

Men Who Hunger

by Yisroel Shtern

Translated by Robert Friend (1987)

Different their voices, different their eyes,
the sky as bald as a hairless head,
the smell of ether in every street,
and each day white like a hospital bed.

Different their voices, different their eyes,
burning like lamps with their wicks turned low,
but why does their speech cut sharp as an awl
though they are healthy like water or bread?

Different their voices, different their eyes,
When they say “man,” the world fills with regret
as though the gold sun were shorn of its locks.
When they say “branch,” the forests grow sick
as though the birds lost the notes of their song.
And when they say “hay,” fires flare in the ricks.
For their eyes and voices are different,
different – utterly different.
Because the hungry can be as solid as bone,
lacking in mercy and hard as a stone,
they tell themselves in the depths of the night
a tale that appalls:
that the stars are the heads, greenish and white,
of pus-swollen boils.

So they wander on far-flung roads,
seeking a long spear that when heaven-hurled
will pierce the white pustules till the pus flows
and floods all the world.

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(Ed.: the first letter of l.15 has been capitalized here, correcting a typographical error in the 1987 book).