

Springtime in the Hospital

by Yisroel Shtern

Translated by Jon Levitow (2005)

I

It's a wonder, how tender and pure the sick are,
gazing across vast distances, seeing things that no one else does,
staying up at night, and smiling in the darkness,
as their beds caress them with the joy of having solved a mystery.

Is it then a wonder, how the sick arise from napping
rich and perfumed (like a seed awakening from sleep in spring),
lie fresh in quiet wards, and listen as a fly knocks
on their headboards, and someone calls their names?

It's a wonder, how readily the sick become holy,
Waiting the days out gladly, as one separates a tithe...
It's a wonder, when the Ineffable walks in the hospital air,
as once His Spirit moved upon the waters of creation!

II

Where does the love come from, that goes like a doctor
from bed to bed, to incline an ear and listen
while the ward awakens like a frightened city
when cries go up from every gate?

And where does the love come from that hangs like a light bulb,
that rouses a lone dreamer from his sleep
until everyone is sitting up, white shapes in stillness,
looking – thinking – when suddenly – a sob takes hold?

And if the sick are close to one another
like the separate rays from one great source of grace,
is this not because, in this coarse and coarsened world,
to them belongs the finest city of them all?

III

For a city looks its best in the final, bloody clots
of day, as the shop doors fold up like quiet hands.

The market opens tenderly in darkness; for the first time it looks upwards.
In the sky someone lies faint in a bed of white and burns.

Sidewalks hide their faces and go their secret ways.
Whoever walks feels sick at heart and scrapes along the speechless walls,
mothers with fearful fingers test their young for fever,
and buildings hang their heads. The city mourns, lost in a foreign land,

looks for home, looks up and down, where mountains grow in blood,
and thinks, for Day it's all right, far above, but I'm still in the Valley.

But what do you know, when days flow by like water in the twilight --
what do you know out on the street what a day means in the hospital?

IV

What do you know of how the early mornings sprout, grow upwards, bloom
into shape, and shine red sadly, like a rosy rash?
Do you see the night's beginning cling to the healthy face
of the mountains and grow large, as a cyst swells on the cheek?

What do you know out on the street of how the sun tastes
and how marvelous the spring looks when a knife
strolls deep within you (as one strolls through heavy-laden orchards.
Handfuls of red cherries) and eagerly rips ulcers out?

What do you know out on the street of nights when blood
pours freely as a king through every gate of skin,
and the sky lies in the window, blue as spleen, already spent,
and the moon stands still – great death's white mask?

V

What do you know out on the street about life in a hospital?
Sick, you must not go too far, you take your walks – inside yourself,
as in a garden. Worked over like a garden bed. All the trees
storm-damaged, overturned, stones under every step.

You scattered days by fistfuls like a peasant,
The sower sang, "The soil is ours, free like the plants
we'll grow!" He's ploughed with body and soul – why then have dogs

dragged out the days while bones grow in the fields?

You sit yourself on the remainder of the day as on a tree stump.
You look into the darkness: who's at fault? That's it - the caretaker's gone.

You fall exhausted in your sickbed... when your minder wakes you to drink
tea:

Hey sleepyhead – where are you? you say: alone, here in the garden.

VI

Here the forms of loneliness all smell like hay, like grass in evening shadows.
Here the people live and grow as blue as trees when sunlight dies.
Here tired strangers come like winds across the fields at twilight
and go like the songs of peasants as they tie up the final sheaves...

Here hearts bend down and fall like days at sunset.
Yet, here the sunset's beautiful, and one falls in satin darkness.
Everyone becomes a distance, every person is a stillness,
and the stillness hurts so much: here it's always time for prayers at end of
day.---

They always pray, the ones who face the end. From there
white sadness flows into the world like from the early stars.
It turns so cold, uncertain: where? Who? Then someone writes
in golden letters on a cloud: Come! You will all be mine! --

VII

And while the day's red youth runs out and stains
the borders of the west, his rosy body dies with difficulty,
the distance holds its breath and listens to his burning will and testament --

the beds begin to tremble – “Someone there is calling us – but who?”

While the final hour burns out across the emptiness of the horizon,
the veins turn blue in the slender hands of streams and mountains:

Everyone takes it to heart as the night comes after her inheritance ---

The sick wander half-asleep, "Someone's looking...who is it asks for us?"

And while the heiress-night is homesick and lingers in an avenue of trees,
or runs, madly drumming on the windowpanes, to grip the walls of houses,
the world outside dons sack-cloth, no one can go on without the day, --
and the eyes of the sick turn over: "Prepare to leave...to whom?"

VIII

As they run through ample tracts of heaven – for where else do stars run? ---
those lamenting carry news – "You tender and endangered ones,
you've known me a long time; imagined me at length on your last shore,
you're all my mirrors, but the face is always mine.

You've looked on stones and dust, reflected back the rat-race,
smooth surface laughing along with the rush of spaces;
but once the haste had faded, a sadness used to draw your still glass tight,
and you backed into the polished abyss.

You stood by the walls, looking back, -- into yourselves, -- into your own
reflecting depths, and from your silence streamed forth
sorrow on to everything – so you hurt me,
you're all my mirrors, I your final form."

IX

One lies there, listening: someone's moving between the steps and the
hospital roof.

One tries to go along, so dark, so light, as a star moves,

for example, stolen out of time, and time lags behind.

(Bodies are cleaned with gasoline here like rusty watches ...)

Time bends down, listens: someone in the long ward hovers over her,
kindly visits the sick who cough, who cry, who spit,
the high ceiling grows yet higher, white walls wait: it's going to happen.
The doors are shut like the eyes of someone gripped by a mighty thought.

The night sits in concealment, knowing she's the last,
now and then out of the dark rises a heavy head, to look towards the door:
it's not my wife yet – it's not my child yet -- where are they – it's so late –
the one who moves in silence calls: it's time – to come to me.

X

I've seen, poor brothers, your poor way,
you've gone, like winter goes through fields,
your arms hanging heavy like the ice-covered branches,
and I've gone after you, like winter goes through fields.

The day hurt white and white: you were snow-covered villages,
the night howled deep within itself - a homeless dog.
While I, a stranger passing through your fields, bloomed with them;
stones grew up over me, and like your grass I froze.

And as the first mild hour arrives like the first swallow,
the second glitters in a small, white bed, and the third has brightly sounded:
I'm rich – I'm not poor next to you:
Now I'm radiance, now I'm sadness, I'm springtime in the hospital.