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Woe to those... by Jakob van Hoddiss and *mystery and crime and elderly couple* by Yaak Karsunke

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Gregory Divers
Woe to those...

Jakob van Hoddis
Weh denen...

Woe to those who await the night
In the pale glow of twilight
 – Evenings they say
The goddess of life slinks smiling
Through the streets in a sheer silk
Moon-woven gown, red flowers
In her white hand and if she meets
You in dull dreary rooms where
No lamp's sacrificial brightness
Glow, she will sneer and go her way –
Woe to those who await the night
In pale twilight.

Gregory Divers
mystery and crime

Yaak Karsunke
mystery and crime

for Rainer Hachfeld

Samuel Dashiell Hammet “knew
a man who once
stole a Ferris wheel”
(more than that he didn’t divulge)

yet: such a contraption doesn’t
just walk off on its
own (even if it’d been dismantled
broken down to parts & pieces
& stored in crates)

the gondolas alone
added to that girders & struts
plus nuts & bolts
by the hundredweight

at the least one will need
a flatbed trailer with the length as well as
a tractor with the power to haul it all away
(& from where to take
if not to steal)

a lot of work – on the other hand:
who’s going to steal a Ferris wheel?
Hammett
still knew someone who did

Gregory Divers
elderly couple
(after Sebald Beham)

Yaak Karsunke
älteres paar

für Ingrid

there on a palm-of-the-hand-sized
copper engraving from 1543
you see them standing
a woman & a man
not exactly slender no longer young
the inventors of love

that rustling sound of fig tree leaves
rubbing against each other
kept Eve from her sleep
& as Adam took the apple he saw
her breasts with new
eyes above his slowly
opening lips

(shortly thereafter both were
deeply moved by knowledge)

the serpent slithers
out of paradise & glides
smoothly towards you & me –
let us go then into the garden
& adorn their altar
with pomegranates

Commentary

Jakob van Hoddis: *Weh denen... / Woe to those...*

Jakob van Hoddis was born in Berlin in 1887 as Hans Davidsohn; his pen name van Hoddis is an anagram of the family name. Although primarily known as an early-expressionist German poet ranking alongside Georg Heym, Georg Trakl and Ernst Stadler, van Hoddis is also considered a forerunner of surrealism.

Jakob van Hoddis was deported to Poland in 1942 and murdered by the Nazis, most likely in Sobibór. Unfortunately he published relatively little during his lifetime; “Weh denen...” is one of his many poems first published long after he was dead.

“Weh denen...” is somewhat unique among the works of Jakob van Hoddis. Unlike the majority of his poems “Weh denen...” has neither formal stanza structure nor rhyme scheme. The content, however, is representative of his verse. Like many of his generation, van Hoddis followed in the Romantic tradition of appropriating legends and mythological figures for his subject matter. Here we have an unnamed goddess of life. Whether this is the Egyptian, Greek or another deity is not specified; nevertheless, this goddess readily finds a home in the unique poetic world of Jakob van Hoddis. The setting is at twilight, a special time for van Hoddis for it marks the passage from day to night. His goddess of life is endowed with distinctive qualities both in her attire and mannerisms, particularly in how she “slinks” through the streets and sneers at those she encounters in “dull dreary rooms” during twilight time. Although this goddess of life appears as ephemeral as twilight itself, there is something overtly ominous in how the text is bracketed by the initial two and final two lines. The repetition of “Woe to those who await the night” coupled with the actions of this goddess of life suggests that the wait is in vain.

Yaak Karsunke: *mystery and crime*

Although Yaak Karsunke began as a political poet during the 1960s, his poetry includes a wide variety of subject matter. He

has long been fascinated by crime novels and is the author of *Toter Mann* (1989) for which he received the *Deutscher Krimi Preis* in 1990. His poem “mystery and crime” pays tribute to an American master of the crime novel and is dedicated to Karsunke’s friend Rainer Hachfeld, a jazz saxophonist. The poem is rendered in Karsunke’s distinctive style and orthography: only proper nouns are capitalized, the language is unadorned, the diction concise. The quote in stanza one is Note # 28 in Hammett’s “From the Memoirs of a Private Detective” (*The Smart Set*, March 1923). The key to translating Yaak Karsunke’s poetry is capturing the voice (especially with regard to how he uses flavoring particles such as *ja* and *eben*); and here that means somehow blending in the voice and diction of Dashiell Hammett lurking in the background. Furthermore, Karsunke’s deft use of the German language and occasional word play are not easily rendered in English. For example, in stanza four I chose the more lengthy but parallel construction of “a flatbed trailer with the length” paired with “a tractor with the power” to emphasize the crucial point expressed in the original. Finally, the vocabulary in this poem is somewhat dated. The best example of this is “by the hundredweight” in stanza three, a phrase typical of Dashiell Hammett’s 1920s.

Yaak Karsunke: *älteres paar* / *elderly couple*

Yaak Karsunke’s “älteres paar” is based on a copper engraving by the 16th century German artist Hans Sebald Beham. The poetic treatment of an artist and work of art has been a constant in the poetry of Yaak Karsunke ever since the 1960s. Once again, this poem is representative of his distinctive style and orthography with only proper nouns being capitalized and his preference for the ampersand. The language is succinct with no word wasted. The German in “älteres paar” was relatively easy to render in English; the challenge in translating this poem was not only to capture the voice but also to make sure that line breaks enhanced both content and diction. One advantage I have in translating Yaak Karsunke is that we have known each other for over twenty years and communicate freely regarding my translations. Both he and his wife Ingrid, to whom this poem is dedicated, have a good feel for the English language and that

greatly aids this partnership. Yaak Karsunke calls “älteres paar” one of his personal favorite poems (a vintage print of the copper engraving hangs on the wall above his desk) and is also a double portrait of him and his wife. As a closing note, those readers familiar with T. S. Eliot’s “Prufrock” will recognize the “let us go then” in the final stanza.

Source texts:

Hoddis, Jakob van. “Weh denen...,” *Dichtungen und Briefe*, edited by Regina Nörtemann, Arche, 1987, p. 147.

—. “Mystery and Crime.” Previously unpublished.

Karsunke, Yaak. “älteres paar.” *hand & fuß: Gedichte*, Lyrikedition 2000, 2004, p. 58.