

SUTZKEVER

essential prose

Translated by Zackary Sholem Berger

Introduction by Heather Valencia



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GREEN AQUARIUM

I

“Your teeth are bars of bone. Behind them, in a crystal cell, lie your enchained words. Remember the advice of the elder: the guilty, who drop poisoned pearls into your goblet—set them free. Out of gratitude, they will build your eternity. But those others, the innocent, who trill obtrusively like nightingales over a grave—those you must not spare. String them up, be their hangman! Because as soon as you release them from your mouth, or your pen, they’ll become demons. If I am not speaking the truth, may the stars plummet from the sky!”

This testament was left to me years ago in the city of my birth by an old solitary poet, somewhat flummoxed, with a long braid in back like a fresh birch broom. No one knew his name, knew where he came from. I only know that he wrote rhyming notes to God in Aramaic, dropped them into the red mailbox near the Green Bridge, and then thoughtfully strolled by the Viliya, waiting for the mail carrier in Heaven to bring an answer.

II

“Walk through words like you’d walk through a minefield: one false step, one false move, and all the words that you have threaded onto your veins your whole life will be torn apart, and you with them . . .”

That’s what my very own shadow whispered to me when both of us, blinded by the searchlights, traveled by night through a bloody minefield, and every step that I set down for life or death sheared my heart like a nail piercing a fiddle.

III

But no one warned me to be careful of words drunk on otherworldly poppy blossoms. Thus I became the servant of their will. But I can't understand their will. Certainly not their secret: Do they love or hate me? They wage war in my skull like termites in a desert. Their battlefield pours out of my eyes with the radiance of rubies. And children go white with fear when I tell them, Happy dreaming to you!

Recently, while lying in the garden on an average day under a branch of an orange tree—or maybe it was kids playing with golden soap bubbles—I felt a movement in my soul. All right, my words are heading out! In their victory, they vowed to occupy positions previously off limits: people, angels, and why not stars? Their fantasy plays on, drunk on otherworldly poppy blossoms.

Trumpets blare.

Torches like birds aflame.

Accompanied by musical lines, frames.

I fell to my knees before one of those words, apparently the overlord, riding ahead in a crown set with my sparkling tears.

“That’s how you leave me, no goodbye, no see you later, no nothing? We wandered together for years, you nourished yourself on my time, so before we separate, before you go off to conquer worlds—one request! Give me your word you won’t turn it down.”

“Agreed. I give my word. But no long sentences. Because the sun is curving down the blue branch, and in just a moment it will plummet into the abyss.”

“I want to see the dead!”

“That’s quite a wish! Fine. My word is more important to me . . . look now!”

A green knife cut open the earth.

It turned green.

Green.

Green.

Greenness of dark pines through a fog;

Greenness of a cloud with a burst gallbladder;

Greenness of mossy stones in rain;

Greenness uncovered by a hoop rolled by a seven-year-old girl;

Greenness of cabbage leaves in splinters of dew that bloody the fingers;

First greenness under melted snow in a circle dance around a blue flower;

Greenness of a half moon, seen with green eyes from under a wave;

And celebratory greenness of grasses lining a grave.

Greennesses streaming into greennesses. Body into body. And the whole earth has now become a green aquarium.

Closer, closer to the green swarm!

I look in: people are swimming like fish. Innumerable phosphorescent faces. Young. Old. And young-old together. Every person I ever saw in my entire life, anointed by death with green existence; they are all swimming in the green aquarium, in a kind of silky, airy music.

Here the dead are alive!

Underneath them rivers, forests, cities: a giant plastic map. Above them, the sun floating in the shape of a fiery human being.

I recognize acquaintances and friends and doff my straw hat to them:

“Good morning.”

They answer with green smiles, as a well’s response to a stone is a series of broken rings.

My eyes slap with silver oars, they race and float among all the faces. They search, looking for one face.

I found it, found it! Here is the dream of my dream . . .

“It’s me, darling, me, me! The wrinkles are just a nest for my longing.”

My lips, swollen with blood, are drawn to hers. But—oh, no—they are stopped by the glass of the aquarium.

Her lips swim to mine too. I feel the breath of burning punch. The glass is a cold cleaver between us.

“I want to read you a poem, it’s about you, you’ve got to hear it!”

“Darling, I know it by heart, I’m the one who gave you the words.”

“I want to feel your body one more time!”

“We can’t get any closer, the glass, the glass . . .”

“No, the border will soon disappear, I’m going to smash the green glass with my head . . .”

The aquarium shattered after the twelfth smash.
Where are the lips, the voice?
The dead, the dead—did they die?

No one. Opposite me, grass—and overhead, the branch of an orange tree, or
maybe kids playing with golden soap bubbles.

THE WOMAN IN THE PANAMA HAT

Before the time of slaughter, I sat writing one day in a dark little room. It was as if the angel of poetry were confiding in me: “The choice is in your hands. If your song inspires me, I’ll protect you with a fiery sword, and if not—you’ve got nothing to complain about. . . . My conscience will stay clean.”

In the small room I felt like the clapper of a bell. A touch, a vibration—and the bell might start ringing.

Words were hatching in the quiet.

The knock of a finger bone was heard at the door.

The quiet suddenly spilled over the floor like mercury from a broken thermometer.

“Danger. A friend wants to warn you.”

I drew back the bolt.

A woman appeared. She seemed like a beggar. No surprise there. In the pause between death and death, when hunger ruled in full skeletal glory, masses of beggars migrated from place to place like swollen locusts. But this beggar astonished with her clothing: a straw summer hat decorated with dried wild strawberries; a long, old fashioned crinoline—a rainbow of rags; a bag at her side; around her neck a thin strand of obsidian, which ivory opera glasses were hanging from; and on the ends of her patent leather shoes—two ravens with open, blood-red beaks.

I asked nothing but gave her a heel of bread, moldy at the edges.

She took a couple of steps forward, took the bread, put it on the table—and then, with the voice of a cuckoo:

“If I’m not mistaken, you’re *that* character, and if so I won’t take the bread.”

“You can have a seat, auntie, you’ll be more comfortable that way. The bread? Moldy, sure, but I give you my word that I don’t have any other bread. We will live

to eat challah again.”

I showed the woman the only stool and set myself on the table across from her.

“Oh, that’s not what I mean, in truth.” Like a dancer, she lifted her crinoline so it wouldn’t get wrinkled and sat herself on the stool. “Can I ask a small favor?”

“A small favor is a favor, auntie. You don’t need to treat me with kid gloves.”

“These sheets of paper with the ink still wet. Who wrote on them?”

“Me . . .”

“You’re a writer?”

“A writer.”

Tears started to flow not just from the corners of her eyes but from all her wrinkles. Pink, smiling freshness, like mist after a rain in May, blossomed from her soul.

“If so, good. Now let me unburden my heart. For these minutes the Almighty will pay you back in years.”

She pulled from her sleeve a pink handkerchief bordered in silver and touched it to her lips. From the handkerchief—the dying breath of an old perfume. She started telling her story:

“My name is Felicia Pozansky. The writer I. J. Singer immortalized me in a novel. I looked different once, but that’s not important.”

From the other sleeve she pulled another handkerchief, this one of a multicolored peacock hue with a different scent of perfume, and she wiped the moisture from under her eyes and went on:

“This Felicia, let’s say she’s a different one, not the beggar who’s sitting here next to you; once she was a rich woman, that is, my husband Ignaz was a millionaire. Nine factories, hundreds of looms. The president of the city lived in one of his mansions. Aside from that he was an honorary consul to Portugal . . .”

The sunset illuminated her wrinkles with the light of green fireflies. She was getting thinner, shrunken, and she seemed like a mummy or an ancient Egyptian princess.

“No one liked Ignaz, not even his family. People thought he was a misanthrope. Maybe. People shouldn’t judge so quickly. There was a reason for his hatred of people. As a child he broke his nose like a clay pot, and the greatest doctors in the

world couldn’t put it back together. So he had to wear a replacement nose made out of rubber. Because of that, he lost the voice of a man and spoke really high, too high, like a newborn kitten.

“I did love him. Though not for his riches, or for his carriage. No. I loved him for his writing. He wrote a long poem in Polish about Job . . .”

At night, in his office, he would take off his rubber nose, so he could breathe more easily, and write the whole night through. Felicia was the happiest woman in the world. Pozansky the factory owner? No, a writer—like Byron, Heine! Byron was missing part of his foot, and wasn’t he was the greatest writer of the century? Pozansky was also a writer, and he was missing a nose!

The setting sun lit up the sky outside my attic, which encased me like a copper bell. The crying of a child in hiding wandered its way to its Creator. The woman in the Panama hat kept on:

“On the first day of the war everything changed. A piece of shrapnel hit Ignaz in the head. Before he breathed his last he made her swear: ‘Felicia, Felicia! Be sure to save my works. My whole life is there—both this world and the world to come.’

“Felicia fled the city with one suitcase. Inside was the long poem about Job, a packet of diamonds, and the costume she had worn to the masked ball where she had met Ignaz. She stole across the Lithuanian border. On the way across the river, her ship capsized and the suitcase fell into the water. Miraculously, Felicia swam to shore and told the border guard about the diamonds; he dove in twice and rescued the suitcase. He was an honest farmer, and they divided things up just as they had agreed: he got the diamonds, and she got—her husband’s posterity, his work, and her costume. ‘You can see it,’ she said. ‘I’m wearing it now, and I want to wear it at the masked ball of death.’”

The woman in the Panama hat suddenly stood up and curtsied as she once had done at that heavenly masked ball. But something happened—what was it? She couldn’t unbend. Her face went dark, her face shone like scorched paper, and on the edges of her straw hat the wild strawberries bled.

“I don’t need any water—no water. It’s just a twinge in my chest, such a silly thing. Where were we? Right, I’ll make it short.” Standing there, she peered at me

through her opera glasses, and her voice began to sound as if a blood vessel of hers had burst.

“Now I’m a beggar, it’s been a couple of years. There was a time when I taught Portuguese to two girls and got two potatoes for each lesson. But since the girls disappeared I don’t have anyone to teach Portuguese to. So I beg. But just for a couple of pieces of bread. I wanted to find someone like you, a writer, and give him my dear husband’s masterpiece. Because, dear man, I won’t be here much longer. I’m going to meet the two girls . . . give me your word that you will preserve this poem about Job like your own papers, and after the war—maybe you yourself—give me your word!”

When her bony right hand with the elegant piano fingers closed itself on mine, the left hand took from her sack a pocket-sized notebook and put that on the table next to the moldy bread.

When the woman went downstairs, the bell sounded. It couldn’t stand the quiet any more. The quiet of old people snatched off the streets.

CHILDREN’S HANDS

A single window in a basement, frozen over. On the pine forest of the window, the prints of two children’s hands, like the priestly blessing. Between the hands, a forest opening to the outdoors, and the sun falling into the basement like a dead man into a grave.

The walls are covered with tufts of snow and glimmer like a salt quarry.

On the ground, in a corner—scattered rags from a bed, and among them, like gold teeth, hidden straw peeks out.

On the rags—a thick *Korbn Mincha* prayerbook, dripped on by wax bearing the imprint “The Widow and Brothers Romm.”

Nearby, in a pot of sand, a frozen wax candle, twisted like a bird trying to pick out its own heart with a dead beak.

And in the middle of the basement, between the prints of the children’s hands on the window and the *Korbn Mincha* on the rags of the bedding—a bronze horse’s head, with a silver spot like a dagger at its temples and the cold, eternal eyes of black marble.

The children’s hands in the window speak:

Dear head, our apologies. We did not chop you off a living neck. When the very last people disintegrated into ash, we found you in a butcher’s shop, and slowly, under a stranger’s long coat, we dragged you into the basement. We wanted you to satiate an elderly lady. The elderly lady lay here in the corner, just as lonely as you are now on the ground. A burning candle at the head of the bed. But all of a sudden—dogs, dogs, dogs. They attacked the elderly lady, your frozen flesh. Attacked the boy that we belong to. We really wanted to help him . . . we were dragged to the window, to the snowy forest; where are we, where are we?

When the children's hands in the window tell the story, the icicles melt from the bronze head. It becomes shiny, alive. Its left ear droops like a lock of hair. In the eyes of black marble, tears appear.

LADY JOB

From disintegrated clay nests, from barred windows and distorted doors, burning leaves of holy books travel to the sunset. Like children with their arms stretched out, as if the sun had given birth to them in the synagogue square and they're fluttering back to their mother.

When the sun hides her children behind a cloud, they leave their black tears, glowing soot, on the gallery of the city synagogue.

The two-story gallery, lifted in a pyramid above the ruins of alleys and byways, doesn't look the same as always.

Now the gallery has turned into an eagle on top of an eagle!

The top eagle, with the head of an animal and a blue breast, like a spring among roses that sits between purple wings, digs into the bottom one with the talons of his four bronze feet.

And the eagle underneath, with a head like an angel, a brilliant snake around its neck, and with its wings that are two boulders facing each other over a cliff, stands bent over the city synagogue. Its ten feet, columns hacked out of salt, wobble under the heavy wings.

Overhead, near the bronze legs of the top eagle, against the background of its blue breast, I see a little man hiding.

"Little man, who are you?"

"I'm the painter Yankl Sher, the painter of the alleys . . ."

He is standing before a canvas in his green velvet jacket. He got the jacket in Paris. It once was renowned in our city. People used to stop in the street and admire its beauty. It buttoned at the neck with a big brass hook. Its pleats shimmered like a peacock's feathers. It had dozens of different pockets full of paintbrushes, pencils, and notepads.

Now the jacket's hanging off him, swollen, covered with mold, as if worn not