

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 “joshing” 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

of difficult-to-parse topics, including *On Property* (Rinaldo Walcott), *On Class* (Deborah Dundas), and *On Risk* (Mark Kingwell), all of which are characterized by a self-reflective quality of thought. To navigate the mountainous terrain of “community,” Plett offers forty-two short reflections, separated into two parts, and relies on a series of switchbacks and careful footholds that yield “Yes, and . . .” or “Sure, but . . .” sentences. (My favourite of these fluid transitions: “And. Well. I wonder” [71].) The result is an evocative and narrative-driven exploration of that “damn amorphous” (14) quality of community—its simultaneous life-giving and life-taking qualities. Plett is someone who knows of this intimately, and this slim volume teems with storied wisdom wrought by the circuits of her life: her (and her parents’) movements in and out and around tightly prescribed Mennonite life and small-town culture in Manitoba; the sharp contrasts she draws with the suburban individualism that awaits her family in Oregon; Plett’s own migratory living between Windsor, Ontario, and Brooklyn, New York; her life and community work among queer and trans people; her literary jobs in publishing and book sales; the hours she’s logged with lonely others at Tim Hortons restaurants or at late-night dive bars across the continent; her book tour/couch-surfing travels among “the trans community.”

But what is “community,” exactly? Plett spends the first half of the book circling the term, its many uses and abuses, teasing out its boundaries and its nuances. She acknowledges it is politically and socially expedient to have a language that names a group of people, but with “the luxury of slow consideration” (17), Plett demonstrates the erasures and occlusions that arise whenever “we” talk about “the [X] community” (16, 21). By the end of part 1, Plett lands decidedly on the ruinous dangers of groupthink and the violence that can emerge from the heart of communities, everywhere: “this jolting wash of communal feeling” (99), she warns, is also a constitutive part of expressions of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Plett cites Sarah Schulman’s argument, for example, that “homophobia is not a phobia, it’s a pleasure system” and that homophobia is better described by the concept of *joy* than by words like *hate* and *fear* (100). Similarly, she worries about the ease by which communal affects—including those evoked in print—can slide into a dangerous sense of patriotism. Using Benedict Anderson’s groundbreaking anti-colonial argument about the role of newspapers in the growth of national “imagined communities,” Plett asks, “Is it more than metaphor how closely steeped you can find the etymology of community and nationalism?” (100).

And yet. And yet “humans need community,” she writes. “Every piece of our knowledge tells us this. Isolation and loneliness are

deadly, like *actually* deadly” (49). Plett opens part 2 with a discussion of compassion, finding that “the idea of compassion as not finite—*not something to be hoarded*” helps her “expand conceptions of my communities away from insularity. Cliquishness. Suspicion towards outsiders” (105). In this turn, she stumbles upon “a stray fragment” from Michael Warner’s theory of publics and comes up with a working definition of community as “an ongoing space of encounter” (136–38). It’s not perfect, she admits, but it names both a place and a people who interact with each other in an ongoing way. The encounter is not “a one-off” (139), which is precisely why compassion can help maintain a porosity to that space of encounter. “For a community to be a healthy and nurturing place, for it to function well,” she writes, “there needs to be some kind of openness and possibility towards strangers” (145). Plett calls for “unhoarded compassion” as the most likely way to make a community work in the long term and argues that “openness and compassion” can provide “guiding lights” for our ongoing spaces of encounter (145).

Of course, that work at maintaining openness and compassion can be exhausting. It can also feel unsafe. And feeling safe is no small matter for trans people who face significant threats in the course of a given day. Helpfully, Plett lands on a careful distinction between the subjective *feeling* of belonging/not belonging to a community and the objective *actions* of community. Community is the water we swim in, whether we know it or not. But the *work* of community is done not by feeling/not feeling a sense of belonging, but by direct, concrete actions that show love, compassion, openness. Do *that*, with others, she suggests, and you’ll find yourself within community of some kind. “Don’t give up on it,” she writes at the book’s close. “Don’t give up on this stuff” (170).

Ultimately, *On Community* is a deft work of social insight, accessible in terms of its narrative voice, daring in terms of the diverse array of communities she draws together for our consideration. The cumulative effect is to point us towards decisions that lead towards better, healthier community. Which is to say, less isolation.

Geoff Martin
Kitchener, Ontario

Elina Penner, *Nachtbeeren*. Berlin: Aufbau, 2022.
Pp. 248. Hardcover, €22.

Elina Penner was born in the Soviet Union in 1987 and moved to Germany with her family in 1991, part of the million-plus wave of