It is Menno's story, the blocking voices say, Menno's day, Menno's picture.

BUT WHO IS MENNO? This is the question that drowns the ceremony, then takes us by the hand and leads us, poor children, back into the human world — the world of unwiped noses. And it is these untold stories that bring the picture to life. By itself the story of my absent mother was a horror story. Joined by these other absences, there is comfort after all for the motherless child.

The fern on the body (long since turned to dust in the grave in Altona) now intertwines with the swirling pattern of the fern on the linoleum (long since abandoned as refuse) to offer new life. Something stirs. It is hard to hold the picture still. What stirs is not a message. What is on the picture is as nothing. Unlike the sombre portrait of Menno Simons so often reproduced for his followers, this portrait of Menno makes no claims to authority. This Menno cannot see for us. Flesh is turned to stone which speaks of limits.

Situated symmetrically at the centre of the composition, the coffin contains no kernel of meaning. The composed pose of the baby and the closed eyes make it impossible to conflate the eye of the camera and that other Eye. This is more like that painting by Mantegna that distorts the perspective on the crucified body of Jesus so that all we see are the soles of his feet. On the soles I make a motto saying: STOP.

Side by side by side by side. . . . All washing our feet in the same pink bathtub; all telling different stories. Always another side, another layer, another angle. This is the limit that turns us back to life. Those are not pearls that were his eyes, little children, little children, like gems for His crown. Like a handful of pebbles, gravel thrown into a pond, the stories multiply from many centres, expanding outwards like watery flowers in ever-widening circles, forming endlessly new combinations. If this is the richness that happens when a child is born dead, imagine it multiplied many times over when the child lives — for ten months or for sixteen years or for sixty years. Death is an explosion of life that cannot be taken away from you. You reach out to take it. But tell me, sister, is this the resurrection? Has the stone been rolled away or is it at the bottom of the pond? Or are we, perhaps, talking of Michelangelo?

MAGDALENE FALK REDEKOP
Toronto, July 1988



Altona, Manitoba
Box 321
February 20/49

Dear Mother,

I am very lonely for you already. Please bring along our game if you come home. I would very much like to kiss you. Martha wrote this for me. I always told her what to write.

x x x x x x x x x x

Goodbye,
From your,
daughter Magdalene

COME HOME SOON!

* * *

Altona, Manitoba
Box 321
February 20/49

Dear Mother,

Three

~~Nearly~~-all of our crayons are broken already. We sometimes play outside. Today we had such good food to eat that we had to button everything open. We had meat and water moose. ~~Come-home-soon.~~

x x x x x x x x x x

Goodbye,
Your daughter,
Elizabeth

COME HOME SOON!

2. *No Stone*

STANDING HERE, I am in awe at the size of this place. The Lord only knows what I am doing here. I am thinking maybe it will be like my recurring nightmare. We have been asked to sing in a church and the music is in my care. I page and page and I cannot find the song. Finally the service is over and I still have not found the music.

Menno's day was March 1, 1949. Forty years. Give or take. Martha said of her brother Lazarus: "But Lord . . . by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days." Still, the Lord was in favour of removing the stone.

Between us, I believe we have located the bones of our brother. The colouring seems easy. Exposing flesh: that won't be a Sunday School picnic.

At the mere mention, here stands a gleaming pulpit, behind it white sepulchral walls, on either side a bare rectangular window. Our father's body has been raised for a moment in time, upright from his coffin (woman, how you do take liberties) dressed in his black suit and white turtleneck sweater . . . the air is filled with deep rumbling sounds . . . alles fleisch ist grass . . . all flesh is grass.

As if by design I have been given the ideal place to write, I think. I am spending a few days at a serene cottage on Pelican Lake with my artist friend. She will do what artists do. I will do what writers do.

She has cleared the kitchen table for me, overlooking the water. Here, she says, I can do my work. Behind me, on the wall hangs a water-stained picture of a blue August sky, a grassy prairie, an empty train track leading to a train station in the distance. Above the horizon in small black letters:

As for man, his days are as grass:
As a flower of the field, so he flourisheth.
Soon the wind passeth over it, and it is gone,
And the place thereof shall know it no more.

King David 1000 B.C.
Psalm 103:15-16

I am very familiar with this door where I find entrance to Menno's day. I see my daughter there now, Tamara, returning the first time to her brother's burial place, her body bent in the wind, weeping. The ground beneath the lonely elm is covered with snow. There is no stone. She returns to the car, her face glistening with tears. I was thinking she says, its place remembers it no more. We have placed an evergreen wreath and as we leave I look back. It seems there is someone there. One end of the red ribbon bow is snapping jauntily in the wind, waving us out of sight. There is in the gesture a brave gaiety combined with the dignity of a military salute.

Here at Darcy's grave I find entrance to this massive cave. I pause before I enter as if to memorize the exact location where I am. Instinct. I am in a sunfilled place, with white birds winging across the water outside; on the other side hills separate lake and sky.

You must know I do not want to go inside. The photograph. I Elizabeth am very sad. You Magdalene are petrified. I know that Fear and Sadness have long inhabited this place. Fear is at the door. If I address it sadness begs to be released into the sunlight. I restrain sadness and fear grips me. Am I afraid of sadness?

There is clutter and confusion here. I know by now that all this has little to do with time and chronological order. (Yes, certainly, our father has long since gone back to rest.) Sorting it out now will be like trying to wrestle with live wires, like making eternity fit into time. Electricity crackles through the bond that was forged between us when Menno died . . . a cord of three strands is not easily broken . . . do you know where Mary is?

I look outside once more; my eyes readjust and rest on flowing slate-coloured water, little flecks of white foam moving with the liquid rock. I hear the wind sighing.

Inside the cave I see a light. I am not sure I trust it. It is the light on my mother's face. I can see her telling the story of Menno's birth. She is leaving her body, going higher and higher, singing *Nearer My God to Thee*. It is ecstasy. She can see her body in the bed below, her grief-stricken husband sitting beside it. He is losing another wife in childbirth. Plumps! she says. She is back in her body. Never again will she fear death. Her face is shining.

I am afraid here. If you do not see the same light I see, is it really there? I don't know where Mary is.

Mary is in school. She is not here for the picture and when she comes home and finds out they have taken it without her, she feels left out.

The little dresses we are wearing are red plaid with white eyelet trim.

The chairs we are sitting on are varnished brown wood. I remember my first glimpse of them in the lamplight of an early Christmas morning. (I painted them red.)

The lilies were orange. The plants appeared dead in their tin containers of earth for most of the year, but early in spring they produced orange coloured blossoms. I don't remember any fragrance.

The pots are standing on the squeaky organ stool that Uncle John built.

There is no air in here. Outside there are white butterflies, blowing about in the wind. I don't understand why they would even try to fly. I wonder if their sailing is without effort and if they land where they choose?

I don't think the door behind me in the picture is the door to our parent's bedroom, Magdalene. I think that door is beside you, outside of the picture frame. The door in the picture (in this story) leads into the hallway.

The little coffin rests on a telephone directory. I'm not sure why.

Directly behind me, behind the blanket is the wall telephone. (I think the blanket is a rough-textured dark earth colour. Did it come from Henry and Peter's room?) The wall is a corner wall. In this corner behind the blanket stands father's heavy wood and brown leather rocking chair.

Grandfather built the coffin.

David and John dug the grave.

Sarah baked the bread. In the absence of our mother, other visiting "mothers" hovered and worried and hours before the funeral Sarah baked more bread. Kneading the white dough, watching it rise, what was she thinking, our sister Sarah?

IT WAS AUNT ELIZABETH (our father's sister) and Mrs. Bergen who laid the leaves on Menno's body at the funeral. I like to think they brought leaves from their own potted plants. I have a vague memory of brightly coloured leaves. I dig out my album and find the close-up of Menno alone. Yes there is coleus. Bunta Yosaf we called it. Joseph's Coat. This picture is taken on the funeral day outside in the snow, exotic leaves on soft white flannel. That cannot be a bare little foot at the lower end of the coffin. More leaves have been added for this occasion. How do I express the sorrow I feel. Am I crying for my brother now, or for the plants? All flesh is grass.

The funeral was in the large room which was our kitchen/dining room before a wall separated the two. The coffin stood at the entrance to the hall. Father was there by the coffin. I have a sense of Aunt Elizabeth presiding. Mother was not there. (Actually I don't know if Aunt Elizabeth spells her name with a z. The little plastic card in my wallet clearly states that I was registered Elisabeth Falk. I have a vague memory of standing at the blackboard in school. I remember the spot. What they taught in school was right, wasn't it? There was the Queen Mother on the wall. Elizabeth? Zed for Zoo and Zebra, Xylophone and Zuider Zee. Exotic. Zed.)

The funeral is over. Before the procession begins there are pictures taken outside the house. Menno alone. A group picture: to the left of the box are Mary, Martha, and Magdalene; to the right David, John, and Elizabeth. Who arranged this grouping?

NOW DAVID IS ON THE ROAD, walking. David is fourteen. He is wearing a checkered heavy wool shirt against the March wind. In his arms he is carrying the wooden box. At the treeline bordering the garden he pauses to shift

the weight and I see the side of his face. I look away and now I feel my own features contorting in grief and guilt. Down the long muddy driveway, eastward, toward the highway on the way to the cemetery, he carries our brother. We walk with him. The mud pulls at our boots, imprinting our footsteps.

They said it was good that Menno had died, because by the time he was an adolescent, father would have been too old. Who said this? (Mother wrote in her little book:

“Ein lieber sohn Menno vom Herrn erbeten und auch erhalten” . . . dear son Menno petitioned of the Lord and also received . . . “Der Herr in seiner grossen Liebe nahm ihm aber gleich zu sich am 1 Maerz 1949. Dort ist er sicher von Suende, Teufel, und Welt an Jesu Brust!” . . . the Lord in his great love however took him to Himself immediately on March 1, 1949. There he is safe from sin, the devil, and the world on Jesus’ breast . . .)

Father would have been too old. Who said this? I know I repeated it in the pink bedroom of our farmhouse when I was an adolescent.

My only memory of the burial is that a neighbour lady stood between me and the grave pulling me away from it.

I am in the mortuary, the place of embalming; an employee has arrived and is waiting in these chilly recesses to do whatever it is he will do. Thanksgiving weekend . . . two minutes . . . the stone cold table . . . my son’s long body six feet two give or take draped with a white sheet, feet cold, I dare not lift the sheet from my son’s naked flesh, what will I see, the eyes half closed, the tongue is thick, blond hair is matted with blood, the beautifully shaped head is roughly stitched at the back of the scalp trickling blood and water from the autopsy, are you sure he’s dead . . . very sure . . . my son . . . could you please wake up Darcy . . . could you please wake up. She pulls me from behind, the neighbour lady. I know without looking it is she because if I looked to see who it was that pulled at me I’d want to beat them to a pulp. Clutching hands . . . grasping . . . appearing protective . . . thinking I am being sucked in by death . . . hands that believe they have power over life and death . . . I am furious . . . I am calm. Why is it so cold in here?

I COULD TURN AROUND NOW and leave. There is no one behind me. You are over there on the other side of the coffin, warm and compassionate and supportive. Yet I feel cold and angry and sad and alone. We are not finished. I have not forgotten about the bread. I like to believe it was I who ate the bread . . . laughing and crying and saying Mamabiet, she said . . . I like to believe it was I because I am the one who laughs and cries and if that one ate the Mamabiet that proves I was really there, already alive when Menno died.

It seems to me like it was morning and we were just waking in our shared “little girl’s” bedroom. Half asleep. Someone came in and told us we had a baby brother. I don’t know who. It was a woman. A brother after four girls. Oh joy! Jumping up and down. He can sleep there. Right there in that cradle in the corner against the wall adjoining Father’s Staefchi. What’s that she’s saying? He’s dead? What does it mean? He is dead. Who is alive and who is dead? Who decides? Who is a person and who is not? Who decides? Was I a person?

Somewhere here there is the old blue tub in the “old house.” It is mid-December, almost Christmas. Someone is bathing a baby, washing naked flesh, “Jreesu Bet, Liesabet” (Elizabeth is a dirty tub). All is forgiven. Under the blood. How many washings after grandmother found the baby lying in a pool of blood from an umbilical cord too loosely tied? How many . . . how much water . . . blood . . . how many deaths . . . damned spot. Microfilmed newspapers at the city library call it the Black Winter of Hitler. 1942.

It was a pink tub full of ice you say, almost new? In father’s Staefchi, in the “new house”? I cradle and rock the memory of warm summer evenings, all of us washing our feet, each in our turn in the pink enamel tub.

Perhaps I’ll skip the Michaelangelo thing. I was going to play with Revelations chapter twelve. Can you imagine? It is not to be played with. Angels and red dragons fighting . . . Menno and mother falling in and out of heaven . . . flight and fear . . . twelve stars . . . like the stars of the morning, His bright crown adorning . . . the angel Michael appears, the great warrior . . . Darcy is a warrior, I say. Perhaps, you tell me, I should go back to *Pride and Prejudice* from which I got his name and see that Darcy and Elizabeth were lovers. I say nothing. I know he is a warrior.

Fear rises up in my stomach. Why is it so hard to talk about the clown? Once more I experience joy and sorrow mixed with fear in the memory of my son’s death and your son’s birth. Out of that which was inseparable Menno came into being. I can’t really remember anymore how it all happened. Who was it that took Menno’s graveclothes wrapped around Darcy from birth and loosed him? Who freed them both, my brother and my son, to exist in separateness? I am very afraid. It is getting so dark in here and I have a sense of the uncanny. Who else is in here? How could we both think we named the clown?

I don’t remember. Like the bread. I thought these were inanimate objects, long turned to dust. Somewhere there is betrayal here. The bread is stone. Stone figures. Faces and bodies, partially released from solidified prisons of mass molecules . . . there is an incredible life force in here and I have no control . . . flesh is grass . . . stone is flesh . . . the earth is shaking . . . we have disturbed the universe and rocks are warring with each other. All for a piece of bread with marmalade.

If there is betrayal here, I see that it is I. I have betrayed myself here in this place reeking of death. I traded my own existence for the security of mother’s. No

matter if she willed it. I do know how to get out of this cave. We are only here to explore together. It's only a story. What else is in this wretched place? Longings for heaven and release, failed lovers, mothers, brothers, fathers . . . ice-filled pink bathtubs and rocking chairs behind blankets. Arrogant fool that I am, I have often tried to bring about the resurrection in this cave. Believe me I have tried to undo the fall. We are approaching the entrance. Two lights now dangle strangely here, reflecting on all the grotesque shadows we have wrestled with. The lights contain within them these truths: neither mother (nor I as her namesake) killed Menno; babies, even dead ones, are not promised new dolls.

"My sister's story breathes warm life . . ." I think not. I feel so cold. Correction. At this rewriting my body is flushed with heat. Eureka! Here is the place to balance my son's "Michaelangelo" with my daughter's title for this story: "that menopause thing" . . . Surely if I draw in both of my children, invoke their creative powers, there will be enough life.

A shadow follows me out of the cave . . . there was never enough of mother to go around. I turn. There is never enough life in mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, children, or lovers to sustain us. There is not enough life in me to sustain those I love. The words rise and push out of me like a groaning. The Lord giveth. The Lord taketh. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

NEVER ENOUGH AND YET ENOUGH, for you and I, Magdalene, have broken bread. The memorial crumb is broken and multiplies. If we passed it on to Mary, Martha, David, John, Sarah, Henry, Peter, Susie, William, Justina, would there be enough? You have "priested" to me, Magdalene, by making space beside you for my separate story of Menno's still life. Will there be enough bread? If we try to gather up more than enough for you and me, for today, will it rot like manna in the wilderness by tomorrow? Certainly we make space for their stories; there is room at the table. Some sit quietly, others speak formally and with dignity. There are those who laugh raucously and some who think it's no use to cry. A few of us speak better with our hands and wine bottles crash and spill across the table. Some wish others would be silent and some must preach. In all of us there is a little of the other, here at this table. Mother and father are here, Menno and the other Mary, the other William, and Anna. We are all here with room to spare for all our children and grandchildren. There is plenty of bread and as I have said wine flows freely. A marriage is taking place. He is here, Jesus our brother kind and good.

The Name becomes a Door. Now the dark cave disappears into thin air and we are in a new place, at a new table. We are all here and still more coming . . .

Our father raises his deep voice in a song:

“Grosser Gott wir loben Dich,
Herr wir preisen Deine Staerke.”
Holy God we praise Thy Name
Lord of all we bow before Thee.

Our Older Brother breaks the bread, gives thanks, and says, take, eat.

Mother’s face is radiant and raised in confident anticipation. She turns and extends her hand and there is room beside her. The other Sarah. We are all here.

* * *

I confess I plumped.

I am back in the photograph trying to make an ending out of a beginning . . . a beginning out of an ending. Gathering fragments. Each one enough to make another story.

I don’t know if we should wait here any longer, Magdalene. There is no one here. They have all gone away.

I wonder if our brothers will like what we have done.

Mary was here. I saw she was crying.

I wonder if anyone said thank you to Sarah for the bread?

I had a dream. Father and I were in the same pew; he was partaking of a basket of stone wafers and he was laughing so hard I could feel the pew shaking.

It is the wrong time of year for all this. Almost Thanksgiving. Yesterday I went outside (of the picture) for awhile and the leaves were falling. I was very sad for the last three days. It will be ten years next week since mother died.

It is very early; still dark. I don’t think there is anything more we can do here . . .

ELIZABETH FALK
Winnipeg, September 1988

