

Avot Yeshurun's Poems Translated by Gabriel Levin

From **The Syrian-African-Rift** (1974)

THE POEM ON THE EVE OF THIS DAY

Sages say, at the time the Syrian-
African Rift occurred, the local inhabitants weren't
up-to-date. Each man plied
his trade. Honing hatchets. Cleaving animals.

Ancient humanness and land of its axe.
And when those seek any change in the earth
one is obliged to apply an anesthetic.
Later on they wake the earth up.

As they did to me once in solitude in anesthesia
under plywood and the roof
in Bellinson Hospital: "Yeshurun, you've undergone surgery!"
Here I am. Yom Kippur.

THE POEM ON THE GUILT

Bless Mother bind your hand on my head on the night
of this day. I would what would I have not done
for Yom Kippur. Towns crash and you inside and for the center
Of the land your soul and body longed but didn't get there.

Your father came to you in a dream.
Opened the glass cabinet. Broke you a glass. A child of yours died
And you asked why. Your father didn't answer and went out and you meant to atone
And you lay on the floor and you lay on the child dying of longing.

From **Master of Rest** (1990)

MASTER OF REST

I haven't come to tell a thousand nights.
Of light and sun through blinds of night.
I was in place and came to me the light
through sunlight night.

With my own eyes saw a starlet of stars
devour a star. The super nature
something outer
fanned her flames, her chafings.

Master of Rest
from ends of universe,
is this morning
or "glatt" morning.

Master of Rest
my stick I'll take.
Is this morning
or idiot morning.

Master of Rest
I'll take my stick
(just lifted)
I didn't know

rest. Turned
rolled the stick
on its belly
of wood.
This was

desecration of rest.

Knew what

rest is

Master of Rest

from the dark,

is this stick-itⁱⁱ night

or a shmuck night.

Master of Rest

from night,

is this a night

or *drék* night.

Master of Rest

from bum night

is this undies night

or prick night.

Master of Rest

from *schvantz*ⁱⁱⁱ night

is this toches^{iv} night

or dick dick

Master of Rest

from panic,

will my heart stop

or will I shut thee up?

Master of Rest.

Balm. Hideout.

Stinkingme night

or shtinker night.

Master of Rest balm.

Master of Rest hideout of dark,

I lay out before you

clemency

on dumbnight that's mirenight.

Master of Rest

I'll shitme

& wipeme

& scrubme

& shaveme

& showerme

& go with Thee.

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ⁱ *Glatt* – in Yiddish: any.

ⁱⁱ *Stick it* – in the original *stock* meaning in Yiddish – utter darkness.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Schvantz* – in Yiddish: tail, dick.

^{iv} *Toches* – in Yiddish: buttocks.

From I DON'T HAVE NOW (1992)

YOUR FACE TO MY FACE

Be to me
your face lovely
to my face.

Be to me
face to
face me.

Mouth to
mouth. Sigh
to sigh.

BEAR SILENT

Pure gates
watch over me
lest one follow
me in

the only coffin
other than Creator
of souls. As
it was

in childhood rising at dawn
at dawn I rinsed
my hands and believed
my lids open.

OPEN SHUT

Rise come
to the place
I will show you
you left

to the place.
Open shut
for me and mother
and I was born.