# Mennonite Songs

Cantata for SATB Chorus, Solo Voices and Piano

### Poems by JULIA KASDORF

### Music by BRUCE TRINKLEY

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*Mennonite Songs* are settings for chorus and solo voices of poems by Julia Kasdorf from her collections *The Sleeping Preacher* and *Poetry in America*. The collections are published by the University of Pittsburgh Press which has given permission to use the poetry in the musical settings.

The choruses were composed during a residency at the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation of New Mexico in Taos, New Mexico, January through April 2012.

**Duration: approximately 27 minutes.** 

#### 1. Vesta's Father

Mom's in the kitchen telling stories from before she was born, how Vesta figured if her father quit smoking, he'd save enough to buy new winter coats that she and her sisters would not be ashamed to hang in the anteroom of Locust Grove Mennonite Church, where the ladies couldn't help but smell smoke when the girls pressed around the mirror to jab pins in their buns and straighten prayer coverings. He drank, too. Deer season each year when he went with the Hoot Owls to their camp on Back Mountain, someone always brought him home, drunk, to his wife, who had spells when she couldn't stop crying. The bishop found out he wore a baseball cap and made him confess that worldliness to the whole congregation. And when he died, with whiskey on his nightstand, he was buried by the Lutherans.

Tears gleam on Mother's cheeks as she traces the grain in the table boards, but I am not weeping like his wife or daughters. The sins of the fathers won't be visited on my generation. I say there is no shame in lying among Lutherans where folks are allowed to put flowers on graves, his plot in plain view of those mountains that rise dark and silent as old Mennonites standing in pews – black-stockinged women on one side, blacksuited men on the other – those mountains so high they slow the sunrise and hurry the night.

#### 2. A Family History

At dusk the girl who will become my mom must trudge through the snow, her legs cold under skirts, a bandanna tight on her braids. In the henhouse, a klook pecks her chapped hand as she pulls a warm egg from under its breast. This girl will always hate hens, and she already knows she won't marry a farmer. In a dim barn, my father, a boy, forks hay under the holsteins' steaming noses. They sway on their hooves and swat dangerous tails, but he is thinking of snow, how it blows across the gray pond scribbled with skate tracks, of the small blaze on its shore, and the boys in black coats who skate hand-in-hand round and round, building up speed until the leader cracks that whip of mittens and arms, and it jerks around fast, flinging off the last boy. He'd be that one – flung like a spark trailing only his scarf.

#### **3. The Sleeping Preacher**

About the time guilt got the best of the Fox sisters, and they confessed the rappings were not messages from the dead to comfort their friends, but only the girls' toe knuckles cracking, about that time, the Sleeping Preacher came to the Valley. Our great-grandma saw him swoon across the front pew and preach against jewelry, fancy dresses for women, and photographs. That day she threw all the old daguerreotypes in gilt and red velvet cases, all the prints of her parents on their wedding day, of the milk wagon parked outside their barn, and herself in high button shoes into the cookstove. She stoked those flames to burn away the sins that might keep her kin from rising on the last day. She did not think of us, only to save us, leaving nothing for us to touch or see except this stubborn will to believe.

#### 4. The Only Photograph of My Father as a Boy

In Amish trousers and suspenders, he's barefoot by the field lane, blond hair bowl-cut, his face twisted. He knows this shouldn't be – this worldly uncle squinting into a box camera, commanding, "Hold still." That click, something flew out of him with, "Don't tell your mother 'bout this." And something flew in. The next picture, high school graduation, he's grinning on the rim of the world, as confident as science in 1951.

#### 5. Grossdaadi's Funeral

This is the child in a buff-colored coat with a foxtail collar. This is the child who walks down the aisle between straight-back benches

in Amish church; gapes at great-aunts and great-uncles and covens of cousins in black.

This is the child whose momma knows she'll see plenty of this and lifts her to the bare, pine box that Grossdaadi made for himself.

(He crawled in to test, then kept it locked in a spare bedroom back at the farm.)

This is the child who stares at his hand, bony and veined, covered with skin like the paper her momma wraps sandwiches in; she touches his face chilled by the aunts who sat up all night sponging the corpse.

This is the child who fingers his beard, as gray as the fur on the foxhead muff that dangles from grosgrain around her neck. Later she'll learn the hair of the dead – like this dirty gauze beard – still grows in the grave.

This is the girl who clutches the muff, who digs in its fur for edges of skull, scrapes at the glass beads glued in for eyes, and presses the teeth so her fingertips sting all through the long, German prayers.

#### 6. When Our Women Go Crazy

When our women go crazy, they're scared there won't be enough meat in the house. They keep asking but how will we eat? Who will cook? Will there be enough? Mother to daughter, it's always the same questions. The sisters and aunts recognize symptoms: she thinks there's no food, same as Mommy

before they sent her away to that place, and she thinks if she goes, the men will eat whatever they find right out of the saucepans.

When our women are sane, they can tomatoes and simmer big pots of soup for the freezer. They are satisfied arranging spice tins on cupboard shelves lined with clean paper. They save all the leftovers under tight lids and only throw them away when they're rotten. Their refrigerators are always immaculate and full, which is also the case when our women are crazy.

#### 7. Dying with Amish Uncles

The ground was frozen so hard his sons used a jackhammer to pry open a grave in the rocky field where Grossdaadi's wife and daughter lay under the streaked stones that tell only last names: Yoder, Zook, Yoder.

Amish uncles, Grossdaadi's sons, shoveled earth on the box; stones clattered on wood then quieted while we sang hymns to the wind. Bending over the hole, Uncle Kore wouldn't wipe his dripping nose and chin.

Ten years later when we gather for July ham and moon pies, the uncles stand to sing Grossdaadi's favorite hymns. At "*Gott ist die Liebe*," they almost laugh with the tears running into their beards; Abe and Mose and Ben do not wipe them.

Their voices come deep as graves and unashamed of shirtsleeves or suspenders. Seeing them cry that brave, I think the uncles mustn't die, that they'll stay with those of us who must, being so much better than we are at weathering death.

#### 8. That Story

In this story the Garden of Eden is the Valley; Adam and Eve are the parents who left all those fine holsteins and the swallows darting under the barn beams at dusk. Once out of the Garden, they had to find jobs, so Eve became a nurse, silent witness to the world's ills, and Adam was doomed to office work. In the evenings he pushed a plow in his garden's poor soil, while his children stooped over the furrows behind him, trailing pebbles of fertilizer from their fists, dropping seeds painted pesticide pink.

In this story, Cain is a woman who slays with words. She moves to the city where she fusses over a Christmas cactus and African violets in pots. Her garden is only as wide as a sidewalk; stray cats pee on her ragged tomato stalks. Sometimes she thinks back to the nights she and her father, tired together, sat on the edge of their patch. Now she knows his silent longing for that Garden. It is easy to believe that story and to grow as weary as Israel's children by the waters of Babylon.

#### 9. Leftover Blessings

His dinner on the stove, Grandpa smirked at our jar of pickled eggs and beets, "Old maids' picnic, party for hens." They still let Bertha come since she married so late and someone so mean. (Who could begrudge all those children a mother, besides it was she who taught that proud Amishman to drive in her own new, black Plymouth.)

They had a spot under the hemlocks by a stream on Back Mountain, the Valley's leftover blessings: Elsie and Miriam, the three Stayrook sisters who crocheted and sang and Mary and Loamie who lived on the home farm like girls – calling all the chickens by name, milking goats and Rosie the cow by hand, feeding geese and guinea hens just for fun. Winters they hooked rugs from wool rags, heating only one room in that great, dark house. The only child among women, I couldn't imagine them young or waiting for dates, though I'd seen the photograph from Rehoboth or one of the ocean cities – five of them lined up, laughing in the surf, thin, dark-haired, hiking their skirts. I never guessed they might have chosen to stay with women.

I only felt the weight of the way they heaped my plate and touched my hair, or the picnic games they made only for me. How they cheered while I raced against invisible children, sparing me the indignity of three-legged relays, bestowing balloons and butterscotch. So much for just one child, I thought. This is what it means to be a blessing, enough love left over to give prizes for nothing, for just showing up, being young, being born the granddaughter of a man someone married.

#### **10. Oral Tradition**

Before I leave, Percy Yoder means to give me something I can use:

Your grandpa was a worker, a driver. We only saw him at market when

he had a calf to sell. But his dad – I worked for him when I was young –

stopped plowing well before suppertime so the horses cooled down and wouldn't drink

*so fast back at the barn.* Of the fields our ancestors cleared long before tractors,

some lie bare to the sun. In others, great oaks rain shade for horses and men.

Percy means to show me both kinds so that I may choose one.

#### 11. Mennonites

We keep our quilts in closets and do not dance. We hoe thistles along fence rows for fear we may not be perfect as our Heavenly Father. We clean up his disasters. No one has to call; we just show up in the wake of tornadoes with hammers, after floods with buckets. Like Jesus, the servant, we wash each other's feet twice a year and eat the Lord's Supper, afraid of sins hidden so deep in our organs they could damn us unawares, swallowing this bread, his body, this juice. Growing up, we love the engravings in Martys Mirror: men drowned like cats in burlap sacks, the Catholic inquisitors, the woman who handed a pear to her son, her tongue screwed to the roof of her mouth to keep her from singing hymns while she burned. We love Catherine the Great and the rich tracts she gave us in the Ukraine, bright green winter wheat, the Cossacks who torched it, and Stalin, who starved our cousins while wheat rotted in granaries. We must love our enemies. We must forgive as our sins are forgiven, our great-uncle tells us, showing the chain and ball in a cage whittled from one block of wood while he was in prison for refusing to shoulder a gun. He shows the clipping from 1916: Mennonites are German milksops, too yellow to fight. We love those Nazi soldiers who, like Moses, led the last cattle cars rocking out of the Ukraine, crammed with our parents - children then learning the names of Kansas, Saskatchewan, Paraguay. This is why we cannot leave the beliefs or what else would we be? why we eat 'til we're drunk on shoofly and moon pies and borscht. We do not drink; we sing. Unaccompanied on Sundays, those hymns in four parts, our voices lift with such force that we lift, as chaff lifts toward God.

1. Vesta's Father

For SATB Chorus, 4 Solo Voices and Piano

















## 2. A Family History For SATB Chorus and Piano











### **3. The Sleeping Preacher**

For SA Chorus, 2 Solo Voices and Piano











#### 4. The Only Photograph of My Father as a Boy <sup>19</sup>













### 5. Grossdaadi's Funeral

For Four Solo Voices and Piano








## 6. When Our Women Go Crazy

For SATB Chorus and Piano Adagio ossessionato  $d_{\cdot} = 69$ p sotto voce Women When our women go cra-zy, they're **p** sotto voce Men When our women go craz-y, they're Piano mp 6 **mp** urgently W scared there won't be e - nough meat in the house but тj Μ scared there won't be e nough meat in the house. They keep ask - ing \_ 6 тf 10 W. how will we eat? Who will cook? Will there be e nough? pp M Will there be e - nough? 10 1 20 0 dim. pp $\mathbf{\nabla}$ p









# 7. Dying with Amish Uncles

For TTBB Chorus, Solo Voices and Piano











#### 8. That Story

For Soprano and Baritone Solo Voices and Piano



















### 9. Leftover Blessings

For SA Chorus, Two Solo Voices and Piano



















## **10. Oral Tradition**

For SATB Chorus, Two Solo Voices, and Piano







## 11. Mennonites

For SATB Chorus and Piano























