

The Hungry Man Says

Translated by Andrew Firestone and Beni Gothajner

If I were the Creator
what would I create?
All the cobblestones in every street
I'd turn into loaves of bread
for the sun to bake!

For why should old overburdened porters
who hump flour for the whole world
stand on corners, girdled tight
by rings of rope
because they are about to fall apart
like a leaky old barrel.
They brace their bodies
and stay whole, and yet
more than whole -
for they are swollen, and bloated
from hunger, God, from hunger.

In the middle of Bielanska Street
I came across an old Jew
set down like an ancient law.
I couldn't see his face,
just as I can't see Yours, Creator;
his head so screwed up, and beslimed
like a baby's at birth.
Wishing to divine his secret I approached
and there on his chest in huge letters
were the solemn words:
INCURABLE AILMENT
CAUSED BY HARD LABOUR
I dug a hand in my pocket,
downhearted and pensive
(like a doubting fisherman
casts his line in a river)

but instead of a coin, a note came out -
a bit of paper guilt,
screwed up like the old man's body,
wrinkled and white like my mood:
on it, the start of a poem -
"The hungry man says".

1926



Translator's note: the first two lines are the beginning of a well-known song.