

Song of the Insane Asylums (1939)

by Yisroel Shtern

Translated by Zackary Sholem Berger (2006)

We were the ones who ran away
to hide behind metal bars.
As with heavy rags
The world is hung with weeping.

Your life is twilight and dawn.
The street is constantly bleeding.
Mothers go out of their minds.
Children die off like minutes.

And fathers vanish like years
but not as quiet and slow;
they are not ripe rye
hurried to the mill.

Wherever the wagon rolls by
no grass will grow.
There's nothing but to mourn.
Your voice breaks like glass.

Your days are empty holes.
Your happiness: buttons mis-sewn.
If you want to catch a thief
you snatch at your own heads.

Of course, the night wants to turn
inside your brain, crazily.
You can hear the angry sky
gnashing its white stars.

You don't know where to run. You think
*From whence will my aid come?*¹
But your time cheats you and laughs,
wraps you around like Cain.

City and village rattle their throes,
groan like lepers ill and unclean.

And for help you come to us – your God,
to us, the great insane.

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¹ Psalm 121, first line. (Trans.)