

# *Reversion*

Poems

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Richard Fein



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*Jewish Currents*: “August” and “When I was ...”

*Poetica*: “The Return of the Repressed”

*The Poetry Porch*: “Going on Three” and “A Yiddish Poet at the End of His Tethers”

*Tsukunft*: “Maplung”

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“deep memories yield no epitaphs”

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

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**I**



## Back of the Store

As if scored by annular calibration, the rod of the shoe-stretcher  
threads down to the hole where it enters the wooden foot,  
the winged handle of the rod gripped by the father's hand that pushes the  
block  
into a shoe and turns the handle, the fissure widening, pressing the wood  
against the leather.

Out of use, the mimic foot hangs on the wall,  
or sits on the bench, in idle recovery of its split wholeness,  
not expanding and pressuring the leather;  
for now, having regressed to its own form,  
the wooden block no longer forced to exert itself in the darkness of the  
shoe,  
the metal rod no longer pressing on the back lip of the leather;  
for now, a shape altered to itself, purpose usurped;  
for now, otiose wood with a slope that speaks without a tongue,  
and with a tip that points nowhere and outlasts its old mode of push and  
stress  
and that now enters a realm stronger than intent (like the glabrous torso  
of the mannequin in the dress shop window), the dutiful ware  
gone over to a new guise, design having disappeared  
into the inactive wood, as if we've lost our footing  
and that half-clog looks like an object a photograph has captured and  
surrendered to—  
smooth, honey-colored wood, grooved metal and winged handle.

## My Father's Store Was Closed on Sundays

“Shh, don't tell,” you whispered, and I watched  
your index finger press against  
your puckered lips, lift off, and press again  
as it stretched from the tip of your nose to the cleft  
of your chin, thumb jutting toward your Adam's apple.  
You reached across my chest to lock me in, pawed  
the amber knob of the stick shift crooking up from the floor  
and we shot from the curb, off on our jaunt  
to the edge of the borough.

Taking off from Floyd  
Bennett Field we flew over Brooklyn with Wiley Post  
a few months before he crashed. You pointed out to me  
the Rockaways, Coney Island, the Upper and Lower Bays,  
and far off, though within walking distance  
of where we lived, the hypodermic needle-tower  
of Kings County, where they took the mad. The blocks  
of Brooklyn tilted below me. Back home,  
I told mother, landing you in hot water.

Sunday mornings, you slept late, showered a long time,  
then, half dry, stripped to the waist, buckling-in  
your belt, you'd bolt into the living room  
to turn on the radio, watch it light up and dim  
as you turned the dial to “The Forverts Hour”—  
your chest under whorls of hair, tufts sprouting  
near the knob of your spine, randomly clustering  
on your back, and on your shoulders wispy epaulettes.

## Shoebox

Just enough room so I could hide  
under the front edge of the top  
without falling into the box itself  
where the shoes slept in their sheets of tissue.  
And so I spied from under the ledge,  
between the chamber of the box and the size  
and color stamped below the brown  
Florsheim logo shining on the front.

Oh, my father had his way of thumbing off  
the top and making it a bed for the box,  
then flicking back the tissue and plucking  
out a shoe, cradling and softening the leather  
in the heels of his hands, his silver shoehorn  
tending shoe and heel as he bent toward  
the customer's foot on the neck of the stool.

# Father-Legend

(translated from H. Leyvik)

The old Jewish cemetery of Ihumen  
in thick wild grass, abandoned.  
I have not come to this old cemetery  
to curse or to mourn,  
but to receive a blessing  
from under a mound.  
Autumn. Moss on the mound,  
sun on the moss.  
All of my limbs—  
the strings of an instrument,  
and moving over the strings a hand  
of someone who rises from death  
and comes back to life:  
“Son, you are here.  
Good. Good.  
Your smile—let it rise  
not over these graves, but gardens.  
My blood pours out in this sunshine—  
overflows into another body.  
Who is this other body?  
Tree—the tree in the forest is this other body,  
threshold—the threshold of our home on Berezene St.  
is this other body.  
Oh, my boy, my boy—  
it is I, your father,  
I with the red beard.  
Let your hands carry every touch of mine,  
let your lips carry my kisses,

kisses I wanted to give you,  
that I should have given you,  
but always shame held me back.  
And also my words,  
which in my poverty and in my sadness  
stammered....  
Lying under the earth  
I have seen light from your life,  
light from your heart.  
Lying under the earth  
I have heard all of your cries,  
seen the pain and suffering,  
forced and rising  
from your remote and lowered eyes.  
Lift your eyes and see  
how much light is over you,  
over our poor home  
where you gave your first cry  
in white, legendary Kislev.  
As I lie here under the earth,  
light has opened up to me,  
truth revealed itself to me—  
that on the day you will come  
(and I knew that you would, that you must)  
I will receive you  
with clear,  
good,  
lucent words.”

So spoke my father  
from the grave.

# The Sacrifice of Itzik

(translated from Itzik Manger)

*Rock me, rock me, blind fate,  
I dream with my eyes open,  
I see—a great silver bird  
flying in from the ocean.*

What is that silver bird bringing me?  
God knows! Maybe the Kiddush cup  
Grandfather held while blessing sweet wine  
from the land of Israel?

But who brought up Grandfather's name?  
Here he is, coming towards me, the wagon  
driver from Stopchet: "Itzik,  
the sacrifice is ready."

His eyes burn at me—two stars  
shining in the autumn night, his beard  
mussed up by the wind and stained  
by seven large tears.

Grandfather leads me by the hand toward  
cities, villages and ditches—the cities  
so small, the villages so large,  
and we stride across them.



Grandfather says, “Itzik, do you  
remember—a long time ago—an angel  
spread his wings above us  
and you were saved?”

He regrets that, our old God,  
and now demands His sacrifice,  
though I’ve lived and I’ve died  
so many times.

Enough’s enough. I don’t need His mercy.  
He shouldn’t get the idea, up there...  
Good thing your mother’s dead, Itzik.  
She’s spared more tears.”

Grandfather leads me by the hand toward  
cities, villages and ditches—the cities  
so small, the villages so large,  
and we stride across them.

# Notes

## I

### “Back of the Store”

A few phrases are adaptations from Berenice Abbott’s essay “The World of Atget,” reprinted in *Berenice Abbott / Eugene Atget*, edited by Clark Worswick (Santa Fe: Arena Editions, 2002).

### “Father-Legend”

Kislev: The Jewish month (usually overlapping with December) during which candles are lit in celebration of Chanukah.

### “8-mm”

*Kokhaleyn* (Yiddish: literally “cook alone”) is a summer cottage in the Catskills where vacationers cooked for themselves, unlike resort hotels, where meals were prepared and served by the staff.

### “Pesach Shabus”

The italicized lines are the refrain of a Yiddish folksong from the ’20s celebrating the fact that under the Soviet system Jews can now be productive workers on a collective farm. Jewish collective farmers in a region of the Crimea brought their produce to the depot, Dzhankoye. Dzhavili seems to be a play on the city’s name.

By 1952, Stalin had killed most of the prominent Yiddish writers.

### “My Grandmother’s Picture”

*alte heym* (Yiddish): old country.

Sheol: the abode of the dead in Jewish eschatology.

### “Geister”

The title means ghosts in Yiddish.

## II

### “Going on Three”

The line in quotation marks almost quotes exactly a line from Emily Dickinson’s poem “The Months have ends—the Years—a knot—”

### III

#### **“A Yiddish Poet at the End of His Tethers”**

Part 2—“My potential readers/readers of Eliot” comes from Irving Howe’s *World of Our Fathers*, and the last two lines rework two sentences by Andrei Sinyavsky I found at the head of the preface to *The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol*, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky.

### IV

#### **“Marsyas”**

*Desaparecido* is a word coined by the Argentine military during the Dirty War of 1976–1983 to describe a citizen who though actually killed or imprisoned or tortured by the military was referred to as having disappeared or vanished. See Marguerite Feitlowitz’s *A Lexicon of Terror*.

#### **“In the Service”**

The last three lines of stanza two come from C.R. Leslie’s *Memoir of the Life of John Constable*, p. 383.

#### **“Forty-Five Years”**

Michal, one of Saul’s daughters, is married to David. When the struggle between Saul and David becomes bitter and protracted, she doesn’t see David for years, and becomes married to Paltiel. After Saul’s death, David is anointed King over the House of Judah, and he orders that Michal be returned to him.

#### **“Book Pouch”**

Part 1—The passage “a way to live...one action” is from Fanny Howe’s article “Past Present,” in *Harvard Review*, No. 25 (Fall, 2003), p. 108.

Part 3—This part of the poem quotes from and owes a great deal to Paul Zweig’s magnificent study, *Walt Whitman: The Making of the Poet*. I also relied on Justin Kaplan’s *Walt Whitman* and Jerome Loving’s *Walt Whitman*.