

Efraim Goldbrukh (from *Ostrolenke*)
by **Yisroel Shtern** (1927)
translated by Jon Levitow (2007)

I.

Just like someone who lies at the feet
of night and wraps his head
with darkness as with bandages –
for terrible pain cuts into him
with knives long as his years,
and scores of lanterns spit out
light onto the sidewalks,
every spot of light a year –
so all his years lie
spat out in the streets,
and he runs off (as the sky runs off
at dusk, seeing
everything it owns burnt up,
its last gold coin a fake,
the color rubbing off ...),
he runs off, like a mother
at the funeral of her child,
her sight and hearing gone,
the wind sighing at every step, "Turn back!
To see your light buried
would drive you mad,
and your other children
still need a mother...!"

So he runs away and dives
into the darkness as in a river.
Maybe he has heavy sins,
maybe he needs to rise enriched
from being immersed and purified -
and so must be alone, estranged.
Because before the wool's been sheared

it can't be spun,
and only after everything is lost,
can he perhaps find God.

Who knows, then, what his sadness means?
He lies somewhere by a plain,
a far-flung, unknown plain,
holding, wrapped in darkness
as in an ample *kitl*,¹
all his parts broken into pieces
by the world; and weeps.
But someone's moving in the distance
with a lantern in his hand.
The shadows start to tremble,
run off sideways,
and creep along the walls,
seeking there a saviour –
and they set upon him, pleading,
as he lies there, lonely-sad,
and they bring to him their supplications.

Just like someone who lies at the feet
of night and wraps his head
with darkness as with bandages,
although shadows, who get scared,
fail to understand and still expect
help from his human strength –
so you come and cling to me, downcast
Ostrolenke faces, bowed down like the years;
but of you all, just one grew
close to me – Efraim Goldbrukh.²

¹ observant Jewish man's festive white linen robe

² Efraim Goldbrukh was an elderly Ostrolenke resident during Shtern's childhood who upset his wealthy family with his piety and devotion to acts of charity. His grandson Menakhem Flakser's biographical essay about Shtern also appears on this site.

II.

"A fine, upstanding Jew!" they'd say,
as at full moon, "a lovely night!"
You were like the moon,
homeless as well.

Roofs kiss each other tenderly and scarcely move.
The sky shakes like a bluebird.
Windows run from the street to seek sweet dreams...
the town already lies in sleep up to its neck.

Night's wind-washed body
is reflected in the silent streets.
Only two still-open shutters flap
like children who don't want a bath
when they're already in the water...

"Even with a wife, a bed, and a big house –
a man in his castle – he creeps around, a mouse,"
says Zebrovski the Constable to the dogcatcher.
"Still open, look! The windows not yet barred!"
But you don't hear, and the stars have followed you out
to help you find a resting place.

III.

You sleep somewhere like a beggar – like a sack – on a sack.
Your age struggles to rise with rooster's reveille,
while your home is full of perfume,
the flowered rugs so lifelike...and a bed of fine mahogany

stands tall-spotless-lonely....,not waiting for its master,
it dozes in cool linen as in fresh, deep snow.

Don't take it hard that you've been tossed out, Efraim Goldbrukh,
from your wealthy home like a fly from a nice, clear glass of tea.

It's dangerous, after all, not to know that only the rich
may eat fine pastry – and to go around yelling,
“How come *Piaski*³ children chew on glass from hunger,
when to the poor belong both property and God Himself...”

Your *kapote*,⁴ Mr. Goldbrukh, is no river –
so why does suddenly beneath its hem appear
a living fish? You swiped it
from your Freyde⁵ – and now you take it to a sick woman giving
birth.

Is this normal? Leave such things in the cupboard,
else you kill the business, however fine the cashflow.
So don't resent, Efraim, that you were sent off.
What were you in a wealthy house? A ruthless letter in a dainty
envelope.

IV.

So, all right, on a Friday, everybody knows
at highway's end they warm up the horizon.
Efraim looks: in heaven they're baking khallos⁶
for the Shabbos.

While at Yossel Patchmaker's they die for lack of food.
You'll just have to choose, good Jews, and braid
a penny in your bread!

And when the evening puts red tongues
into white clouds,
we see that up above
they're lighting silver candlesticks.

³ *Piaski*: Jewish slum section of Bialystok, the big city nearest to Ostrolęka.

⁴ long coat like a kaftan, traditionally worn by observant Jews.

⁵ his wife's name: the reader presumes it was she, the storekeeper, that threw him out.

⁶ fine loaf of twisted white bread, eaten on the Sabbath.

And Widow Leah must sit in darkness?

So, fair enough, on Friday,
a man does what he can,
but all week long? God preserve us! –
from the first specks of day
until the night begins – he prays,
a prayershawl over his head, he prays...

V.

The clouds mingle and file by without sound.
Quiet and holy the day begins
like an old book opening, sweet and awesome.
The sun comes out like a beautiful thought.

The streets attend and are cleansed.

The town has shaken sleep from its eyes
as one wipes the dust from ornaments for Pesach.
Even Horki the Tailor, already bent by his machine,
sews more chapters of the Psalms than shirtpieces.

And what does Efraim Goldbrukh do?
He prays.

Noontime lies across the world, burning with rage and shame:
on his body kerosene, salt, soap, and flour are poured.
He loves the people, and he shines for love, but they are strange to
him,
and noontime lies there while they skin him and sell his hide.

In the market trade proceeds, and in the sky, the sun as it goes by
bequeaths
golden wheat and barley heaps.
Clouds catch rays of sunlight in their mouths, like dandies

who seek bargains on new grain, holding straws between their teeth.

And what does Efraim Goldbrukh do?

He prays.

The day ends, lovelier still than it began...

The streets lie still and blue like rivers.

Tender moments of dusk fly over them like doves,

while for a door of heavy gold that seals off a king's domain

the sun prepares a key of blood; and now bent thoughtfully and piously

brick houses stand that were so proud

an hour ago, like clever people who have seen a lot

and finally realize one thing – that a person must believe...

And Khatzkel Kupfermintz doesn't know what's got hold of him – his heart, it burns so much – and like a child he rests his head against the windowpane

and gazes at the market: shadows fall to earth and hug the stones.

He stands inside his store, forgets, remembers, wants to cry.

And what does Efraim Goldbrukh do?

He prays.

VI.

Oh Efraim, Efraim!

How can someone spend all day

and do nothing else but pray?

The world sets great store

by a fine front tooth.

People look into the mouth of the world,

throw in a little earth and bits of stars.

The clay dish must be smooth:⁷

it would be hideous, terrible,

if on the other side as well the tooth

should start to fall or wobble (like a troubled conscience).

The tooth in front would be torn out

and make a dark hole in Eternity.⁸

One weighs a heart out slowly, just like honey bars

and pieces of earth, like honeycake, on the scale⁹ –

so, how can someone all the day

do nothing but pray?

VII

And Efraim Goldbrukh replies...¹⁰

⁷ The world must be in balance, below and above. This difficult section, combining the images of teeth falling out of the “mouth of the world” with a scale which must be balanced and a clay dish which must be made smooth, echoes to some degree the description in Talmudic Tractate “Avodah Zarah” 51a of the worship of Mercury which consisted of throwing stones at an idol (compare stanza 2) - or of the veneration of its broken fragments. The reader will have to decide whether it would be going too far to suggest that Shtern had this in mind here.

⁸ Here as in Section 1 above, where EG holds his own “broken pieces” (Yid. -“*teyln...farshtikl'*”) in his “*kitl*,” one may also compare the Kabbalistic theme of the “Shvirat HaKeylim” or “Breaking of the Vessels,” a cosmic disruption and reordering which results in the configuring of spiritual energies into distinct “Partzufim” or “faces,” the features of which stand for different levels or faculties within the spiritual worlds.

⁹ As a final level of mythological allusion, one could also turn to Egyptian mythology, where the hearts of the deceased are weighed on a scale in the land of the dead.

¹⁰ The poem was published in the Warsaw “*Literarische Bleter*” in 1927 with the postscript “to be concluded” - but it never was.