

Shoes in Kopatkevichi

Some winters old men spend their days
gazing out at the street, the children cry
inside. No one has money. Shoes
are for the wage earners. The porters haul
their wood-wheeled carts like oxen,

rags binding what remains of soles
and uppers; even in their sleep, they cradle
their old boots. To keep his family, a man
must come to terms with cobblestones that gnaw
through leather soles in six weeks' time:

to hawk his wares, to haul his loads,
to walk with all the other men
to shul, to bring his son to cheder,
where he'll learn to follow in his fathers' steps.
Only the man with no legs needs no shoes:

from dawn to dusk, the crude cart bearing him
through what pogromschiks left him
of his life parks by the roadside
while his son bends to a tumpline, shoulders
loads of wood. Nearby, inside his dim shop

sits the shoemaker who stitches day and night.
Somehow he buys his leather. Somehow
customers with nothing buy his shoes:
what is a man to do but take each step
if he's to carry on?