Sonia. He has also spent a great deal of time and energy buried in MCC archival materials. From my own research for *The Transforming Power of a Century*: *Mennonite Central Committee and Its Evolution in Ontario* (Pandora Press, 2002), I can attest that researching and writing MCC's history is no small task. In short, *Service and the Ministry of Reconciliation* is a welcome addition to the abundance of recorded MCC histories and stories, including Weaver's own edited collection, *A Table of Sharing: Mennonite Central Committee and the Expanding Networks of Mennonite Identity* (Cascadia, 2011).

Lucille Marr
The Presbyterian College, Montreal

## Literary Reviews

### Julia Spicher Kasdorf, *As Is*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023. Pp. 90. Softcover, $18 US.

What does it mean to live with things as they are? When I first picked up *As Is*, Julia Spicher Kasdorf's fifth collection of poetry, this was the question that came to mind. On the one hand, learning to accept a thing—like, for example, myself—"as is" struck me as radical, even rebellious, when faced with an endless stream of social media influencers peddling body hacks and self-improvement tips. On the other hand, after shutting my windows against wildfire smoke all summer long, acceptance of the apocalyptic seemed defeatist and irresponsible. I soon learned that Kasdorf's new poems, which take careful stock of human error and effort, of fracking fields, family farms, and air force bases, aren't posing questions of acceptance but rather questions of attention. What does it mean to try to perceive what is, exactly as it is?

"Let go your desire to wrap / it up; closure's a hoax," Kasdorf writes in an early poem, immediately countering any pretense about human ability—through language or faith or observation—to come to a full understanding about life as we encounter it. Still, whether gently turning over an eastern box turtle to inspect the underside of its shell or standing on the shore of Lake Perez and imagining what was there before ("a barley field . . . wood hicks, charcoalers, soot

. . . tannin staining the stream"), the speaker of these poems is resolutely, restlessly driven to document and examine the material of their experiences and surroundings.

Almost every page of *As Is* grapples with histories—personal and global, literary and biblical—that pierce through to the present: the plagues of Egypt; the "two brothers in Derby hats / who moved to Oregon and Dakota following Indian Removal"; "the 45th president—with lips like / Mussolini"; the colleague who "runs Jewish studies, no simple task, given Palestine"; a "thirty-years-ago school bus route"; the "killing fields in Poland near Mennonite homes"; the "summer you suffered a crush on X"; the barn fire of '47; the murder of Claude Neal; the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. "We didn't recognize / history or anything out of the ordinary," Kasdorf says, remembering the patch town near her Appalachian childhood home. Now in middle age, she recognizes history everywhere, finds it "easy to think of time's thin rings hidden / beneath pine bark."

Some of the book's most potent poems step outside rumination and into immediate, visceral experience. These pieces best showcase Kasdorf's immense skill as a lyric poet. "Love, leave / your desk, come to the woods / where all is urge and bird-flurry," she writes in "Freshet," the wonder of the world *as it is* alive in the pulse of the sounds. The collection's stunning closing poem "Unnamed Tributary" links images with rhymes and rhythms that resonate across lines: "Call it fern preserve, root splay / all manner of moss. Call it crayfish . . . Name it refuge / regeneration, / safehold, shadow home." That repeated "ay"—splay, cray, name, safe—builds momentum much like a stream flowing into a river.

Closely observing the external world through subtle, sensory detail, Kasdorf also directs her fine-tuned curiosity inward, scrutinizing her own identity and positionality as a white woman, a Mennonite, an academic, a mother, and an American. Longer poems like "Gideons," "As Is," and "Meditation at Panama City Beach, Florida" trace fractured inheritances and arrive at stark revelations. While walking a "wide, white beach among white- / haired white people," she remembers how, after a reading with Yusef Komunyakaa, she'd invited him on a nighttime stroll. He declined, explaining, "I am a Black man. / You are a white woman. This is the South after dark." These poems, simultaneously direct and disjointed, leap from allusion to allusion, memory to memory, and deftly mimic the disorienting feeling of trying to grasp the extent of one's own complicity and agency in the widening gyre of the world's injustices.

Kasdorf draws together many different strands in this book, including from her own writing. "I have always believed things / will turn out with work and hope," she asserts in "Climate Change with

Daughter and Tomatoes," indirectly referencing her research on the "digger" emblem from early editions of the *Martyrs Mirror*. The poem upends that optimistic assertion; it turns out with rot and mould. However, in these intimate negotiations and examinations, work and hope do seem essential to the task of trying to attend to what is. Sifting through the stuff of a life, *As Is* weighs what's been carried so far, how to "make use of whatever's at hand," what should be "cho[sen] to pass on," and how to "live content with what we get."

In these perceptive poems, Kasdorf pulls at the various threads of her preoccupations to reveal, rather than resolve, the complex knots at their centres. *As Is*'s assured storytelling notes both the "tiny jet beads sewn at the neck" of an heirloom dress and the "bullet hole in the bodice," making openings from endings, looking again, and then again.

Sarah Ens
Winnipeg

## Casey Plett, *On Community*. Windsor, ON: Biblioasis, 2024. Pp. 184. Softcover, $19.95.

Casey Plett opens her first book of non-fiction, *On Community*, with two vignettes from the Pembina Valley in southern Manitoba. In the first, she recounts a return to town, to a house party laced with meanness, a decade or so after having moved away to Oregon. Her surprise entrance is greeted by immediate threat, but her one friend intervenes: "It's cool, he's from here" (11). That claim to place (briefly) dissipates the threat of violence. In the other story, her schoolteacher uncle who was born in Steinbach but has lived now for twenty years in Pembina Valley, just an hour away, admits to her that "I still don't feel like I'm *from* there." *There*, where the Red River serves as a watery divide between ostensibly similar Russian Empire Mennonite–descended peoples: *Dit Sied* and *Jant Sied*. "This side" and "That over there side" (12). This Low German "josh-ing" calls to mind some of the old regional divides between Old Order and Conference Mennonites in Waterloo Region, where I'm writing this review: *Die Overa* and *Die Unera*—"the upper" and "the lower." Community can be made and defined by just such borderlines, guarding who's in and who's out, who's *from here* and who *is not*. But as Plett explores throughout her essay, the concept is more complex than a simple drawing of borderlines.

*On Community* is the eighth volume in the Field Notes series published by Biblioasis. These book-length essays cover an assortment