

**They say about you what is said about the sunⁱ
by Yisroel Shtern (1939)**

Translated by Miriam Leberstein (2006)

I.

Hospital nurse,
merciful nurse:
the sick have said about you
what is said about the sun:
you heal.

II.

Merciful nurse!
If not for you, how angrily would the day
array itself in shadows.
Here people lie dozing, like winter meadows.
Hardened clods of earth with icy jabs remind us:
where once it greened, sparkled, bloomed; now only thorns grow.
Merciful nurse!
If not for the silvery streams that muse so sweetly in your eyes,
how difficult for the blood to dream.
Here, people sleep beneath blizzards.
The stiffened earth's spread out; the sky is hanging, like a stone.
If it should fall, no help will come; here everyone lies frozen, so alone.

Hearts crumble like flowers past their bloom, crushed by winter's vise.
Heads languish here, like frozen fields, their brows packed in ice.

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But then in you come, merciful nurse,
and the world starts to sing at your step.
Your apron billows with warmth, shimmers like summer, white and wide.

III

Merciful nurse!
The heart's suffused with doubt,
but you are courage, you are faith.
Your white apron hangs upon you
like his jeweled breastplate on the *Koyen-godl*.ⁱⁱ

Upon the earth there fall and fall
pitch-black nights like lumps of coal.
Suddenly, they start to smoulder,
send out sparks to knees and bellies,
gowns and pillows catch on fire –
a hellish fire – and in its midst, a person.
Heat rises, soars like reddish doves,
flies to the window, like evil spirits,
sitting, laughing on the casement,
flicking fat and swollen tongues
turning tongues into mountains.
And the chestnut tree outside
grows feverish, and terrified,
not wanting to remain alone,
it reaches for the building's wall,
nestles up, as would a child,
bends to whisper in the window's ear
quickly tells what yesterday he saw here
and what has yet to happen here today.

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Upon the earth there fall and fall
pitch-black nights like lumps of coal.
Suddenly they start to smoulder—
a hellish fire – and in its midst, a person.

You hold a thermometer in your hand
and quickly try to close your eyes –
Too late! A tear's slipped out
and then come four, five more,
and you stand, frozen in horror
as if in wet and frigid weather,
stroking the hot, moist foreheads of the sick,
like a spoon skimming across the stove-top.
Half the world flows out as tears,
the rest, within your breast, knows this:
39... 38...ⁱⁱⁱ

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What would the night be without you?

Merciful nurse,
what would the night be, without you?
When sacks of darkness
press heavily on trees and roofs and yards

like humps on crippled backs,
and roofs and yards and trees
remain awake, afraid to fall asleep.
In the dark reaches of heaven
the stars have taken their places
like children gathered around their dead mother.
And yards and roofs and trees,
doubting and desolate,
writhe with pity for themselves
and for so many others,
and quietly inquire of the night:
will the Creator chastise us as well?

Merciful nurse!
What would the nights be, without you?
Huge village dogs, who must stand guard
against an unforeseeable peril.
The last candle has gone out,
the village is deathly quiet.
The dogs mill about in the silence,
twisting on their chains,
circle about, ever more forlorn,
sensing the presence of evil
unable to escape the gloom
that leaps like mice and creeps like spiders
from every hovel and ruin,
from haystacks, and wheat filled barns,
from swamps where goblins glimmer.
Dogs slink about with heavy steps
and can't escape their burdened hearts,
remain on guard,
stalking about with eerie calm;
and gaze into the distance with strange eyes
like two pieces of madness
stretching towards the mill
and watch as someone strides out of the river.
Too afraid to howl,
they wait on his arrival.

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What would the night be, without you?
A silent dog in a silent village.

Hospital nurse,

merciful nurse
when the heart's suffused with doubt
what would the night be, without you?
A clever foe, who knows
to hold vigil in hospitals.
He harkens to the quiet, and disturbs all rest,
so that the sick are left uncomforted.
And they see, and understand
there's no way out;
they've come into the thick of battle.
God's wrath hangs like a house
over every head.
And like an animal running from the field
who's tangled in the brush
and struggles to get free,
they lie here, ensnarled
in the immense fetters of silence.
Silence compresses the heart,
winds tightly like a chain
about shoulders and arms.
Who will emerge the victor?
They seek the answer in the color of your eyes,
the way we see in the rainbow
the sign of God's forgiveness.
"What will be our fate?"
They stare at the walls in a frenzy.
"Has the time already come?"
And they stare at your hands,
the way the ancients peered at omens
to divine God's will.^{iv}
But you are the merciful nurse.
You smile and outwit
the long and tortured nights
and strangle them with your apron.
And you stand there
laughing and crying
filling icebags with ice
and sighing out white songs:
what you can't see
is still there all the same,
hour of grief,
the longest hour.
Is man mute?
The world concealed?

A deer's pursued
in a distant field...
what you can't see
is still there, all the same.
The hour of danger
has arrived –
sealed shut
by wood and stone
heaped high,
your heads are on fire.
Burning wood melts
the silver gate above.
The moon pours out,
like an abscess
that has burst.
God sees the gate's unlocked
and wraps himself
in sorrow like a cloak
and goes to the door
which stands open
like a weeping sore
and runs out into the world
bubbling up through time
aching through timelessness;
his lamentations fanning out
like coat-tails flapping
and he shouts into the ears
of those who say
the midnight prayers^v:
“My old head
is as white as snow,
my old arms ache.
What's happening
here, on my earth?
Today I've heard
such wailing.
Who is it who's invoked my name?
Who is it who is ailing?”

(That's why
all the streets
are so sad
at the time of midnight prayers.)

And wherever it begins,
wherever it ends
he is embattled
and he questions.
But who would dare to venture an answer?
Life and death,
heaven and earth,
and darkness, too
– all are afraid.
From head to heel
fears nest everywhere,
From roots to branches
terror rises
like mercury in a thermometer
(and that is why,
late at night,
the leaves toss in fever),
when suddenly
he pushes away
the boards and stones
that have weighed upon you –
and calls out, calling
“I am here.”

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Having sung this song
you remain lost in thought
and smiling for a while...
The sick lie listening to your song.
It falls upon their faces
with solace and awe,
as when alone and in a wood
one sanctifies the moon...
On every side bright roads open out
to bright days –
They are so close to believing,
still so far from heaven.
Far, yet you remain
entwined in your white chain
while a great stranger lurks in every corner –
you know him not.
You're nearly mad with eagerness to know
where he's been and where he'll go;
but you are lonely and unsure.

The sick lie listening to your song
and feast on the radiance of your face
and though their pain is eased,
still they are cold,
as when alone and in a wood
one sanctifies the moon.
People were brought to greatness here,
now on the trees dread grows still greater.
What will this night bring?
They want to see into your eyes
as through an opened lock
to see what's hidden beyond the winds
that blow late at night.
They want to ferret out the great secret
but they tremble and blindly grope,
their throbbing hearts probing
they stare at you
the way the ancients peered at omens.
Silently they search and ask
has God in his mercy already come?

You have no answer
but you are the merciful nurse
so you joke and outwit
the long hard tormented night
and strangle it with your apron
leaving its throat bruised -
its long, bluish marks
traverse the yard
and the windows start to rejoice
and through the panes
the fresh and holy morning dew
looks upon the frozen faces of the sick
and your white apron hangs upon you
like his jeweled breastplate on the *Koyen-godl*.

IV

In the morning, merciful nurse
your joy is still restrained
because the day has not yet fully wakened
from its faint.
It sees with eyes half-opened

and walks with unsure steps
and trembles in the wet and silent cold
as if it had just survived a drowning,
dragged out of the water, half dead.

So you stand, dear nurse, in the kitchen
hearing how the tea-urns sing.
But their song doesn't please you.
The dawn slinks in,
warms itself at your fire
like a beggar, frozen through,
bringing you to the edge of tears – you sense
there's a reason that the morning is cold
and its blue lips twitch:
who knows if the world
won't fall into a whirlpool and drown.
For you recall how fraught with danger
was the night.

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— And how are they faring now?

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You dash into the big wards
like those fine, light rescue boats,
entering silently.
Are those signals crying out?
No; it's just the sound of the sea.
Step by step, the day grows brighter,
the world's heart feels lighter.
The night has already discharged
its entire debt.
The patients play with their fingers
as with little golden fish.

V

Hospital nurse,
merciful nurse,
the sick have said about you
what is said about the sun:
you heal.

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NOTES

ⁱ (Ed.) This poem closely resembles *Friling in Shpitol*, and we may expect they were composed around the same time, despite its late publication. It has been translated from the version shown on this website - the re-publication in *Di Goldene Kayt*, 1984, no.114, pp.36-44, where it states "this appeared in the last issue *Faroy's*, Warsaw, August 18, 1939 (46) 18. It was Shtern's last publication... the copy of *Faroy's* is damaged, and missing or dubious words are indicated by square brackets.." This has not been done in the translation, but the translation has corrected two spelling errors: In Section III, l. 38: not *yoyst* but *yukht* (cowhide), and *piente* - heel, last line of p.5.

ⁱⁱ High Priest; (Yiddish: *Koyen* only)

ⁱⁱⁱ Temperatures indicating fever, in the Centigrade (Celsius) system.

^{iv} (Tr.): Shtern refers to the *urim-vetumim*, (rendered as "urim and thurrim" in English). These were two objects that were kept in the breastplate of the *Koyen-godl*, and used in conjunction with the breastplate as a means of divination. The physical nature of these items, as well as the precise manner in which they were used, is not known. Some authorities speculate that the method involved the play of light upon the jewels in the breastplate.

^v (Tr.): Shtern is referring to the custom of rising at midnight for study and prayer in commemoration of the destruction of Jerusalem

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