

The following five poems from the German of Nelly Sachs appeared in a special Translation issue of the journal *Able Muse* (#17, Summer 2014), edited by Charles Martin.

Teresa Iverson

Translated from the German of

Nelly Sachs

1891 – 1970

Five Poems

I.

“Wenn ich nur wüßte”

If only I knew,
what your last look rested on.
Was it a stone that had already drunk
many last looks, until they fell in blindness
on the blind?

Or was it dirt,
earth enough to fill a shoe,
and already turned black
from so many good-byes
and from causing so much death?

Or was it your last road,
that brought you the farewell from all roads
you had walked on?

A puddle, a piece of mirroring metal,
the belt buckle of your enemy, perhaps,
or any other small fortune-teller
of heaven?

Or did this Earth, that doesn't allow
anyone to depart from here unloved
send a bird-sign through the air,
reminding your soul so that it flinched
in its body burned with anguish?

II.

“Chor der Waisen”

Chorus of Orphans

We orphans

We lament the world:

Our branch was cut down

And thrown into the fire—

Out of our protectors, they made firewood—

We orphans lie on the fields of Loneliness.

We orphans

We lament the world:

In the night our parents play hide-and-seek with us—

Behind the black folds of Night

Their faces study us,

Their mouths are saying something:

We were dry wood in a woodcarver’s hand—

But our eyes have become angel-eyes

And look at you,

They see through the black

folds of Night—

We orphans

We lament the world:

Our toys have become stones,

Stones have faces, Father- and Mother-faces

They don’t wilt like flowers, they don’t bite like animals—

And they don’t burn like dry wood, when one throws it in the oven—

We orphans we lament the world:
World why have you taken our tender Mothers
And our Fathers, who said: My child, you resemble me!
We orphans, who no longer resemble anyone in the world!
O World,
it's you we accuse!

III.

“Engel der Bittenden”

Angel of suppliants,
now, where the fire like a rending sunset
scorched all habitation to night—
walls and utensils, the hearth and the cradle,
all fallen parcels of longing—
longing, that flies in the blue sail of air!

Angel of suppliants,
on Death’s white floor, that supports nothing any more,
grows the forest planted in despair.
Forest of arms with branches of hands,
nails dug into the castle of night, into the stars’ mantel.
Or else plowing Death, him, the one who preserves life.

Angel of suppliants,
in the forest that doesn’t rustle
where shadows are painters of the dead
and transparent tears of lovers
the seed-corn.
Mesmerized by the moon, the mothers
tear out their roots as if seized by the storm,
and creaking, the old men’s dead wood decays.
But the children are still playing in the sand,
practicing, forming something new out of the Night
since they are still warm from transformation.

Angel of suppliants,
bless the sand,
let it understand the language of longing,
from this something new wants to grow from a child's hand,
always something new!

IV.

“Wenn der Tag leer wird”

When the day empties itself
in the twilight,
when the imageless time begins,
the lonely voices join together—
the animals are nothing other than the hunting
or hunted—
the flowers no more than fragrance—
when everything becomes nameless as in the beginning—
you go under the catacombs of Time,
which open for those that are near the end—
there where the heart buds grow—
into the dark inwardliness
you sink downward—
already past death
which is only a windy passageway—
and freezing from going out
you open your eyes
where a new star
has already left its reflection—

V.

“Der Schlafwandler”

The sleepwalker
circling on his star
in the white feather of morning
wakes up—
the spot of blood on it calls it to mind—
lets the moon fall startled—
the snowberry shatters
on Night’s black agate
dirtied with dreams—

No pure white on Earth—

TERESA IVERSON is a poet, translator, and editor. She holds a PhD in German Literature and Literary Translation from Boston University; her dissertation, on the poetry of Gottfried Benn, is titled: *Gottfried Benn's Intimate Discourse: The "Du" in Monologic Art*.

With Rosanna Warren, she taught poetry at MCI-Framingham, Massachusetts' only prison for women, and coedited *In Time*, a collection of student inmates' writing.

Her own poems and translations have been published in many journals, including *PN Review*, *AGNI*, *Fulcrum*, *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, *Notre Dame Review*, *New Criterion*, *Delos*, *Partisan Review*, *Poetry Porch*, *Sonnet Scroll*, and anthologized in *World Literature: An Anthology of Verse from Antiquity to Our Time* (Katherine Walsh and John S. Major, editors). Her translated *Selected Poems of Nelly Sachs* is under review for publication.