

When The Surgery Is Over

By Yisroel Shtern

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Translated by Andrew Firestone¹

The scalpel knows
We are not ryegrass
It brings a winter snap
A halt to growing
And bids us be alone
Divorced from our own breath:
Between life and life the chloroform strolls
With soft, stealthy
Shadowy steps;
Like a cat leaping
Between two roofs,
Gazing at the world's expanse.

.....
We sleep and sleep,
Like buildings late at night
 Oblivious to what's taking place above us.
Where are we? Are they really cutting us up
Like fruit,
Fruit that sways
To its last drawing of breath
Into its limbs
Of fragrant gardens
Where a tree still mourns them now?...
Or are we more?
Does something still await us?
And are we just

The sinful sons
Of a wrathful king:
To make of us more faithful bearers of the crown?
They've driven us into deserts...
Parched with thirst we drink "Sleeping Potion".
Comes a sorcerer and with a knife
Carves on our bellies:
"People, you have
already reached
the edge
of the Abyss,
now turn around
and remember!"
we wake up knowing:

no one ever before
saw death so prematurely...

.....
Oh why can't our bodies be the nights,
The world's mournful nights,
And while they split us open, have the cock crow:
God's torn away the darkness, here's the Dawn!

¹ The poem is remarkable for expressing accurately and sensitively the foreboding and trappedness felt by people at the time, as well as the desperate wish for a heaven-sent explanation and solution.

The central trope is a comparison of Polish Jewry's situation after 1938 to an isolated, helpless anaesthetized body waiting to be cut up. Will it be put together again, he asks? We have chosen the "sleeping potion" rather than face the truth.

Stern puts forward two readings of this state of affairs. In the first, we are material creatures only and will be dealt with like stupid plant matter. The other alternative is that we are our Father's children and He is testing us. We can still repent in time, though on the verge of death - and will experience a new beginning.