

Review Article

“A Nest of Singing Birds”: New Work by Mennonite Women Poets

Al Reimer, *The University of Winnipeg*

mother, not mother. Poems by di brandt
(Stratford, Ontario: The Mercury Press, 1992).

standing all the night through.
Poems by Audrey Poetker-Thiessen
(Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1992).

The Upside-Down Tree. Poems by Jean Janzen
(Winnipeg: Henderson Books, 1992).

Violence and Mercy. Poems by Sarah Klassen
(Windsor: Netherlandic Press, 1991).

Sleeping Preacher. Poems by Julia Kasdorf
(Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992).

Let us throw hats in air, dear readers of *JMS*, clap hands and sing for joy as we celebrate our expanding singing school of Mennonite women poets and the fine new volumes they have graced us with in the past year. Reading these five books one after the other is to experience not only the exhilarating insights into the human condition provided by all good poetry, but to be powerfully confronted with challenging insights into the Mennonite condition past and present. Di Brandt with her third volume, Audrey Poetker-Thiessen, Sarah Klassen and Jean Janzen with their second volumes, all display new strengths and developing skills in their poetic art. And Julia Kasdorf promises with her first volume to become a worthy addition to this accomplished group. All five—Di Brandt more obliquely than the others—explore their Mennonite world with shrewd, fearless sensibilities, but always with love, honesty and compassionate understanding.

Di Brandt's *mother, not mother* is an intensely personal—almost unbearably intense and personal in places—revelation of womanhood and its endlessly various, often contradictory, phases and meanings. Brandt writes from the womb, so to speak, with the woman's body as literal and figurative *topos*, the mothering self as metaphor, for what becomes ultimately not only the total range of woman's experience, but a full human landscape of mind and heart and body. In these laser-projected poems the speakers embody both that which is mother and that which is not-mother, both Madonna and tiger, princess and dragon. Brandt's earlier theme of the woman as defiant victim in a patriarchal society is dichotomized and deepened in this new book to include the woman as both victim and victimizer, the mother in need of a mother, the princess who devours the dragon (man) and becomes dragon herself. Failing to be a perfect mother, Brandt confesses,

in your heart's cry
you wanted

a woman holding you,
crooning
a child's lullaby.

Whether singing the sensual glories of pregnancy—"how i loved my body then,/ my huge floating belly, my nipples/ big, dark, swollen"—or dramatizing the inherent violence in all human relationships—"the colour mothers see most often/ is red....remembering, fiercely, in the night, tiger's eyes,"—Di Brandt defiantly asserts her independence (even as she confesses her need to be mothered), her continuing struggle to remain herself, not to be submerged in any collective identity or group agenda. And she insists as a poet on her right to address *everyone*, not just the converted, the approving insider, the complacent majority. In "what *de Englischel* didn't understand," she writes:

how hard it is to tell a story
so it can be heard.

how easily the reader climbs
on top of it,

pronouncing judgment,
the eternal optimist, tourist,

pointing fingers.

Di Brandt no longer flaunts self-dramatization as obsessively as in her first book *Questions i asked my mother*, nor does she as often take high-wire emotional risks over a torrent of self-pity or the hard ground of vituperative hatred. Her tender gestures of reconciliation with her parents and background, her lucid tolerance of the crooked human heart, her more relaxed self-acceptance—"this growing toward/ beauty, growing old"—give her latest work a new depth and maturity.

Occasionally, her tight couplet forms become somewhat rigid, the rhetoric pressed flat by anger—"i'm trying/ not to feel the rage/ burning in my head,/ arms, chest, all of me,"—or turning prosaic—"for twenty years i've been/ running away/ from the family, & the Bible/ & God"—or reaching for the sensational metaphor, as in "every pore a vagina." But such lapses are not frequent enough to mar this superb collection of poems. And what a splendid poetic voice Di Brandt gives us—fearless and wise, achingly personal, speaking night into day eloquently and with power.

In *standing all the night through*, Audrey Poetker-Thiessen shifts from the very personal focus of *i sing for my dead in german* to a much broader, though equally intense focus she calls "menno," which becomes the *topos* for the religious quest and historical identity of the Mennonite people from Anabaptist times. Poetker-Thiessen is developing into a philosophical poet of considerable range without losing her richly sensual rendering of personal experience, her gift for investing the concrete and specific with symbolic overtones.

The heart of this book is a series of "menno" poems, one for each letter of the alphabet plus several more, which in imagery and cadences redolent of the Psalms and The Song of Solomon explores various phases of her people's story, their stubborn faith, high hopes and naive expectations, as well as their perverted pride and the tragic realities of their destinies. With their often savage irony, their clear-eyed indictments of Mennonite hypocrisy and perversions, and their pungent modern imagery, these deeply felt religious poems—and they are religious—can be thought of as a set of Mennonite psalms, or perhaps more accurately, parodic psalms. Here are the opening and closing lines of poem "i":

rise up rise up
my people & flee
like a dove from the east
the world has shattered
the prince of darkness
soughs through your
avenues of birches....
& the air is split
with war & famine
only the dead
progress in this story
& i keen on & on

from mount zion *my children*
my children

The indictments can be succinct and merciless:

I.
how the faithful people
have become a harlot
a wild she-ass
snuffing up the wind

"menno" may be hailed as irresistible lover:

he is my lover
i will meet him anywhere
strength is with menno
joy is with fire
every aching wanting
to fill every hole

but he can also be utterly condemned:

& the glory of menno has fled
before the stink
of his hypocrisy

Even the tragedy of violence suffered by the Russian Mennonites is not permitted to remain sentimentalized and innocently undeserved, as it is in popular memory: "*the sin of sodom was/ fullness of bread.*" And Mennonite moral and ethnic tacking in the political winds is described in stark, unrelenting terms:

we claimed boers
& nazis by turn
for cousins
with each advance
retreat advance
changing to dutchmen
from deutschmen
& back again

Not all these poems deal with Mennonite history and identity. There are other religious poems in this impressive book that consist of richly suggestive and tender love poems with Jesus as the ardently pursued lover. Perhaps the most arresting and ambitious poem in this collection is "out of the earth," a remarkable "creation" poem that recasts in wonderfully lyrical and philosophical terms the Adam and Eve story of falling out of the innocent and spontaneous world of "I Am" into the fallen, no longer natural world which has become objectified through "naming" by "the first woman/ & the man together" until "they made a poem/ out of everything/ they had named/ out of existence" and were left without any of the spontaneous magic of existence. In the end even "god is dead" and the first (and last) pair are left "searching for that/ former brightness/ all/ our/ days/ calling his name/ into the void/ only the smallest/ speech/ echoes/ back." Audrey Poetker-Thiessen is a young poet of shining gifts and one can only wait impatiently to see what she will

accomplish next, even as one rejoices over what she has done already.

In *The Upside-Down Tree*, Jean Janzen abundantly demonstrates that she too has a capacity for growing as a poet, giving us some of her best work to date. I like Janzen's gentle urbanity of tone, the unobtrusive but confident sophistication that enables her to enrich many of her poems with allusions and metaphorical references to a wide assortment of artists from Beethoven to Chopin to Tchaikovsky, from Rembrandt to Vermeer to Ruisdael to Chagall, without ever losing the direct simplicity of her Mennonite subjects or her unpretentious but witty treatment of ordinary people with ordinary experiences which somehow become transformed into the extraordinary by her deft poetic touch. By way of example, here is the opening stanza of "Plain Wedding":

I try to imagine my grandparents
on their wedding day flying
over the Russian village
with cow and moon. But Chagall's donkey
drops them with a thump.
None of that frivolity,
the fathers said. Black dress
for the bride, like penance
over the apple-breasts,
hair tightly bound.

How vividly and playfully these lines capture the austerity of Russian-Mennonite society in contrast with Marc Chagall's inimitable genre paintings of the much gayer and more colorful Jewish village life in pre-revolutionary Russia.

Jean Janzen is at her best when she evokes the emotional ambiances of Mennonite society, exploring the familial and religious traditions of her people, as she does beautifully in the Dutch poems of Part II and in the even darker Russian poems of Part III. She interweaves past and present in vivid threads of meaning in a poem like "Flowers of Amsterdam," in which the Anabaptist period of martyrdom is rendered in precise but lyrical, almost romantic, images:

Their bodies flare out in a triple bloom,
still flare out in the mind, the recalcitrant
flesh still acrid. And Catherine drowns
in the canal, her skirts billowing out
over her tied legs like a lily.

The rest of the poem reflects on the meaning of this grisly martyrdom as though time has not intervened, as though the modern Mennonite tourist is seeing both the events of history and the sights of the present city simultaneously, in one meditative continuum. The poem closes with the image of

...one figure in a boat,
the twin oars quietly opening the water's
glistening petals, opening a secret passage
in the deep and watery place.

Even when she contemplates the obscene human sacrifices demanded in the

building of the Dnieper River power dam at Chortitza—"their bodies electrifying/
Stalin's world"—she can celebrate her people who for so many years lived there,

...given up
to the Maker, whose moon
has begun to rise and soon
will rain its silver over all.

Many of Janzen's poems end with this kind of gentle benediction, the benediction of a poet who can probe the ancient wounds, confront the darkness and pain of existence, but who always comes around to the lush colors and rich textures of life redeemed by love and compassionate understanding.

Although Sarah Klassen's *Violence and Mercy* was out just in time to be reviewed in last year's *JMS*, it deserves to be included in this survey of new work by Mennonite women poets. Klassen shows in this new volume, as she did in *Journey to Malta*, her first book, her knack for making viable, often arresting, verse out of very ordinary, even unpromising, materials. In her opening section "Doing Time" she fashions some sensitive and original poems out of her experiences in the classroom as an English teacher. (If that isn't prosaic stuff for poems, what is?) In poem after poem she finds interesting ways of playing off her students' crude vitality and unreflective physicality against her own discerning but ultimately ineffectual intellectuality and cultural gentility:

The metaphors they grasp
have motors revved for violent rhetoric
they choose raw decibels
unmodified beat that speaks
persuasively to fluent limbs
eyes electric with understanding.
superlative and running on
beyond the need for words

Mine echo in the empty room
and settle harmlessly into the chalk dust

Yet somehow these contrasts illuminate both cultures, bring them into a widened circle of meaning.

Inspired by the power and beauty of language—"All things begin and end/ with words"—Sarah Klassen is also wise enough to know its limitations in the human equation—"there's only so much you can do with words," the same poem concludes. She has a nimble emotional touch, this poet, and her gentle sense of irony allows her always, as a poet, to stand at the hot crater of human experience while at the same time contemplating it coolly, as though from a safe distance.

In *Sleeping Preacher*, Julia Kasdorf, an American Mennonite who lives and works in New York, proves, like Sarah Klassen, that good poems can be made from very common experience, if you know what you are doing. Indeed, many of Kasdorf's poems about her family and background in Amish Pennsylvania appear to be pedestrian and uninspired at first reading, but looked at more closely begin to

reveal unexpected intricacies of pattern and tonal subtleties. And while many of these poems have a deceptively folksy Robert Frost informality about them, they are in fact tightly woven and often move towards illuminating closures. In "Mennonites," one of her best poems, Kasdorf draws wittily impressionistic historical pictures of the various groups of Mennonites in history:

We keep our quilts in closets and do not dance.
 We hoe thistles along fence rows for fear
 we may not be perfect as our Heavenly Father....
 We love Catherine the Great and the rich tracts
 she gave us in the Ukraine, bright green winter wheat,
 the Cossacks who torched it, and Stalin,
 who starved our cousins while wheat rotted
 in granaries. We must love our enemies.

The poem concludes with the lines:

We do not drink; we sing. Unaccompanied on Sundays,
 those hymns in four parts, our voices lift with such force
 that we lift, as chaff lifts towards God.

The word "chaff" is inspired and ironically makes good the grain and harvest imagery that preceded it.

Sleeping Preacher won the 1991 Agnes Lynch Starret Poetry Prize for first-book manuscripts, and this promising young poet will, I'm sure, be heard from again.

What these five new volumes of poems have in common is a searing honesty that refuses to compromise itself with flashy rhetoric or experimental techniques. Coupled with that honesty are uniquely feminine angles of vision and fearless assertions of independence which, while not traditional with Mennonite women, are revealing exciting new perspectives on what it means to be Mennonite. Acutely aware of the pain of enforced silence traditionally suffered by Mennonite women, these women poets are confidently shedding their inherited victimhood and looking past the burdens of guilt inherited from a sternly patriarchal society, guilt most Mennonite male writers still struggle with in their work. Showing remarkably little bitterness for the long years of oppression and suppression, these women poets focus instead on compassion for their oppressors and on sympathetic understanding of the long and twisted road their people have wandered. The Mennonite vision that these poets share, in various degrees, is perhaps summed up best in the words of Audrey Poetker-Thiessen: "i am in love not with what my people are but with what they want to be."