

WALTER HESS

JEW'S HARP

PLEASURE BOAT STUDIO

Jew's Harp

Poems by Walter Hess, ©2009

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Contact **Jack Estes**

Fax; 888-810-5308

Email: [pleasboat@nyc.rr.com](mailto:pleasboat@nyc.rr.com)

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# Survivor

It took some time  
to look at all those pictures,  
the black and white ones;  
to hear those stories once again;  
heads nodding toward  
her and him;  
that book of shadows  
when we were kids  
who knew enough  
to fill in that which happened;  
knew to perfection that desire,  
no, the need to stay apart,  
away from them;  
from that which happened  
endlessly to those you loved  
but not to you.

# Oma

1

She stayed in the village where they knew her worth –  
sixteen and pregnant and no one reproached her.

2

Once I saw the gypsy at her door,  
skin like oil and beads of coral about her neck,  
who looked in my Oma's eyes, and bowed her head,  
who saw her sorrows but the muted flint of fiery being;  
her joy, long flowing silence and calm knowing.

We sat in front of bread and butter then –  
mothers and grandmothers rising like steam  
from sweet creamy coffee,  
safety like raisins among the blue-lined china  
and the nougat fathers dotted along the four o'clock napery.

This is for my grandmother, an unimportant Jew,  
whose apron gathered morels in a green pine wood,  
who, in a walled city, died of Typhus  
in Tereszin, city of Therese, Empress of Typhus,  
eight days before the liberating Russian army came.

Bulldozers may have shoveled her to stuff the pits,  
to stem the stench and sickness  
from leaping beyond sane and certain borders,  
laconic hands on throttles, shovels,  
levers doing overtime,  
thin arms,  
heads falling back in awkward postures.

There must have been some scraping sound of gears  
of metal on the hard-baked ground  
of the resistance so much poundage makes  
against an oily diesel energy.

Or, she just fell over, toppled in a heap,  
became a boulder,  
a holy stone,  
one of many dotting the parade ground  
before which even the dark tanks halted –  
steel-tinged with the awesome soul of so much stone.  
I think that someone picked her up,  
a Russian soldier maybe,  
persuaded beyond her rotting flesh  
by memory and awe to place her gently with the others,  
to burn with others in the immense hollow of her grave.  
In other words, in piety, doing what I do now.  
Grandmother,  
the cantillation of the rails  
whistles in the three-starred night,  
enfilades where I am not;  
and where I am, the song evokes distance, borders, margins,  
winds of cloves, dark whistling winds  
bearing cinnamon and plaited candles;  
Sabbath ends reflected in the half moon of your nails  
and both your hands upon my shoulder resting.  
What do you know about me?  
I shine like cobbles after rain, dew on a web,  
Friday nights,  
and I've seen wonders:  
eyes, chins –  
sadness like yours –  
song, speech, love, all like yours.  
And you, gathered like weed with serrate leaves,  
like potato vines piled high for burning.  
I ride a train whose rolls of dust...  
I am not here –

almost.

Sometimes

I hear your great haloo within the loamy wood.

Come

gather where the mushroom grows in oblique golden light,

where folded hills, where sun,

where brilliant semaphores of leaves

leave signal echoes along the lakeside road

and they are lovely.



## Children's Drawings

The colors of Terezin  
have eyes that never sleep,  
contain blue thorn and wire thorn,  
red sun of Moloch fire.

The colors of Terezin  
have eyes that never sleep,  
blue thorn and wire thorn  
that pierce the pupil.

The colors of Terezin  
have eyes that never sleep,  
red sun,  
Moloch and Haephestus fire  
that hammer razors,  
slashing open lids,  
the nictitating membranes of the brain  
and all the networks of forgetting.

## *Haimat*

Walking,

the boy saw:

The moon in a slot of sky  
between the roofs of two houses.

Metal cobbles like shiny  
backs of beetles – pieces of armor in a  
book.

A yellow leaf shaped like  
a heart or the tip of a spear flown  
up against the steel-gray sky.

A house that showed a corner  
of shattered masonry;  
thin mud-colored bricks.

On the white walls of a house,  
black lines.

Behind the calcimined walls,  
pictures of fish swallowing  
their tails.

The blank faces of the houses  
and the cylindrical trees.

His hands held feeling  
like the orange light of a candle  
in a narrow room.

This was 1937 or '38.

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