Abstract: Rudy Wiebe's latest novel Sweeter Than All the World is, like his much-anthologized short story "Where Is the Voice Coming From?," a meta-fiction. Like the earlier, shorter work, the novel is a meditation on how an individual might--through the mediating forces of historical artifact and mystical experience--at once encounter history and discover something about oneself. In the novel Wiebe uses particular photographs from a 1981 collection entitled Forever Summer, Forever Sunday: Peter Gerhard Rempel's Photographs of Mennonites in Russia, 1890-1919. The photographs enable Wiebe to explore the transformative power of individual recollection (literally, re-collection: the taking up of the artifacts of the past one more time) and the role of the collective (the community and the commonly held stories and other representations of the past) in the articulation of longing and the realization of desire.

There are many ways to see us. We can look elsewhere; there are mirrors all around: let us begin with the Old Country.

--David Waltner-Toews, "A Word in the Nest"

We believed it would be always summer always Sunday. On Khortiza Island we fell on our knees searching reluctant undergrowth for evidence of our having been there. Our fingers trace names once chiselled deep in weathered stone.

--Sarah Klassen, "Origins"

Presumably all the parts of the story are themselves available. A difficulty is that they are, as always, available only in bits and pieces.

--Rudy Wiebe, "Where Is the Voice Coming From?"

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Actual photographs--testimonies to historical circumstance--inform some of the narratives of Rudy Wiebe's Sweeter Than All the World. 

(1) The following passage from the novel, and the accompanying photograph, illustrate what I mean [Plate #1]:

Father, show me a picture. Which one, sweetheart? You know, you know. You made me laugh, he says, laughing. So hard I shook the camera under the hood. You and Greta Isaak were perfect slender young men in trousers and tied cravats, flat-brimmed hats, pince-nez and twirled moustaches, superb, she in black, stood leaning towards you in grey, seated in the round-backed chair with your left leg perched at the ankle on your right knee, each of you with a long cigarette elegantly between your fingers, rolled paper actually, such beautiful young men. (2)

This essay investigates the relationship between literary fiction and the photograph. It probes the nature of collective memory. It suggests that, sometimes, cultural artifacts can engage our consciousness, invade our imagination and lead us "home."

Members of my own generation of "Russian Mennonites," children and grandchildren of 1920s German-speaking immigrants to Canada from the Mennonite colonies of southern Ukraine (our parents called it Russia), (3) are cognizant of how far we have travelled from the richly layered religious and social ethos our parents occupied, once, and of how little material culture we can gather around us to give us a palpable sense of how they lived and who we are relative to their past--our heritage. We find ourselves pondering the limited material inheritances our forebears have passed on to us. They are primarily photographs,...