

## An Orphan Sings

Translated by Freda Hodge (2015)

Night senses in its sleep:  
the streets' complaints  
of emptiness have ceased:  
a youngster is singing.

Night opens wide its eyes and ears:

the singing rips through a tight, split jacket,  
the uppers of his shoes are torn, and he sings.

He has nowhere to sleep:  
the gates are boarded tight  
like the grave of his father,  
the windows are all unlit  
as he is, missing a mother.  
He and the pavement both down and out  
and in the heavy grip of idleness  
and now the city, the city  
is like a newbuilt orphanage:

no kitchen built yet  
no trace of any pot  
you look everywhere in vain!  
No compassionate Sisters  
in aprons full of white goodness,  
no straw mattresses in the corners,  
no made bed

an orphan.

With nowhere to sleep.

He drifts from place to place,  
drags a stomach full with hunger  
through the dull, deserted emptiness  
of a large, dark city,  
(he a small dark youth)  
drags on, not knowing where to or where from,

gapes: from somewhere a mouse runs out  
he chases it, can't see it: where?  
He doesn't shout: God, a scrap of peace!  
His gums are useless for any prayers,  
his father never taught him,  
nor has he a mother,  
so from where shall he draw tears?  
And staring zombielike  
in miserable silence  
(like tin roofs,  
like panes of glass  
like limewash on the houses)  
he blunders through street corners  
And doesn't know what's in his face:  
Maybe  
a lantern?  
Perhaps the stars?  
And he is unable to hear  
The trumpet in his left ear....

The darkness is a weight upon his shoulder,  
in his breast hangs a little sack of sand,  
from where it's come he has no idea  
and the sack of sand is huge,

as he wanders lost, not feeling, and feels:  
beneath his feet it is so pleasant  
they are celebrating a festival there,  
earth kisses the soles of his shoes so warmly.

Dreamily he sets himself down  
and lies there a person in the middle of the road,  
(like lips fastened on a dead breast  
is his black head on the dark cobblestones)  
for no reason at all he breaks into song  
(Heard from youngsters at synagogue?  
From an old beggar at a market?  
Or somewhere from gypsies?)  
Dozing, he hugs the ground,  
snoozes snoozes snoozes and  
sings out in his sleep:

"Good stones, soft stones  
I was good-looking once,  
now no one casts a glance;  
all sleep, I only wake,  
no one knows how I am starving.  
My teeth have already blackened,  
soft, soft, soft stones;  
I was good-looking once,  
I alone in all the neighbourhood  
oh, I am already just skin and bone,  
why do you stay silent, hard stones?"

Night hears on the streets,  
the tin of the roofs hears it  
and the panes of glass in the windows,  
and the bricks of the houses all hear:

an orphan sings.

(1921)