

Reversion

Poems

Richard Fein



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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. Dzhanvili 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*.