

O let me join you, big and little,
20 Together let us rot away!

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The City of Slaughter [Version 1]

Arise and go now to the city of slaughter;
Into its courtyards wend thy way;
There with thine own hand touch, and with the eyes of thine
 head,
Behold on tree, on stone, on fence, on mural clay,
5 The spattered blood and dried brains of the dead.
Proceed thence to the ruins, the split walls reach,
Where wider grows the hollow, and greater grows the breach;
Pass over the shattered hearth, attain the broken wall
Whose burnt and barren brick, whose charred stones reveal
10 The open mouths of such wounds, that no mending
Shall ever mend, nor healing ever heal.

There will thy feet in feathers sink, and stumble
On wreckage doubly wrecked, scroll heaped on manuscript,
Fragments again fragmented –

15 Pause not upon this havoc; go thy way.
The perfumes will be wafted from the acacia bud
And half its blossoms will be feathers,
Whose smell is the smell of blood!

And, spiting thee, strange incense they will bring –
20 Banish thy loathing – all the beauty of the spring,
The thousand golden arrows of the sun
Will flash upon thy malison;
The sevenfold rays of broken glass

Over thy sorrow joyously will pass,
 25 For God called up the slaughter and the spring together, –
 The slayer slew, the blossom burst, and it was sunny weather!

Then wilt thou flee to a yard, observe its mound.
 Upon the mound lie two, and both are headless –
 A Jew and his hound.
 30 The self-same axe struck both, and both were flung
 Unto the self-same heap where swine seek dung;
 Tomorrow the rain will wash their mingled blood
 Into the runnels, and it will be lost
 In rubbish heap, in stagnant pool, in mud.
 35 Its cry will not be heard.
 It will descend into the deep, or water the cockle-burr.
 And all things will be as they ever were.

Unto the attic mount, upon thy feet and hands;
 Behold the shadow of death among the shadows stands.
 40 There in the dismal corner, there in the shadowy nook,
 Multitudinous eyes will look
 Upon thee from the sombre silences –
 The spirits of the martyrs are these souls,
 Gathered together, at long last,
 45 Beneath these rafters and in these ignoble holes.
 The hatchet found them here, and hither do they come
 To seal with a last look, as with their final breath,
 The agony of their lives, the terror of their death.
 Tumbling and stumbling wraiths, they come, and cower there.
 50 Their silence whimpers, and it is their eyes which cry
Wherefore, O Lord, and why?
 It is a silence only God can bear.

Lift then thine eyes to the roof; there's nothing there,
 Save silences that hang from rafters
 55 And brood upon the air:
 Question the spider in his lair!
 His eyes beheld these things; and with his web he can
 A tale unfold horrific to the ear of man:

A tale of cloven belly, feather-filled;
 60 Of nostrils nailed, of skull-bones bashed and spilled;
 Of murdered men who from the beams were hung,
 And of a babe beside its mother flung,
 Its mother speared, the poor chick finding rest
 Upon its mother's cold and milkless breast;
 65 Of how a dagger halved an infant's word,
 Its *ma* was heard, its *mama* never heard.

O, even now its eyes from me demand accounting,
 For these the tales the spider is recounting,
 Tales that do puncture the brain, such tales that sever
 70 Thy body, spirit, soul, from life, forever!
 Then wilt thou bid thy spirit – *Hold, enough!*
 Stifle the wrath that mounts within thy throat,
 Bury these things accursed,
 Within the depth of thy heart, before thy heart will burst!
 75 Then wilt thou leave that place, and go thy way –
 And lo –
 The earth is as it was, the sun still shines:
 It is a day like any other day.

Descend then, to the cellars of the town,
 80 There where the virginal daughters of thy folk were fouled,
 Where seven heathen flung a woman down,
 The daughter in the presence of her mother,
 The mother in the presence of her daughter,
 Before slaughter, during slaughter, and after slaughter!
 85 Touch with thy hand the cushion stained; touch
 The pillow incarnadined:
 This is the place the wild ones of the wood, the beasts of the
 field
 With bloody axes in their paws compelled thy daughters yield:
 Beasted and swined!

90 Note also, do not fail to note,
 In that dark corner, and behind that cask

Crouched husbands, bridegrooms, brothers, peering from the
 cracks,
 Watching the sacred bodies struggling underneath
 The bestial breath,
 95 Stifled in filth, and swallowing their blood!
 Watching from the darkness and its mesh
 The lecherous rabble portioning for booty
 Their kindred and their flesh!
 Crushed in their shame, they saw it all;
 100 They did not stir nor move;
 They did not pluck their eyes out; they
 Beat not their brains against the wall!
 Perhaps, perhaps, each watcher had it in his heart to pray:
A miracle, O Lord, – and spare my skin this day!

105 Those who survived this foulness, who from their blood awoke,
 Beheld their life polluted, the light of their world gone out –
 How did their menfolk bear it, how did they bear this yoke?
 They crawled forth from their holes, they fled to the house of
 the Lord,
 They offered thanks to Him, the sweet benedictory word.
 110 The *Cohanim* sallied forth, to the Rabbi's house they flitted:
Tell me, O Rabbi, tell, is my own wife permitted?
 The matter ends; and nothing more.
 And all is as it was before.

Come, now, and I will bring thee to their lairs,
 115 The privies, jakes and pigpens where the heirs
 Of Hasmoneans lay, with trembling knees,
 Concealed and cowering, – the sons of the Maccabees!
 The seed of saints, the scions of the lions!
 Who, crammed by scores in all the sanctuaries of their shame,
 120 So sanctified My name!

It was the flight of mice they fled,
 The scurrying of roaches was their flight;
 They died like dogs, and they were dead!
 And on the next morn, after the terrible night

125 The son who was not murdered found
 The spurned cadaver of his father on the ground.
Now wherefore dost thou weep, O son of man?

Descend into the valley; verdant, there
 A garden flourishes, and in the garden
 130 A barn, a shed, – it was their abbatoir;
 There, like a host of vampires, puffed and bloated,
 Besotted with blood, swilled from the scattered dead,
 The tumbril wheels lie spread –
 Their open spokes, like fingers stretched for murder,
 135 Like vampire-mouths their hubs still clotted red.

Enter not now, but when the sun descends
 Wrapt in bleeding clouds and girt with flame,
 Then open the gate and stealthily do set
 Thy foot within the ambient of horror:
 140 Terror floating near the rafters, terror
 Against the walls in darkness hiding,
 Terror through the silence sliding.
 Didst thou not hear beneath the heap of wheels
 A stirring of crushed limbs? Broken and racked
 145 Their bodies move a hub, a spoke
 Of the circular yoke;
 In death-throes they contort;
 In blood disport;
 And their last groaning, inarticulate
 150 Rises above thy head,
 And it would seem some speechless sorrow,
 Sorrow infinite,
 Is prisoned in this shed.
 It is, it is the Spirit of Anguish!
 155 Much-suffering and tribulation-tried
 Which in this house of bondage binds itself.
 It will not ever from its pain be pried.
 Brief-weary and forespent, a dark Shekinah
 Runs to each nook and cannot find its rest;
 160 Wishes to weep, but weeping does not come;

Would roar; is dumb.
 Its head beneath its wing, its wing outspread
 Over the shadows of the martyr'd dead,
 Its tears in dimness and in silence shed.

- 165 And thou, too, son of man, close now the gate behind thee;
 Be closed in darkness now, now thine that charnel space;
 So tarrying there thou wilt be one with pain and anguish
 And wilt fill up with sorrow thine heart for all its days.
 Then on the day of thine own desolation
 170 A refuge will it seem, –
 Lying in thee like a curse, a demon's ambush,
 The haunting of an evil dream.
 O, carrying it in thy heart, across the world's expanse
 Thou wouldst proclaim it, speak it out, –
 175 But thy lips shall not find its utterance.

- Beyond the suburbs go, and reach the burial ground.
 Let no man see thy going; attain that place alone,
 A place of sainted graves and martyr-stone.
 Stand on the fresh-turned soil.
 180 Such silence will take hold of thee, thy heart will fail
 With pain and shame, yet I
 Will let no tear fall from thine eye.
 Though thou wilt long to bellow like the driven ox
 That bellows, and before the altar balks,
 185 I will make hard thy heart, yea, I
 Will not permit a sigh.

See, see, the slaughtered calves, so smitten and so laid;
 Is there a price for their death? How shall that price be paid?

- Forgive, ye shamed of the earth, yours is a pauper-Lord!
 190 Poor was He during your life, and poorer still of late.
 When to my door you come to ask for your reward,
 I'll open wide: See, I am fallen from My high estate.

I grieve for you, my children. My heart is sad for you.
 Your dead were vainly dead; and neither I nor you
 195 Know why you died or wherefore, for whom, nor by what
 laws;
 Your deaths are without reason; your lives are without cause.

What says the Shekinah? In the clouds it hides
 In shame, in agony alone abides;
 I, too, at night, will venture on the tombs,
 200 Regard the dead and weigh their secret shame,
 But never shed a tear, I swear it in My name.
 For great is the anguish, great the shame on the brow;
 But which of these is greater, son of man, say thou –
 Or liefer keep thy silence, bear witness in My name
 205 To the hour of My sorrow, the moment of My shame.

And when thou dost return
 Bring thou the blot of My disgrace upon thy people's head,
 And from My suffering do not part,
 But set it like a stone within their heart!

210 Turn, then, to leave the cemetery ground,
 And for a moment thy swift eye will pass
 Upon the verdant carpet of the grass –
 A lovely thing! Fragrant and moist, as it is always at the coming
 of the Spring!
 The stubble of death, the growth of tombstones!
 215 Take thou a fistful, fling it on the plain
 Saying,
 'The people is plucked grass; can plucked grass grow again?'

Turn, then, thy gaze from the dead, and I will lead
 Thee from the graveyard to thy living brothers,
 220 And thou wilt come, with those of thine own breed,
 Into the synagogue, and on a day of fasting,
 To hear the cry of their agony,
 Their weeping everlasting.
 Thy skin will grow cold, the hair on thy skin stand up,

225 And thou wilt be by fear and trembling tossed;
Thus groans a people which is lost.

Look in their hearts – behold a dreary waste,
Where even vengeance can revive no growth,
And yet upon their lips no mighty malediction
230 Rises, no blasphemous oath.

Are they not real, their bruises?
Why is their prayer false?
Why, in the day of their trials
Approach me with pious ruses,
235 Afflict me with denials?

Regard them now, in these their woes:
Ululating, lachrymose,
Crying from their throes,
We have sinned! and Sinned have we! –
240 Self-flagellative with confession's whips.
Their hearts, however, do not believe their lips.
Is it, then, possible for shattered limbs to sin?
Wherefore their cries imploring, their supplicating din?
Speak to them, bid them rage!
245 Let them against me raise the outraged hand, –
Let them demand!
Demand the retribution for the shamed
Of all the centuries and every age!
Let fists be flung like stone
250 Against the heavens and the heavenly Throne!

And thou, too, son of man, be part of these:
Believe the pangs of their heart, believe not their litanies:
And when the cantor lifts his voice to cry:
Remember the martyrs, Lord,
255 *Remember the cloven infants, Lord,*
Consider the sucklings, Lord,
And when the pillars of the synagogue shall crack
At this his piteous word

And terror shall take thee, fling thee in its deep,
 260 Then I will harden My heart; I will not let thee weep!

Should then a cry escape from thee,
 I'll stifle it within thy throat.
 Let them assoil their tragedy, –
 Not thou, – let it remain unmourned
 265 For distant ages, times remote,
 But thy tear, son of man, remain unshed!
 Build thou about it, with thy deadly hate
 Thy fury and thy rage, unuttered,
 A wall of copper, the bronze triple plate!
 270 So in thy heart it shall remain confined
 A serpent in its nest – O terrible tear! –
 Until by thirst and hunger it shall find
 A breaking of its bond. Then shall it rear
 Its venomous head, its poisoned fangs, and wait
 275 To strike the people of thy love and hate!

Leave now this place at twilight to return
 And to behold these creatures who arose
 In terror at dawn, at dusk now, drowsing, worn
 With weeping, broken in spirit, in darkness shut.
 280 Their lips still move with words unspoken.
 Their hearts are broken.

No lustre in the eye, no hoping in the mind,
 They grope to seek support they shall not find:
 Thus when the oil is gone,
 285 The wick still sends its smoke;
 Thus does the beast of burden,
 Broken and old, still bear his yoke.

Would that misfortune had left them some small solace
 Sustaining the soul, consoling their gray hairs!
 290 Behold the fast is ended; the final prayers are said.
 But why do they tarry now, these mournful congregations?

Shall it be also read,
The Book of Lamentations?

It is a preacher mounts the pulpit now.
295 He opens his mouth, he stutters, stammers. Hark
The empty verses from his speaking flow.
And not a single mighty word is heard
To kindle in the hearts a single spark.
The old attend his doctrine, and they nod.
300 The young ones hearken to his speech; they yawn.
The mark of death is on their brows; their God
Has utterly forsaken every one.

And thou, too, pity them not, nor touch their wound;
Within their cup no further measure pour.
305 Wherever thou wilt touch, a bruise is found.
Their flesh is wholly sore.
For since they have met pain with resignation
And have made peace with shame,
What shall avail thy consolation?

310 They are too wretched to evoke thy scorn.
They are too lost thy pity to evoke,
So let them go, then, men to sorrow born,
Mournful and slinking, crushed beneath their yoke.
Go to their homes, and to their hearth depart –
315 Rot in the bones, corruption in the heart.

And when thou shalt arise upon the morrow
And go upon the highway,
Thou shalt then meet these men destroyed by sorrow,
Sighing and groaning, at the doors of the wealthy
320 Proclaiming their sores, like so much peddler's wares,
The one his battered head, t'other limbs unhealthy,
One shows a wounded arm, and one a fracture bares.
And all have eyes that are the eyes of slaves,
Slaves flogged before their masters;
325 And each one begs, and each one craves:

Reward me, Master, for that my skull is broken
Reward me for my father who was martyred!
 The rich ones, all compassion, for the pleas so bartered
 Extend them staff and bandage, say *good riddance*, and
 330 The tale is told:
 The paupers are consoled.

Avaunt ye, beggars, to the charnel-house!
 The bones of your fathers disinter!
 Cram them within your knapsacks, bear
 335 Them on your shoulders, and go forth
 To do your business with these precious wares
 At all the country fairs!

Stop on the highway, near some populous city,
 And spread on your filthy rags
 340 Those martyred bones that issue from your bags,
 And sing, with raucous voice, your pauper's ditty!
 So will you conjure up the pity of the nations,
 And so *their* sympathy implore.
 For you are now as you have been of yore
 345 And as you stretched your hand
 So will you stretch it,
 And as you have been wretched
 So are you wretched!

What is thy business here, O son of man?
 350 *Rise, to the desert flee!*
Thy cup of affliction thither bear with thee!
Take thou thy soul, rend it in many a shred!
With impotent rage, thy heart deform!
Thy tear upon the barren boulders shed!
 355 *And send thy bitter cry into the storm!*