

HEATHER TOSTESON

FOREWORD

I regard my family as typical if not normative. I was raised in a family layered by divorce. My older half-sister's father was Jewish, and in our episodically Episcopalian household we regularly feasted on borscht my mother made from her ex-mother-in-law's recipe. My younger half-siblings, the same age as my own son, have a mother who is both Argentine and Jewish. My favorite niece and nephew speak Spanish as their first language. Our grandchildren, with skin as fair as that of people from the land of midnight sun, call us *abuelo* and *abuelita*, unaware, as yet, of all the steps involved here. My step-daughter is bi-sexual, my husband's brother is gay. My own son's wife is South Korean. The daughters of my heart come from Iraq. But this is all foreground become background for the day. It sounds like what it is, a well-practiced story.

I can't remember exactly when the idea for this anthology came to me—were we planning to go to some family event, relaxing afterwards, engaged in our by now comfortably habitual *Sturm und Drang* about family dynamics—Yours! Yours! Or looking back at our thunderstorm with a sense of bemusement. Where did all that energy come from? Where did it go?

What inspired the idea is understanding what it means to have pluralism forced upon you—at very close quarters. Where all the tidy niceties of relativity don't apply. I believe it was my friend Connie Veldink who said, "There is no relativism at the breakfast table." Or was that in bed?

In any case, where it matters most. These stories and poems explore how we respond to differences where they matter most, our own intimate lives. Where we can't finesse our own needs or the needs of those around us. Where words are said, deeds are done. Harm and blessing are now, and forever will be, twinned. Where it is the truth, not the tidiness, of our own experience that will free us. And those around us. For perhaps these stories, of difference inherited or actively chosen, of deep rift and even deeper repair

can help create a more resilient, stormy, and gracious norm for us, one that sees necessity not just as the mother of invention but also the mother of a scapegrace love that, in Gerard Manley Hopkins words, "lights a lovely mile."

Reading through the stories, memoirs and poems we selected, they seemed to fall naturally into four general categories: inheritance, choice, rift/repair, and the spirit of adoption.

If we have inherited pluralism, then it is both of us in some unconscious and ineradicable way and also something that needs to be consciously accepted as well. In the first section, INHERITANCE, many of the stories, memoirs, and poems hold this tension between the unwanted but inescapable and the generously accepted, with all the difficult freedom that acceptance implies.

Anna Steegmann in "Phantom Pain" writes intimately about the difficult pluralism of history—of a father in post-war Germany who sings the now prohibited Nazi Party's anthem when the pain of his phantom limb assails him. In "Provisions" she writes of a world known only by hearsay where starvation was once the great equalizer, but where the only battlefield she and her mother now know is one splattered blood red by delicious currant jelly. These are not tensions or fidelities that fit tidily into categories.

Lorena Smith, Michele Markarian, and Elinor Benedict begin to understand, at different levels, what it means to embody multiple cultural realities. Smith tries to integrate the reality of her Swedish mother's impoverished childhood with her own privileged life as a Sri Lankan with, now, her adult life in Texas. Abundance comes in many forms. Cultural fidelity too. Michele Markarian, at ten, native-born, begins to take in the seismic tremors that accompany immigration—her parents', her newly arrived distant cousin from Lebanon's, whose name, she understands, Americans will mispronounce, misunderstand, think odd. She now understands herself, as well, as inextricably involved in the same dynamic. Elizabeth Benedict seeks to understand the implications of her aunt's choice to marry a Chinese man and live most of her life in China. Her poems touch on the mystery and terror of involuntary identity—her cousin sees his own face staring back at him in the Chinese market, while she, the physical likeness of her aunt, has the same