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MASSENGRÄBER

After Heinrich Lersch

Mass graves sink into the solitude of lowland heath.
Dark pines stand beyond the heather and sand.
Wan-blue sky hangs high above barren hamlets.

Low white clouds scud by, shadows sunk
to greet the dead below, comrades drifting
face-down or beached upon the final strand.

Mass graves scatter this land
as strange birds circle above, black-feathered, mournful,
searching the hours for lovers lost that longed for home.

They sing the elegy of mothers, of brides that-never-were,
laments of man and child for dead ideas of duty.
Their bootless feet but scarcely tread the earth:
frail clay, lame and unformed for rest.

Eyes black, with the pearl's tearful lustre,
their torn hearts shimmer from gaping chests.

So they fly, circling land and sea. And the seldom cry
of disconsolate joy rings out, as a bird finds its love's goal,
knowing that the love lies buried where the blood flows.

Once more it sings to an end the lay of unknown men,
and ever more crimson runs the heart's wash into dry cracked earth.
The dying bird lies on the grave, a black cross of raised head and spread wings.

The song becomes softer now – a psalm of return, wounds and resurrection –
until it dies away and, at home, a final mother dries her tears.