

Tribute to Sarah Klassen

Hildi Froese Tiessen

Among the richest formative periods in the emergence of Mennonite literature in Canada was the decade of the 1980s, the beginning of which was marked by the publication of Patrick Friesen's *The Shunning*. The remarkable first fictions of both Sandra Birdsell and Armin Wiebe followed (*Night Travellers* in 1982; *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* in 1984). Then the first volumes of poetry by Di Brandt (*questions I asked my mother* in 1987) and Sarah Klassen (*Journey to Yalta* in 1988). Those of us who had found the pioneering work of Rudy Wiebe and Patrick Friesen and David Waltner-Toews throughout the preceding decade compelling and inspiring, were truly overwhelmed with the amazing breadth and depth – and resonance – of this new work. In spite of the few who had begun to speak of what we Mennonite readers knew intimately, we had not grown used to seeing the familiar markers of our identity recorded in print, never mind made available for anyone to read.

Each voice was distinctive. Each attracted reading audiences both within the Mennonite community and without. All found within the Mennonite communities they evoked things to flee or resist – and things to embrace. That is, each of the new volumes published in the 1980s evinced ambivalence. And diverse layers of ambivalence were registered over and over in Mennonite literary texts in the years that followed, and sometimes featured in book titles like Miriam Toews's infamous *A Complicated Kindness* (2004) or Sarah Klassen's suggestive *a curious beatitude* (2006).

Some of these authors of the '80s foregrounded in their work their own experiences or those of their contemporaries, and so revealed the texture of the Mennonite worlds they knew. Sarah Klassen often invoked, with sensitivity, insight, and grace, the environment and sensibilities of people who had gone before. In a goodly number of her poems she records compelling personal memories – memories she has assembled from others, as well as her own – and, by force of her wonderful poetic voice, she transcribes the past and inscribes it with a palpable force of emotion.

Klassen's first volume of verse, *Journey to Yalta*, was honored with the Gerald Lampert Memorial Award (bestowed by the League of Canadian Poets on the best volume of poems published by a first-time poet); three of her works of poetry since then have been short-listed for the McNally Robinson Book of the Year Award, administered by the Manitoba Writers' Guild. *Journey to Yalta* foregrounded family history, among other things, and confirmed the role of poetry as a language of memory among the Mennonites. But Klassen's subject matter has never been confined to her Mennonite experience. Her second collection of poetry, *Violence and Mercy* (1991), as well as her third, *Borderwatch* (1993), offered insightful commentaries on how we are shaped, challenged, and circumscribed by the diverse worlds that call for our attention.

Klassen, whose first volume of verse was published when she was well into her fifth decade, turned her attention, after three books of poetry, to the world of teaching that had been her first career. In 1995 she collaborated with fellow poet Betsy Struthers on a compendium of essays by members of the League of Canadian Poets on conducting poetry workshops in schools. Their book was entitled *Poets in the Classroom*.

By the mid-nineties, Klassen's interests ranged from sixteenth-century Christian martyrs to the first Canadian woman in space. When an exhibition of Jan Luyken's engravings from *The Martyrs Mirror* toured North America, Klassen composed a suite of poems in response to these images of faith in the face of sure and awful death. A full-length musical composition entitled *Singing At The Fire*, inspired by the same exhibition and by Klassen's martyr poems, was composed by Brent Weaver in 1996, and performed by organist Shirley Sprunger King as the 1997 C. Henry Smith annual peace lectureship. In June 1996, a suite of Klassen's poems

inspired by Canadian astronaut Roberta Bondar's experience aboard the space shuttle, set to music by Linda Schwartz and entitled *Born Again*, was premiered at the "Anabaptist Women Doing Theology Conference" at Concord College in Winnipeg.

Klassen's fourth volume of poems, *Dangerous Elements* (1998), included the suite of martyr poems. It was followed in 1999 by a collection of poems that spoke in the voice of another kind of martyr: Simone Weil, the renowned French activist who in 1943, at age 34, starved herself to death. Of *Simone Weil: Songs for Hunger and Love* Klassen remarked: "I was intrigued by this woman who, in the midst of her intellectual and political activities, experienced mystery and turned her attention to God." There was much critical praise for this "moving and brilliantly realized lyrical work."

By the turn of the century, a workshop encounter with Robert Kroetsch, mentor also to Sandra Birdsell, Armin Wiebe, and others, led Klassen to experiment with prose. Her wonderful stories were published in 2000, in a collection entitled *The Peony Season*. The fine narrative texture of these works of short fiction is enriched by her lyrical sensibility.

Sarah Klassen's most recent work is a collection of stories called *A Feast of Longing* (2007). Her most recent collection of poems, entitled *A Curious Beatitude*, was published in 2006. It includes the poem "Rewinding Time," which won a National Magazine Award for Poetry. This poem closes with these lines:

Before he died, our father
told us, by heart, stories of another country. Spoke of going home.
He didn't mean the wind-whipped shack at Beechy,
Farm house in Niverville, the white suburban bungalow in Winnipeg.
And not that unexpected home across the ocean. Nor was this planet,
in his mind, his only home.

The pewter clouds have opened up a slit to let light through:
blood dappling the sullen sky. The coffee's cold. In future as in past
the wind blows where it chooses. We also must go home.
We are waiting for the snow, another camouflage. For music to ring out
the old, summon the new. As if our father's hand had once again

raised the harmonica, his warm lips breathed a new song into it.

A scene such as this, so intimately and evocatively suggestive of particular human lives remembered, represents only one of the great many directions and subjects Sarah Klassen's poet voice has explored. In her work we find not only the chronicler of family stories but also the teacher and the traveler, the lover of music and visual art, the ready collaborator, the peace activist, the philosopher, and the mystic. Klassen said of Simone Weil, "Committed to the quest, she never closed her mind around some aspect of truth, but kept it always open for more light."

Thank you, Sarah, for keeping your eyes to the light so that we all can see, for raising your warm lips to the harmonica, so that we all might hear. For enriching all of our lives with your wonderful work.

Hildi Froese Tiessen's biographical note appears on page 49.