

## **Tribute to Jean Janzen**

*Julia Kasdorf*

I first met Jean Janzen at her home in Fresno. A bouquet of flowers in hand, I knocked on the door of that imposing house, built to copy someone's ancestral manor in Britain, purchased by the Janzens as a real estate white elephant. In those days, 1986 or '87, if you were living in New York, as I was, you had to go all the way to California to find a serious (by that I mean university-trained and actively publishing) Mennonite poet who was also a woman and an American.

Later I'd learn that Jean was born in Canada, naturally – in Saskatchewan in 1933, the daughter of Henry and Anna Schultz Wiebe. Her father was a country school teacher. The family moved to Mountain Lake, Minnesota in 1939, when her father became the pastor of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church there.

In addition to Mountain Lake, Jean lived in Hillsboro, Kansas, and Meade, Kansas, as a girl. For her undergraduate education, she attended Tabor College, Grace College, and Northwestern University in Chicago – in part following her husband Louis Janzen and his medical training. She completed her BA in English at Fresno Pacific College. Mostly in Fresno, she raised four children. Two of the children became artists and two became doctors, which seems about right, given the balance in the Janzen household.

Jean supported her husband's career, working in the doctor's office in the early years, and also extended hospitality to the arts and culture from their home. Their large house and gardens have long been the site of musical concerts, art exhibits, gracious feasts, and lodging for visiting artists. Jean once confessed a chronic weakness for elegant table linens – and I say that to show that her aesthetic sense is equally rooted in domestic life. She has managed to run a complicated household and write some fine poems, although she frankly admits a tension; both kinds of work take time, one robbing the other.

In mid-life, Jean returned to graduate school and earned a master's

degree in creative writing from California State University in Fresno. At Fresno State, she studied with Philip Levine, and you can see traces of his grittiness and the material world in Jean's work, but her poems seek a kind of transcendence that Levine hasn't accomplished.

Jean and Louis Janzen were charter members of the College Community Mennonite Brethren Church in Clovis, a kind of progressive alternative to the local MB establishment. Since 1961, she served that congregation in many capacities, including church council, worship planning, and education commission; she sang in the choir for forty years. She has also served on the boards of Fresno Pacific College and the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, where she used her influence to remind the Evangelical-tending MBs of their Anabaptist roots.

For twelve years, she has taught poetry writing and literature at Fresno Pacific University and poetry writing at Eastern Mennonite University – showing up, like Nick Lindsay used to at Goshen, the itinerant poet met with great expectation. She has published six poetry collections: *Words for the Silence*, 1984; *Three Mennonite Poets*, 1986; *The Upside-Down Tree*, 1992; *Snake in the Parsonage*, 1995; *Tasting the Dust*, 2000; *Piano in the Vineyard*, 2004; and *Elements of Faithful Writing*, 2004. (We have Good Books to thank for most of these volumes.) Jean's work has been included in numerous anthologies and prestigious journals, including *Poetry*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Antioch Review*, *Image*, and *Christian Century*. In 1995, her poetry was recognized by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts. She also serves as poetry editor for the DreamSeeker series of Cascadia Press, and thereby mentors and nurtures the coming generation of Mennonite poets.

In addition to poetry, she writes hymn texts, eight of which appear in *The Hymnal*, the current Mennonite worship book. They have been reprinted in hymnals and song books used by Lutherans, Catholics, the United Church of Christ, the Disciples of Christ, Methodists, Canadian Presbyterians, the United Church of Canada – and in Scotland, China, and Germany. Several commissioned poems were incorporated into Alice Parker's oratorio, "That Sturdy Vine."

Jean is older than my mother, though she never seemed so to me. And I used to wonder how she did it, without getting mad (crazy or angry)

– all those traditional forms of nurture and service – while still finding time to write in her tiny office, a pantry really, off that enormous kitchen. Now I see that it could not have been otherwise, given all the loves in her life. And there's more to Jean than meets the eye.

Rudy may be a Wiebe, but Jean is a “Wee-bee” (the American voicing of her name), a fact which she stresses by collecting small broaches and ornaments fashioned in the form of honey bees. Jean is a bee – think of hard work and efficient organization; think of sweetness, how she produces it, and how she is drawn to it through her unabashed love of beauty. But cross her, and you'll find that behind that sweet smile, Jean is not without a certain sting. Recently we talked about her church's decision to relegate gay members to associate status. She smiled sadly, then with ambiguity said something like, “Oh, what does any of our membership mean, anyway? Maybe we all could live without it.”

Jean, we celebrate the ways you have changed in your life, and for the ways you have remained faithful – to relationships, to belief, to communities, and, especially, to your own work – we thank you.

*Julia Spicher Kasdorf's biographical note appears on page 90.*