

And he will shed blood.
 What is left is—drinking.
 Softly be it said,
 ‘Man begins his stinking
 Even before he’s dead.’”

LXIII

Night. On squares and corners
 Four make a demonstration.
 “Europe, Europe,
 Our sword is for you.
 Aged Sodom—you are sinning
 On an unmade bed.
 Down with Beethoven and Goethe
 And the Dome of Cologne!
 Because the skies are graying
 We are turning gray.
 We—the last wolves howling
 In the ruins of a world.”

Nathan Halper

V I L N A

I

Someone in a *tallis* is walking in your streets.
 Only he is stirring in the city by night.
 He listens. Old gray veins quicken—sound
 Through courtyard and synagogue like a hoarse, dusty heart.
 You are a psalm, spelled in clay and in iron.
 Each stone a prayer; a hymn every wall,
 As the moon, rippling into ancient lanes,
 Glints in a naked and ugly-cold splendor.
 Your joy is sadness—joy of deep basses
 In chorus. The feasts are funerals.
 Your consolation is poverty: clear, translucent—

Children in beds—yellow, slippery worms,
 Girls half-undressed, their bodies like boards—
 These gloomy men are narrow like your streets.
 The brow mute—a rigid wall of a synagogue yard.
 The eyebrows mossy: like a roof above your ruins.
 You are a psalm inscribed upon the fields.
 A raven, I sing to you by the flow of the moon.
 No sun has ever risen in Lithuania.

IV

Your joy is sorrow—joy of deep basses
 In chorus. The quiet Maytime is somber.
 Saplings grow from the mortar. Grasses push from the wall.
 Sluggishly, a gray blossom crawls out of the old tree.
 The cold nettle has risen through mud.
 Dung and rigid walls are steeping in their damp.
 It may happen by night. A breeze moves a dry pebble on a roof.
 A vision, moonbeam and drops of water,
 Flows through the silver, tremulously dreaming streets.
 It is the Viliya, cool, mistily arising,
 Fresh and baby-naked, with long, river-like hands,
 Who has come into the town. Blind windows are grimacing.
 Arching bridges are crooked on their walls.
 No door will open. No head will move
 To meet the Viliya in her skinny, blue nakedness.
 The bearded walls marvel—the hills around you.
 And silence. Silence.

V

You are a dark amulet set in Lithuania.
 Figures smolder faintly in the restless stone.
 Lucid, white sages of a distant radiance,
 Small, hard bones that were polished by toil.
 The red tunic of the steely bundist.
 The blue student who listens to gray Bergelson—
 Yiddish is the homely crown of the oak leaf
 Over the gates, sacred and profane, into the city.

Like summer mist on the edges of the city.
 You are a dark amulet set in Lithuania.
 Old gray writing—mossy, peeling.
 Each stone a book; parchment every wall.
 Pages turn, secretly open in the night,
 As, on the old synagogue, a frozen water carrier,
 Small beard tilted, stands counting the stars.

II

Only I am stirring in the city by night.
 No sound. Houses are rigid—bales of rag.
 A tallow candle flutters, dripping,
 Where a cabalist sits, tangled into his garret,
 Like a spider, drawing the gray thread of his life.
 “Is there anyone in the cold emptiness?
 In our deafness—can we hear the lost cries?”
 Razel is standing before him; he gleams in the darkness.
 The wings an old, faded parchment.
 The eyes—pits filled with sand and with cobweb.
 “There is no one. Only sorrow is left.”
 The candle drips. Stupefied, the weak man listens.
 He suckles the darkness out of the angel’s sockets.
 The garrets breathe—lungs of
 The hunchbacked creature who is drowsing in the hills.
 O city! You are the dream of a cabalist,
 Gray, drifting in the universe—cobweb in the early autumn.

III

You are a psalm, spelled in clay and in iron.
 The letters fading. They wander—stray.
 Stiff men are like sticks; women, like loaves of bread.
 The shoulders pressed. Cold, secretive beards.
 Long eyes that rock, like rowboats on a lake—
 At night, late, over a silver herring,
 They beat their breasts. “God, we are sinful . . . sinful.”
 The moon’s white eye, bulging through the tiny panes,
 Silvers the rags that hang on the line,

Gray Yiddish is the light that twinkles in the window.
 Like a wayfarer who breaks his journey beside an old well,
 I sit and listen to the rough voice of Yiddish.
 Is that the reason why my blood is so turbulent?
 I am the city: the thousand narrow doors into the universe,
 Roof over roof, to the muddy-cold blue.
 I am the black flame, hungry, licking at these walls—
 That glows in the eyes of the Litvak in an alien land.
 I am the grayness! I am the black flame! I am the city!

VI

And, on the old synagogue, a frozen water carrier,
 Small beard tilted, stands counting the stars.

Nathan Halper

◆◆◆ Chapter 5
ELECTRICITY

One day Bereh turned up in the yard. An unseasonably warm glow coated the world, glazing the storm windows with an unexpected spring sheen. He walked slowly down the dark footpath, followed by a worker of some kind. They surveyed the roofs, tapped the walls, and pointed at the sky.

A wave of unrest swept the yard.

"We're in for a new disaster!"

"What's he up to this time, the genius?"

Aunt Malkaleh took it as a sign to break out her primers and copy-books and spread them on the table.

Bereh proceeded to have a look at all the rooms. He checked the walls and ceilings and went away.

At no time did he say a single word.

That evening it got around that he was planning to electrify the yard. They would all have to trade in their kerosene lamps for electric current.

At first no one knew what to make of it or realized how serious it was. Some even thought it a good thing. Hats and coats were donned, and all ran to Uncle Zishe to see what he had to say. Zishe proclaimed that things looked bad for two reasons:

1) No one knew what to do with electricity once you had it. 2) It wasn't for common folk like them.

"I'm all for it," Uncle Yuda declared, "as long as it's in someone else's house."

"Take my word for it, he'll be the death of us all!" Uncle Zishe told his beard as he paced back and forth in his room.

Only Uncle Itshe blinked and asked:

"What's the big deal? Doesn't the synagogue have electricity?"

Uncle Zishe stopped pacing, as if suddenly bolted to the floor. "Listen to the know-it-all!" he said to the womenfolk who were present. "The synagogue also has a prayer stand. Does that mean we need one in the yard?"

Bubbe Bashe took it the hardest. At first, thinking that Bereh was planning to dig a well in the yard, she remembered with a pang that this had been Reb Zelmele's great dream. It hadn't come to pass. Condemned to drink the water of strangers all his life, he had died with it unfulfilled.

Finally grasping the truth, however, she exclaimed with all her wits about her:

"Mark my words. No one is breaking down any walls around here as long as I'm alive!"

◆◆◆

That night the elder Zelmenyaners assembled in the dark yard and waited for Bereh to come home. The sky was sprinkled with a few small stars. They stood wrapped in their scarves and kerchiefs, collars up, breathing heavily. It was close to midnight when Bereh turned into the yard from the street. At once they assailed him.

"Listen here, you bandit! What are you doing to us?"

"Why can't we live out our lives with our old lamps?"

"You can have your electricity! We don't want it!"

"Get off the backs of us plain working folk, brother!"

Bereh stood there saying nothing, his neck stiff as an oak beam. The cool rays of the moon glanced off his cheeks and off the Zelmenyaners' homespun shoulders.

DRAFT. Please do not circulate or reproduce

Minsk Mud

By Izi Kharik

Translated by Madeleine Cohen

First part

1

Around each proud street—perhaps a hundred quiet alleys
With low little houses, like sheep at the foot of a mountain...
Minsk had forgotten, about them, about everyone--
Every pathway leading only to the marketplace...

And here in the depth, in the warmth of the mud,
In wooden houses already erased from the city, —
A pain rises, juicy and ripe,
And a fist shudders in every childish heart.

People don't plant trees in parks here, —
Here you play in the bare dirt...
And a fist, young and strong, is pumping, filling up,
And at some point it'll punch through a windowpane.

At some point a hatred will push through the senses,
And hard and sharp, make a cut above the heart...

Little children play here, little Pinyes play here
Here they roll around in the bare sand.

2

In each little house, in each little chamber

A sewing machine speaks, or a plane, or a hammer.

The noise of the machines is still quiet, still small there,
But everyone tires themselves out, until night and since the dawn air.

In wooden houses bodies become restless,
In wooden houses ballads become restless...

By the drill, by the plane, by the cobbler's thread and awl,—
They sing high and they sing hot, and each will suddenly call:

"ay, ay, ay, ay, Yashke is going away,
Let us bless ourselves, the train is pulling away." — —

Through days like this, through nights like this, through weeks without end...
But where is want and what is need by simple craftsmen!...

3

Pinye didn't grow up spoiled here,
Like thousands of others abandoned under the sun...
What does a youth from warped alleyways know
Except fearsome stories about the "Bund"?

And hard days, and nights without dad or mom
With only a bare fist and misery under his head—
There's a city full of light, close by, nigh on,
From up there to down here no one descends.

Minsk—clarified Belorussian sorrow
With warped beggarly hands,
Why do you have at every proud wall,
So many cellars as well?

It's good, like this, long after midnight,
 When the houses lie, all tired out,
 To go out suddenly, to go out quietly
 In old and restless rags.

To let loose, pell-mell,
 Alley after alley,
 And there—are you, and there—am I,
 Now let's forget ourselves.

Our nervousness, the nervousness now, —
 Now we need to run...
 And a hatred pounds, and a heat pounds
 In the heart and in the temples.

And unexpected, and unawares,
 We stand still and—*basta!*
 Why is there suddenly so much light
 Like a celebration in the street?

The High Market is bright and high
 And so proud are its walls, —
 "Walls, walls, you are strong,
 But how long will you stand?"...

And a sharp rock flies at the windowpane...
 "A greeting to you from the mud!"...

Rushing back, running home,
 Breath, it rushes, it flies...