

Under Alien Skies by Yossel Birstein

Don't Brighten Me

Translated by Kathryn Hellerstein

Don't brighten me with sun and day,
I'm tired of shining light.
Just let me be content enough
In a corner of the night.

I'll cherish the most trivial verse
Whose every word, so close to me,
Breathes of the exquisite ache
I've not known yet intimately.

Knead me, as the potter his clay,
Into my home's destiny.

Explain the meaning once again
Of all the stories that told
How Hassidic joyousness once healed
The miseries of this world.

Of a great-grandfather whose love
Beamed at every opportunity —
Its distant, pale reflection now
Vanished from my weary eye.

Knead me, as the potter his clay,
Into my home's destiny.

I see my great-grandfather perched
On the tavern's gabled roof.
Below, the landowner, stinking drunk,
Points a gun at him and laughs.

He squints an eye, takes careful aim,
And pulls the trigger hard.
My great-grandfather spreads his arms
And flies off, like a bird.
Knead me, as the potter his clay,
Into my home's destiny.

I've no need to unfurl a scroll
Recording that generation—
My great-grandfather still flies aloft
In my imagination.

His coat-tails flapping like black wings,
His faith was pious and whole.
How Heaven and God sang for him,
All's silenced for me now.

Knead me, as the potter his clay,
Into my home's destiny.

Explain the meaning once again
Of that story that is told
About a water-porter's steps,
The Baal Shem Tov in the field,

Who strides as on a festival
To pray among grass and corn
And explains the meaning of the world—
As simply love and song.
Knead me, as the potter his clay,
Into my home's destiny.