

Mennonite Trio: Odyssey, Elegy and Striptease

A Review Essay

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Naomi Reimer, *The Taken* (Custer, WA: Birch Bay Books, 1997). Soft cover, 71 pp. \$12.00.

Barbara Nickel, *The Gladys Elegies* (Regina, SK: Coteau Books, 1997). Soft cover, 81 pp. \$10.95.

Julia Kasdorf, *Eve's Striptease* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998). Hard cover, 86 pp.

Once again the borders of Mennonite writing have been extended, this time by a trio of new poetry collections, one from Canada, two from south of the border. All three authors are Mennonite women and each one reveals her Mennonite identity in some way.

Mennonite stories are front and center in Naomi Reimer's *The Taken*. The title refers to the millions, including Mennonites, who were exiled and killed under Joseph Stalin. The poems in the first two sections are an ambitious retelling of the Russian Mennonite story, sketching the troubled odyssey from Prussia to Chortiza and from there to Siberia, Crimea, Poland, and Oklahoma.

The weight of so much history is almost too much for the nine poems to carry, and sometimes the need to provide information about events and people crowds out the potential for evocative power her subject might possess.

Much more satisfying are the poems in the last three sections which follow three generations: the poet's grandfather who committed suicide, her aging parents, and finally the poet herself. The movement from a broad sweep of Mennonite history to the personal story of one woman gives the book its organic shape.

Reimer prefaces each section with a scripture text, choosing Isaiah 54:8 for the "Grandfather" poems: "For a brief moment I forsook you, but with great compassion I will gather you." These words would serve well for the entire collection, mirroring as they do the poet's belief as well as the compassion with which she explores both the suffering of the Mennonite people and more personal family grief. I found them particularly powerful as an introduction to her grandfather's story. Using simple language, she relates his death, surrounding the tragedy with details of farm life in Oklahoma:

Farmer, user of ropes, former of knots,
you stopped your own breathing
knotted a rope around rafter and neck,
put an end to your heart's beating.
Years later your corn crib decayed
and the barn burned—burned the rafter away.
("Grandfather I")

Paralleling the loss of a grandfather are references to the burial of a young Arapaho, and in a later poem, "Coincidence" her father's birth and death are accompanied by Arapaho ceremonies. This imaginatively forged connection between Mennonite and Arapaho both softens the loss and universalizes the experience of life and death.

Reimer's poems are never self-indulgent. Even in her most personal poems she keeps herself in the background, modestly preferring to draw the reader's attention elsewhere:

One winter, so near the Washita that river
bottom poplar dropped their leaves on
shingles of our frosted roof, my mother
bore me; the poplars stood stripped of green,
long smoky limbs bare, while nuzzling
its seed under bark the mistletoe
reached down its parasitic roots draining
the tree of life.
("The Return")

Reimer's work is somber but never hopeless. The waters of the Washita River flowing through these poems, and the poplar trees that grow on its banks, are symbols of hope and life, however threatened. They remind me of that other river, and the immortal trees growing along its banks, in the eternal city of Revelation.

With *The Gladys Elegies*, Barbara Nickel, the Canadian in the threesome, makes her very self-assured debut. Moving back and forth in time and space, she sets her keen imagination loose on a diverse range of subjects: family history, relationships, New York socialites, martyrs and art.

"The Gladys Elegies" of the title section are a series of sonnets in which Nickel recreates the lives of twin sisters who were presented to New York society in 1931, according to a headline in *The New York Times*. Having little information to go on, Nickel invents circumstances to provide the context for subtly drawn tensions in the lives of these sisters:

We clasped our hands and cast for rainbow trout.
 You hauled one in—I raised the stick and hit
 its judging eye, like Father's shot with soot.
 ("Marion, 1935: To My Twin Sister")

This poet's mastery of the sonnet form, her control of language and her confident voice are impressive. I sensed that sometimes the formality dampens the emotional power. Mostly, though, the precise, vivid images and subtle rhymes serve to reveal the poem's heart.

Nickel's Mennonite poems are laced with the tastes of Mennonite food, the texts of scripture and hymns, the details of prairie farm and church life, stories of relatives past and present. Her description of *Vareniki* is layered, the food endowed with a sensuality that goes beyond taste buds: "Is it sin, the creamy secrets I taste/ in their dimples, those places/ where the pale skins touch?" ("Komm Essen") She is keenly aware that her Mennonite world is not ideal, but irony rather than anger is her response.

The final section, "The Rosary Sonatas," is an elegant poem cycle written in response to Heinrich Biber's *Rosenkranz-Sonaten* for violin. Each sonata in this cycle is paralleled with an event in the life of Christ. Weaving together the language of music, the Bible and nature, Nickel, a musician herself, orchestrates a musical tapestry where we find a violin being tuned and bowed, Christ at various stations of his life, and a young girl's sexual and musical awakening. A splendid accomplishment, as this excerpt from "The Crucifixion" illustrates:

Over and over the bow makes its cross
 on the slackened string, staccato
 notes flying off into smoky October
 night so chill the fingers
 nailing the string are numbed.

Readers familiar with Julia Kasdorf's first book *The Sleeping Preacher* (1991), in which she explores her Swiss Mennonite family, will find in her second book, *Eve's Striptease*, evidence of a growing maturity of vision. Kasdorf observes her world with care and love and brings to her work the ability to clothe her vision in language so illuminating that the reader's understanding too is enlarged.

In the first half of this book Kasdorf explores a young woman's passages: the search for independence, first love, loss of innocence, marriage, moving away.

Always unhurried, the poems convey, with pristine clarity, a sense of the worth of human life, and also the inevitability of loss.

Family and friends inhabit her poems, always drawn with respect and insight. The title poem, "Eve's Striptease", depicts a mother offering pre-marital advice to her bride-daughter after shopping for wedding lingerie. The rest of the poems unfold not only the bride's pre-nuptial anxiety but also her appreciation for her mother:

But she didn't say lust
is a bird of prey or tell me the passion
she passed on to me is no protector of borders.
She'd warn me only about the urges men get
and how to save myself from them. Though
she'd flirt with any greenhouse man
for the best cabbage flats, any grease monkey
under the hood, she never kissed anyone but Dad.

The second half of the book, "Map of the Known World", continues to chart the many nooks and crannies of human desire, striving and pain. Kasdorf is very present in her work, observing, reflecting, speaking wisdom. "Learning the Names," begins with a daughter following her father along the path, reciting the particular names of plants and trees; it concludes with an acknowledgement of the power and limitations of language:

Like Aquinas, I learned to carry the names
of whatever God made in my head. To never
think tree, but hemlock or shag-bark....
I learned this is how you use language
to know what you will never possess..

In "Houseguest Confession," Kasdorf views the Russina Mennonite loss of Kroeger clocks, blue onion plates, a whole way of life within a larger, contemporary context where "New Yorkers all over the city continue/ to lose jobs, lose their faith./ lose homes and mates." Like the other poets in this threesome, she does not speak from anger. Her passion is born from witnessing the world with faithful attention.

Three new books to savor, three poets to celebrate. The best of these poems leave me astonished at the poetic skill that, while shaping the physical, reveals the spiritual.