

Against Barbarism: A Very Brief Survey of Holocaust Poetry

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Abstract: This paper proposes to attempt a very limited survey of select Holocaust writers and their poems written during and after the 1939-45 Second World War to show how through the poignant verses, the predominantly-Jewish litterateurs had tried to commemorate their own sufferings at the Nazi-organised concentration camps for their posteriors so that they could safeguard themselves against the dangers of ultra-nationalism, xenophobia, and racism.

Keywords: Holocaust, Shoah, World War II, Jewish, Nazi, German.

Any essay about the subgenre of Holocaust/*Shoah* poetry is expected to begin a reference to Theodor Adorno's terse comment in *Prisms*, "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (34). According to the German literary critic, who regarded the Holocaust as the most fatal of socio-political cataclysms to have ever occurred, no metrical language would ever be potent enough to capture the sufferings and horrors of the millions of Jews during the atrocious European days of the *Shoah*, and so intellectuals should conscientiously avoid such attempts. However, in spite of Adorno's observation, many poems were written about the genocide especially by people of Jewish or ethnic-Polish descent. Several concentration-camps inmates commemorated their sufferings in short and poignant verses scribbled on torn notebooks, spoiled pamphlets, soiled notices, discarded newspapers, and other paper-based mediums. Understandably, whereas almost no Holocaust novel written in concentration camps exists, poems – that require short space and time and give vent to emotions more artistically than prose-works – are available in considerable proportions. Human desires to record sufferings and castigate tormentors led to such mellifluousness of *Shoah* poetry during the days of anti-Jewish pogroms and post-Second World War that Adorno was forced to retract his oft-quoted statement, and state instead, "[P]erennial suffering has as much right to expression as the tortured have to scream [...] [.] [H]ence it may have been wrong to say that no poem could be written after Auschwitz" (*Negative* 362). This essay proposes to attempt a very brief overview of the Holocaust poems (in English translated forms) and their writers. In "Theories of Trauma", Lyndsey Stonebridge puts importance to all such poems as being parts of the "literature of testimony" (*The Cambridge* 202). Sara Horowitz further comments, "Holocaust poetry mediates on the nature of memory and testimony, and its special use of language gives expression to what falls outside the boundaries of ordinary speech" (*The Oxford* 437). In the 'Preface' to *Images from the Holocaust: A Literature Anthology* (from where many of the poems referred to in this essay have been quoted), Brown, Stephens, and Rubin state that 'there was no standard Holocaust

experience' and the *Shoah* had had been individually and uniquely experienced by those incarcerated in Nazi concentration camps (xi). Waxman has an important point about Holocaust poetry: she is scared that such metrical attempts might lead to "the aestheticisation of the sufferings of the Jewish people through the use of poetic or luxurious language", and that many of Holocaust poems are "concerned with the problem of Jewish self-identity during the Holocaust, as well as [...] [their] own impotence in the event of deportation of [...] [their] famil[ies]" (18, 35). Nevertheless, critical studies of different Holocaust verses automatically group them into those written during the advent of the Nazis, those composed following the ghettoisation of the Jews, their attempts to escape, or inside concentration camps. Hanoch Guy has identified some common themes for Holocaust poems, and they include the preservation of the past as a living presence, focus on the 'Christian and Pagan antipathy' towards the Jews, recording of the great sufferance of the Jews, and a blaming of the gentiles, the Jews, and divinity for remaining non-responsive to the Holocaust exterminations (*Holocaust Literature* 472).

Among the early poems about the Holocaust poems is Yala Korwin's "Casimir-the-Great Street", divided into 'The Courtyard' and 'The Street' sections. The poem occurs as a narrative by a Jewish girl maturing in a Polish society that has had divided itself on basis of the so-called 'Nordic' and 'Oriental' physical features and Christian and Judaic faiths. In 'The Courtyard', Korwin presents the same Polish society in its early stage of mindless segregation, where she writes, "My peasant nanny and my friend's mother/ came down to fetch us for our midday meal. / They stopped to chatter. 'Look at them', / the neighbour said pointing at us, / 'Next to that damned Jewish brat, / Mine is a darling lamb'" (l. 18-23). In 'The Street', the child-narrator is given a candy 'with white and pink stripes' (symbolic of the colour of dresses concentration-camp-inmates were compelled to wear) (l. 10), and when she is about to be taken away to safety by her parents, a 'fat man', obviously an anti-Semite, begins to exhort passers-by to stop them. Korwin's poem may be interpreted as an appropriate prologue to all the Holocaust poems that were to follow and she was to write: about survival in unfriendly societies, horrors of concentration camps, and about existential crises. Her fifty-liner "The Little Boy with his Hands up", collected in her 1987 poetry-collection *To Tell the Story: Poems of the Holocaust*, is considered unanimously by the Holocaust literary critics to be among the more poignant early *Shoah* poems, and is based on a widely-reprinted 1943 black-and-white photograph of a Jewish boy – most probably the later-day's New York-based physician Tsvi Nussbaum (b. 1936) – who is being deported alongwith his relatives and acquaintances from Warsaw to *Bergen Belsen Concentration Camp*. The daughter of a Jewish teacher and his bookkeeper-wife, Korwin (b. 1923) was forced to work at a German ammunitions-factory between 1943 and 1945. She published several Holocaust poems in different magazines and journals like *Midstream*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Bereavement*, and so on, and among her oft-read poems are "His Words", "O Israel!", "The Unveiling of Belzec Monument", "I lost my Mother Tongue in the War", "Dawn", "How Lucky!", "Singing in the Sun", "As You Spoke", "I feel a Sword over my

Head”, and “Such Innocent Words”. Writing on the length or shortness of different postmodern Holocaust poems, Yair Mazor writes, “The poet’s decision regarding the length of a line, done for aesthetic reasons, often results in a discrepancy between the length of the line and the syntactic unit, a discrepancy that tends to create run-on lines (enjambment). Sometimes the poet’s aesthetic reason for creating run-on lines is obvious, and sometimes it is obscure or altogether inscrutable. But the fact remains that only in poetry – and not in prose – is the length of the line a consequence of the poet’s aesthetic choice, and not of technical or economic considerations” (27-8). Korwin’s choice of short lines is evocative of her breathlessness in the claustrophobic atmosphere of Nazi internment camps. Friedrich G.E. Martin Niemöller (1892-1984) wrote perhaps the most eloquent of the advent-of-the-Nazi-period poems, “First They Came for the Jews”, first referred to in a 1955 critical work by Milton Mayer. His twelve-line-poem runs:

First they came for the Jews / and I did not speak out / because I was not
a Jew. / Then they came for the Communists / and I did not speak out /
because I was not a Communist. / Then they came for the trade
unionists / and I did not speak out / because I was not a trade unionist. /
Then they came for me / and there was no one left / to speak out for me.

Niemöller’s poem criticises the German intellectuals for their studied silence during the Nazi torture of the Jews. Two of the early Holocaust poems, focussing on the gradual strengthening of ultra-nationalists and aggravation of their tortures on Jews are “Cupful of Songs” and “King of the Kings of the Land” by Salomon Meisels (1887-1942), Korwin’s father – both of them printed in *Our Movement*, a Hebrew literary magazine that Meisels edited. In “A Cupful of Songs” (1935), Meisels demonstrates a *carpe diem* motif as if aware about the impending decimation of the Jews. The coveted brother in the second poem does not arrive at a royal feast – apparently executed by the ruler. Primo Levi (1919-87), one of the more poignantly efficient of the Holocaust writers, appeals to general humanity for sympathy in such a stressful time in his “Shema” (translated by Michael Burch): “You who live secure / in your comfortable houses, / who return each evening to find/ warm food, / welcoming faces .../ consider whether this is a man: / who toils in the mud, / who knows no peace, / who fights for crusts of bread, / who dies at another man’s whim, / at his ‘yes’ or his ‘no’” (l.1-11). In “Girl without Soap”, also translated by Burch, Miryam Ulinover (1888-1944), who published the poetry-collection *Grandmother’s Treasure* in 1922 and would be gassed to death at Auschwitz, writes about the hardships of Jews’ life in the fascist-dominated countries. The execution of Jews would have multiplied had not several philanthropists and intellectuals aided them in self-concealment even they themselves were in risk of being annihilated or interned. Writing in commemoration of the Holocaust victim Noemi Meisels, Korwin, who was helped against the Nazis by her relative, writes in “Noemi”: “You hid behind a borrowed name, / bleached your raven crown, / but there was no dye / to cover the pigment of doom / in your eyes!” (l. 1-5). On the other hand, Helen Degan Cohen’s “In Hiding”, a thirty-four-liner, which introduces itself as a ‘Poem about the many days

in hiding with a Catholic woman in a countryside beside a place called War'. Evoking the image of a young girl's brief escape from the horrors of belligerence, Cohen, who is also known by her Polish name Halina Degenfisz, writes in the poem,

[...] Our war went still / and deep, around the weightless sleigh. / And now, in a trembling present, / tense with the lunacy of peace / such as it is – a masquerade in blooming / shades of sacrifice, of comfort jaws / and love-drops like the red of war – / I crane my turtle-head for frozen air, / then burrowing / into the soft escape, the easy ride, / I hear, beside the child I was, / those solitary bells of joy / pulling her lonely sleigh (l. 22-34).

The last two lines of this poem, which first appeared in *Spoon River Quarterly* in 1985 and later included in the Charles A. Fishman-edited *Blood to Remember: American Poets on the Holocaust* (2007), are perceptively the most poignant of all because they focus on the child's capacity for hope and love in an atrocious atmosphere of war and extermination: an aspect which both helped them survive during the Holocaust but prolonged their suffering. The family members of Cohen (b. 1935), who had been incarcerated in a ghetto, escaped from Poland to Byelorussia after some of them became involved in Polish resistance movement, and later migrated to the United States of America in 1947. Cohen's memories of the Holocaust are mostly as a child in concealment, and they can be as well interpreted in her thirteen-line "I have been lost in an Image Forest" (1984). Abraham Sutzkever's "1980", translated into English by Cynthia Ozick and included in *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse* (1987), is another specimen of Holocaust poetry in hiding. Sutzkever (1913-2010), who has been identified as the 'greatest poet of the Holocaust' in the 17 June 1984 *New York Times* article "God the Implausible Kinsman", can be termed an 'émigré poet', considering that he was born in Belarus, settled in Siberia, and spent his advanced life in Israel. During the Second World War, Abraham Sutzkever and his wife Freydke were interned at the *Vilna Ghetto* in Vilnius, Lithuania, from where they and the Yiddish poet Shmerke Kaczerginsky (1908-54) escaped and became involved in partisan movements against the occupying Germans. In July 1943, Sutzkever's notebook of Holocaust poems was smuggled into Moscow, and he himself escaped to Russia in March 1944. Whereas Kaczerginsky would later write the Holocaust songs like "It Happened", "Pioneers", and "Redemption will come soon", and publish the poetry-collections *The Song of the Vilna Ghetto* (1947) and *Songs of the Concentration Camp and Ghettoes* in 1948, Sutzkever nostalgically recalls in "1980" the aid extended to him by the Polish woman Yanova Bartoszewicz during his period of concealment. Sutzkever produced a number of other critically-acclaimed Holocaust poems too, collected in the 1987 anthology, and these included "Frozen Jews", "How?", and "Here I am, Full-grown, Flourishing". Self-concealment from the Nazis might have protected thousands of the helpless Jews in the German-occupied countries, but to Miklós Radnóti (1909-44), a powerful Hungarian Jewish commemorator of the Holocaust who was to perish in the *Shoah*, the action was associated with

obliviousness and cowardice. In his “Postcard 2”, translated by Michael Burch and written in Serbia, he critically writes: “A few miles away they’re incinerating / the haystacks and the houses, / while squatting here on the fringe of this pleasant meadow, / the shell-shocked peasants quietly smoke their pipes” (l. 1-4). Furthermore, in “And so will I wonder...?” (translated into English by Gina Gönczi), Radnóti, while ‘admitting’ the cowardice of self-concealment, demonstrates an artistic concern for his poetic oeuvre. He did not conceal himself, and when, after the war his body was identified by his wife Fanni Gyarmati from a mass grave in north-western Hungary, his poems recording his experiences of the death march from Yugoslavia to Hungary were found in a small exercise-copy on him and they were posthumously published as *Foaming Sky* (1946). As the Nazis gradually and firmly assumed powers in Germany, and following the initiation of the Second World War, unleashed terror and execution in the conquered northwestern European countries, the Jews began to escape from the anti-Semitic German soldiers to foreign countries. Many Jewish children and intellectuals spontaneously wrote poetry during the periods of escape not only in order to give vent to their pent-up emotions but also to leave for posterior readers firsthand accounts of Nazi barbarism. ‘Karen Gershon’, that is, Kaethe Loewenthal (1923-93), who would ultimately publish seven superior poetry-collections in England, her country-of-settlement since 1938, writes “Cast Out”, compiled in *We came as Children: A Collective Autobiography* (1966), to depict the emotions of a Jewish child as s/he is forced to escape from the marauding Germans. Her 72-line “The Children’s Exodus”, also collected in *We came as Children*, opens with the perplexities of a child as s/he is forced to leave an unspecified German-occupied country by train. However, numerous adolescent Jews could not escape from the Nazis and were asphyxiated to death in gas chambers. In “A Page from the Deportation Diary”, Wladyslaw Szlengel (1914-43), the writer of the posthumously-published *What I Read to the Dead* (1977) who would later die during the *Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*, writes about a group of captured Jewish children on the verge of being shoved into the gas-chamber. Moshe Kaufman (b. 1908) was luckier than the children mentioned by Szlengel. The author of the verse-compilation *From All My Homes* (1944) could escape to Argentina during the period of carnage and later compose poems like “Bitter Life”, “Carry Me, Little Boat” “The Wine is bitter”, and “My Last Request” in which he commemorates the episodes of escape and sufferings.

A number of heart-rending Holocaust poems were written by Jewish litterateurs as they were forcibly interred into ghettos, suffering daily hardships and miseries only to be ultimately annihilated. Among the larger ghettos for the European Jewry were the segregated areas at Warsaw, Łódź, Kraków, Budapest, Amsterdam, Lublin, and Lvov, and as Tim Cole, quoting a ghetto-historian, writes in *Holocaust City*, the open-incarceration areas for the Jews were specially designed to ‘encourage’ crime among the Jews (6). Interestingly, Eric J. Sterling, in his *Introduction to Life in the Ghettos during the Holocaust*, points out that though the Jews suffered from extreme living conditions in the ghettos, they could also

enjoy peace of mind and healthy relationships because these encircled areas were “far better than [...] the concentration camps” (xxx). Nevertheless, the unbearable life of the ghettos reflected in various poems by the interns. Imprisoned in the Łódź Ghetto, Yitzkhak Viner writes in “Let it be quite in My Room!” (translated by Michael Burch): “Let it be quiet in my room! / Let me hear the birds outside singing, / And let their innocent trilling / Lull away my heart's interior gloom” (l. 1-4). Another ghetto poem is “The Garden” by Frantisek Brass (1930-44), a child-poet of the Holocaust who, following deportation to *Terezin Concentration Camp*, died at Auschwitz. The eight-line-poem focuses on the transience of life in ghettos and concentration camps.

In their anthology, Jean Brown, Elaine Stephens, and Janet Rubin include two ghetto-poems – the first “A Girl of Six from the Ghetto begging on Smolna Street in 1942” by Jerzy Ficowski (1924-2006), and the second “Warsaw in April 1943” by Kazimierz Stanislaw Marczak-Oborski (1921-87) (*Images* 168, 173). While the Polish resistance-fighter and *Home Army* member Ficowski was imprisoned in the *Pawiak Prison*, Marczak-Oborski was an active member of the Polish defenders against the German Armed Forces in September 1939, headed secret students' theatres, and edited the underground literary magazine *The Way* from January 1944. In “A Girl of Six from the Ghetto”, Ficowski, who would also write such poignant verses as “A Prayer to the Holy Louse” (on a 1944 incident of the delousing of gypsies at Auschwitz-Birkenau) and “Lamentation” (for the philanthropic ghetto-paediatrician Janusz Korczak, that is, Henryk Goldszmit, c. 1878-1942), captures the hopelessness of ghetto-life. The temporality of existence at ghettos is portrayed in “Jewish Effects”. Marczak-Oborski's “Warsaw in April 1943” recalls the *Warsaw Ghetto Uprising* (of 19 April-16 May 1943). A founder of the *Łódź Yiddish Literary Group*, Hershele Danielovitch (1882-1941) wrote two appalling ghetto-poems – “My Wife and Children are starving” and “Who can know what I lack?” before dying of starvation at the *Warsaw Ghetto*. His first poem records reaction typical of all the Jews incarcerated in the Nazi-erected ghettos. Concentration camp-poetry and verses written by people with direct or indirect experiences of incarceration at the Nazi-erected internment camps during or after the Holocaust are most bounteously contributed though, as Zoë Vania Waxman writes, “[...] [E]yewitness accounts written in the concentration camps are extremely scarce, [but] th[at] does not mean that those held captive did not have the desire to one day bear witness to their experiences. Informed by their captors that there would be no survivors, prisoners could only dream of one day telling the world of their suffering” (51). Other than Brown, Stephens, and Rubin, Desmond Graham compiles a number of poems of these three categories in his *Poetry of the Second World War* under the sections *Speechless you testify against us* (163-86) and *I am Twenty-four led to slaughter; I survived* (189-213). Paul Celan's “Death Fugue”, written in 1944 and first published in 1947, is the most evocative and terse verse from this period, its title referencing to the ‘death music’ concentration-camp-prisoners were forced to play to other inmates waiting for asphyxiation. The poem thus

begins:

Black milk of daybreak we drink it sundown/We drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night/We drink and we drink it/We dig a grave in the breezes there one lies unconfined. / A man lives in the house he plays with the serpent he writes/ He writes when dusk falls to Germany [...]
(translated by Michael Hamburger) (l. 1-6).

'Celan', or Paul Antschel (1920-70), who was born into a German-speaking Jewish family in northern Bukovina, Romania, suffered at the hands of both the Nazis and the anti-Semitic Soviets, and was interned at a camp of Transnistria, Ukraine, where he could not find any other focus than on his impending death, just like Hanus Hachenburg (1929-43), whose "Terezin" is one of the more often-anthologised children's writing of the Holocaust. In "September 1944", Charles Fishman (b. 1942) imagines how he "stood in the gypsy camp/ by the high-voltage wires, / around us the bare Polish/ plains and forests" (l. 1-4). The noted German playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), who escaped execution by the Nazis by immigrating to the United States of America during the Second World War, commemorates the Holocaust and the survivor's guilt in "I, the Survivor": "I know of course; it's simply luck/ That I've survived so many friends. But last night in a dream/ I heard those friends say of me: 'Survival of the fittest'. / And I hated myself". That was precisely the paradoxical situation the anti-Nazi and Jewish intellectuals found themselves in during the 1939-45 global belligerence – they neither wanted to be exterminated nor were ready to survive without their Jewish compatriots. One of the more mellifluous contributors to the subgenre of Holocaust poetry is Nelly Sachs (1891-1970), who escaped with her aged mother from Germany to Sweden a week before she was to be incarcerated at a concentration camp. Though her reputation has been built on non-Holocaust poems as well, compiled in *The Seeker, and Other Poems* (1970) and *Collected Poems I, 1944–1949* (2007), Sachs's *Shoah* poems include "Even the Old Man's Last Breath", "A Dead Child Speaks", "Chorus of the Orphaned", and "Chorus of the Rescued". In the last poem, Sachs stresses, just like Brecht, that the Holocaust survivors would never forget those killed at the concentration camps. As the U.S. 97th *Infantry Division* in which Anthony Hecht (1923-2004) served helped liberate the *Flossenbürg Concentration Camp*, Bavaria, the liberating soldier would recall the terrible condition of the internment areas in his "More Light! More Light!" About the soldier-poet Tim Kendall writes, Hecht's "Holocaust poems are [...], as Wilfred Owen claimed every war poem should be, 'a matter of experience'" (238).

In "Nineteen Forty-five", Bernard S. Mikofsky (1919-2005) explores how memories of the Holocaust continue to trouble the survivors like Sachs. Burton D. Wasserman focuses on the condition of the Holocaust survivors after liberation in his "The Silence" where he writes about

a letter/ From Poland. / Delivered simply/With the junk mail/ And the butcher's bill, / Yet breathing the bristle/ Of military commands/ And commanding the sight/ Of dragging, bleeding feet (l. 1-9).

In "What Happened That Day", Luba Krugman Gurdus (b. 1914), the

author of *Painful Echoes: Poems of the Holocaust from the Diary of Luba Krugman Gurdus* (1985), pays tribute to her parents, who helped their children escape while awaiting their own death. William Pillin (1910-85), in "A Poem for Anton Schmidt", commemorates the German army-sergeant who was executed in March 1942 for providing military vehicles and forged credentials to members of the Jewish resistance. In "Yugoslavia, 1944", Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) pays tribute to Hannah Szenes (1921-44), a Hungarian Jew who was parachuted by the *English Armed Forces* into Yugoslavia during the Second World War to help save the Hungarian Jews from being sent to the Auschwitz gas chambers. While Emily Borenstein (b. 1923) writes about the importance of acting as a witness to the Holocaust in her "I Must Tell the Story", Florence Weinberger (b. 1932) tries to make her children understand the cataclysm of Holocaust in her twenty-three-line poem "Survivor", and in "Anguish", she narrates the pain of a Holocaust survivor as his wife. Yevgeny Yevtushenko (b. 1933) remembers the massacre of approximately thirty-four thousand Jews at the Kiev ravine of Babyn Yar on 29 and 30 September 1941 in "Babi Yar", while the Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz (1911-2004) pays tribute to the six million Jews who perished in the Holocaust in his "Dedication". Among the other poets of these periods, as Graham anthologises, are Charles Reznikoff (1894-1976), Stanisław Wygodski (b. 1907), Anna Kamińska (1920-86), Tadeusz Różewicz (b. 1921), Zbigniew Herbert (1924-98), and Agnes Gergely (b. 1933). Reviewing the poems and poets of these periods, Kendall writes, "Primo Levi has commented that 'we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses'. As the event which most 'commands our belated witness', and which (for the same reasons) denies the possibility of that witness, the Holocaust provokes in [Geoffrey] Hill a self-tortured and, inevitably, self-indulgent art. A poet's vocation, he has written, is of 'necessarily bearing his peculiar unnecessary shame in a world growing ever more shameless'. The shame is unnecessary because the rest of the world seems to prosper without it" (230). Before concluding it would be relevant to recall some of the poems written during the active Jewish resistance against the onslaught of the Nazis. While the U.S. poet Susan Dambroff explores some of the many ways in which individuals resisted the Nazis in her "There Were Those", Hirsh Glick (1922-44), in "Silence, and a Starry Night", pays tribute to the Jewish partisans of the *Vilna Ghetto*, who fought against the Germans in the summer of 1942. In "Ninety-three Daughters of Israel", Chaya Feldman, who ultimately died at Kraków, Poland, at the hand of Nazis, writes,

"We washed our bodies / and we grew clean; / we purified our souls /
and we grew quiet. / Death does not terrify us; / we go out to meet him. /
We served God while we were alive / and now we can best serve our
people / by refusing to be taken alive" (l. 1-9).

It is because of the interpretation of such indomitable spirits of the Holocaust fighters, victims, and survivors that reading or writing poetry after Holocaust, unlike Adorno's observation, has not become barbaric. Rather, the poems appear as witness to the fact that the experience people have got over with the problem of representation of the horrors, for as

Debarati Sanyal writes in “The French War”, “The Holocaust is often said to provoke a crisis of representation and of witnessing. Indeed, how is it possible to recover and convey the horror of the concentrationary experience in language, especially when its traumatic conditions could unravel one's identity altogether?” (*The Cambridge* 90). The Holocaust poems are rather against the Nazi barbarism, which continue to warn posterior readers against the dangers of ultra-nationalism and xenophobia – aspects that would ultimately drag their perpetrators to complete annihilation like the Nazis.

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Peace In No Man's Land

a poem dedicated to
Stephen Gill

- Jaydeep Sarangi

Peace is -
Holding hands together
Against restless, wayward minds
Of two nations.
When rolling tank misfires,
When a sage from somewhere
Stands up
And announces public prayer:
Shanti, shanti, shanti ...

My little daughter walks out
With a lantern in her hand
In old busy south Kolkata street
When day becomes dark
And all men and women wait for
The auspicious hour and a tranquil sky.

Somewhere a Dove flies
When each small thing has a life.