

**When the Surgery is Over**

**by Yisroel Shtern**

Translated by Andrew Firestone (2013)

The scalpel knows  
we aren't a field of rye  
it brings a winter snap  
a halt to growing  
and bids us be alone;  
each breath removes us:  
between our lives before and after, the chloroform strolls.

With soft, stealthy  
shadowy steps;  
like a cat leaping  
between two roofs,  
gazing at the world's expanse.

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We sleep and sleep,  
like buildings late at night  
oblivious to what's happening above us.

Where are we?  
are we really being cut up  
like dumb fruit that swings  
to its last suck of breath  
the fragrance,  
the fragrance of gardens  
where a tree still mourns for them now?

Or are we more?  
Does something still await us?  
And are we just  
the sinful sons  
of a wrathful king:  
delighting in exile  
to make of us more faithful bearers of the crown?

We have been driven into deserts...  
so parched with thirst, we drink Sleeping Potion.  
A sorcerer comes to carve with a knife  
on our bellies:

"People, you have already reached  
the edge of the abyss -  
turn around now,  
and remember!"

We awaken knowing:  
never before did anyone  
see death so early...

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Oh why can't our bodies be the nights,  
the world's mournful nights,  
and while we're split open, let the cock crow:  
God's torn through the darkness, it's the dawn!

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Shtern's last published poem, it appeared in the last issue of Haynt  
(Warsaw), 1.9.1939, p.4.

Shtern compares the plight of Polish Jewry to an anaesthetized body about  
to be cut apart. We took Sleeping Potion to avoid seeing the truth, he  
says... but even now on the edge of the abyss, it is in our power to  
comprehend that we are our Father's children — and repent..(A.F.)