A Spring Morning

During the night there was a pouring rain, and in the morning when the first trucks drove across the bridge, the foaming Gniezna River was the dirty-yellow color of beer. At least that's how it was described by a man who was crossing this bridge—a first-class reinforced concrete bridge—with his wife and child for the last time in his life. The former secretary of the former town council heard these words with his own ears: he was standing right next to the bridge and watching the Sunday procession attentively, full of concern and curiosity. As the possessor of an Aryan great-grandmother he could stand there calmly and watch them in peace. Thanks to him and to people like him, there have survived to this day shreds of sentences, echoes of final laments, shadows of the sights of the participants in the marches funèbres, so common in those times.

"Listen to this," said the former secretary of the former town council, sitting with his friends in the restaurant at the railroad station—it was all over by then. "Listen to this: Here's a man facing death, and all he can think about is beer. I was speechless. And besides, how could he say that? I made a point of looking at it, the water was like water, just a little dirtier."

"Maybe the guy was just thirsty, you know?" the owner of the bar suggested, while he filled four large mugs until the foam ran over. The clock above the bar rattled and struck twelve. It was already quiet and empty in town. The rain had stopped and the sun had broken through the white puffs of clouds. The sizzle of frying meat could be heard from the kitchen. On Sunday, dinner should be as early as possible. It was clear that the SS shared that opinion. At twelve o'clock the ground in the meadow near the forest was trampled and dug up like a fresh wound. But all around it was quiet. Not even a bird called out.

When the first trucks rode across the bridge over the surging Gniezna, it was five in the morning and it was still completely dark, yet Aron could easily make out a dozen or so canvas-covered trucks. That night he must have slept soundly, deaf to everything, since he hadn't heard the rumbling of the trucks as they descended from the hills into the little town in the valley. As a rule, the rumbling of a single truck was enough to alert him in his sleep; today, the warning signals had failed him. Later, when he was already on his way, he remembered that he had been dreaming about a persistent fly, a buzzing fly, and he realized that that buzzing was the sound of the trucks riding along the high road above his house—the last house when one left the town, the first when one entered it.

They were close now, and with horrifying detachment he realized that his threshold would be the first they crossed. "In a few minutes," he thought, and slowly walked over to the bed to wake his wife and child.

The woman was no longer asleep—he met her gaze immediately, and was surprised at how large her eyes were. But the child was lying there peacefully, deep in sleep. He sat down on the edge of the bed, which sagged under his weight. He was still robust, though no longer so healthy looking as he used to be. Now he was pale and gray, and in that pallor and grayness was the mark of hunger and poverty. And terror, too, no doubt.

He sat on the dirty bedding, which hadn't been washed for a long time, and the child lay there quietly, round and large and rosy as an apple from sleep. Outside, in the street, the motors had fallen silent; it was as quiet as if poppy seeds had been sprinkled over everything.

"Mela," he whispered, "is this a dream?"

"You're not dreaming, Aron. Don't just sit there. Put something on, we'll go down to the storeroom. There's a stack of split wood there, we can hide behind it."

"The storeroom. What a joke. If I thought we could hide in the storeroom we'd have been there long ago. In the storeroom or in here, it'll make no difference."

He wanted to stand up and walk over to the window, but he was so heavy he couldn't. The darkness was already lifting. He wondered, are they waiting until it gets light? Why is it so quiet? Why doesn't it begin? "Aron," the woman said.

Again her large eyes surprised him, and lying there on the bed in her clothing—she hadn't undressed for the night—she seemed younger, slimmer, different. Almost the way she was when he first met her, so many years ago. He stretched out his hand and timidly, gently, stroked her. She wasn't surprised, although as a rule he was stingy with caresses, but neither did she smile. She took his hand and squeezed it firmly. He tried to look at her, but he turned away, for something strange was happening inside him. He was breathing more and more rapidly, and he knew that in a moment these rapid breaths would turn into sobs.

"If we had known," the woman said softly, "we wouldn't have had her. But how could we have known? Smarter people didn't know. She'll forgive us, Aron. Won't she?"

He didn't answer. He was afraid of this rapid breathing; he wanted only to shut his eyes, put his fingers in his ears, and wait.
“Won’t she, Aron?” she repeated.

Then it occurred to him that there wasn’t much time left and that he had to answer quickly, that he had to answer everything and say everything that he wanted to say.

“We couldn’t know,” he said. “No, we wouldn’t have had her, that’s clear. I remember, you came to me and said, ‘I’m going to have a child, maybe I should go to a doctor.’ But I wanted a child, I wanted one. And I said, ‘Don’t be afraid, we’ll manage it somehow. I won’t be any worse than a young father.’ I wanted her.”

“If only we had a hiding place,” she whispered, “if we had a hiding place everything would be different. Maybe we should hide in the wardrobe, or under the bed. No... it’s better to just sit here.”

“A shelter is often just a shelter, and not salvation. Do you remember how they took the Goldmans? All of them, the whole family. And they had a good bunker.”

“They took the Goldmans, but other people managed to hide. If only we had a cellar here . . .”

“Mela,” he said suddenly, “I have always loved you very much, and if you only knew—”

But he didn’t finish, because the child woke up. The little girl sat there in bed, warm and sticky from her child’s sleep, and roused all over. Serious, unsniffling, she studied her parents’ faces.

“Are those trucks coming for us, Papa?” she asked, and he could no longer hold back his tears. The child knew! Five years old! The age for teddy bears and blocks. Why did we have her? She’ll never go to school, she’ll never laugh. Another minute or two . . .

“Hush, darling,” the woman answered, “lie still, as still as can be, like a mouse.”

“So they won’t hear?”

“So they won’t hear.”

“If they hear us, they’ll kill us,” said the child, and wrapped the quilt around herself so that only the tip of her nose stuck out.

How bright her eyes are, my God! Five years old! They should be shining at the thought of games, of fun. Five! She knows, and she’s waiting just like us.

“Mela,” he whispered, so the child wouldn’t hear, “let’s hide her. She’s little, she’ll fit in the coalbox. She’s little, but she’ll understand. We’ll cover her with wood chips.”

“No, don’t torture yourself, Aron. It wouldn’t help. And what would become of her then? Who would she go to? Who would take her? It will all end the same way, if not now, then the next time. It’ll be easier for her with us. Do you hear them?”

He heard them clearly and he knew: time was up. He wasn’t afraid. His fear left him, his hands stopped trembling. He stood there, large and solid—breathing as if he were carrying an enormous weight.

It was turning gray outside the window. Night was slipping away, though what was this new day but night, the blackest of black nights, cruel, and filled with torment.

They were walking in the direction of the railroad station, through the town, which had been washed clean by the night’s pouring rain and was as quiet and peaceful as it always was on a Sunday morning.

They walked without speaking, already stripped of everything human. Even despair was mute; it lay like a death mask, frozen and silent, on the face of the crowd.

The man and his wife and child walked along the edge of the road by the sidewalk; he was carrying the little girl in his arms. The child was quiet; she looked around solemnly, with both arms wrapped around her father’s neck. The man and his wife no longer spoke. They had said their last words in the house, when the door crashed open, kicked in by the boot of an SS-man. He had said then to the child, “Don’t be afraid, I’ll carry you in my arms.” And to his wife he said, “Don’t cry. Let’s be calm. Let’s be strong and endure this with dignity.” Then they left the house for their last journey.

For three hours they stood in the square surrounded by a heavy escort. They didn’t say one word. It was almost as if they had lost the power of speech. They were mute, they were deaf and blind. Once, a terrible feeling of regret tore through him when he remembered the dream, that buzzing fly, and he understood that he had overslept his life. But this, too, passed quickly; it was no longer important, it couldn’t change anything. At ten o’clock they set out. His legs were tired, his hands were numb, but he didn’t put the child down, not even for a minute. He knew it was only an hour or so till they reached the fields near the station—the flat green pastures, which had recently become the mass grave of the murdered. He also recalled that years ago he used to meet Mela there, before they were husband and wife. In the evenings there was usually a strong wind, and it smelled of thyme.

The child in his arms felt heavier and heavier, but not because of her weight. He turned his head slightly and brushed the little girl’s cheek with his lips. A soft, warm cheek. In an hour, or two . . .

Suddenly his heart began to pound, and his temples were drenched with sweat.

He bent towards the child again, seeking the strength that flowed from her silky, warm, young body. He still didn’t know what he would do, but he did know that he had to find some chink through which he could push his child back into the world of the living. Suddenly he was thinking very fast. He was surprised to see that the trees had turned green overnight and that the river had risen; it was flowing noisily, turbulently, eddying and churning; on that quiet spring morning, it was the only sign of nature’s revolt. “The water is the color of beer,” he said aloud, to no one in particular. He was gathering up the colors and smells of the world.
Fiction

that he was losing forever. Hearing his voice, the child squirmed and looked him in the eye.

“Don’t be afraid,” he whispered, “do what Papa tells you. Over there, near the church, there are a lot of people, they are going to pray. They are standing on the sidewalk and in the yard in front of the church. When we get there, I’m going to put you down on the ground. You’re little, no one will notice you. Then you’ll ask somebody to take you to Marcyia, the milkmaid, outside of town. She’ll take you in. Or maybe one of those people will take you home. Do you understand what Papa said?”

The little girl looked stunned: still, he knew she had understood.

“You’ll wait for us. We’ll come back after the war. From the camp,” he added. “That’s how it has to be, darling. It has to be this way,” he whispered quickly, distractedly. “That’s what you’ll do, you have to obey Papa.”

Everything swam before his eyes; the image of the world grew blurry. He saw only the crowd in the churchyard. The sidewalk beside him was full of people, he was brushing against them with his sleeve. It was only a few steps to the churchyard gate; the crush of people was greatest there, and salvation most likely.

“Go straight to the church,” he whispered and put the child down on the ground. He didn’t look back, he didn’t see where she ran, he walked on stiffly, at attention, his gaze fixed on the pale spring sky in which the white threads of a cloud floated like a spider web. He walked on, whispering a kind of prayer, beseeching God and men. He was still whispering when the air was rent by a furious shriek:

“Ein jiidisches Kind!”

He was still whispering when the sound of a shot cracked like a stone hitting water. He felt his wife’s fingers, trembling and sticky from sweat; she was seeking his hand like a blind woman. He heard her faint, whispering moan. Then he fell silent and slowly turned around.

At the edge of the sidewalk lay a small, bloody rag. The smoke from the shot hung in the air—wispy, already blowing away. He walked over slowly, and those few steps seemed endless. He bent down, picked up the child, stroked the tangle of blond hair.

“Deine?”

He answered loud and clear, “Ja, meine.” And then softly, to her, “Forgive me.”

He stood there with the child in his arms and waited for a second shot. But all he heard was a shout and he understood that they would not kill him here, that he had to keep on walking, carrying his dead child.

“Don’t be afraid, I’ll carry you,” he whispered. The procession moved on like a gloomy, gray river flowing out to sea.

14. Isaiah Spiegel

Isaiah Spiegel was born in Lodz, Poland, in 1906. He attended Jewish and public schools and studied at a teacher-training college. He taught Yiddish language and literature in Lodz until the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939, and then worked in various capacities for the Lodz Jewish Council after the ghetto was established in May 1940. He remained in the ghetto until August 1944, when he left with the last deportations to Auschwitz, where the rest of his family perished. After Auschwitz was evacuated in January 1945, Spiegel himself spent the rest of the war in several labor camps.

Spiegel began publishing Yiddish poems in 1922. His first book of poetry, Facing the Sun, appeared in 1930. Many other unpublished manuscripts from the prewar period were lost during the Holocaust. While in the Lodz ghetto, he continued writing stories and poems, some of which he buried in a cellar and others he brought with him to Auschwitz (where, of course, they disappeared). Following his liberation, he reconstructed some of the missing works from memory, adding them to the surviving stories, which were published in Lodz in 1947 in a volume called Ghetto Kingdom. A second collection appeared in Paris in 1948 under the title Stars Over the Ghetto.

Spiegel resumed his teaching career, first in Lodz (1945–1948) and then in Warsaw (1948–1950). In 1951, he emigrated to Israel, where he worked for the Finance Ministry while remaining a prolific author of fiction and poetry. He died in Israel in 1991.

Like the story “Bread,” which is included here, Spiegel’s tales are romanticized narratives of ghetto existence, when hunger and fear created an incurable daily misery for most of the inhabitants. His simple, laconic style highlights the horror of Jewish life under the inhuman demands of German rule, when parental instincts, shorn of the luxury of love, had to struggle with utter need to sustain the urge to nurture.
here in this carload
i am eve
with abel my son
if you see my other son
cain son of man
tell him that I

The Roll Call

He stands, stamps a little in his boots,
rubs his hands. He's cold in the morning breeze:
a diligent angel, who worked hard for his promotions.
Suddenly he thinks he's made a mistake: all eyes,
he counts again in the open notebook
all the bodies waiting for him in the square,
camp within camp: only I
am not there, am not there, am a mistake,
turn off my eyes, quickly, erase my shadow.
I shall not want. The sum will be all right
without me: here forever.
Tenebrae

We are near, Lord,
near and at hand.

Handed already, Lord,
clawed and clawing as though
the body of each of us were
your body, Lord.

Pray, Lord,
pray to us,
we are near.

Wind-awry we went there,
went there to bend
over hollow and ditch.

To be watered we went there, Lord.

It was blood, it was
what you shed, Lord.

It gleamed.

It cast your image into our eyes, Lord.
Our eyes and our mouths are so open and empty, Lord.
We have drunk, Lord.
The blood and the image that was in the blood, Lord.

Pray, Lord.
We are near.

There Was Earth Inside Them

There was earth inside them, and
they dug.

They dug and they dug, so their day
went by for them, their night. And they did not praise God.
who, so they heard, wanted all this.
who, so they heard, knew all this.

They dug and heard nothing more;
they did not grow wise, invented no song,
thought up for themselves no language.
They dug.

There came a stillness, and there came a storm,
and all the oceans came.
I dig, you dig, and the worm digs too,
and that singing out there says: They dig.

O one, o none, o no one, o you:
Where did the way lead when it led nowhere?
O you dig and I dig, and I dig towards you,
and on our finger the ring awakes.
O the Night of the Weeping Children!

O the night of the weeping children!
O the night of the children branded for death!
Sleep may not enter here.
Terrible nursemaids
Have usurped the place of mothers,
Have tautened their tendons with the false death,
Sow it on to the walls and into the beams—
Everywhere it is hatched in the nests of horror.
Instead of mother's milk, panic suckles those little ones.

Yesterday Mother still drew
Sleep toward them like a white moon,
There was the doll with cheeks derogled by kisses
In one arm,
The stuffed pet, already
Brought to life by love,
In the other—
Now blows the wind of dying,
Blows the shiver over the hair
That no one will comb again.

Even the Old Men's Last Breath

Even the old men's last breath
That had already grazed death
You snatched away.
The empty air
Trembling
To fill the sigh of relief
That thrusts this earth away—
You have plundered the empty air!

The old men's
Parched eyes
You pressed once more
Till you reaped the salt of despair—
All that this star owns
Of the contortions of agony,
All suffering from the dungeons of worms
Gathered in heaps—
O you thieves of genuine hours of death,
Last breaths and the eyelids' Good Night
Of one thing be sure:

The angel, it gathers
What you discarded,
From the old men's premature midnight
A wind of last breaths shall arise
And drive this unloosed star
Into its Lord's hands!
Peoples of the Earth

People of the earth, you who swathe yourselves with the force of the unknown constellations as with rolls of thread, you who sew and sever what is sewn, you who enter the tangle of tongues as into beehives, to sting the sweetness and be stung—

People of the earth, do not destroy the universe of words, let not the knife of hatred lacerate the sound born together with the first breath.

People of the earth, O that no one mean death when he says life—and not blood when he speaks cradle—

People of the earth, leave the words at their source, for it is they that can nudge the horizons into the true heaven and that, with night gaping behind their averted side, as behind a mask, help give birth to the stars—

Landscape of Screams

At night when dying proceeds to sever all seams the landscape of screams tears open the black bandage,

Above Moria, the falling off cliffs to God, there hovers the flag of the sacrificial knife Abraham's scream for the son of his heart, at the great ear of the Bible it lies preserved.

O hieroglyphs of screams engraved at the entrance gate to death.

Wounded coral of shattered throat flutes.

O, O hands with finger vines of fear, dug into wildly rearing manes of sacrificial blood—

Screams, shut tight with the shredded mandibles of fish, woe tendril of the smallest children and the gulping train of breath of the very old, slashed into seared azure with burning tails.

Cells of prisoners, of saints, tapestried with the nightmare pattern of throats, seething hell in the doghouse of madness of shackled leaps—

This is the landscape of screams! Ascension made of screams out of the bodies grate of bones, arrows of screams, released from bloody quivers.

Job's scream to the four winds and the scream concealed in Mount Olive like a crystal-bound insect overwhelmed by impotence.

O knife of evening red, flung into the throats where trees of sleep rear blood-licking from the ground,
where time is shed
from the skeletons in Hiroshima and Maidanek.
Ashen scream from visionary eye tortured blind—

O you bleeding eye
in the tattered eclipse of the sun
hung up to be dried by God
in the cosmos—

30. Jacob Glatstein

Jacob Glatstein (Yankev Glatshteyn) was born in 1896 in Lublin, Poland, which at the time was still part of the Russian empire. He received a thorough Jewish education, studying Bible, Talmud, and commentaries, while private tutors guided him in secular subjects. He emigrated to the United States without his family in 1914 and published his first short story that year in a Yiddish newspaper. He was associated with the In zikh (literally, within the self), or Introspectivist, movement, a group of writers whose Manifesto of 1919 urged the poet to see the world “egocentrically” because it was “the most natural and therefore the truest and most human mode of perception.” The individuality of the poet, they believed, created the individuality of the poem. Only deep in the psyche could the poet find images and associations “trustworthy” enough to prevent language from betraying one’s perception of experience.

These guidelines, which encouraged him to be “subjectively attuned,” may have been partly responsible for Glatstein’s turning away from his Jewish background in Poland in his poetry during the decades following World War I. But in 1934, he visited Poland for the first time since he had left it, and this, combined with the approaching threat against the Jews signaled by the rise of Nazi Germany, led him to direct his attention to contemporary Jewish themes. The catastrophe of European Jewry inspired some of his most powerful poems, and after the disaster he tried to re-create the vanished, or more precisely, the perished, world of his youth.

Glatstein also worked for many years as a journalist. For more than a decade, he contributed a column to a Yiddish weekly that included literary criticism, book reviews, and analyses of Jewish issues. In 1940, he published a long prose account of his 1934 visit to Poland, translated in 1962 as Homecoming at Twilight, which received the Louis Lamed Prize. He was again awarded this prize in 1956 for his collected poems, Fun mayn gants fun (From All My Toil).

Glatstein’s first work, Jacob Glatshteyn (1921), is the first volume of Yiddish poetry written exclusively in free verse. His Holocaust poems represent only a small part of a long and distinguished career, whose themes