

And Goodness Lay Over the High Snow

Five Songs on Yiddish Poetry

Robert Greenberg

- I. The Circus Lady, Celia Dropkin
- II. Of Course I Know, Zishe Landau
- III. Widowhood, Malka Heifetz Tussman
- IV. Poem, Malka Heifetz Tussman
- V. Winter, Jacob Isaac Segal

The five poems that comprise *And Goodness Lay Over The High Snow* were all originally written in Yiddish. Though I've set them in English, they are heard here in superb translations by Marcia Falk, Grace Schulman, and Ruth Whitman. The songs were composed between September 1997 and July 2000.

These songs were written to celebrate the poets and their poems. Celia Dropkin (1888-1956) was born in Bobroisk, Russia, and died in New York City. Zishe Landau (1889-1937) was born in Plotsk, Poland and died as well in New York. Jacob Isaac Segal (1896-1954) was born in Solovkovitz, Ukraine and died in Montreal. Malka Heifetz Tussman (1896-1987) was also born in Ukraine and died in Berkeley, California. All of these poets emigrated from the old world to the new; and although all of the poems I have set were written in the new world, they were created in the language of the old. They reflect, then, new experience and contemporary emotions, given voice through a native language and expressive style that reflect centuries of tradition.

These are passionate, deeply moving poems, for which I have tried to provide music equal to the expressive power of the texts. The piano part is a full partner to the voice, and the technical demands made of the pianist and soprano are not inconsiderable.

I. The Circus Lady
Celia Dropkin

I'm a circus lady,
I dance between the knives,
standing in the ring,
tips pointing up.
My lightly bending body
avoids death from falling
by brushing lightly, lightly against the blades.

Breathless, they watch me dance
and someone prays for me.
Before my eyes the points flash in a fiery wheel,
and no one knows how much I want to fall.

I'm tired of dancing between
you, cold steel knives.
I want my blood to scald you,
I want to fall
on your naked tips.

An Anthology of Modern Yiddish Poetry, 3rd edition; Ruth Whitman, Wayne State University Press,
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II. Of Course I Know
Zishe Landau

Of course I know today is Sunday
and tomorrow will be Monday
and after spring comes summer
and our system is a bad one,
and in New York lives Opatoshu,
the pride of France is Jaures.

I also know many deep secrets:
the Duke of Abruzzi is
no duke. He's our equal,
and he often goes walking down the street
on nice days; his coat on his arm.

I also know: that Darwin guessed right,
Copernicus was right,
but best of all I know:
I

am
lost forever.

An Anthology of Modern Yiddish Poetry, 3rd edition; Ruth Whitman, Wayne State University Press,
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III. Widowhood
Malka Heifetz Tussman

1.
Do something
to the W
in "widow"
so it won't be
like a spider

that crawls on my flesh
scratching death,
scratching
death.

Do something
to the
W.

2.
Illumined within myself,
luxuriating in my warmth,
I am a column of sun.

And he bent down,
bent down low over me.

I looked up and softly said:
My name is Desire—
is yours Passion?

And he: No, my name
is Compassion.

And he opened his large, square mouth
and blew on my glow

and put me out.

3.

A gentle hand slowly descended
like an earth-longing leaf
to brush my skin.

A quiet cheek,
cool and compassionate,
bent down and barely touched mine.

And he whispered
like a quiet prayer:
Wife, sad wife.

He had wanted to calm,
he had meant to soothe
the wailing of my flesh.

With Teeth in the Earth: Selected Poems of Malka Heifetz Tussman; Marcia Falk, Wayne State University Press, 1992; used by permission

IV. Poem

Malka Heifetz Tussman

I'm becoming lighter
and lighter all the time
and it gets harder and harder
for me to bear my lightness.
Soon a breeze will succeed
in taking me
who knows where.

It's long past midnight
and I don't rest.
It's not yet day
but I don't sleep.

And it gets harder
and harder all the time
to transport my lightness
Into tomorrow.

With Teeth in the Earth: Selected Poems of Malka Heifetz Tussman; Marcia Falk, Wayne State University Press, 1992; used by permission

V. Winter
Jacob Isaac Segal

My father woke at dawn
and found death at the table
in the empty gray house.

Death rose from the bench,
cane in hand,
came to his bed
and said, like a Jewish stranger:

"Reb Aaron Ber,
you're not well;
it's still and white;
the road is easy and silent.
Look: just hold on to me
and off we'll go.

And off they went.
They passed the synagogue.
The first minyen was at prayer,
candles and lamps lit the windows,
and goodness lay
over the high snow.

The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse, ed. By Irving Howe, Ruth Wisse, and Khone Shmeruk,
Grace Schulman, translation; Penguin Books, 1987, used by permission