

Letter to Clara Thomas

from Adele Wiseman

August 8, 1987

Dear Clara,

Thank you for your letter. I cannot disapprove of any project which honours Margaret. And I cannot refuse you, knowing how she cared about you. But it is simply too soon for me to try to turn her into paper. Our long conversation continues, a monologue now, but she is not yet an absence, though she is silent, but so she was to all my rages. As to those rages, even in that she left me with some comfort. Not long before she died she phoned and told me about something dreadful someone had said to her, someone I'd warned her about, warnings which she had as usual ignored, though as always with the rider, "though you're usually right, Adele." I was appalled and furious, and told her exactly what I thought. She offered extenuations for another's gross insensitivity which I brushed aside like the featherweight excuses they were. She asked me please not to talk about what had upset her, and I bargained, as usual, about whom I might or might not mention it to, at what time, and in what detail. When we had come to an agreement, and were about to ring off, she said quietly, "I needed your anger, Adele."

Someday I may be able to approach Margaret and write about her as a memory out of my past, but not now. She's been dead only seven months. It's a year since we all celebrated her sixtieth birthday at that great garden party she and Joan Johnston threw in Joan's backyard on the banks of the Otonabee. [Editor's Note: Joan Johnston's article immediately follows this letter]. This time last year we still didn't know she was terminally ill, though she'd just found out that her kid brother was. She wouldn't call the party off and disappoint her guests, though she already had her ticket for her farewell flight West. I think Margaret had begun to

accept the need to grieve and celebrate simultaneously our unstable lives. Luckily for us she gave us a celebration to remember in our grief. You're the scholar, Clara, and have no doubt already remarked what I've just noticed, the ironies in that last sentence.

You suggested I might write something about the Ding Ling and Chen Ming visit in '81. What you didn't know, I daresay, what I didn't know myself till quite some time after, was that Gary Geddes had invited Margaret to go on that trip to China, and in refusing, she had suggested me instead, as she knew I'd always wanted to go to China. And that's how I got there. Ding Ling had been a kind of myth figure for me for years, a writer in life's arenas, not its ivory towers. She was a comrade of the great revolutionary leaders of China in the early days, but when she felt that the revolution had not yet done as much for women as it should, she stood up to her old friend Mao, "we slept on the same pallet" and suffered for it. For over twenty years, before and during the Cultural Revolution, she was banished to the hinterland, and for a long period was kept in solitary confinement. Her husband, Chen Ming, who was also banished, told of how they would smuggle heart to each other. The men knew of the path she was taken on for her solitary walk, and they would leave encouraging messages on leaves along the path, little poems, for each other, in the Chinese pictograph script, poems, for instance, about the sail that would one day show over the horizon.

By the time I got to China their ship had arrived, and Ding Ling, rehabilitated, was now the vice-Chairperson of the Chinese Writers' Association. She entertained us sumptuously at a Peking Duck banquet, and with great warmth privately for tea in her own home. When our gang of seven heard that she and her husband were in Iowa, we pleaded with them to come up to

Canada and give us the opportunity to return their hospitality. I believe it was you who dubbed that wonderful visit to Toronto the Ding Ling Wing Ding.

You know how onerous Margaret normally found public appearances to be. And you also know that it was impossible to persuade her to something she didn't want to do. In fact according to her analysis, the reason we had been friends for so long was that we had never tried to tell each other what to do. The very rare moment indeed when either one of us caught herself trying unsolicited advice on the other, was immediately followed by abject apologies. That was why when she volunteered to do something public, knowing how much it cost her, I was the more grateful. When the Women's Bookstore was burned down during all that bigoted anti-choice activity, I told Margaret that some of our Second Hundred group, (of great Canadian writers), namely Joyce Marshall, Miriam Waddington, Helen Weinzweig, Rachel Wyatt and I, had volunteered to do a benefit reading for the bookshop. Margaret immediately asked if she could join us. She read with us, and read, as always, well and movingly, and what would have been a moderately successful event was, with her participation, a crowded celebration. So it was when I told Margaret that Gary Geddes had managed to persuade Ding Ling and Chen Ming to come to Canada. She threw herself enthusiastically into arrangements for their Ontario visit.

And that's where you came in, through Margaret, you, and through you the offer from Maurice Elliott, Master of Winters College of the guest suite at Winters College where we could put them up. That was an exciting and a gratifying time. Unofficially and spontaneously we had the opportunity to show a great Chinese writer and patriot, a great woman and feminist, a grass roots Canadian wel-

come. And we really tried to keep it a grass roots human and not a media event. Daily telephone calls to and from Margaret. Daily long lists arriving by mail, lists of ideas, lists of people, lists of things she'd do and I might do and you and Geoff Hancock and Alice Munro might do.

And people responded. We got in touch with some crackerjack young people in the Chinese community and the whole Chinese community responded. Suddenly I was besieged by phone calls from people who had heard that Ding Ling was coming: scholars, Sinophiles, lovers of literature, admirers of the great lady, the great fighter, the great writer. It was our great good luck too, to have an equivalent figure, in Canadian terms, to co-host our guests. And they did hit it off.

I still have Margaret's timetable for greeting them when they arrived at Winters College. I had done a huge shop on Dundas. Margaret and Geoff Hancock and I arrived at Winters early, loaded down with packages of stuff we intended to heat up for my quite possibly erroneous version of the combinations necessary for a really sumptuous Chinese tea, as well as for our guests to nosh on when they were alone in the apartment. After admiring the nifty little flat room by room we came to the kitchen nook and suddenly realized that there was no stove. Panic. A great deal of rushing up and down corridors. A great deal of wringing of hands by Margaret and me, of tragic striding to and fro in the little apartment, and any minute the guests due to arrive! The day saved at the last minute by Geoff Hancock, mock not the mock heroic. Geoff found his way to the campus pub, and got them to heat up the goodies.

What a happy afternoon that was for us, exuberant with relief and delight. I re-

member Richard Liu, who travelled with and translated for Ding Ling and Chen Ming, struck just the right note as far as Margaret and I were concerned, of attentiveness and filial concern. We talked about things that engage us all, about the survival of the human and the humane, about the future of the children, all the children, about how pleased and honoured we were, about how it might be possible for people to learn to respect and admire and even enjoy each other after all.

I know all of this must excite the suspicion and scorn of the political and the powerful. They'll have their wars regardless, and make their profits. But those of us, like Margaret, who care enough, will at least have our say, and show that other ways are possible if we can gather the goodwill and the courage and the resolution and the persistence to insist that other ways are indeed necessary for the ultimate survival of us all.

Clara, I won't go into detail now of all the other events of that visit. Some moments stick in my mind. The Chinese Community honored us by inviting us to the banquet they threw for our illustrious guests, and what was so moving was the fact that every part of the community joined in. Ding Ling and Chen Ming even had the opportunity to swap incarceration stories with people who had been imprisoned, not by the Gang of Four, as they had been, but by the Chiang Kai Shek regime in Formosa. Crazy world, eh?

I have to confess, Margaret and I, who discovered something to laugh about on most occasions, this time got our memorable moment of life enhancing giggles when we found ourselves sheepishly admitting to each other, sotto voce, how attractive we both found the Chinese historian who was brilliantly and instantane-

ously translating for us, and enumerating to each other his positive attributes. I can still hear his sexy voice.

Happily, a wonderful variety of people, young and old, among them some of our finest scholars and linguists, feminists, artists and just plain human beings came to meet and hear our guests at the various receptions at York University. Tired though they must have been, Ding Ling, great little trouser that she was at seventy six, and Chen Ming, would not dream of foregoing the pilgrimage to Norman Bethune's birthplace or the trip to Niagara Falls. Of our original gang of seven writers, (Gary Geddes, Susanne Paradis, Robert Kroetsch, Patrick Lane, Alice Munro, Geoffrey Hancock, and me), Alice Munro and Geoff Hancock, with his new bride, Gay Allison, were there to host their various journeys in Ontario. For me, of course, the best time was the party at our house. We had taken them to dinner at a Chinese Restaurant downtown, and by the time we got home the house was already crowded with happy, celebrating people.

Several years later we threw a surprise party for Miriam Waddington on the occasion of her sixty fifth birthday, at our house. When my turn came to say something I talked of the three wonderful women writers we had celebrated in our house in recent years: Tillie Olsen, Ding Ling and Miriam Waddington. It never even occurred to me to mention Margaret Laurence, because she was there with us, celebrating, all the time. She always will be.

love,
Adele

MARGARET AVISON

JUST LEFT. The Night Margaret Laurence Died.

Bare branches studded once with jewelled birds
Someone inexorably plunders
One by one till an
Impoverished wintry sky from hill to
Darkening hill reveals
Untreasured tree-spikes, almost only
(One hunched bird left
His eye aglimmer there).

Waiting, dim
Loneliness, place of
That withdrawing vision —

More than the well of light from
The first far planet —
Fills, fills, fills, fills.

Mutable mortal night
Blinds mortal day
Still to changelessness.

The perched, askew,
Will ruffle still as the day-ocean
Lips in and foams towards flood of
All emptiness exposed.