

Three German Poems

Translated from the German
by [William Ruleman](#) (December 2018)



Winter Landscape, Anselm Kiefer, 1970

Georg Heym (1887-1912), one of the German Expressionist poets, is perhaps best known for his nightmarish visions of the modern city and cultural collapse, but he was also a sensitive and romantic observer of nature. His poetic output before his accidental death by drowning at the age of 24 was

extremely prolific.

Winter Solstice by Georg Heym

After all the winter rains
Came days like islands in the sea
Cast upon the winter's gloom
With south winds rough and wild and free

The way a child takes from the floor
Of some old chest a string of pearls
Within whose dull and faded gleam
The luster of lost love still swirls.

The midday sun now rests its warm
Effulgence on the oak's brown bole
As on an ancient warrior's armor
Rests a campfire's flaming coal.

Season of the winter solstice,
You are not like hearts that wane,
Who, accustomed to their sorrow,
Wax too fond of constant pain.

Sometimes only dreams still give
A harvesting of fame and gold,
As when, upon a shepherd's lips,
A forlorn sort of smile takes hold.

Wintersonnenwend

Nach den Winterregen kamen
Tage, Inseln gleich im Meer,
In des Winters Graun verschlagen
Mit dem Südwind ungefähr.

Wie ein Kind vom Grund der Truhe
Eine Schnur von Perlen nimmt.
Doch in ihrem blassen Glanze
Noch der Liebe Schimmer schwimmt.

Wärmend ruht die Mittagssonne
Auf der Eichen braunem Stamme,
Wie auf alter Krieger Panzern
Ruht der Lagerfeuer Flamme.

Zeit der Wintersonnenwende,
Gleichst du nicht dem alten Herzen,
Das, gewöhnt an seine Trauer,
Liebgewann die steten Schmerzen.

Manchmal nur in einem Träume
Erntet Ruhm es noch und Gold
Wenn um Schläfers Lippen fliegt
Ein verlornes Lächeln hold.

Paul Boldt (1885-1921), also a German Expressionist, was given to frolicsome and sometimes bawdy poetic depictions of life, love, and sex in Berlin during the years preceding the First World War. Though drafted into the army, he was discharged in 1916, being declared psychologically unfit to serve. He died at the age of 35 from complications resulting from hernia surgery.

Nights Over Finland by Paul Boldt

The pine woods toward the east have lost their light;
And now the ghost of darkness starts to poke
Its yellow head from the sea, enwreathed in smoke,
To taste the starry fragrance of new night.

Spruces' posts turn toadstools in one's sight,
And every bough wears moonlight's tender cloak
Of frozen cloth that filigrees each spoke,
Its contours etched from frost of clean, ripe white.

Upon the ground's old rounded ebony ice,
The erstwhile rushing rivers have congealed.
In rubbled moraine shines the slippery gneiss:

It gleams in glints on polished moor and field.

The crows cry endlessly. Each day and deed,
With mist and chill, descends like sack and seed.

Nächte über Finnland

Die Nadelwälder dunkeln fort im Osten,
Und aus den Seen taucht das Nachtgespenst
Den gelben Kopf, von Feuerrauch gekränzt,
Den Sterngeruch der neuen Nacht zu kosten.
Zu weißen Pilzen filzen Fichtenpfosten,
Und Ast an Ast in zartem Lichte glänzt,
–befrorne Linien–Filigran umgrenzt,
Zieht die Kontur aus reinen, reifen Frosten.
Bis auf das alte, runde, schwarze Eis
Des Grundes sind die Flüsse zugefroren.
In Schuttmoränen glänzt der glatte Gneis
Und in den leuchtenden, polierten Mooren.
Die Krähen schreien ewig: Tag–und Tat–
Nebel und Kälte fällt wie Sack und Saat.

Alfred Wolfenstein (1883-1945), yet another of the German Expressionists, started out as a poet yet increasingly

concentrated on translation, rendering works by Shelley, Emily Brontë, Hugo, Verlaine, Rimbaud, among others. Afflicted by heart disease and hounded by the Nazis, he took his own life in a Paris hospital in January of 1945.

In the Zoo by Alfred Wolfenstein

I roam among the cages as I choose,
My steps—amid their roars—desultory;
Yet in those noble creatures' eyes I see
Their lovely freedom, which they never lose.

My puny pupils meet their vast sea's-gaze;
The city's petty pace wears on my toes;
Yet in that tiger's knees, lone lushness flows;
His tree-striped flanks flare with the jungle's blaze.

Their pure, hot souls now make my weak will, warm
With a woman's kind of longing, start to melt.
And my own wan face and limbs have felt
Gold lightning in the jaguar's storm-night form.

Statue-still, the eagle sits. His eyes,
Though solid, soar up toward a higher realm;

His upswing grips me, sets me at his helm . . .

I stand back still as stone. Alone, he flies.

The elephant's icebergs tower: gray and bald

And blinding heights where now just great ghosts dwell;

Wild freedom whirls all round my sad self's cell;

A ring of cosmos fire holds me enthralled.

Bestienhaus

Ich gleite, rings umgittert von den dunklen Tieren,

Durchs brüllende Haus am Stoß der Stäbe hin und her.

Und blicke weit in ihren Blick wie weit hinaus auf Meer

In ihre Freiheit . . die die schönen nie verliercn.

Der harte Takt der engen Stadt und Menschheit zählt

An meinen Zeh'n, doch lose schreiten Einsamkeiten

Im Tigerknie, und seine baumgestreiften Seiten

Sind keiner Straße, nur der Erde selbst vermählt.

Ach ihre reinen heißen Seelen fühlt mein Wille

Und ich zerschmelze sehnsuchtsvoller als ein Leib.

Des Jaguars Blitze gelb aus seinem Sturmnachtleib

Umglühn mein Schnee Gesicht und winzige Pupille.

Der Adler sitzt wie Statuen still und scheinbar schwer

Und aufwärts aufwärts in Bewegung ungeheuer!

Sein Auftrieb greift in mich und spannt mich in sein Steuer

—

Ich bleibe still, ich bin von Stein, es fliegt nur er.

Es steigen hoch der Elefanten graue Eise,

Gebirge, nur von Riesengeistern noch bewohnt:

Von Wucht und Glut des wilden Alls bin ich umthront

Und ich steh eingesperrt in ihrem freien Kreise.

Formerly a professor of English, William Ruleman now devotes himself to writing, translating, and painting. His most recent books include the poetry collection *From Rage to Hope* (White Violet Books, 2016) and his translations of Hermann Hesse's *Early Poems* (Cedar Springs Books, 2017) and Stefan Zweig's unfinished novel *Clarissa* (Ariadne Press, also 2017). More

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