A Mennonite Father: New Poems

by Elmer Suderman Gustavus Adolphus College

Elmer Suderman is Professor Emeritus of English at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota, where he still teaches part-time. He is also a dynamic preacher whose services are drawn upon by Mennonite and non-Mennonite congregations alike. His poetry has been widely published over many years and, as this selection of his poems richly demonstrates, he is at his best when evoking the ethnic ambience of his rural American-Mennonite background. Intensely interested in Mennonite literature, Elmer Suderman is a sensitive, articulate and discerning critic who was quick to recognize the early literary promise of Mennonite writers like Warren Kliwer and Rudy Wiebe. He is also a skilful translator who has translated, among other German works, the journal kept in 1873 by his grandfather Leonhard Sudermann, one of the twelve Russian-Mennonite leaders who came to America to assess settlement sites for the migration of 1874.

My Mennonite Father’s Eyes

My father’s picture hangs on our living room wall.
Not yet thirty, unmarried, he was handsome
with red whiskers, neatly trimmed,
hair carefully parted on the left.
Born one hundred and twenty years ago,
he died, my diary reminds me, when he was seventy, May 14, 1938 at 10:05 p.m.

I was seventeen. In two short years I’ll
be as old as he was when he died.
I look into those eyes that

watched thunder storms gather in the west
but never saw Danish rockers or Gogan prints,
never saw or even dreamt of TV or jet planes,
atomic bombs, space ships,
ever read Einstein, Darwin or Freud,
Moby Dick or Huckleberry Finn.

If he ever wanted to know the world’s name,
I didn’t know it.
He was satisfied to know simple names:
weat, woltje, himmel, rääjn, kegel, pead.

He wasn’t sure what a Ph.D. was:
"title docta" he called them.
I look into his eyes and wonder
how he must feel about his "title docta"
son. Concerned I think.

I look at those eyes follow me now,
and wonder what he’s thinking
watching from that long-past photograph
as I read a book or write a poem.
Long nights he sees me here trying
to understand and write about eyes,
his and mine, eyes that seeing see not.

I was, he once told his friend,
who lived across the street, a pest.
His other children, he said, kept quiet,
didn’t ask questions. I wanted to know
what you called the world.

I remember seeing him shiver on cold nights,
sweat under hot sun, pace hard oak floor.

In the hutch next to his picture
the same clock that struck
the midnight hours for him
strikes for me in the middle of my night,
then one and two and some nights four
before I fall fitfully asleep
and wake up weary. He understands.
As I trace our strange story
bound so inextricably together
Yet so far apart, neither hearing
the voice of the other,
our eyes meet, he looking
from the photograph at me
across the silence of fifty years.

I return his look and sometimes
across that silence I still hear him
saying with raspy breath before he died:
"Dee meda kjarpa jeit too ruh."
Then once more I stand at his death
bed, our eyes sharing the years’ long look.

To Know Which Way North Is

Grandfather waited for a clear starry
night to lay the foundation in this
new world for his first house built
from the sod of Kansas prairie
to make sure the walls ran straight
north and south and east and west
using the north star as his plumb line.
He wanted to be sure he always knew
which way north was, just as he always
wanted to know which was right
so he could do the right. That house,
insignificant, on that enormous space
would always steer him right.
I do not always know where
in the sky to look for that illusive
star to which the compass points.

When I find the north star today
shine through all the smog and glare
of city lights, it often isn’t
where I was so sure it had to be.
It Was Like This

It was like this:
Father and I were
walking on the back eighty
when he said:
"If you look over there,
you’ll see it,
that line our prairie makes
when it touches the sky
slicing the sun in half
and then into a quarter.
That line has swallowed up
the sun
and the glow explodes
until the dark will swallow up
the clouds.
The wind will shove
silence and night
over stubble fields.
over buffalo grass.
Over us.
We’ll walk home
in the dark."

Schlorra

Grandfather Jacob Becker died
before I was born. But the shoe last
he used then to pound the schlorra
into shape to make a meagre living is mine now.

I hold that last and that far off
and unknowable time when he held it,
becomes a now. I turn the last
over and over and see the marks
of his nails and grandfather
who left a church, decadent,
he thought, to start a new and
purer he thought Brüdergemeinde
is suddenly not long dead
but here with his flowing beard,
quoting endless Scripture verses
from memory. I hold his last

and he is here, and my mind flits
back and forth between his time
and mine, between his world and my world
so different from his, and the past

is no longer a far away thing
at the faded limits of long gone
past years. Holding this last
in my hands, the past crowds in

on today, my day, to become a powerful
presence with which I must deal.
Holding this last in my hand, here
in a home, simple, really, but

for him so plush he would never
see one like it, grandfather whose
voice I never heard, speaking
about what I'm told his tongue

tripped over when living
speaks to me now more intimate
than he could ever have spoken
when alive speaks, his tongue

nimble now, of baptism by immersion,
of ecstasy in Jesus Christ, and I, aghast,
embarrassed, repelled at what he says
am quick to judge. I, not wanting to listen now,

to his long-gone voice I never heard
but hear so clearly now,
stop, think and withhold judgment,
unable at last to judge.
Father Husbanded His Words

Father husbanded his words
as carefully as he cut straight furrows
plowing wheat stubble,
spoke eloquently in the silence
among the waving wheat we walked through
or in harvest-shared
summer-scorched drink
from wet burlap-wrapped jug.

Fifty years later
I hear his tenor voice singing
in a land where few streams flowed
"Ich weiss einen Strom
dessen herrliche Flut
Fliesst wunderbar stille durch’s Land"
accompanied by the squeak of chains
and gentle motion of porch swing
he rocked on every summer evening
after he retired.

Did He Know His Own Story?

Did he know his own story?
What dreams did he dream
as he sat there looking
out the window at Bermuda grass

he planted when he moved to town
and watered faithfully and protected
from irksome sandburrs? Did he know
that his past told a story?

When he owned a half section
of land, he said it would do.
It was enough to keep mother
comfortable after he died.

He was right. He retired a few
months before Black Friday
tumbled wheat prices
to twenty-five cents a bushel.
Frugal all his life, he didn't
mind living on $400 a year,
his only extravagance an occasional
bunch of bananas once a month
from Wedel's grocery where mother
sent him to get a loaf of bread
and quart of milk. He was satisfied
to rock the past awake:
coming to Kansas from the Ukraine,
age eleven, working from sunrise
to sunset busting sod for others
to help his parents build their
first sod house;
homestead a quarter section
for himself when the Cherokee Strip
opened; buying in 1910 his first
model T and later a long line
of chevrolets. Did he know, sitting
there at that window that window
rocking and humming
"Die Zeit ist kurz
O Mensch sei weise"
that his past told a story?
If he did he never told me.
And I asked.
I think about him often, wondering
about the stories he did not tell
so I might tell for him
stories that might be true.