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A Curious Beatitude by Sarah Klassen [Review]

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Sarah Klassen’s luminous sixth volume of poetry, which follows her 2000 short story collection, *The Peony Season*, takes its title from a seven-part poem that puts into words the experience of listening to Brahms’ “Ein Deutsches Requiem.” Klassen’s lyric rendering of blessings, including the strange blessing of sorrow itself, sets up the elegiac joy of this collection, which proposes, among other things, a consideration of spiritual pragmatics. Glossing the word “curious” in both its meanings, inquisitive as well as odd, Klassen contemplates the oddness of existence on earth along with the difficult consolations of a philosophical and inquisitive faith. Klassen is a writer of such integrity and vision that she consistently and conscientiously offers a poetic view that considers morality but never moralizes, that travels but never forgets first-world complicity in poverty and hunger, that writes of political oppression without simplifying its causes and consequences. Klassen, is, in other words, a poet whose conscience leads her to consider the sorrow of the world without luxuriating in it. Like Margaret Avison’s, Sarah Klassen’s poetry reads like an invitation to breathe differently.

In the collection’s first section, “Requiem and Magnificat,” Klassen introduces an encounter with the sorrow offered by Brahms’ Requiem, beginning with “The Saddest Music in the World,” a wry reference to Guy Maddin’s film of the same name. Sorrow itself becomes a double blessing with solace, and Klassen captures the ambiguous embrace of this blessing in her line breaks: neither “blues nor jazz can offer this much / sadness. It leaves you curiously / undone. It leaves you / comforted” (13). In seven sections – one fewer than the beatitudes delivered in the Sermon on the Mount – these poems capture the rise and fall of the music with the poetic imperative of their own cadence. Klassen follows this with a series of poems prompted by paintings and photographs, moving from the poetic project of pulling words from music to discussing the bewildering power of sight. Klassen pushes notions of reading the image far enough to include doubt and disturbance in viewer reception. In the poem “Fiction,” for instance, concerning Edward Hopper’s painting, “Hotel Room,” perception is blinding rather than illuminating: “not knowing which bright panel is the window / troubles us,” but we are very aware that, regardless of what we can or cannot perceive, “fiction lurks in the freshly painted corners” (25).

Subsequent sections, “The Far Country” and “The Stripped Garden,” perform other feats of poetic balance. Klassen’s travel poems deftly refuse literary recolonization of the land through which the
traveller passes. Two longer poem series stand out here as clear-eyed examinations of the historical texture of Christianized cultures. In “Postcards from the Andes,” Klassen invokes the violence of Spanish colonialism and complicates the notion of pilgrimage. “Wilderness Wandering,” an exploration of the Old Testament desert, includes the voice of Isaac narrating Abraham’s attempted sacrifice of the boy to God, and eventually locates the desert as a site of rigorous spiritual cleansing that becomes an artistic conundrum: “Think of the desert as the book of grief in which you write / everything that you have broken, that has broken you ... // Think of the wind / obliterating overnight the lengthy lines in sand” (47). The setting of the Carberry Spirit Sands at the conclusion of “Wilderness Wandering” suggests a walk on the Canadian prairie as a contemplative sojourn, demonstrated by Klassen’s final witty enjambment: “Do not hesitate / and do not hurry” (48). Her skill with the multi-sectioned lyric is evident in the final two poems of the collection, “German Lessons in the Interlake” and “Rewinding Time,” for which she won a National Magazine Gold Award in 2000. Too often poems about childhood memory and elegiac odes flounder in sentimentality, but Klassen rewrites family as a space between languages as well as between large bodies of water, using Goethe’s “Wanderers Nachtlied” to shift to the call to mourning in “Rewinding Time.” Books like A Curious Beatitude, with its beauteous ambiguities of lyricism and its sense of social responsibility, deserve readership and respect, not the least for the way these poems quietly insist, as Klassen does, that “thought when it lights in the brain is a bird” (51).

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