Classic Poetry Series

Peter Huchel

- poems -

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Eastern River

Do not look for the stones
in water above the mud,
the boat is gone.
No longer with nets and baskets
the river is dotted.
The sun wick,
the marsh marigold flickered out in rain.

Only the willow still bears witness,
in its roots
the secrets of tramps lie hidden,
their paltry treasures,
a rusty fishhook,
a bottle full of sand,
a tine with no bottom,
in which to preserve
conversations long forgotten.

On the boughs,
empty nests of the penduline titmice,
shoes light as birds.
No one slips them
over children's feet.

Translated by Michael Hamburger

Peter Huchel

Meeting

For Michael Hamburger

Barn owl
daughter of snow,
subject to the night wind,

yet taking root
with her talons
in the rotten scab of walls,

beak face
with round eyes,
heart-rigid mask
of feathers a white fire
that touches neither time nor space.

Coldly the wind blows
against the old homestead,
in the yard pale folk,
sledges, baggage, lamps covered with snow,

in the pots death,
in the pitchers poison,
the last will nailed to a post.

The hidden thing
under the rocks' claws,
the opening into night,
the terror of death
thrust into flesh like stinging salt.

Let us go down
in the language of angels
to the broken bricks of Babel.

Translated by Michael Hamburger

Peter Huchel

Melpomene

The forest bitter, spiky,
no shore breeze, no foothills,
the grass grows matted, death will come
with horses' hooves, endlessly
over the steppes' mounds, we went back,
searching the sky for the fort
that could not be razed.

The villages hostile,
the cottages cleared out in haste,
smoked skin on the attic beams,
snare netting, bone amulets.
All over the country an evil reverence,
animals' heads in the mist, divination
by willow wands.

Later, up in the North,
stag-eyed men
rushed by on horseback.
We buried the dead.
It was hard
to break the soil with our axes,
fir had to thaw it out.

The blood of sacrificed cockerels
was not accepted.

Translated by Michael Hamburger.

Peter Huchel