

**An Adage Concerning a Man and an Old Book
by Yisroel Shtern (1939)**

Translated by Robert Friend (1987)

Spring, but the day was dark with rain and sleet.
Over the pillars of night like a cat, grief
climbed and frightened every street.
Solitary in my room I sat, leafing
an ancient tome, when like a crown
through the gloom of centuries dead
an adage gleamed, proud though old.
I didn't greet the dream – not with a silver tray
and not with salt or bread.
Nor did the adage flash like lightning through my sleep,
nor did it sit at the head of my bed
in the first light of dawn,
with knives in its eyes of judgement and punishment,
nor did it gnaw like sulphur night and day.
And I partnered the spring in the dance of the day,
and my stick wrote gladness on the warm sands,
and my sorrow did not drip into my food.

A Jew, heavy and blind like a cloud, and covered with blood,
dragged along a wall, unable to find his house,
while laughter rippled the hair of torturers on a lark,
and my street fled, small and fleet as a mouse,
and the trees stood erect like hunters' guns in the park.
But the dawn felt no shame and neither did the noon,
and the sun towered over the town in its crown of gold,
and not in sun, not in tree, and not in me
did the old-book-words burn, "Man is a fragment of God."

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(Ed.: lit. the title is "A word about Man in an old book")