

Der Werwolf

by Christian Morgenstern (1871-1914)

Ein Werwolf eines Nachts entwich
von Weib und Kind und sich begab
an eines Dorfschullehrers Grab
und bat ihn: »Bitte, beuge mich!«

Der Dorfschulmeister stieg hinauf
auf seines Blechschilds Messingknopf
und sprach zum Wolf, der seine Pfoten
geduldig kreuzte vor dem Toten:

»Der Werwolf«, sprach der gute Mann,
»des Weswolfs, Genitiv sodann,
dem Wemwolf, Dativ, wie man's nennt,
den Wenwolf, — damit hat's ein End.«

Dem Werwolf schmeichelten die Fälle,
er rollte seine Augenbälle.
»Indessen«, bat er, »füge doch
zur Einzahl auch die Mehrzahl noch!«

Der Dorfschulmeister aber mußte
gestehn, daß er von ihr nichts wußte.
Zwar Wölfe gäb's in großer Schar,
doch ›Wer‹ gäb's nur im Singular.

Der Wolf erhob sich tränenblind —
er hatte ja doch Weib und Kind!!
Doch da er kein Gelehrter eben,
so schied er dankend und ergeben.

The werewolf

Literal English Translation

A werewolf one night stole off
from wife and child and proceeded
to a village schoolteacher's grave
and asked him, "Please, decline [grammatical] me!"

The village schoolmaster rose up
from his tin-plate brass-knob [burial plate]
and spoke to the wolf, who his paws
patiently crossed in front of the dead one:

"Der Werwolf," spoke the good man,
"des Weswolfs, genitive then,
dem Wemwolf, dative, as one calls it,
den Wenwolf, — thereby there is an end."

The werewolf [was] flattered [by] the cases,
he rolled his eyeballs.
"But," he requested, "add however
to the single also the multiple!"

The village schoolmaster could but
admit, that he did not know of it.
It is true there would be wolves in a large pack,
but "Wer" would be only in the singular.

The wolf got up blind with tears—
he still had wife and child!!
However because he [was] no kind of scholar,
he therefore left thanking and resigned.

The Werewolf

Translated by Mark Herman and Ronnie Apter
Translation approach suggested by Alex Gross

One night a werewolf crept from bed,
abandoned wife and child and fled
in desperation to the stone
that marked a dead schoolmaster's bones.

"Great sage," he howled in his frustration,
"let me receive your conjugation!"
He crossed his paws. The corpse awoke
within its grave, rose up, and spoke:

"Were 'were' the plural past in tense,
a 'werewolf' were, in consequence,
a 'wolf you were.' To be succinct,
you were then, as it were, extinct.

"But given 'wolf' is singular
and 'were' subjunctive to concur,
just one sense must one thence infer:
you are not now nor ever were."

The werewolf howled, "Most wise of men,
can I be brought to life again?"
The scholar shrugged, "It cannot be.
The 'iswolf' is a fantasy."

The werewolf bowed to erudition
and thanked the dead academician;
then, blind with tears, sought kith and kin
to tell them all they might have been.