

*"A Woman's Song":
The Poetry of Esther Raab*

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In memory of my beloved father
יוסף בן ירחמיאל ומלכה, Joseph Lapidus

The development of modern Hebrew poetry gave rise to a burgeoning of poetic activity among women. Rahel, Yocheved Bat-Miriam, Esther Raab, and Elisheva were the most prominent of a cluster of women who started writing and publishing Hebrew poetry in the early 1920s after a puzzling total absence of women Hebrew poets from 1890 to 1920.¹

Among these poets, Esther Raab (1894-1981) is distinguished both by her poetry and by her biography. She is the only one of the group who was not part of the Russian poetic tradition. Harold Schimmel suggests that Raab, like Emily Dickinson, stands outside the poetic mainstream (9-10).

Her birth in 1894 in Petah Tikvah gives Raab the distinction of being the first woman born in the Land of Israel to become a Hebrew poet. This accident of birth distinguishes her poetry from that of her contemporaries. Actually, it is not really fair to refer to this as an accident of birth, because her father, Judah Raab, who made *aliyah* in 1876 and married Esther's mother in 1878, intended to re-establish his family's European agricultural heritage in the Land of Israel.² His childhood had been formed by his experiences living on an agricultural estate in Hungary; his children were, he hoped, destined to be Jewish farmers who experienced no conflict of homeland or landscape.

Thus, Esther Raab—unlike Leah Goldberg, for example—had no deep European forests, no church spires flashing through her consciousness. Unlike Hayyim Nahman Bialik, the greatest Hebrew poet of the previous generation, Raab was not the poet “of the hills, woods and streams of Volhynia” (Aberbach, 1988, 50). At a point when her contemporaries were, in a sense, a *dor midbar*—a wilderness or transition generation who relished the opportunity to settle in Israel but still hankered after their childhood or early adult experiences in Europe—Raab wrote through her primal contact with the land. Raab herself was aware of the importance of these influences (1989b).

Her birth in Petah Tikvah also affected her language. For most Hebrew writers of Raab’s generation, Hebrew was not the first language. Spoken Hebrew was not even an early language. While Raab clearly knew Yiddish (originally in a Hungarian form; later, influenced by a wave of settlers from Lithuania who came to Petah Tikvah, in its classic, Lithuanian form), she had an early, natural connection with the Hebrew language.³ Of course, at the turn of the century, modern Hebrew was in the process of developing the vocabulary and syntax that would allow it to become a flexible medium of expression. Raab later described that process: “Every Hebrew word was new and shining with a wealth of colors like a bird’s wings. . . . And I caught it as one catches a bird; I loved to pronounce it” (Be’er, 11 March 1988, 11). It was not an acquired language for her, but an innate vehicle of expression which grew and developed as she did.

The nature of her connection with the land, unique in her generation, may have contributed to Raab’s fate as a poet who has been undeservedly overlooked in the study of modern Hebrew poetry.⁴ In his lengthy introduction to the 1982 *Yahdav* selection of her poetry, Reuven Shoham offers a number of explanations for this oversight (52). It may have been because her corpus was not large to begin with and that less than half of it was published in a collected volume during her lifetime. In addition, Raab never really belonged to the generation of writers who were her contemporaries; she was somehow too independent—a loner out of sync with the zeitgeist, the spirit and experience of her generation of poets. Finally, Shoham suggests, Raab’s language, in its concreteness, set her apart from the norm. Miron’s emphasis on Raab’s unwillingness to adapt her poetic voice to that of a “submissive” woman provides yet another tantalizing explanation.⁵

Taste and the establishment of the canon are issues which are most complex. None of the explanations Shoham puts forth can be easily

dismissed or readily accepted. True, Raab’s corpus is small, and she underwent a long period of silence from 1935 to 1947.⁶ Yet, it is far from the smallest corpus of the period and, with Bialik’s protracted silence before us, we can scarcely say that a poet whose muse is sometimes absent is always dismissed. And, while Raab was in many ways unique, she describes herself as having been in touch with many of the great writers of her time.⁷ If there is one salient difference between Raab and others of her generation, it is precisely that she does not seem to belong to that generation in terms of theme or style. As Shimon Ginzburg wrote of her poetry in 1936: “she captures the look of the landscape of the Land of Israel in a manner different from that of most of our poets who come from the foreign countries, in a natural and true presentation, unadorned, without the falseness of sentimentality” (279). Raab’s style is clearly different, for she accepts as a given the Land of Israel, its flora and fauna, and uses them throughout her poetry.

Raab’s poetry deals with issues that arise from her unique situation, as well as those connected with her ties to Jewish religious tradition—questions that pervade modern Hebrew literature. To illustrate, I will focus on one of her later poems, which serves well as a lens through which can be refracted a number of issues relevant to the broader corpus of her work.

I have selected “*Shirat ishah*” or “Woman’s Song” (1969), because in both title and themes it is a complex and multivalent poem. In its rich layers of meaning, the poem incorporates three major themes: womanhood, religion, and poetry.⁸ Its very autobiographical ambiguity—disclosing and veiling self—is part of its fascination. A poem as rich as this one affords a challenge to those who would presume to analyze it, for, in so doing, one must necessarily unravel the seamless nature of the work. I will first examine each of the three strands, and then consider nature, the thread which is dominant in much of Raab’s work but missing here.

שִׁירַת אִשָּׁה

בְּרוּךְ שֶׁעָשִׂי אִשָּׁה—

שָׂאֵנִי אֶרְמָה וְאָדָם,

וְצִלַּע רֶכֶּה;

בְּרוּךְ שֶׁעָשִׂיחֵנִי

עֲגוּלִים עֲגוּלִים— 5

כְּנִלְגָלִי מְזֻלֹחַ

וּכְעֲגוּלֵי פְרוּחַ—

שֶׁנִּחַח לִי בֶּשֶׁר חַי

פורח,
 10 וְעִשִּׂיתָנִי כְצִמְחַת הַשָּׂרָה—
 נושא פרי;
 שְׂקָרְעֵי עֲנִיָּה,
 מְחַלְקִים כְּמֹשֵׁי
 עַל פְּנֵי וִירְכֵי;
 15 וְאֲנִי גְדוּלָּה
 וּמְכַשֶּׁשׁ לַהֲיוֹת יְלָדָה,
 בּוֹכִיהַ מִצֶּעֶר,
 וְצוֹחֶקֶת, וְשָׂרָה בְּקוֹל,
 דַּק מִן הַדָּק—
 20 כְּצִרְצֵר זָעִיר
 בְּמִקְהֶלֶת כְּרוֹבִיד,
 הַנִּעְלָה—
 קִטְנָה שֶׁבְּקִטְנוּת—
 אֲנִי מִשְׁחַקֵּה
 25 לְרַגְלֶיךָ
 בּוֹרְאִי!

Woman's Song

Blessed He who made
 me a woman—
 that I'm earth* and Adam,
 and a tender rib;
 Blessed who made me
 5 circles upon circles—
 like wheels of planets
 and like circles of fruit—
 who gave me living flesh
 which blossoms,
 10 and made me like
 plant of the field
 that bears fruit;
 so that Your cloud-tatters,
 slide like silk
 on my face and thighs;
 15 and I am big
 and want to be a girl,
 weeping from sorrow,
 and laughing, and singing
 with a voice, thinner than thin

A Woman's Song

Blessed be He who made
 me a woman,
 That I am earth and man
 And tender rib;
 Blessed be You who made me
 5 All in circles—
 Like heavenly spheres
 And circles of fruits—
 That You gave me
 Blossoming, live flesh,
 10 And You made me Like
 a plant of the field
 Bearing fruit;
 That Your ripped clouds
 Caress like silk
 My face and hips;
 15 And I am grown
 And want to be a girl
 Crying of sorrow
 And I laugh and sing
 With the faintest voice

20 like a wee cricket
 in the chorus of your lofty
 cherubs—
 smallest of the small—I play
 25 at Your feet
 my Creator!⁹

20 Like a small cricket
 In the lofty chorus
 Of your cherubs—
 The smallest of small—
 25 I play at your feet,
 My Creator!¹⁰

* "earth", in Hebrew *adamah*, from
 whence Adam's name

First published in 1972, in the collection of Raab's poems entitled *Tefilah aharonah* [A Final Prayer], "*Shirat ishah*" is a relatively short poem—although of about average length for Raab—in which the poet expresses her personal attitudes toward being a woman.¹¹ It is a poem of joy, of reveling in womanhood. The unequivocally positive mood which pervades the poem does not always strike a welcome note in the minds of contemporary feminist readers, because they often feel that the poem minimizes the power of women.¹²

The title "Woman's Song" does not tell us anything about the connection between the subject of the poem and the narrator.¹³ Where we might expect some first person signifier in the title—perhaps something along the lines of Bialik's "*Shirati*," [My Song]—we find instead a title that is telling in its very sparseness. As defined by the title, this is a poem of more than personal significance. Although the poem itself is boldly first person, Raab is, through the title, telling us that her song can be the song of any woman. Her experience, to the extent that it is herein reflected, is not special, singled-out, unique. Yet, she simultaneously indicates—with a modicum of hubris—that her poem also is the quintessential poem of a woman. In so doing, Raab opens, particularly for her women readers, the issue of their identification with what is expressed in her "Woman's Song" or their rejection of it.¹⁴

Raab's opening sentence, in both its form and its substance, addresses gender issues. She plays with the words *adamah* (earth) and *adam* (man), while engaging the accepted notion of the earth-mother. When Raab's first-person narrator states "*ani adamah*," (I am earth) the reader hears a simple statement of this metaphor. When the narrator adds, "*ve'adam*" (and man), the reader recognizes that this is a multivalent line. On the one hand, Raab is telling the reader that the land is both feminine and masculine. After all, if there were a need to create the masculine form of *adamah*, it would necessarily be *adam*. This takes the reader back to the

second Creation story, in which God formed "man from the dust of the earth" (*ha'adam afar min ha'adamah*) (Gen. 2:7). It is significant in this context that, in other poems, Raab sometimes reverses the trite earth-mother, male-fructifier image to give the female the penetrating role.¹⁵ Yet there is another reversal inherent in this line. The feminine form of *adam* would be *adamah*. Hebrew's lack of nongendered language often leaves us using *adam* to mean person, for want of a less gendered word.¹⁶ Through the use of this juxtaposition, Raab is saying, "I am both mother-earth and father-earth; I am both the male and the female first human."

The imagery from the Creation story continues as Raab lists the third component in her makeup as "*tsela' rakah*" (a soft rib), alluding to the formation of Eve from Adam's rib described in the second chapter of Genesis. This is an oxymoron, for ribs are bony and not soft. Clearly, in these two lines, Raab is composing a midrash on Genesis, introducing a distinction between male and female, perhaps even addressing the question of the appropriateness of fashioning a woman out of a man's bone. From her positive opening we may reasonably deduce that the softness she attributes to the rib is a positive characteristic, appropriate to the somewhat androgynous creature whose Creator she praises.

The intimate, second-person God is praised for having created the narrator in circles—first plain circles, then the circles of the planets or spheres, and finally circles of fruits.¹⁷ Beyond the rolling *g.l.* (*gimel-lamed*) onomatopoeia of the circular words Raab uses, what do *mazalot* (planets) and *peilot* (fruits) signify? In addition to their being largely circular or rounded in shape themselves, fruits and the heavenly spheres are often found in orbits or arranged in circles, like the *'igulei deveilah* (round cakes of pressed figs) mentioned in rabbinic literature.¹⁸ They are thus circles of circles. The fruits are the symbols of female fertility and sexuality; the planets represent Raab's reach beyond Earth to the cosmic. The planets are of the heavens; the fruit, of the earth; and the "blooming, living flesh" that is the woman represents an intermediate plane.¹⁹ It is on this intermediate plane that the poem focuses. At the same time, all of these circles, particularly the cosmic ones, are also cycles and remind us of the cyclical nature of a premenopausal woman's life.²⁰

Female fecundity is further underscored by Raab's use of the words "*ketsemah hasadeh*" from one of Ezekiel's visions. God dictates to Ezekiel the following: "When I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you: 'Live in spite of your blood.' Yea, I said to you: 'Live in spite of your blood.' I let you grow like the plants of the field [*ketsemah hasadeh*]; and you continued to grow up until you attained to woman-

hood, until your breasts became firm and your hair sprouted. You were still naked and bare" (Ezek. 16:6-7).

The appropriateness of the verse—which also appears as part of the midrashic section in the Passover *Haggadah*—to Raab's context can be seen both in the ending of the verse, which she does not quote, and in the way the verse is used in other midrashic contexts (Goldschmidt, 1960, 120).²¹ The "growth of the field" is, for Ezekiel, part of a metaphor comparing the people of Israel to a woman who is unclothed, unkempt, uncivilized. Rabbinic interpretation expanded this negative statement, suggesting that the Children of Israel were "naked" of God's commandments, or *mitsvot*. But for Raab, it is a positive metaphor: the salient characteristic of this woman is that she is "bearing fruit"; the covert characteristic is her rounded and mature sexuality, her firm breasts.

Even in Raab's simple statement that a woman, like the plants of the field, bears fruit, there is a biblical reference which emphasizes her particular vision. The first Creation story in Genesis informs the reader that on the third day God had the earth bring forth "trees of every kind bearing fruit" (Gen. 1:11). While the biblical translator has chosen to use the term "bearing fruit," the Hebrew has "*oseh peri*," better translated as "making fruit." Raab compares her woman to a plant "bearing fruit" (*nos'e prei*). In echoing, but not repeating, the language of Genesis, she underscores the woman's role. While a woman cannot "make" fruit without a man, she "bears" the fruit alone.

From the covert sexual imagery of the growth of the field metaphor, Raab moves to a fairly explicit description of physical pleasure. The sensual experience of being caressed by torn clouds which feel like silk on the narrator's face and thighs is barely a touch, but enough for the reader to imagine the narrator seen large and tall across the landscape. Clouds are common in Raab's poetry and prose, but torn clouds, implying perhaps a struggle, or at least an imperfection, are not.²² The feel of the silk, its rarity, and its connection to the boudoir introduce a new element into the poem.²³

The second half of the poem, opening with a contrastive *vav*, focuses not on the creation of the narrator, but on her feelings.²⁴ She expresses her ambivalence about whether she wants to be grown-up or "a girl".²⁵ While Raab tellingly does not enumerate any of the advantages of being grown-up, she does describe for us the things about childhood that she misses. Essentially, she characterizes childhood as a period in which one is free to express oneself in pain, in joy, or in song. She has not forgotten

the pain. In fact, she mentions it first; but it is followed by the joy of her laughing and singing aloud.

Her ambiguity about her stature is also reflected in the many examples of alternating heavenly and earthly metaphors to be found in the poem. The round metaphors of the planets and the fruit, the contrast between the field and the clouds, and the sounds of the cricket and the cherubs allow the reader to sense the ambivalence that underlies the image of the poem's narrator. One is reminded of the Hasidic tale which suggests that a person always carry in one pocket a note saying, "I am but a little lower than the angels," and in the other a note saying, "I am but dust and ashes."

The comparison Raab draws between the narrator and a cricket is particularly striking. One expects to find crickets fairly close to the ground. The cricket described by the narrating persona in Bialik's "*Shirati*," for example, is in the cold hearth. It sings, as pointed out by Ziva Shamir (1986), in response to the Sabbath songs sung by the narrator's family and by the Sabbath angels (71). Raab, in describing the voice of her first-person narrator as that of a cricket, moves rapidly from earth to heaven, for her cricket situates itself in God's exalted cherubic choir. One experiences again the ambivalent mix of hubris and modesty. While she hears her voice as that of the lowly cricket, it is only so in relation to the heavenly chorus; while she sees herself as the smallest of the small, it is only in relation to the feet of God the Creator.²⁶

The question of relative size or, perhaps, of relative importance, raises a central feminist issue. In her article about Israeli women poets, Lilly Ratok discusses this issue in the context of the conflict between feminine and literary values among women writers. She maintains that the primacy of female values would, perhaps even unconsciously, influence a woman writer to forgo vying for excellence or for a central position in the field of literature (1988, 58-59).

Raab here emphasizes the significance of the insignificant. Her self-portrayal as small, a cricket, a voice in the chorus, raises the hackles of those who maintain that women, like men, must see themselves as persons of considerable magnitude.²⁷ Yet it is a vision of self which, while not exclusive, appears elsewhere in Raab's work, as well. In anticipating her own death, for example, she said: "I believe that the spirit is not lost. I leave a little, something, one point within eternity, some drop in the sea" (Be'er, 1 April 1988, 15).

Clearly, for some, the male model of dominance is not the only one. In this poem, Raab seems to be suggesting that her different voice is also

important. Her integration of another standard, her emphasis on being at one with nature, precludes her viewing a hierarchical male standard as the only one.²⁸ She is more comfortable recognizing the consequence of the quotidian.

In sum, "Woman's Song" presents us with a version of what being a woman means to Raab. It involves a sensual joy in being female, a reveling in the roundness of female physiology and fertility, and a being at one with the cosmos. But from the preceding analysis of the poem, I have deliberately eliminated the other salient themes. "Woman's Song" is not just a woman's poem, it is also a poem in which Raab attempts to come to terms with God and Judaism, as well as a vehicle for expressing some of her feeling about the craft of poetry.

Writing in Hebrew, one is forced to heed the echoes of traditional texts and attitudes which pervade the language. A Hebrew writer is hard-pressed to avoid the encounter with tradition. For Raab, "Woman's Song" represents an attempt to articulate both her reconstruction of parts of traditional Judaism and her relationship with God.

The opening line represents her direct challenge to the Jewish tradition of her childhood. In the observant community of Petah Tikvah where she was raised, Esther Raab's education was interrupted when David Hayyun, the new principal in the local school, decided that young men and women would study together in co-educational classes. This met with the opposition of her own beloved and admired father, who decided that his daughter could not continue her studies in mixed classes.²⁹ She must often have bristled at the denigration of women implicit in having men praise God daily for not having created them women. While she may have known that it was the requirement that males perform more *mitsvot* than females and not rampant misogyny which gave rise to this wording, she dealt directly with the issue in the opening line of this poem by simply omitting the negative from the blessing traditionally said by men. It is a modest protest, one couched in omission, but one which is also quite effective, for it echoes the liturgy while reversing its sense. At the same time, to the female reader whose ear may be better attuned to the female version of the blessing, Raab confirms the divine plan. While men say the words previously mentioned as part of the liturgy, women positively bless God for having made them according to his will.³⁰ By conflating the texts, a woman hears that God made her a woman, which is according to the divine will. She retains the rest of the blessing, having turned its sense on its head,

and continues, for example, to refer to God in the third person, as does the fixed form of traditional blessing.

The previously discussed criticism of the Creation story in Genesis, implicit both in Raab's use of *adam* and *adamah* and in her conversion of the bony rib into a soft one, is a further example of her quiet but firm challenge to accepted texts and approaches. One wonders whether Raab was familiar with the possibility raised in the Talmud that the language used in that version of the Creation story points to the woman's having "more understanding than the man."³¹

After the description of her creation, Raab's first-person narrator returns to the blessing formula with which she had opened. This time she introduces another, more subtle modification. *Berakhot*, or blessings, traditionally shift from the second person to the third. While opening with "*Barukh atah*" (Praised are You), they proceed to acknowledge God as ruler of the universe in an apostrophe and then shift to third person language. The fourth line of the poem starts as essentially a reprise of the first, except for the person of "*asitani*" (You made me), an archaic and formal form of the verb, which has now been changed to the second person.

This seemingly minor grammatical shift establishes the intimate I-Thou relationship between the speaker and God which suffuses the poem.³² Yet it is only in the final line and word of the poem that the speaker, who had been addressing God as You throughout, actually uses one of God's epithets.³³ The name she uses is "*Bor'i*," (my Creator), which brings the reader full circle to the Creation motif of the opening lines. By framing her poem in the context of Creation, Raab repeats the ambivalent message of the poem. On the one hand, this is the poem of Everywoman, or, perhaps, Eve-rywoman; on the other, this is the poem of a unique woman—strong and significant.

There are also additional instances in which Raab's speaker grapples with Jewish tradition. The word she uses for aloud, "*bekol*," takes us directly back to the familiar rabbinic dictum "*kol be'ishah 'eroah*" (a woman's voice constitutes lewdness) (*Berakhot* 24a). Once more, Raab is taking on traditional Judaism in a straightforward, but mild-mannered way. She does not criticize the tradition, but simply states that she sings "aloud," or "in a voice."³⁴

The metaphor that has the narrator playing at God's feet is yet another implied critique of the traditional image of woman's role. One well-known version of the World to Come has men sitting and studying Torah, while women sit at their feet. Raab has twisted that tradition by

accepting what is a subservient role, but she sits not at the feet not of a man but of God, Whom she here characterizes as "*Bor'i*," (my Creator).

In closing her poem with that single word "*Bor'i*," Raab does more than return to the Creation with which the poem opened. Replacing the impersonal "Woman's Song" of the title is the strongly possessive "my Creator" at the closing. On the one hand, Raab is writing of total subservience to God and God's will; on the other, she is defining God in terms of the narrating woman whom God has created. The way in which God, as the subject of the opening word *barukh* and the referent of *Bor'i* at its close, frames the poem is striking. The effect of the frame is further underscored by the repetition of the "*b.r.*" sound at the beginning of the opening and closing words of the poem. Although its title is "Woman's Song," the poem itself is a Romantic expression of an intimate relationship with God expressed in natural terms (Zach, 1964, 87).

Submission to God's will is a sentiment which Raab expressed quite vividly in her *The Notebook of Hell*, a collection of vignettes and brief reflections dating some time from 1970 to 1977. In one passage she wrote: "I have not betrayed the form in which God created me—if it was not as perfect, perhaps, as that of others—it was mine, and I fulfilled the intention which was entrusted to it by my Creator (*Yotsri*)—whether good or bad."

While the theme of the craft of poetry does not vie with Judaism or womanhood for dominant rank in this poem, it is clearly significant. By titling what is obviously a poem or song (the terms being identical in Hebrew) "*Shirat ishah*," Raab leads us to consider poetry per se.

Her use of the weighty, feminine noun *shirah* instead of the less formidable, masculine *shir* tells us that her poem is significant. When we consider the word "*shirah*," we realize that at the same time that Raab is avoiding pomp, she is taking on circumstance. "*Shirah*" immediately evokes *Shirat hayam*, the majestic poem sung by Moses after the Israelites crossed the Reed Sea as they left Egypt (Exod. 15:1-18) and *Shirat Devorah*, the poem with which Deborah, one of Raab's models, celebrated her victory over Sisera (Judges 5).³⁵ An ordinary poem is a *shir*; an extraordinary one may be classified as a *shirah*. Indeed, despite twelve poems with the word *shir* in their titles, eleven poems or groups of poems with the word *shirei*, and five with *shirim*, this is Raab's only use of the word *shirah* in a title of a poem.

Raab's choice of title is also dictated by an implicit comparison with Hayyim Nahman Bialik, generally considered the "master" of modern Hebrew poetry, a judgment with which Raab concurred.³⁶ Bialik's

"*Shirati*," previously mentioned, describes the twin sources of his poetry: his father's poverty and his mother's sadness. It is a poem which is quite explicitly autobiographical, alluding to Bialik's own family situation. In contrast, Raab's poem is not specific and does not embody any truly autobiographical element other than the references to poetry.

Bialik's influence is also perceived in the voice of Raab's narrator, particularly in the thin voice of the small cricket.³⁷ Beyond the onomatopoeic effect of the word *tsratsar* (cricket) lurks another deep intertextual connection with "*Shirati*." Bialik is the master against whom all modern Hebrew poets must be measured, whose influence they must confront.³⁸ On the surface, nothing could be farther from Bialik's poetry than Raab's. Her poems do not follow his traditional rhymes and meters; her stanzas and his are totally dissimilar. His rich weave of biblical and rabbinic allusion is absent from her poetry, and her intimate contact with the Land of Israel does not pervade his. Yet, as though validating Harold Bloom's dictum that no poet "speaks a language free of the one wrought by his predecessors" (1973, 25), Raab must have had "*Shirati*" in her consciousness.

The recognition of the connection with "*Shirati*" gives us an insight into Raab's message. Her poem is a counterpoint to Bialik's. While the most apparent distinction between them may be that Raab discusses her experiences in the Land of Israel while Bialik writes about his in the Diaspora, it is not to this distinction that Raab relates. She sees her poem as a woman's poem and must, perforce, see his as that of a man. For this reason, it is most telling that Bialik divides his poem into two halves, devoted respectively to a description of his father's contribution to his poetry and to his mother's. Raab borrows only the cricket in which Bialik, calling it the "poet of poverty," embodies his father's voice. She does not attempt to capture his mother's tear. How revealing that is of the father's impact on Raab's consciousness and artistic formation and of the absence of the mother.³⁹

The thin voice that Raab describes, for all its crickety chirping, is also Raab's poetic voice.⁴⁰ Like Rahel, Emily Dickinson, and other poets, particularly women, Raab does not see her work as something grand; as something, to borrow a phrase from Horace, *aere perennius*.⁴¹ In its form, "*Shirat ishah*" incorporates Raab's view of poetry, a view which she has, consciously or unconsciously, embedded in the poem by describing one of the three components of woman narrator as *tsela' rakah*. While the primary meaning of *tsela'* is, as previously indicated, rib, it also came to be used in medieval Hebrew poetry as a term for a half-verse of poetry.⁴² In

writing about her rejection of fixed poetic meter, Raab uses the same word *tsela'* in a somewhat idiosyncratic way, to mean a fixed form, a strait-jacket. "Sometimes I used to write in rhymes, and that is a *tsela'*, and did not find favor in my eyes" (Shoham, 1977, 84). In that context, she clearly intended to refer to something hard and not soft. One may therefore conclude that one of the features of the woman narrating this poem is a "soft," perhaps flexible, verse.

"*Shirat ishah*" is a spare poem of twenty-six short lines, only one of which has as many as four words and two of those monosyllables. More than half the lines have but two words; none has more than three accented syllables. The anapest does dominate the poem, but in no fixed pattern. Shoham, in his article entitled "Free Rhythms in Esther Raab's Poetry," asserts that none of her poems uses either tonic/syllabic accents or end-rhyme. This poem is certainly true to form—or more precisely, to non-form. In describing her own use of established forms, Raab states: "I listen only to vague impulses and musical rhythms. Rhyme cuts my wings. At seventeen or eighteen, when I started to write, I immediately wrote in the same free meter, I did not feel that it was daring on my part or that I was influenced by anything" (Shoham, 1977, 84).⁴³

Raab's declared independence from literary tradition may be viewed either as a statement of self-reliance and self-worth, or as a reflection of her lack of aspiration to become a link in that chain of literary tradition. Here, again, there is a feminist issue of competing agenda. Are we to heed Patricia Meyer Spacks who takes Anne Sexton to task for not having "generalized and universalized her experience—linked it to traditions outside of itself—to have made it into good poetry?" (4) Or, are we rather to consider Suzanne Juhasz's view that "Sexton's poetry, like that of many women, is different, because it refuses to generalize or universalize its individual experience; because its sources are other than the literary (or religious) traditions of the patriarchal society in which it exists?" (116) Particularly in Jewish culture, where patriarchy is pervasive, is there room for another voice—one which aspires to join not the male chorus but the divine?

In a letter to Shoham, Raab expanded on her view of poetics—a view which is embodied in this poem. She indicated that she tried to write in rhymes but found it too constraining. Once she felt free, she reported: "And then the short lines came, dashes and single words as a line, something like musical notes. . . . One word like an explosion as an ending (finale)" (1977, 84). It is certainly a modest, rather than a grand view of poetry that she presents here.

While some may feel diminished to a degree by the apparent lack of self-assurance and low self-esteem of the poetic persona Raab projects here, others may well perceive that Horace's voice is a male's and that women may have a different, less hierarchical perspective on their place in the grand scheme of things, valuing different kinds of work more equitably.⁴⁴

Having analyzed the themes which Raab *does* explore in this poem, it is appropriate to turn to the one she does not. The lack of specificity in the descriptions of nature here is too striking to overlook. Specific use of flora and fauna is the hallmark of Raab's poetry. Zach opens his essay on Raab with a long catalog of the plants she named and which he does not recognize (86). Shoham lists the words Raab introduced into Hebrew poetry. Schimmel, in the introduction to his unpublished volume of English translations, discusses in some depth the plants she incorporates in her work and their significance (7-8). But in this poem, the only specific term used is the *lseratsar*, or cricket. While Raab knew the cricket from her own experience, she might just as well have borrowed it directly from Bialik. All other terms are quite vague: *adamah*, earth; *peirot*, fruits; *tsemah*, growth; *sadeh*, field; *peri*, fruit; *ananim*, clouds. It is almost as though in this strongly feminine poem she abandons her loudest note.

In an article entitled "Imagining Women: Notes toward a Feminist Poetic," Mary Carruthers discusses three themes which, in twentieth-century American poetry by women, "are central to the way women imagine their lives: the relationship of mother and daughter, the tradition of romantic love, and the nature of the powerful woman" (1979, 282). Carruthers's thesis is that poetry written in the United States before and after the watershed era of 1968-1970 deals differently with these issues. In looking at the poetry of Esther Raab, I am struck by the extent to which these are *not* her themes. Raab does not dwell on her mother in poetry. She relates to her father in a much more significant way. There is little about romantic love in her poetry—unless one broadens that concept to include an ongoing affair with the Land of Israel; and, although Raab seems to admire her father's heroism, she seems to need to see herself as a woman writ small, and not heroic (Schimmel, 10-11).

This poem presents the reader with a version of what being a woman means to Raab. It is, in Carruthers's terms, one of her attempts at "imagining women." This imagining, counter to Carruthers's view, does not see woman in relation to a man, or even to another woman (283). The primary relationship outlined in this poem is with God, described through nature in terms that are, for Raab, unusually spare. The poem

carries no hint of another human being beyond that embodied in the impersonal reference to Adam and his rib.⁴⁵

In its deep sense of acceptance of the divine, this poem echoes the "Prayer" Raab embedded in *The Notebook of Hell*:

My God, receive my soul which rises to You—You have known it from the time I came forth from my mother, from the time I used to awaken at night and go out to the garden to see Your miracles, to see the eucalyptuses standing in the silence, to see how they move slightly, as though You had blown into them—to see the dewdrops on the lilies—and the moonbeams shattering against them into splinters recoiling from Your spirit which passes over my head, You hovered in space over my head, I felt You with all my being—Remember this for me—Gather me up in Your hand and I will not fear—You to Whom the truth is known—⁴⁶

In addition to the development of a relationship with God, Raab describes in this poem her positive evaluation of womanhood and, in so doing, subtly points at places where traditional Jewish views merit revision. She repeatedly confronts established concepts and, through her use of language, counters her readers' expectations. She also elaborates her view of the significance of poetry. It is both "Woman's Song" and a poem which gives us rich insight into Raab's poetry.

NOTES

1. An extensive treatment of these four women Hebrew poets, who started publishing between 1920 and 1922, is to be found in Miron's article "Founding Mothers, Stepsisters" (1989, 1 and 1990, 2). A section of that article in translation appears in this volume. Miron addresses a number of factors that contributed both to the absence of women in the earlier period and to their sudden emergence. The contrast between the relatively easy *entrée* afforded women novelists and the obstacles women poets faced is also complicated by the view of poetry as a holy calling and the consequent connection between the priest and the poet. In this connection, see Gilbert and Gubar (1979, xxi). Gilbert and Gubar also point to the expectation that English poets be immersed in classical poetry as a factor which reduces opportunities for women. As Miron indicates, this phenomenon is, of course, paralleled in Hebrew literature.

2. Esther Raab provided many insights into her childhood home life to interviewers. A series of articles by Be'er, from which I quote in this essay, interweaves a number of these. For providing me with them and a great deal other material about Esther Raab, I am deeply grateful to her nephew, Ehud Ben-Ezer.

3. "Only when we were older did we speak Hebrew. . . . Certainly, in school [kindergarten], when it was founded, we spoke Hebrew." The context makes it clear that even at an early age Raab knew more Hebrew than the teacher, for she mocked

the teacher's errors (Dor, 1971). Unless otherwise indicated, translations of texts that are not biblical are mine. Biblical translations are from the Jewish Publication Society translation.

4. It is of note that of the four poets Miron considers together (1989,1:41), Raab was the only one whose works were not published in the influential periodical *Hatekufah*.

5. Miron characterizes the four "founding mothers" as no less the products of revolution than such male counterparts as Avraham Shlonsky and Uri Tsvi Greenberg. He further posits that Rahel and Elisheva constitute the more conservative wing among the four women poets; Raab and Bat-Miriam, the more radical (1: 36, 58; 2: 176-177).

6. Raab's first book, *Thistles*, appeared in 1930; her second, *Poems of Esther Raab*, in 1964. Initially, one reason for the silence may have been the death of her beloved husband, Isaac Green, in 1930, shortly before the publication of *Thistles*. She later wrote of his death: "Ten years was the number of this life of friendship and serenity [their marriage], and suddenly he [Isaac] went and I was as though I were not widowed but orphaned. . . . I felt great loneliness, as though I had been uprooted from fertile land [and transplanted in] to an empty desert of sand—and the situation had a serious impact on me, I did not write, I did not publish for three years, I was frozen (1990)." I suspect that the flawed syntax is a reflection of the emotional toll of writing about her husband's death. But there is no reason given for her more protracted silence.

7. In an interview with Moshe Dor in 1971, Raab mentions that she published her first poem in Glickson's *Ha'arets* and that she also published in Asher Barash's *Heidim*. When the "avant-garde" movement of Avraham Shlonsky, Eliezer Steinman and Yizhak Norman started, she was involved in *Ketuvim* and *Turim*. Writers associated with many of the literary groups active at the time frequented her home in Tel Aviv.

8. The text is from Raab (1988, 176).

9. Translation by Harold Schimmel, from his unpublished manuscript "Poems of Esther Raab."

10. Translation by Elchanan Indelman, published in *Lamishpaha*.

11. While this article attempts to draw the classical distinction between poet and poetic persona, it is not always reasonable to do so. In discussing contemporary poetry by women, Alicia Suskin Ostriker pithily challenges the conventional wisdom: "For most of the poems in this book, academic distinctions between the self and what we in the classroom call the 'persona' move to the vanishing point. When a woman poet today says 'I,' she is likely to mean herself, as intensely as her imagination and verbal skills permit, much as Wordsworth or Keats did, or Blake, or Milton, or John Donne of the Holy Sonnets, before Eliot's 'extinction of personality' became the mandatory twentieth-century initiation ritual for young American poets and before the death of the author became a popular critical fiction" (1986, 12).

12. This has been my experience in teaching the poem in both university and adult-education settings.

13. Because there is no indefinite article in Hebrew, either Indelman's translation, "A Woman's Song," or Schimmel's, "Woman's Song," could be correct. My sense is that the latter is more likely. The title of this paper uses "A Woman's Song" because it

is closer to the topic of the paper which deals not with women's poetry in general, but with the poetry of a specific woman.

14. For an instructive discussion of a feminist critic's rejection of a woman's work because she instinctively rejects its views of women's experience, see Juhasz (1977, 119-126).

15. This is the way in which Shoham, (1982, 46) correctly, I believe, understands the relationship between the vine (*gefen*) and the earth (*adamah*) in Raab's poem "Portrait of a Woman."

16. Shoham quotes a sentence in which Raab refers to herself as *adam* (1982, 46).

17. I am indebted to Rebecca Jacobs for having pointed out to me the echo in this line from the prayer "Asher yatsar." This blessing, which praises God for having "formed man [*adam*] in wisdom and having created in him many passages and vessels" (lit., orifices, orifices, hollows, hollows; in Hebrew, *nekavim*, *nekavim*, *halulim*, *halulim*) is particularly apt as a subtext. Like Raab's poem, it uses both the term *adam*, human, and the root *b.r.a.* to create *ex nihilo*, which concludes the poem. Further, *n.k.v.*, the root of the word *nekavim*, used in the prayer to mean orifices, is also the root of *nekeivah* which means female. Standard Hebrew text, here cited with the quoted translation in Hertz (10-11). The literal translation is mine.

18. For example, *Ta'anit* 28a.

19. One might reasonably argue that the same binary opposition with a link between them is embodied in the *adam*, *adamah*, and *tsela'* nexus of lines 2 and 3.

20. According to *Pirkê de Rabbi Eliezer*, the reward of the Israelite women who refused to cooperate in the building of the Golden Calf is that in the world to come they "are destined to be renewed like the New Moons" (1916, p. 352).

21. R. Nahora'i is quoted in the *Mekhilla* (Bo, 12: 41-42) as putting this verse from Ezekiel together with Exod. 1:7 and deducing that the Israelite women in Egypt bore sextuplets (Goldschmidt, 1960, 21-42).

22. The only other reference to torn clouds is in "A Strange City," where Raab writes: "On the roofs/Antenna-forks—/Stirring torn clouds" (1988, 176).

23. While one may argue that silk has many uses in women's fashion, I would maintain that in this context it is a not terribly veiled reference to sexuality. In his article on the women Hebrew poets of the 1920s, Miron says that Raab and Bat-Miriam were the ones who dared introduce female sexuality into Hebrew poetry (2: 162).

24. The letter *vav* added at the beginning of a Hebrew word may have one of a number of meanings. The most common is "and". Note that both Indelman and Schimmel, in their translations, interpret this *vav* as meaning "and." I feel that "but" is preferable.

25. Indelman and Schimmel avoid, in different ways, the ambiguity of the word "*gedolah*" in this context, translating it as "grown" and "big," respectively.

26. Rabbi Matityah, the son of Heresh, said, "Be rather a tail to lions than a head to foxes." (*Ethics of the Fathers*, 4:20; Hertz, 677). Raab here locates her poetic persona in accordance with that counsel; she enjoys the small.

27. Having taught this poem in various contexts over the past two or three years, I am struck by the frequency with which adult readers, many of whom are not particularly *au courant* in feminist theory, point to what they consider to be the problem of the small, even diminishing, stature of this poem's narrator.

28. Interestingly, Ratok states, virtually as a given, that one of the goals of the feminist tradition in poetry is "breaking down the lofty image of poetry [*shvirat hatadmit hashemaymit beshirah*]" (62). In a diary entry written in 1910, Raab describes herself as quite depressed, unable to accomplish what she wants to do. Trying to encourage herself to study, she writes: "Yes, you must work, for you were created for great things!" (Hayardenit [Raab], 1981, 47).

29. The story of her being forced to leave the school because of the coeducational classes instituted by David Hayyun is quoted by Shoham (1982, 52). It is interesting that her father had no problem teaching her the "manly" arts of horseback riding, swimming, and shooting (Raab, 1983, 45). This lends credence to the theory of her nephew, Ehud Ben-Ezer (44), that Raab's father (his grandfather) actually pulled her out of school for financial reasons, because of the heavy load of debt he was carrying during that period. As a proud man, he could not concede failure and so used this plausible excuse instead.

30. "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast not made me a woman" (*Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu Melekh ha'olam shelo 'asani islah*) is the blessing recited by men. "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast made me according to thy [lit., His] will" (*Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu Melekh ha'olam sh'asani kirtsono*) is the blessing recited by women (Hertz, 20).

31. "And the Lord God built the rib, which teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, endowed the woman with more understanding than the man" (*Niddah* 45b, in *Seder Tohorot*; Slotki, 315). The basis for this rabbinic comment is the unusual choice of the word "vayiven" (he built) in Genesis. The rabbis connected that root *b.n.h.* with the similar root *b.y.n.*, which means "understand."

32. Unfortunately, neither Schimmel nor Indelman conveys this shift in person in his translations.

33. It is interesting to note that Zelda, a religious poet, often keeps the religious theme of a poem hidden until the very end, when a reference to God comes as a surprise and infuses the poem with new meaning (Bar Yosef, 1988, 136-137).

34. In "Sea Songs," Raab uses a theme similar to that of "Woman's Song," but there the narrator describes herself as "motionless, voiceless" (1988, 160). In an autobiographical story about being confined one night to the cellar as a punishment (1983, 76), Raab describes her voice in loud and penetrating terms as suffusing the whole space.

"I cried for a long time, I sobbed until my strength was gone and I became silent; and suddenly, without paying any attention to it, my foot struck a barrel and it emitted a soft sound, I touched it again, and I began humming softly, to myself, what a sweet tune rose from within my throat, from within my chest, from my whole being. I took off my sandal and began to bang with it on the barrel, and I sang something unknown, something that I had never heard, that suddenly arose, warm and resonant . . . As I dared to raise my voice more and more . . . so I felt that I was approaching the great pardon, that my voice is heard on high, in the upper reaches of the house. The cellar was filled with the sound of strong and loud singing. . . .

35. It is noteworthy that each of these poems is connected with a biblical heroine. The first is followed by Miriam's dance (Exod. 15:20); the second glorifies a victory for which two women, Deborah and Jael, were responsible.

36. When asked in 1971 what writers she enjoyed, Raab answered: "And of ours [Hebrew]—is it at all possible without Bialik, for there is no Hebrew and no Hebrew literature without him?" (Dor)

37. Her only other use of the word "thin" (*dak*) in connection with sound is her description of a *semamit*, a spider or a lizard, chirping thinly (1988, 204). Miron points to Raab's sensitivity to small changes in smell, temperature, sounds, air currents, and so on in her early poetry (2: 174).

38. The issue of Bialik's dominance in the poetry of the period from 1890 to 1920 has been treated at length by Miron (2: 133-142, pass.).

39. Reading her volume of autobiographical short stories as well as her poetry, one is struck by the extent to which the father is, for Raab, the dominant parent. For example, in writing of her time in Cairo, living with the aunt who was to become her mother-in-law, Raab explains that she related to her aunt better than she did to her mother "because she was my father's sister, and that family connection was in her as well" (1990). It is also telling that Raab is the only one of the four early women poets who uses her father's name as part of her professional identity.

40. It is noteworthy that Raab refers to the German poet Walther Kalle, whom she acknowledges as having had a slight influence on her as a "lyrikan *dak*" (a slight or spare lyricist), using the same word (Shoham, 1977, 84).

41. In her 1926 poem entitled "Niv" [Expression], Rahel writes, "I have known countless words—/Therefore will I remain silent." In "El artsi" [To My Land] (1926), Rahel expresses the same idea somewhat differently, claiming that she has not sung paeans of heroism and battles to her land, but has brought it only a small gift-offering (52, 58). Schimmel's introduction to *Poems of Esther Raab* includes an instructive comparison between Raab and Dickinson (9-11). Carolyn Heilbrun offers a valuable contrast between Dickinson and Walt Whitman, comparing her "I'm nobody" with his "I celebrate myself and sing myself / And what I assume, you shall assume" (1990, 204).

42. I am grateful to Professor Avraham Holtz for having pointed out this double entendre.

43. Later, Raab freely admitted that she considered François Mauriac her "maître" and had been influenced by Rilke, Hofmannstahl and Walther Kalle. She also indicated that in her childhood she was exposed to a great deal of the poetry of J. L. Gordon and Menahem Mendel Dolitzky (Dor).

44. Miron considers the poetry of Raab's first period to be that of female power and posits that it was precisely her unwillingness to appear to be submissive which gave rise to her ensuing long period of silence (2:162, 173-77). In contrast, this poem, written long after the silence had been broken, clearly does not resonate with female dominance.

45. In "Rondo," one of the few poems in which Raab uses the word *ishah*, Raab addresses a group of young girls saying: "Let us go up to the goal, / the goal: to be a woman [*ishah*], mother, beloved." Clearly, for the narrator of that poem, the girl's emerging identity will be defined in terms of others, including males (1988, 40).

46. This prayer echoes the following part of the daily prayer service, referred to as "Elohai neshamah" (Hertz, 19):

O my God, the soul which Thou gavest me is pure; thou didst create it, thou didst form it, thou didst breathe it into me. Thou preservest it within me, and Thou wilt take it from me, but will restore it unto me hereafter. So long as the soul is within me, I will give thanks unto thee, O Lord my God and God of my fathers, Sovereign of all works, Lord of all souls! Blessed art thou, O Lord, who restorest souls unto the dead".

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Yocheved Bat-Miriam: The Poetic Strength of a Matronym¹

∞ ILANA PARDES ∞

"'Bat-Miriam' is surely a pseudonym of a male poet."² So claimed Yirmiyah Frankel in a review of Bat-Miriam's first collection of poems, *Meraḥok*, upon its publication in 1932. Later, when it became evident that the bearer of this name was actually a female poet, he apologetically explained his mistake to Dov Sadan, saying that

דרך השירה, העושה כלשון ובצירופיה כחעוזה מפליאה, הוא
שלחש לי, כי הוא דרך גבר בשירה.

this poetry's way of mastering language and its idioms with
an astonishing audacity is that which whispered to me that
this was the way of a man with poetry.

Sadan's apt rebuke was:

אדרבה התעוזה הזאת שאינה משעבדת עצמה למסורת הלשון גם
אם אינה בת־חורין הימנה, היא המוכחת היפך דעתך.

On the contrary, this audacity which does not enslave itself to
the tradition of language even if it is not free of it proves the
opposite of your claim.

In his final remark on this conversation, Sadan reaffirms his original response as a young critic:

ולפי שבינתיים קניתי לי ידיעה בשירתנו המודרנית, שלא
היתה בי בימי קריאת מחזור "מרחוק", ונאבקתי, על פי
חכונתי והשקפתי, לאמונה באשה וברוחה הנואלת — והכוונה
אינה לסונטית או פוזמק כחול, אלא בפירוש למשוררת — לא
חסרתי ואיני חסר גם עתה ראיות לכך.

And since in the meantime I have acquired some knowledge of our modern poetry, which I did not have when I first read *Meraḥok*, and I struggled, in accordance with my character and perception, to believe in woman and her redeeming soul - and I do not mean savantes or bluestockings but rather a poetess - I did not lack then and I do not lack now proof of that.

Let us first examine Frankel's observations. The matronym "Bat-Miriam," literally the daughter of Miriam, is necessarily a pseudonym, and in this respect Frankel is right. It isn't the sort of name that is passed down within a patrilineal naming system. While patronyms with the word *ben* (son) as prefix are common Hebrew surnames, matronyms are rare and nontransferable. The name Miriam Ben-David, for example, is as banal as Mary Johnson, but a name such as David Bat-Miriam, whose English equivalent would be David Miriamdaughter, is unheard of. But how could Frankel have attributed a matro-pseudonym that is preceded by a feminine proper name to a male poet? It is the forcefulness of Bat-Miriam's work which misled him, he claims, implying that feminine writing is normally submissive and gentle.

Sadan's critique, albeit brief, of conventional assumptions concerning writing and sexual difference is wonderful. Mocking Frankel's perception of "the way of a man with poetry" (a phrase with overtones of sexual dominance, echoing Prov. 30:19—the "way of a man with a maid"), he defines the audacity of Bat-Miriam's work as necessarily feminine, suggesting that no man would have dared to write in such a manner.

But what is poetic strength, and what makes it feminine? Poetic strength is the unmistakable specialty of Harold Bloom. In *A Map of Misreading*, Bloom argues that "poetic strength comes only from a triumphant wrestling with the greatest of the dead and from an even more triumphant solipsism" (1975, 9). He goes on to explain that a strong poet is one who engages in an Oedipal struggle with a ghostly literary father, for his "deepest desire is to be an influence, rather than to be influenced." But even in the strongest of poets, "the anxiety of having been formed by influence still persists" (12-13). As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Bloom's male-oriented psycholiterary model, with its focus on the father-son dyad, is inapplicable to the experience of the female poet. Having to deal with precursors who are exclusively male and therefore different from her, she experiences an anxiety that is more primary than the Bloomian "anxiety of influence." Gilbert and Gubar (1979, 49) call this anxiety "the

anxiety of authorship." The female poet, they suggest, confronts a literary past in which women hardly participate, in which writing is primarily a male prerogative, and thus her anxiety "is a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor' the act of writing will isolate and destroy her" (ibid.). How, then, does a female poet acquire strength?

Through a rereading of Bat-Miriam's matronym, I will argue that unlike the male strong poet who struggles to send his forefather back to hell (or heaven), the strong female poet is one who is capable of raising the dead, or rather of raising a foremother. Virginia Woolf raises Shakespeare's sister, Sylvia Plath resurrects Lady Lazarus out of the ashes; and Bat-Miriam, I would suggest, derives her strength from conjuring up the name of Miriam the prophetess's and reconstructing a matrilineal poetic/prophetic tradition whose beginnings lie in the prophetess's ardent singing of the Song of the Sea (Exod. 15:20). The evocation of the name and song of the biblical Miriam is beautifully depicted in "*Kifsukim hayamim*" [Like Verses, the Days], one of Bat-Miriam's early poems from *Meraḥok*:

"כפסוקים הימים"
ונשמע לי: עולה וחוזר ונשנה
שמי שעור רעד על גלי מי שחור.
שחורים הם פני, כבואה רחוקה
נשחירה מדורות חרדה ביאור.
ונדמה: הנה אשליכה את ידי
ואקשר המחול בעונב וגיל,
החעור, תתלקח ונען לקראתי
שירת-ים-קדומים שגזזו בגיל...

And it harkens to me: my name rises time and again
still shaking upon the waves of black water
black is my face, a distant reflection,
a remnant from way back, tremulous in the Nile.

And it seems: Here I will throw my hands
and launch the dance with pipe and joy
an ancient apocryphal sea song hidden in parchment
will awaken, will flare up and answer me . . .

(1972, 77)

But there is more. When Yocheved Bat-Miriam, née Zhelezniak, chooses to call herself the daughter of Miriam, she not only raises a female precursor but also commemorates her biological mother, who

was indeed called Miriam.³ Bat-Miriam's choice of a name, then, needs to be seen both as a concrete challenge to the patrilineal naming system and as a critique of a culture in which literary tradition, like names, is passed down from father to son.

It would be misleading to suggest that the male poet has no need to discover admirable literary forefathers or that Bloom's model needn't be somewhat modified even with respect to the father-son dyad. (His deidealization of the so-called Western perception of tradition somewhat misreads Freud's depiction of the ambivalence which marks the son's relation to the father.) In modern Hebrew literature in particular, due to the unusual circumstances of its emergence, the male poet surely has had to raise the dead. The difference has to do with the fact that for the modern Hebrew female poet, formulating tradition, or rather formulating a female literary past, is far more urgent and far more difficult: the dead haven't quite been born yet. Bat-Miriam's poem "*Kifsukim hayamin*" makes this point clear, for it depicts the reflection of the biblical Miriam, which floats upon the black waves of the Nile, as a dim and distant one. Similarly, the work of the prophetess is almost invisible: it is "an ancient apocryphal sea song hidden in parchment" (*shirat yam kedumim sheganzu bagevil*). If Bat-Miriam is a strong poet it is precisely because she manages to "kindle" the remnants of her foremother's work, calling into question the male criteria of the canon.

Let me add that, unlike Bloom, I do not perceive the word "strong" as synonymous with the center of the canon. Although Bat-Miriam received some of the most prestigious Israeli literary prizes, she was a rather marginal member of the Hebrew *Moderna* (or Palestinian Generation). Her lack of popularity may be, in part, attributed to the cryptic and dense character of her symbolist poems. Few critics—with the notable exception of Ruth Kartun-Blum and Dan Miron—have attempted to analyze her idiosyncratic diction, elliptic syntax, and esoteric references.

I would suggest, however, that the patriarchal aesthetic presuppositions made explicit in Frankel's review and held by far too many readers of Hebrew poetry are another crucial factor accounting for the lack of interest in her work. Even Avraham Shlonsky, the revolutionary founder and spokesperson of this literary circle, is not free of such stereotypical assumptions. Under the influence of the Russian revolution, he may provocatively call for the abolition of the traditional sex roles, yet his perception of sexual liberation in a literary context is not as radical as it sounds. In a manifesto against the *melitsah* (high-flown rhetorical style) Shlonsky (1973a, 154) proclaims:

המילה נכנעת, מוחלת על כבודה. המילה אינה רוצה לצאת
לחפשי: אהבתי את אדוני! ולכן רצו את אזניה במרצע אל
המזוזה... רואה אני: המליצה השחילה חוט אפור בחורי
אזניהן הרצועות של מילים-שפחות... המילה (בשלטון
המליצה של הלשון) - כאשה (בשלטון הפטריארכלי של
החברה) אינה בת-חורין: ברשות בעלה היא תלויה וסמוכה
על שולחנה... מרדנו: "אהבה חופשית!" "נישואין
אזרחיים"... - מה לי אבא? מי לי אבא? יש לי משלי
...רב.

The word surrenders, forgoing her honor. The word does not want to be free: I love my master! Therefore pierce her ears with an awl to the *mezuzah*. . . I see: the *melitsah* put a grey thread through the pierced ears of the (female) slave words. . . The word (under the rule of the *melitsah*) - like woman (under the patriarchal rule of society) is not free: she is dependent on her husband. . . We rebelled: "free love!" "civil marriage!" What is a father? Who needs a father? I have plenty of my own. . .

Note that in Shlonsky's scenario of literary/sexual liberation, the word/woman is liberated despite her tendency or need to worship her master. Lacking the revolutionary drive or consciousness, the woman/word must be, paradoxically, forced to be free. Consider another passage from a manifesto entitled "*Ra'ananut*" (Freshness) (1973b, 155):

הזוכרים אחם את פינסוב? רצה הלה להוציא פעם מפיה
הקוקטי של האשה את הקול הפשוט, הטבעי, מה עשה? החננב
מאחורי נבה ובכול עץ - הך על ראשה! וכשפרצה זעקה
נרולה מפי ההמומה והכואבת, ידע: הנה הקול הטבעי!
זהו יוחר מרי בחינת נוקבא יש בה בספרות וביחור
בשירה.

Do you remember Pigasov? Once he wanted to make the coquette's mouth emit a simple voice, the natural one. What did he do? He sneaked behind her back and with a block of wood - he struck her head! And when a great cry burst out of the mouth of the shocked sufferer, he knew: this was the natural voice!

That's it! There is too much of the feminine in literature and in poetry in particular. . .

For Shlonsky, as this striking anecdote makes clear, literary revolutions must involve a victory of masculine writing over the inferior, inauthentic feminine use of language. The depiction of the blow to the woman's head is metaphorical, but it may also express the poet's discon-

tent with the fact that poetry is the preferred genre among women writing in Hebrew. In any case, both quotations ignore the possibility of a different mode of rebellion—a feminine one. Bat-Miriam, I would suggest, could not have been a central figure in a generation whose founder's definition of poetic strength is as male-oriented as Bloom's.⁴

I. Reconstructing Miriam

In what follows, I further examine Bat-Miriam's matronym and poetic strength through a close reading of "Miriam," the one poem Bat-Miriam wholly devotes to her foremother. I regard the poem as a later expansion (it was first published in 1939) of the stanzas quoted above from "*Kifsukim hayamim*." Two questions are of special interest in my reading: How does Bat-Miriam use the biblical portrait of Miriam in reconstructing her foremother? What characterizes this literary mother-daughter relationship?

Before exploring these questions, I would like to stress that my focus on the relation of Bat-Miriam to the biblical Miriam needn't imply that the prophetess is the only female precursor to be raised in Bat-Miriam's work. Much like Rahel Blaustein and Saul Tschernihovsky, Bat-Miriam depicts a variety of biblical figures⁵ but has a special relation to the one biblical character whose name she bears. To put it differently, Bat-Miriam's primary identification is with Miriam, but this does not mean that she has no other "substitute mothers," not to mention nontraceable female precursors.⁶ As for the unidentified foremothers, I wholly agree with Sadan's (1977, 145) laudatory comment on the occasion of Bat-Miriam's reception of the Hayyim Greenberg Prize:

ומי ישער כמה גענועי דורות, כיסופי נערוֹת ונשים לארשח
לירית, ננאלו בשירה הזאת. ואין צורך לומר, כי מחן
נאולה זה וכזה היא לה זכיה גדולה, אם לא הגדולה
בזכיותיה, ביחוד אם נחן אל לבנו על דבר הפלא. כי מחוך
שירתה דוברות אמהות ואחיות, והיא, המשוררת, אינה
יוצאת מכלל עצמה, ונחונה כל-כולה לעצמה, — היא לשירתה
ושירתה לה.

Who can conceive how many yearnings of generations, longings of maidens and women for lyrical expression, were redeemed in this poetry. Needless to say, conferring a redemption of this sort is her great achievement, if not the greatest, especially if we bear in mind the miracle, that from her poetry mothers and sisters speak, and yet she, the poetess, does not go beyond herself, she remains all enclosed within herself, she for her poetry; her poetry for her.

מרים

עמדה מול הסוף והנמא
ונשמה כוכבים ומדבר.
עין אפס ענלה ורודמת
הציפה כחולה המזהר

על החול, על אושתי הזהבת,
על חיוך בתי מלכים הנלאט,
על שיח חרשמים עלי אכן
וזמר היכלים המצער.

מנגד, בדרשן הזכר,
כשפיפון כחאנת עולם,
אמצה נשן הנדרכת
דמיון שבטים מעמם.

— אהך, אהך בסער
נופק משחרבב כהך,
אהך במחולך מול להט
ריח חולות ואין-סוף.

— אספר מקנאה ומצרעת,
אספר מלינה על עצמי.
השבעתיך בנזירותך לא נכנעת,
בכדירותך הזהורה נא חיי

עמדה מהלחש מנגדת
כמלכן פעמי הגל.
נחנה על החינוך כנדר,
קצו,

כפרות,

בנורל.

Miriam

- (1) She stood facing the reeds and papyrus
and breathed in stars and desert.
The round sleeping eye of Apis
flooded its glimmered blue
- (5) Upon the sand, on its goldening rustle,
upon the smile of a princess hidden,
upon a dialogue of hieroglyphs on stone
and a marched palace song.
- (9) At a distance, in the fertilizer of memory,
like a horned viper in everlasting desire,
trodden Goshen adopted
a dim tribal imagination.

- (13) —With you, with you in the storm
your body protruding as a timbrel,
with you in your dance facing fervor
smell of dunes and infinity,
- (17) —I shall tell jealous and leprous,
I shall tell complaining of myself.
I adjure you in your monasticism not surrendering,
In your resplendent isolation do live!
- (21) She stood rocked by the spell
as by the white of the wave's beats.
She bent over the baby as a vow,
as decree,

as redemption,

as fate.

(1972, 179-180)

The title of the poem—"Miriam"—serves as an organizing allusion and is immediately accompanied by two markers⁷ in the first line—*gomel* and *suf* (reeds and papyrus). These words invoke the biblical scene in which Miriam stands at a distance, watching over her brother's ark as it lies afloat on the Nile, hidden among reeds (Exod. 2:4). Bat-Miriam's reconstruction of Miriam's first appearance in the Bible is surely different from the canonical one. While in Exod. 2:4 Miriam's name is not mentioned (she is defined as Moses' sister), here Moses is absent, and Miriam becomes the focus of attention. From mere babysitter she is raised to the position of a focalizer, the subject whose perspective the speaker seems to adopt. Through Miriam's eyes, we are taken into a mysterious pagan Egyptian setting which is nonexistent in the biblical account of this scene.

One of the influential participants in this enigmatic setting is Apis, an Egyptian bull deity. Apis was originally a form of the Nile god Hapi and, like other bull deities in Egypt, he was probably at first a fertility god. Later, he became associated with Ptah, the paramount deity of Memphis, as well as with Osiris, the god of the underworld. Interestingly, Apis was renowned for his oracular capacity. His priests drew omens from his behavior. Thus, for example, "when the bull licked the garments of the celebrated Eudoxus of Cnidus, this signified the astronomer's approaching death; a like fate was predicted to Germanicus when it refused to eat at his hand" (Spence, 1915, 286).

Miriam's prophetic work, Bat-Miriam seems to suggest, is not as monotheistic as one would assume from the little that is said about it in the Bible. The prophetess's gazing at the magical "round sleeping eye of

Apis" (line 3) makes her analogous to the pagan priests of Memphis who followed the bull's movements with great care. This is by no means an attempt to ridicule Miriam's capacity. On the contrary, for a symbolist such as Bat-Miriam, magic, or the quest for a dreamy reality that transcends the phenomenal world, is an essential ingredient of poetry. By linking Miriam to such a deity, Bat-Miriam thus attempts to raise a foremother who could serve as a prototype of a female symbolist.

Apis's sleeping eye is precisely the sort of eye a symbolist must follow. Transcending its confines (note the way the enjambment from line 4 to the second stanza accentuates this overflow), Apis's eye floods "its glimmered blue/ Upon the sand. . . upon the smile of a princess. . . upon a dialogue of hieroglyphs . . . and a marched palace song" (lines 4-8). Furthermore, like a proper symbolist eye, it has the ability to blur the demarcation between past and present, living and dead, animate and inanimate, sights and sounds. Under Apis's ocular spell, the sand acquires a "golden rustle," carved hieroglyphs can converse, and the whispered/hidden smile of the Egyptian princess (the only biblical element in this stanza) blends with the objects surrounding it.⁸

But perhaps no bull's eye attracts Miriam's attention. That is, perhaps her gaze never left the Nile and the reeds. Apis's original role as a Nile god and the double meaning of the word *'ayin* (it means both eye and spring), may suggest that Miriam derives her prophetic "symbolist" insights from watching the flooding of Apis's spring, or rather from following the actual flooding of the Nile. If, so far, my reading has suggested that the sleeping is literal and the flooding figurative, now I am proposing that the opposite reading, if less apparent, is also possible.

The latter reading reinforces the notion that Bat-Miriam's reconstruction of this scene by the Nile relies on the midrashic depiction of Miriam's miraculous well. According to *Bamidbar Rabbah* 1.2, Miriam's well accompanied the Children of Israel in their wanderings in the desert, rolling over mountains and valleys and, most important, producing water upon the people's singing: "Rise up, O well!"⁹ Bat-Miriam thus provocatively presents Apis's spring as the pagan model of Miriam's well and, metaphorically, as the source of her work.

The blending of Hebrew and Egyptian traditions becomes the explicit topic of the third stanza. Such cultural intermingling is depicted as a fertility ritual, perhaps an outcome of the flooding of Apis's eye/spring. The feminine element in this ritual is associated with Goshen (a feminine noun in Hebrew)—the fertile region on the eastern delta of the Nile inhabited by the Israelites. The lascivious "horned viper" and the

"fertilizer of memory" (*deshen hazekher*)—note that the word "memory" (*zekher*) and the word "male" (*zakhar*) share the same root in Hebrew—represent the masculine element. Just as the agricultural prosperity of Goshen depends on the flooding of the Nile so, Bat-Miriam seems to suggest, on the cultural level, the development of the Hebrew imagination depends on its capacity to adopt stimulating Egyptian traditions.

II. Oh (M)other!

The turning point, which involves a transition from third person to second person, takes place in the fourth stanza. As if unable to remain a mere observer, the female speaker appears and addresses Miriam, her foremother, as she joins her ardent dance. The repetition of "*itakh, itakh*" (with you, with you) accentuates the excitement which this sudden encounter creates. Although Miriam's name isn't mentioned, the presence of a timbrel seems to disclose the identity of the female addressee; that is, it serves as a marker which leads us to the biblical description of Miriam's singing of the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15: "And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and dances. And Miriam sang unto them. . . ." (lines 20-21).¹⁰ Bat-Miriam evokes this scene by means of a simile which is based on a metonymy—"your body protruding as a timbrel." Miriam's body becomes the timbrel she is holding, the timbrel which in modern Hebrew is named after her.¹¹ The song, the body, and the timbrel become one, just as the speaker and the addressee merge, in this erotic transcendental dance "facing fervor."

Following Exodus, Bat-Miriam thus shapes a feminine ritual in which women *converse* as they sing, dance, and play. In "Miriam," however, the exchange between the speaker and her foremother hovers between external and internal modes of communication; it is a dramatized internal dialogue in which, to return to Sadan's description of such "miraculous" phenomena, "mothers and sisters speak, and yet, she, the poetess, does not go beyond herself." In *A Map of Misreading*, Bloom (19) analyzes a similar dialogue:

But who, what is the poetic father? The voice of the other, of the *daimon*, is always speaking in one; the voice that cannot die because already it has survived death . . . A poet, I argue in consequence, is not so much a man speaking to men as a man rebelling against being spoken to by a dead man (the precursor) outrageously more alive than himself.

In Bat-Miriam's case, however, we find no rage or frustration vis-à-vis a demonic precursor who has the nerve to be alive and kicking in his descendant's work. On the contrary, the encounter with the (m)other, which involves the oscillation of *both* between the living and the dead, is an inspiring sensual exchange. Instead of struggling with an omnipresent intruder, the speaker attempts to contact a distant unknown relative, beyond reach or, as Bat-Miriam would have it, to smell the infinite (line 16).

Let me propose another reading of the fourth stanza. Bearing in mind that the voices in this dialogue are unidentified and that the boundaries between the (m)other and her descendant (like all boundaries in this poem) are somewhat blurred, this fervid address could be perceived as Miriam's. Perhaps she arises from the dead and discovers, with excitement, that her follower's work is the mirror image of her own. Or perhaps she comes back to life to join her daughter's dance precisely because it is a clear continuation of her own. This alternative reading is compatible with "*Kifsukim hayamim*," where the speaker tries to revive her foremother's song by singing and playing the way her precursor would: "Here I will throw my hands/ and launch the dance with pipe and joy/ an ancient apocryphal sea song hidden in parchment/ will flare up and answer me . . ."

At this climactic point of the poem it becomes clear that Miriam's polytheistic tendencies may be traced back to the Bible itself. Bat-Miriam seems to suggest that Miriam's dance/song/music/ritual is as pagan as the "marched palace/shrine song" (*zemer heikhalim hamuts'ad*) that Apis's eye flooded.

It is noteworthy that the pagan resonance of the Song of the Sea has indeed been acknowledged by various biblical scholars. Thus Umberto Cassuto (1951, 78) argues that the Song of the Sea bears a resemblance to ancient pagan myths "appertaining to the revolt of the sea against his Creator in the cosmic beginning, to the rebellion of Rahab, the prince of the sea, and his allies the sea monsters."¹²

By reviving the repressed pagan facets in the Song of the Sea, Bat-Miriam thus tries to retrieve the uncensored ancient "sea song" of her foremother, kindling Miriam's mitigated challenge to the predominant patriarchal-monotheistic discourse of the Bible. While in Exodus we find only traces of paganism—Miriam's singing is, after all, yoked to national and monotheistic interests (God's victory over the Egyptians)—in Bat-Miriam's reconstruction of her foremother's work, the Father's rule is more fully called into question. If the Song of the Sea celebrates the birth

of a nation and the successful deliverance of the Hebrews, the poem "Miriam" leads us back to the fleshpot, to Egypt and its pagan idols. The monotheistic revolution of Miriam's brother is undermined. The limits God set to the sea in Genesis and Exodus collapse.

III. "I Shall Tell Jealous And Leprous"

Moving from the singing in Exodus, Bat-Miriam goes on to capture Miriam's explicit criticism of Moses in Numbers. To get a better understanding of Bat-Miriam's allusion to this rather unknown incident in line 17 (the markers being "jealous" and "leprous"), it is worthwhile to analyze Numbers 12 in detail.

- 12:1 וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמֹשֶׁה עַל-אֲדֹת הָאִשָּׁה הַכֹּשִׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקַח
כִּי-אִשָּׁה כָּשִׁית לָקַח:
2 וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָרֶק אֶךְ-בְּמֹשֶׁה דָּבַר יְהוָה הֲלֹא גַם-בָּנוּ דָּבַר וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה:
3 וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עָנָו מְאֹד מְכַל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל-פְּנֵי הָאָדָמָה:
4 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה פָּתָאם אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל-אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל-מִרְיָם צֵאוּ שְׁלֹשְׁכֶם
אֶל-אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַיֵּצְאוּ שְׁלֹשָׁם:
5 וַיֵּרֶד יְהוָה בְּעַמּוּד עָנָן וַיַּעֲמֵד פַּתַּח הָאֹהֶל וַיִּקְרָא אֶהֱרֹן וּמִרְיָם
וַיֵּצְאוּ שְ�נֵיהֶם:
6 וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמַעוּנָא דְּבָרִי אִם-יְהִי נִכְיָאֲכֶם יְהוָה בְּמִרְאָה אֵלָיו
אַחֲרָיִךְ בְּחִלּוֹם אֶדְבֹּר-בּוֹ:
7 לֹא-כֵן עֲבָדִי מֹשֶׁה בְּכָל-בֵּיתִי נֶאֱמָן הוּא:
8 פֹּה אֶל-פֹּה אֶדְבֹּר-בּוֹ וּמִרְאָה וְלֹא כַחֲרִית וְחִמְזָה יְהוָה יִבִּיט
וּמִדּוּעַ לֹא יִרְאֶתָם לְדַבֵּר בְּעַבְדִּי בְּמֹשֶׁה:
9 וַיַּחֲרֹף יְהוָה בָּם וַיִּלֶּךְ:
10 וְהָעָנָן סָר מֵעַל הָאֹהֶל וְהִנֵּה מִרְיָם מִצְרַעַת כְּשִׁלְג וַיִּפֹּן אֶהֱרֹן
אֶל-מִרְיָם וְהִנֵּה מִצְרַעַת:
11 וַיֹּאמֶר אֶהֱרֹן אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בִּי אֲדֹנָי חֲשֵׁת עָלֵינוּ חֲטָאת אֲשֶׁר
נִוְאלְנוּ וְאֲשֶׁר חֲטָאנוּ:
12 אֶל-נָא חֲתִי כְמוֹת אֲשֶׁר בְּצִאֲחוֹ מִרְחֹם אִמּוֹ וַיֹּאכַל חֲצִי בָשָׂרוֹ:
13 וַיִּצְעַק מֹשֶׁה אֶל-יְהוָה לֵאמֹר אֵל נָא רַפָּא נָא לָהּ:
14 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאַבְיָה יָרֶק יָרֶק בְּפָנֶיהָ הֲלֹא חָפַלְתָּ שְׁבַעַת
יָמִים חֲסִנָּה שְׁבַעַת יָמִים מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה וְאַחֲרָיִךְ חֲסִנָּה:
15 וְחֲסִנָּה מִרְיָם מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה שְׁבַעַת יָמִים וְהָעַם לֹא נָסַע
עַד-הָאָסֶף מִרְיָם:

And Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married: for he had married an Ethiopian woman. And they said, Hath the Lord indeed spoken only by Moses? hath he not spoken also by us? And the Lord heard it. (Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth.) And the Lord spake suddenly unto Moses, and unto Aaron, and unto Miriam, Come out ye three unto the tabernacle of the congre-

gation. And they three came out. And the Lord came down in the pillar of the cloud, and stood in the door of the tabernacle, and called Aaron and Miriam: and they both came forth. And He said, Hear now my words: If there be a prophet among you, I the Lord will make myself known unto him in a vision, and will speak unto him in a dream. My servant Moses is not so, who is faithful in all mine house. With him will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of the Lord shall he behold: wherefore then were ye not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? And the anger of the Lord was kindled against them; and he departed. And the cloud departed from off the tabernacle; and, behold, Miriam became leprous, white as snow: and Aaron looked upon Miriam, and, behold, she was leprous. And Aaron said unto Moses, Alas, my lord, I beseech thee, lay not the sin upon us, wherein we have done foolishly, and wherein we have sinned. Let her not be as one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed when he cometh out of his mother's womb. And Moses cried unto the Lord, saying, I heal her now, O God, I beseech thee. And the Lord said unto Moses, If her father had but spit in her face, should she not be ashamed seven days? let her be shut out from the camp seven days, and after that let her be received in again. And Miriam was shut out from the camp seven days: and the people journeyed not till Miriam was brought in again.

The jealousy which this episode deals with is evident in the reservations Miriam and Aaron express concerning the special status of Moses' discourse. "Hath the Lord indeed spoken only by Moses?" they protest, calling into question Moses' privileged relationship with the Father. In this drama of sibling rivalry,¹³ God reaffirms His favoritism and punishes Miriam for seeking an equal footing with her brother. Exclusion from the canon is not necessarily a female issue, and yet the fact that Miriam alone is struck with leprosy while Aaron is spared makes clear that the Law has even less sympathy for jealous women.

God's punishment of Miriam is strikingly harsh, so much so that Aaron pleads on her behalf: "Let her not be as one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed when he cometh out of his mother's womb" (Num. 12:12). If Miriam plays a maternal role both in watching over Moses in Exodus 2 and later—on a national level—in leading the women in Exodus 15, the leprosy, as Aaron's simile makes clear, reverses her position: the mother figure of the nation becomes as a child, even a dead child or an aborted fetus, whose flesh is eaten away.

In response to Moses' intercession, God justifies His punishment, reiterating the belittling of Miriam, for now she is compared to a shameful

daughter: "And the Lord said unto Moses, If her father had but spit in her face, should she not be ashamed seven days? let her be shut out from the camp seven days" (Num. 12:14). The analogy God draws is quite astounding. Miriam's demand for greater expression seems to be synonymous with lewdness, and leprosy turns out to be the punitive spitting of the Father.

Although Miriam is brought back to the camp after being "shut out" for seven days, we hear nothing from her after this harsh incident. She dies shortly after without saying a word: "And the children of Israel . . . came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month . . . and Miriam died there, and was buried there" (Num. 20:1).

Miriam's unsuccessful struggle with the Father is a fine reminder of the different lots of male poets and female poets. Miriam's challenge, unlike that of her brother, involves a critique of patriarchy—the very basis of the Father's rule—and as such it is far more difficult and far more dangerous. Moreover, if we expand on Bloom's family romance and take into consideration the respective struggles of the female poet and male poet with their siblings—that is, with their contemporaries (and in Numbers the struggle with the Father is clearly interconnected with sibling rivalry)—here too Miriam's disadvantages are evident. Aaron's rivalry with Moses is not doomed at the outset. As a man, he has the theoretical chance of being the Father's primary representative. By contrast, "penis envy," Freud's controversial term for the sister's jealousy vis-à-vis her brother (which Luce Irigaray [1985, 56] aptly redefines as "representative of woman's desire to enter into symbolic exchange as a subject"¹⁴) is, by definition, incurable in patriarchal society. For a woman in Moses' day with the gift of prophecy would have had to be silenced and then buried in the wilderness for daring to demand a central cultural position.¹⁵

In Bat-Miriam's poem, this complex biblical family drama is radically modified as a hitherto unknown mother-daughter relationship comes to the foreground. Bat-Miriam undoes the Father's punishment by restoring Miriam to her maternal role and "fleshing out" the prophetess's admiring descendant. If it is Miriam who responds to her daughter's address in the fifth stanza, she adjures her follower to turn jealousy and leprosy into a source of power and creativity, which is perhaps the ultimate undoing of the spit of the Father.

(17) – I shall tell jealous and leprous,

(18) I shall tell complaining of myself.

(19) I adjure you in your monasticism not surrendering,

(20) In your resplendent isolation do live!

From her experience, Miriam knows only too well that the marginality of feminine discourse requires a capacity to endure solitude. Bat-Miriam makes the uniqueness of such solitude conspicuous through the distortion of the cliché "splendid isolation" (*bedidut zoheret*). A "resplendent isolation" (*bedidut zehurah*) is nothing like the pretentious Romantic solitude so commonly attributed to poets. Rather, it is a disturbing non-canonical isolation which may serve as a source of inspiration only for those who can avoid surrendering.¹⁶

Miriam's final words to her daughter (line 20) echo Ezekiel's famous address to Zion (16:5-6):

לא-חָסָה עָלֶיךָ עֵין לַעֲשׂוֹת לְךָ אֶחָת מֵאֵלֶּה
לְחַמְלָה עָלֶיךָ וְחִשְׁלָכִי אֶל-פְּנֵי הַשָּׂדֶה בְּנֹעַל נַפְשֶׁךָ
בְּיוֹם הַלֵּדְתְּ אֶתְּךָ: וְאָעֵבֶר עָלֶיךָ וְאָרַאךָ מִחֲבוּסֶסֶת
בְּרִמְיָךְ וְאָמַר לְךָ בְּרִמְיָךְ חַיִּי וְאָמַר לְךָ בְּרִמְיָךְ חַיִּי:

No eye pitied thee, to do any of these unto thee, to have compassion upon thee; but thou wast cast out in the open field, to the lothing of thy person, in the day that thou wast born. And when I passed by thee, and saw thee polluted in thine own blood, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live; yea, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live.

The prophetess seems to encourage her follower to struggle like Zion, to live in spite of her lonely birth, to attain womanhood in spite of the hardships. In contrast to Ezekiel, however, where the daughter's maturation takes place, rather problematically, "under the Father's wing," here it is the mother who assists the daughter.

The foremother Bat-Miriam raises is surely an empowering precursor; one who can offer her daughter the kind of backing she herself did not have when struggling with literary male authorities. But here, as before, I should suggest another reading. It may be the daughter who is giving the advice in the fifth stanza, adjuring the outcast Miriam to return to life and struggle so as to empower herself and her leprous/marginal descendant. In any case, the union of the two enables them to join forces against the canon's exclusion of feminine discourse.

Note that similar adjuring between women who converse while they sing appears time and again in the dialogues of the beloved and the daughters of Jerusalem in the Song of Songs. To give but one example: "I charge you [הַשְׁבַּעְתִּי], O daughters of Jerusalem, If ye find my beloved,

That ye tell him, I am sick of love" (5:8). Yet while the beloved is love-sick, Miriam's disease is rather "monastic" and unpleasant.

What makes leprosy attractive for Bat-Miriam is not only its capacity to characterize the noncanonical status of the matrilineal tradition she attempts to reconstruct, but also leprosy's metaphorical use in the writings of other members of her generation. Shlonsky, in particular, often uses leprosy as a metaphor for creativity. In fact, one could argue that the fifth stanza alludes to Shlonsky's poem "*Tsara'at*" [Leprosy]. In "*Tsara'at*," humanity, struck with leprosy, tries to struggle with this disease in various ways; but, insofar as leprosy is the very core of existence, it remains incurable. The poem ends with the "black amen" of the crow crying: "In your evil-leprosy do live!" (*betsara'atkhem hayu*)¹⁷ to the suffering masses. Rebelling against the false redemption that religion offers humankind, Shlonsky calls for the uncovering of the morbid Truth: there is no redemption; there is no peace-bearing dove. Accordingly the black crow, with his jarring cry, is the appropriate messenger of Truth. The crow's only advice is to turn leprosy and evil into a source of life. But perhaps a passage from one of Shlonsky's manifestos (written in 1923) would best clarify the implications of this metaphor for him (1973b, 157).

לאליפזים אסור לדבר. אסור כהחלט! אבל איוב לא שחק.
איוב לא יכול היה לשחוק. כי לאיוב "גדול הכאב מאד."
זהו והמשורר איוב הוא... כי לא את זולתו ישיר המשורר
אלא את עצמו, ננעי עצמו. ומי שלא הוכה בשחין בשרו—
אינו אמן, כאשר אינו האדם, כאשר אינו הכול אב.

Eliphaz must not speak. Definitely not! But Job was not silent. Job was incapable of remaining silent. Because for Job "pain was immense." That's it! The poet is Job. . . . Because the poet does not sing the suffering of the other, but rather his own afflictions/diseases. And he who is not struck by boils—is not an artist, insofar as he is not *mankind*, insofar as he is not *the sufferer*.

For Shlonsky, the poet, like Job, is the nonconformist who can neither save his skin nor refrain from challenging authority. Boils (which are analogous to leprosy) assure that his writing is about authentic pain and suffering, a cry of the daring outsider. One could argue that Bat-Miriam attempts to develop a feminine model that would be analogous to Job. Miriam, no doubt, is a fine female leper. But there is a significant difference between these two biblical figures. Job is allowed to complain at length—a whole book is named after him—while Miriam's discourse is a

marginal, mitigated discourse within the Book of Moses. Miriam, like Job, could not remain silent but, unlike him, she was eventually silenced. Both Shlonsky and Bat-Miriam intensify subversive trends in the Bible¹⁸; yet, while Shlonsky can rely on a well-established rebel, Bat-Miriam has to reconstruct a model from bits and pieces, and this is precisely what makes her project far more urgent and far more difficult.

IV. The Ark Revisited

In the last stanza which opens, like the first one, with the word *'amdah* (she stood), we return to the opening scene by the Nile; only now a baby, albeit unnamed, is mentioned. It seems as if all that has happened between the first and last stanzas may have been the strange prophetic dream of a spellbound Miriam, facing the fervor of reeds and waves. In any case, mothering this nameless baby is what the prophetess now seems to regard as her "vow," "decree," "redemption," and "fate." Big words. Bat-Miriam allows them to occupy the space of four lines, breaking the strict quadrate strophic structure of the previous stanzas and imitating, visually, the action of bending over a baby. This iconographic message participates in the concretization of the abstract nouns, blurring the distinction between the baby and words, turning motherhood into a metaphor for feminine creativity. Yet, in accordance with the fluidity mentioned above concerning the roles of mother and daughter, this metaphor is not unidirectional. Miriam guards the baby/work and vice versa. Thus it is not surprising that the prophetess does not rock the baby, as one would expect, but rather she herself is magically "rocked" (*menudnedel*).

V. The National Profession

The final big prophetic words at the end of the poem, especially "redemption," suggest that "Miriam" has more in common with the Song of the Sea than one would initially suspect. In the last stanza it becomes evident that Miriam's national role is essential to the understanding of Bat-Miriam's choice of precursor.¹⁹ The motherly figure in line 20 seems to be concerned not only with the deliverance of the baby/work but also with the redemption of the nation as a whole. What augments this notion is Bat-Miriam's elusive allusion to the midrashic interpretation of Exod. 2:4.

Why did Miriam stand afar off? Rabbi Amram in the name of Rab said: Because Miriam prophesied, 'My mother is destined to give birth to a son who will save Israel'. . . . This is why it

says: And his sister stood afar off, to know what would be the outcome of her prophecy (*Shemot Rabbah* I: 22).

In contrast to *Shemot Rabbah*, however, the national redemption Bat-Miriam's Miriam envisions as she stands by the Nile is only vaguely related to Moses. Moses' name remains conspicuously absent throughout the poem. The birth of the nation in "Miriam" is primarily a female endeavor.

Assuming the role of the national prophet is a temptation no modern Hebrew poet seems able to resist. Bialik, Uri Tsvi Greenberg, and even Shlonsky, in his playful treatment of the homonyms "seer" and "shepherd" (רועה – רואה), have made use of the prophetic calling. Bat-Miriam, apparently, is not innocent of such desires either. To some extent, through Miriam, she takes part in the formation of a Zionist pioneer literature, following the exigencies of the period.²⁰ Her nationalism, however, is idiosyncratic. After all, Bat-Miriam's exemplary national prophetess has pagan tendencies and, above all, the projected birth of the nation in "Miriam" brings about no clear individuation. Egypt and Zion/Goshen blend in the background, showing no respect for national borders. Natan Alterman aptly described a similar phenomenon in an article he wrote in honor of the publication of Bat-Miriam's collected poems in 1963.

"רכב אש בין הררי תבל," כך עולה ארץ ישראל מן הספר הזה, אך מהות זו, על אף עוצמת הביטוי האין שני שהיא זכתה לו כאן, ועל אף להט הקנאות הקם מחוכה, אינה נהפכת בכך לכח סגור ומובדל. יחד איתו, ובמקביל לו, וברמת מתח ולהט לא פחותות אולי משלו, נמצאות בספר הזה גם סופות הנהי והזמר והכבלים והדגלים שבשירי רוסיה. אכן כפילות זו... היא מסימני ההיכר הבולטים ביותר של משוררי הדור... אך כאן אחת חש את טעמיה של הכפילות הזאת, לא על דרך הצרימה והדיסונאנס והדגשת הקרעים, כדרך שזימרוה אחרים. כאן אחת חש... את הטרניות האחרת, אולי העמוקה יותר... שבהארמוניה הנורלית, שבה הן מתמוזגות יחד בנפש האחת.

"A chariot of fire among the hills of the world," this is how the Land of Israel rises from this book, but this essence, despite the unique form of its expression, and despite its fervent zeal, does not turn into a closed and isolated power. With it, and parallel to it... the storms of sorrow and singing and fetters and flags of Russia's poems/songs rise. In fact, such duality... is one of the most conspicuous characteristics of the poets of this generation'. . . But here you feel this duality not through jarring dissonance and an emphasis on gaps, as others sang it.

Here you sense. . . a different kind of tragedy, maybe the deeper one. . . in that fateful harmony, in which the two blend in one soul. . .

Just as Bat-Miriam's yearnings for the Land of Israel and for Russia are not mutually exclusive, so Egypt and Zion do not represent oppositional entities. If in reading the first stanzas of the poem such national blending seems to contradict the possibility of "Zionism," at the poem's end one realizes that a different kind of nationalism is at stake, a nationalism that fits no conventional categories.

What makes Bat-Miriam's nationalism even more exceptional is its refutation of the boundaries between the private and the public.²¹ This is evident not only in the last stanza where the word "redemption" relates to both spheres. In retrospect, the allusion to Ezekiel in line 20 may be defined as the initial point where the birth of the daughter/mother/work is inseparable from the (re)birth of Zion. The fact that Zion is portrayed in the Bible both as a daughter and as a mother makes "her" wholly compatible with the fluid mother-daughter bond in this poem. A few stanzas from Bat-Miriam's poem "Erets Yisra'el" [The Land of Israel] may clarify the intimacy with which Bat-Miriam relates to the Land of Israel in her work and to the interchangeability of the roles of mother and daughter in this respect.

מבוכה, חזון ופחד
הורד מאכזב, מרלדל.
אתה כמותך רק זורחת
תוחלת יאוש לא ננאל...
מעגל חוך מעגל מסגרת
עונה מחעקפה חוך עונה,
אתה על פניך נקשרת
וחנה כלות-נפשי כחונה—
וקוראה בחר ללא דרך.
וקוראה בשכול נאימה,
אספיני, סגריני נא בחפאתך
כנפך דלה עירמה...
עד אמצאך ואף בוכה ונוהרת
בחיקי כנמול באורות,
הפשוטה, הדלה ומצערת
עד לבכות על עניך ולבכות—

Bewilderment, prophecy and fear
and a disappointed, impoverished glory.
With you like you only shining
the hope of my despair not redeemed . . .

A circle within a circle enclosed
an orbit spinning within an orbit,
with you I am tied upon your face
encompassing my yearning as a compass—

And calling with aimless echo.
And calling with bereavement and dread,
take me in, do enclose me in the splendor of
your wing, poor and naked— . . .

Till I find you and you are crying and glowing
in my bosom as a weaned child in lights,
the simple, poor and paltry one
to weep for your impoverishment to weep— . . .

(1972, 47-51)

The similarities are striking: here, as in the poem "Miriam," the speaker fervently wishes to join her female addressee (note the repetition of the word *itakh*—with you), driven by an unattainable desire to know her. Here, too, as a circle within a circle, mother and daughter are interchangeable: the daughter who seeks the protection of Zion's motherly wing can equally offer her own bosom as refuge to her mother. Here, too, the mother and daughter are on the margins, impoverished and isolated. Clearly, the presence of the Land of Israel in the poem "Miriam" is rather latent. National references in "Miriam" are primarily used to characterize the mother-daughter relationship and not vice versa, as is the case in the poem "*Erets Yisra'el*." And yet the Hebrew matrilineal poetic/prophetic tradition which Bat-Miriam shapes in this poem seems to depend on such a landscape. Zion nurtures this literary female bonding and, in turn, the foremother and her descendant take part in the formation of Zion.

VI. A Global Consideration

Now that we can view the allusive patterning of the poem as a whole, it becomes clear that Bat-Miriam is a thorough necromancer. She evokes all the Pentateuchal episodes in which Miriam is mentioned in chronological order (except for Num. 20:1, where Miriam's death is recounted laconically). She begins with an allusion to Miriam's standing by the Nile (Exod. 2:4), goes on to invoke the prophetess's singing of the Song of the Sea (Exod. 15:20), and then she reinterprets Miriam's leprosy and jealousy (Num. 12). The linear, chronological order is broken only in the

final stanza of "Miriam," where we are led back to the initial scene by the Nile. This circular ending may be considered the ultimate subverting of biblical norms, one final pagan mythical touch that calls into question the exclusivity of monotheistic values.²² By using and misusing the far too few verses allotted to Miriam in the Bible, Bat-Miriam thus manages to conjure up a strong foremother, an exemplary female symbolist, magician, rebel, outcast; a model national prophetess with dual nationality; and, above all, a precursor who can, in turn, empower her descendant.

VII. The Name of the Mother-Daughter Literary Bond

Let me conclude by returning to the question of psycholiterary models with which I began. I propose that Elizabeth Abel's use of Nancy Chodorow's psychoanalytic concepts is far more applicable to the literary mother-daughter relationship depicted in Bat-Miriam's work than Bloom's model. In "(E)merging Identities" (1981, 433), Abel astutely shows that the willingness of the female poet "to absorb (female) literary influence instead of defending the poetic self from it" is consistent with the flexible ego boundaries and relational self-definition presented in Chodorow's analysis of the mother-daughter relationship. Just as the girl, in Chodorow's adaptation of object-relations theory, never really achieves total separation from the mother nor gives up her earliest relational mode of primary identification, so the female poet tends to experience a sense of oneness and continuity with her foremother. Let me add that such conflation or exchangeability of roles both in the literary and the familial realms has to do with the fact that neither the mother nor the daughter represents cultural authority in patriarchal society.

The name of Yocheved Bat-Miriam miraculously captures the very essence of this fluid literary mother-daughter relationship. If one bears in mind that Yocheved is the name of the mother of Miriam in the Bible, then Yocheved Bat-Miriam is the mother who is the daughter of the daughter. Challenging the authoritarian structure of the patronym whose function is, as Freud (1939, 150-151) and Lacan (1977, 198-199) suggest, to prove and mark the father's paternity, the matronym floats between the mother and the daughter upon the black waves of the Nile (see "*Kifsukim hayamim*"), taking part in the (e)merging of both. But let us avoid idealizing this mother-daughter literary bond. If the Name of the Father, as Lacan would have it, is the paternal metaphor which marks the child's entry into the realm of the father, into the register of the symbolic, of culture, then the name of the mother, in Bat-Miriam's terms, is a "shaky" name on the margins of culture (the Nile is no place for weaned

monotheists). It is a name which, like the dark reflection of the mother, rises and falls time and again.

NOTES

1. I am greatly indebted to Elizabeth Abel, Robert Alter, Zali Gurevich, Hanan Hever, and Chana Kronfeld for their inspiring suggestions and criticisms.
2. This quotation, as well as the following exchange between Frankel and Sadan appears in Dov Sadan's *Orhot ushevilim* (1977, 50). Translations of Hebrew texts throughout the article are mine.
3. I am indebted to Dan Miron for providing me with biographical information on Yocheved Bat-Miriam. The lack of accounts concerning Bat-Miriam's life is astounding. Dan Miron's beautiful article, "*Hitvad'ut limshoret*," is a notable exception.
4. The inescapable question which is beyond the scope of this article is: Why wasn't the lot of Leah Goldberg similar to that of Bat-Miriam? That is, how could Goldberg—also a female member of this literary circle—have attained such renown? This is a complex issue involving many socioliterary factors (e.g., Goldberg's prominent status in the academic critical community). One aspect that is relevant to our discussion is that Leah Goldberg's poetry, unlike the work of Bat Miriam, has quite easily lent itself to stereotypical readings of "feminist poetry." That such readings disregard the often subversive subtext of Goldberg's poems is another issue that awaits further examination.
5. To mention but two examples from this series (*Bein hol veshemesh*) Bat-Miriam authored a poem on Eve and another on Hagar.
6. I am trying to avoid the criticism put forth by Jonathan Culler vis-à-vis Bloom's application of Freudian concepts to literary genealogies. "Bloom's theory," Culler writes, "looks like an account of intertextuality and presupposition, but when intertextuality is narrowed to this point, where it is a relationship between a given poem and a single great precursor poem, one begins to have doubts" (1981, 109-110). Although I tend to agree with Culler's presentation of intertextuality "as an open series of acts, both identifiable and lost" (ibid.), I find his reading of Bloom too literal. Bloom does not refute the existence of nontraceable precursors; rather, his psychoanalytic approach, which involves "practical criticism," is meant to account only for the primary identifiable precursors in literary works. Nor does Bloom so rigidly adhere to the notion that the ephebe has but one poetic father. In *The Anxiety of Influence*, he does not hesitate to mention both Nietzsche and Freud as "the prime influences" upon his theory of influence.
7. I am using Ziva Ben-Porat's term.
8. The profusion of odd participles contributes to the characterization of this lack of boundaries. Participles such as *rodmel* (sleeping) and *muts'ad* (marched) create a hesitation between a present continuous form of the verb and nominal adjectives, the result being a blurring of boundaries between stasis and action. For more on the blurring of distinctions in the poetry of Bat-Miriam, see Kartun-Blum's comprehensive analysis (1977, 33-70).

9. Although a well and the incantation "Rise up, O well" are mentioned in Num. 21:17, it is only in the Midrash that this well is attributed to Miriam. The rabbis base their observations upon the resemblance between this incantation and Miriam's singing of the Song of the Sea.
10. All biblical citations are from the King James Version.
11. The word "timbrel" in modern Hebrew, *tof Miriam*, literally means "the drum of Miriam."
12. It is noteworthy that the very fact that the Song of the Sea incorporates narrative elements (it renders the whole story of God's parting of the sea and the subsequent destruction of the Egyptians) is indicative of its polytheistic origin. Biblical poetry, as Shemaryahu Talmon (1978) points out, tends to avoid narrative. This avoidance, he claims, needs to be seen as a rejection of pagan mythology, which in Mesopotamia was primarily expressed in the form of epic poetry. For an insightful analysis of the question of narrative in biblical poetry, see Alter (1985, 27-61). For a feminist consideration of this issue, see Bal's *Murder and Difference* (1988).
13. For more on sibling rivalry in this context, see Zeligs (1986, 225-238).
14. According to Freud, penis envy can be only partially resolved when the wish for a penis is replaced by one for a baby and a baby boy in particular. For a critique of Freud's observations in this respect, see Irigaray (1985, 83).
15. I am alluding to Virginia Woolf's brilliant account of "what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister" (1929, 48-51).
16. In his otherwise illuminating discussion of Bat-Miriam's work in *Imahot meyasdot, ahayot horgot*, Dan Miron misrepresents Bat-Miriam's relation to resistance. He depicts her early poems as daring and powerful (though somewhat immature) and goes on to suggest that she gradually yields to the conventions of "female poetry" in writing "impoverished submissive poetry," after the model of Rahel Blaustein's work. (Although Miron seems to have a different notion of the character of Bat-Miriam's later poems, he doesn't devote much time to them). Let me suggest, contra Miron, that throughout Bat-Miriam's work there is an immense tension between a desire for power and a realization of the disturbingly impoverished condition of woman. This tension is poignantly represented in the fifth stanza of "Miriam," where the speaker's cry "not to surrender" is accompanied by an acknowledgement of the isolation and poverty that are part and parcel of the life of a female poet.
17. Note the neologism which combines the words "leprosy" and "evil" (*צררעת*). This poem clearly reflects the existential character of Shlonsky's revolutionary stance. For more on this topic, see Kurzweil (1966, 170-180).
18. Alterman's heavy reliance on Ecclesiastes throughout his depiction of the wandering stranger in *Simhat 'aniyim* may be seen as an analogous phenomenon.
19. For more on the biblical Miriam's role as a female redeemer, see Tribble (1989).
20. For an extensive analysis of the national commitment of Third Aliyah writers, see Shaked (1983, 237-269).
21. For more on the blurring of the private and public in Bat-Miriam's work, see Alterman's *Kamah devarim* (1963), and Dan Miron's *Shiratah shel Yocheved Bat-Miriam* (1963).
22. See Alter's discussion of the linear, chronological order in the Bible (1981, 23-46).

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He promised to fulfill all his rabbinical duties and to help his father lead the congregation. The elders wished him luck.

A few weeks went by. The rabbi remained secluded during the day, delegating the handling of all ritual questions and law cases to his son. He even stopped going to the House of Study to pray. As a rule, he ate one meal a day, gruel, bread, meat. Now he left his food almost untouched. On the Sabbath he sang no hymns. He no longer prepared the samovar at night. The household would hear the rabbi striding about in the dark, sighing and talking to himself. His face grew yellow and his beard shriveled.

All at once Reb Kasriel Dan announced that he was giving up his position as rabbi. He requested the community to appoint Reb Pessachia in his place. He stated that he had sinned and must go into exile to do penance.

The weeping of his wife was of no avail. Reb Kasriel Dan took off his satin robe and round rabbinical fur hat. He put on a shaggy long coat and peaked cap of cloth. He said farewell to his wife, to Teltsa Mindel, to Reb Pessachia, to the townfolk. A wagoner gave him a lift to Lublin.

As the rabbi sat in the wagon, a young man noted for his insolence dared to ask him what sin he had committed. And the rabbi answered: "The Commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' includes all sins."

Translated by J. M. Lask and Elizabeth Shub

I. B. Singer

Zeitl and Rickel

I often hear people say, "This cannot happen, that cannot be, nobody has ever heard of such a thing, impossible." Nonsense! If something is destined to happen, it does. My grandmother used to say: "If the devil wants to, he can make two walls come together. If it is written that a rabbi will fall off a roof, he will become a chimney sweep." The Gentiles have a proverb: "He who must hang will not drown."

Take this thing that happened in our own town. If anybody told me about it, I'd say he was a liar. But I knew them both, may they intercede for us in heaven. They've surely served their punishment by now. The older one was called Zeitl; the younger one, Rickel.

Zeitl's father, Reb Yisroel Bendiner, was already an old man of eighty when I knew him. He had buried three wives, and Zeitl was the daughter of the third. I don't know whether he had any children with the others. He was in his late fifties when he came to live in our town. He married a young girl, who died, may God preserve us, in childbirth. Zeitl was taken out of her with pincers. Reb Yisroel's father-in-law had left his daughter a large brick building in the marketplace, with thirteen stores, and Reb Yisroel inherited it.

Strange stories were told in town about Reb Yisroel. There had once lived in Poland a false Messiah, Jacob Frank; he had converted many Jews. After he died, a sect remained. He had a daughter somewhere, and barrels full of gold were sent to her. These people pretended to live like other Jews, but at night they would gather in secret and read forbidden parchments.

Reb Yisroel dressed like a rabbi, in a velvet caftan, a round rabbinical hat, slippers, and white socks. He was forever writing something, standing before a high desk, and people said that Zeitl copied all his manuscripts. He had a wide beard, white as snow, and a high forehead. When he looked at anyone, it seemed as though he saw right through him. Zeitl taught the daughters of rich families to read and write. I was one of her pupils.

It was said of the members of the sect that they liked loose women and secretly practiced all sorts of abominations. But with whom could Reb Yisroel have sinned in our town?

Zeitl got married, but six months later she was divorced. Her husband had come from Galicia, and people whispered that he was one of "the clan"; that was how our townsmen called the sect. Nobody knew why the marriage had come to such a quick end. Everything in Reb Yisroel's house was veiled in secrecy. He had trunks hung with double locks. He had large cases full of books. He came to prayer only on the Sabbath, at the cold synagogue. He seldom exchanged a word with anyone. When the

storekeepers came to pay their rent, he would put the money into his pocket without counting it.

In those years it was unheard of that groceries should be delivered to anyone at home. The richest women went to market with baskets to do their own shopping. But Zeitl had everything sent to her from the stores: bread, rolls, butter, eggs, cheese, meat. Once a month she received a bill, as though she were living in Warsaw. She had aristocratic ways.

I remember her as if it were yesterday: tall, dark, with a narrow face and black hair braided like a round Sabbath bread. Imagine, in those years—and she did not shave her hair. When she went out, she wore a kerchief. But when was she seen in the street? Reb Yisroel had a balcony upstairs, looking out upon the church garden, and Zeitl would sit there on summer evenings, getting fresh air.

She would give us girls dictation twice a week, not from a letter book but from her head: "My most esteemed betrothed! To start with, I wish to let you know that I am in good health, pray God that I may hear the same from you. Secondly. . . ." Zeitl also knew Polish and German. Her eyes were wild, huge as a calf's, and filled with melancholy. But suddenly she would burst into such loud laughter that all the rooms would echo with it. In the middle of the year she might take a fancy to bake matzo pancakes. She was fond of asking us riddles and of telling tales that made our hair stand on end.

And now about Rickel. Rickel's father was the town's ritual slaughterer, Reb Todie. All slaughterers are pious men, but Reb Todie had the reputation of a saint. Yet he had bad luck. His son had gone one day to the ritual bath and was found drowned. He must have gotten a cramp. One of his daughters died in an epidemic. A few years later strange noises began to be heard in his house. Something knocked, and no one knew what or where. Something would give a bang so that the walls would shake. The

whole town came running, even the Gentiles. They searched the attic, the cellar, every corner.

A regiment of soldiers was stationed in our town. The colonel's name was Semiatitsky. He was supposed to have descended from converted Jews. He had a red beard and cracked jokes till your sides would split with laughter. When Semiatitsky heard that a demon was banging in Todie's house, he brought a platoon of soldiers and commanded them to look into every crack and every hole. He did not believe in devils; he called them nothing but old wives' tales. He ordered everybody out and Cossacks stood guard with whips, allowing nobody to come near. But suddenly there was a crash that nearly brought the roof down.

I was not there, but people said that Semiatitsky called to the unholy one to tell his name and what he wanted and that the spirit gave one knock for yes, and two knocks for no.

Every man has enemies, especially if he has a job with the community, and people began to say that Todie should be dismissed as a slaughterer. It was whispered that he had slaughtered an ox with a blemished knife. Reb Todie's wife took it so hard that she died.

Rickel was small, thin, with red hair and freckles. When her father slaughtered fowl, she would pluck the feathers and do other small chores. When the knocking began, suspicion fell on Rickel. Some people said that she was doing it. But how could she? And why? It was said that when she went away for the night the knocking stopped. There's no limit to what evil tongues can invent. One night there was such a loud bang that three windows were shattered. Before that, the devil had not touched the windows. This was the last time. From then on, it was quiet again.

But Reb Todie was already without his job, and he became a teacher of beginners. The family had gone through Rickel's dowry and she was now affianced to a yeshiva student from

Krashnik, a lame young man. He was a Hassid, and soon after the wedding he went on a pilgrimage to his rabbi. At first he would come home for Passover and the High Holy Days. Afterwards he disappeared altogether. Rickel became an abandoned wife. Her father had died in the meantime and all she had left was the old house—little more than a ruin.

What could a husbandless wife do? She went around, teaching girls how to pray. She took in sewing and mending. On Purim she carried presents of holiday delicacies for wealthy families. On Passover she would become a sort of women's beadle and deliver gifts of herbs. When a woman was sick and someone was needed to watch at the bedside, Rickel was called. She learned how to cup and bleed the sick. She did not shave her head but wore a kerchief. She read many storybooks and loved to invent wild and improbable tales.

Old maids, you know, also end up half crazy. But when a woman who has had a man is left alone, it goes to her head. Rickel might have found her husband if she had had the money to send a messenger to look for him, but Todie left her without a groschen. Why did her husband forsake her? Who can tell? There are such men. They get married and then they tire of it. They wander away and nobody knows where their bones have come to rest.

2.

I do not know exactly how Zeitl and Rickel got together. It seems that Reb Yisroel fell ill and Rickel came to rub him down with turpentine. People said he had cast an eye on her, but I don't believe it. He was already more dead than alive. He died soon afterwards, and both girls, Zeitl and Rickel, were left alone in the world. At first people thought that Rickel had stayed on with

Zeitl as a servant. But if Zeitl had never had a servant before, why would she need one now?

While Reb Yisroel was alive, few matchmakers came to Zeitl with offers. They knew that Reb Yisroel wanted his daughter for himself. There are such fathers, even among Jews. She waited on him hand and foot. If his pipe went out, she would bring him an ember to relight it. I don't know why, but he never went to the bath, and it was whispered that Zeitl bathed him in a wooden bathtub. I've never seen it, but those false believers are capable of anything. To them, a sin is a virtue.

Anyway, Reb Yisroel gave the matchmakers such a reception that they forswore repeating their visits to the tenth generation. But as soon as Zeitl was alone, they were back at her doorstep. She sent them off with all sorts of excuses: later, tomorrow, it's not yet time. She had a habit, whenever she spoke to anyone, of looking over his head. Rickel had moved in with her, and now whenever anyone knocked, she would answer from behind the door chain: Zeitl is out, she is asleep, she is reading.

How long could the matchmakers keep coming? Nobody is dragged to the wedding canopy by force. But in a small town people have time, and they talk. No matter how you may try to keep away from strangers' eyes, you can't hide everything.

It was said that Zeitl and Rickel ate together, drank together, slept together. Rickel wore Zeitl's dresses, shortened and made smaller to fit her. Rickel became the cashier, and she paid the bills sent by the storekeepers. She also collected the rents. In the daytime the two girls seldom went out together, but on summer evenings they went strolling down Church Street, along the avenues leading to the woods. Zeitl's arm would be around Rickel's shoulders, and Rickel's around Zeitl's waist. They were absorbed in their talk. When people said good evening, they did not hear. Where did two women find so much to talk about? Some people tried to follow them and listen in, but they were whisper-

ing, as though they had secrets between them. They would walk all the way to the mill or the woods.

Rumors were brought to Reb Eisele, our rabbi, but he said: "There is no law to keep two women from walking to the mill."

Reb Eisele was a Misnagid, a Lithuanian, and they have a law for everything: either it is permitted or it's a sin.

But the talk would not die down. Naftali, the night watchman, had seen Zeitl and Rickel kissing each other on the mouth. They had stopped by the sawmill, near the log pile, and embraced like a loving couple. Zeitl called Rickel dove, and Rickel called her kitten. At first nobody believed Naftali; he was fond of a drop and could bring you tales of a fair up in heaven. Still, where there's smoke, there must be fire. My dear folks, the two girls seemed so much in love that all the tongues in town started wagging. The Tempter can make anybody crazy in his own way. Something flips in your head, and everything turns upside down. I heard talk of a lady in Krasnostaw who made love with a stallion. At the time of the Flood, even beasts paired themselves with other kinds. I read about it in the Women's Bible.

People went to Reb Eisele, but he insisted: "There is nothing in the Torah to forbid it. The ban applies only to men. Besides, since there are no witnesses, it is forbidden to spread rumors." Nevertheless, he sent the beadle for them. Rickel came alone and denied everything. She had a whittled tongue, that girl. Reb Eisele said to her: "Go home and don't worry about it. It is the slanderers who will be punished, not you. It is better to burn in a lime pit than to put another to shame."

I forgot to mention that Zeitl had stopped teaching the girls how to write.

I was still very young at that time, but something of all that talk had reached me too. You can't keep everything from a child's ears. Zeitl and Rickel, it was said, were studying Reb Yisroel's books together. Their lamp burned until late at night.

Those who passed their bedroom window saw shadows moving this way and that behind the drapes, and coming together as in a dance. Who knows what went on there?

Now listen to a story.

One summer it turned terribly hot. I've lived through many a summer, but I don't remember such heat. Right in the morning the sun began to burn like fire. Not only men but even girls and older women would go down to the river to bathe. When the sun blazes, the water gets warm. My mother, may she plead for us, took me along.

This was the first time I bathed in the river. Men went into the water naked, but the girls wore their shifts. The roughnecks came running to peep at them, and it was impossible to drive them off. Each time there'd be a squealing and a panic. One woman started drowning. Another screamed that a frog had bitten her. I bathed and even tried to swim until I was so tired that I lay down among the bushes near the bank to rest. I thought I'd cool off in the shade and go home, but a strange sleep came over me. Not just sleep; may heaven preserve us, it was more like death. I put my head down and remained there like a rock. A darkness seemed to fall over me and I sank into it. I must have slept for many hours.

When I awakened, it was night. There was no moon. The sky was cloudy. I lay there and did not know where I was or who I was. I felt the grass around me, moist with dew, but I did not remember that I was on the outskirts of town. I touched myself; I had nothing on but my shift. I wanted to cry, to call for help, when suddenly I heard voices. I thought of demons and was terror-stricken, yet I tried to hear what they were saying. Two women were speaking, and their voices seemed familiar.

I heard one ask: "Must we go through hell?"

The other answered: "Yes, my soul, but even going through

hell together with you will be a delight. God is merciful. The punishment never lasts more than twelve months. We shall be purified and enter paradise. Since we have no husbands, we shall be no one's footstools. We shall bathe in balsam and eat of the leviathan. We shall have wings and fly like birds. . . ."

I cannot recall all their talk. I gasped. I knew who they were now: the questioner was Rickel, and Zeitl gave the answers. I heard Zeitl say: "We shall meet our fathers and mothers there, and our grandparents, and all the generations: Abraham and Isaac, Jacob and Rachel, Leah, Bilhah, Zilpah, Abigail, Bathsheba. . . ." She spoke as though she had just come from there, and every word was like a pearl. I forgot that I was half naked and alone out late at night.

Zeitl went on: "Father is waiting for us. He comes to me in dreams. He is together with your mother." Rickel asked: "Did they get married there?" And Zeitl answered: "Yes. We shall get married up there too. In heaven there is no difference between men and women. . . ."

It must have been past midnight. There was a flash of lightning, and I saw my clothing, shoes, and stockings on the grass nearby. I caught a glimpse of them too. They sat by the river in nothing but their shifts, their hair down, pale as death. If I did not die of fright that night, I'll never die.

"And then?"

Wait a minute. I came home in the middle of the night, but my mother had left earlier in the evening for the fair; she was a storekeeper. My father was spending the night at the study house. I slipped into bed, and when I woke next morning, the whole thing seemed like a dream. I was ashamed to tell anyone about it. However, as the saying goes, heaven and earth conspired that there should be no secrets.

People began to say that Zeitl and Rickel were fasting. They would eat nothing all day and merely take a bite at night. We

had pious women in town who would climb up the stairs into the women's section of the synagogue at dawn to pray. Every Monday and Thursday they went to visit graves in the cemetery. Suddenly we heard that Zeitl and Rickel had joined the pious company in lamentations and penitential prayers. They had shaved their heads and put on bonnets, as though they had just gotten married. They omitted no line or word, and wept as on the Day of the Destruction of the Temple. They also visited the cemetery, prostrating themselves on Reb Yisroel's grave and wailing.

People ran to Reb Eisele again, but the rabbi sent them off with a scolding. If Jewish daughters wanted to do penance, he said, was that wrong too? He was fond of poring over his books, but the affairs of the town meant little to him. He was later dismissed, but that's another story.

There are busybodies everywhere, and they took the matter to the colonel. But he said, "Leave me out of your Jewish squabbles. I have trouble enough with my soldiers." Cossacks are good soldiers, but sometimes they got letters from home that their wives were carrying on with other men and they went wild. More than one Cossack would go galloping off on his horse, slashing away with his sword right and left. After they had served their five-year terms, they would come into the stores to buy presents for their mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, the whole family. The shopkeeper would ask, "And what will you get for your wife, Nikita?" "A horsewhip," he would say. They'd go back to their steppes on the Don and find bastards at home. They'd chop off the wife's head and be sent to Siberia for hard labor. . . .

Where was I? Oh, yes, penance. Zeitl and Rickel clung to each other and spoke only of the next world. They bought up all the books from every peddler passing through town. Whenever a preacher came, they questioned him: How long was the punish-

ment inflicted on transgressors after death? How many hells were there? Who meted out the penalties? Who did the whipping? With what kind of rods? Iron? Copper? The wags had plenty to joke about.

We had many visiting preachers, but one, Reb Yuzel, was famous. Whenever he went up to the lectern, it was like the Day of Atonement all over again. When he painted a picture of hell, everybody shuddered. People said that it was dangerous for pregnant women to hear him; several had had miscarriages after his sermons. But that's how it is: when you must not do a thing, you're sure to do it. When Reb Yuzel preached, the synagogue was full. The railing closing off the women's section was almost bursting with the crush. He had a voice that reached into every corner. Every word cut like a knife.

The last time he came, I also ran to hear him. There was not one hell, he said, but seven, and the flames in each were sixty times hotter than in the last. There was a man in our town, Alterl Kozlover. He had a screw loose, and he figured out that the seventh hell was myriads of times hotter than the first. Men cried like babies. Women screamed and wailed.

Zeitl and Rickel were also there. They had entered among the men and stood on a bench, wrapped in their shawls. Ordinarily, women are admitted in the men's section only on the Festival of Rejoicing in the Law. But when the women's section was too crowded, some women were allowed into the antechamber, and from there they'd move inside.

Reb Yuzel handed out punishment to everybody, but the worst of his wrath was reserved for the women. He described how they were hung by the breasts and by the hair; how the imps laid them out on boards of nails and tore pieces from them. From fiery coals they were thrown into snow, and from the snow back onto heaps of coals. Before they were admitted to hell, they were first tortured in the Sling, by devils, imps and evil spirits. It made your

hair stand on end to hear him. I was still a young girl, but I began to sob and choke. I glanced at Zeitzl and Rickel: they did not cry, but their eyes were twice as big as usual, and their faces were like chalk. A madness seemed to stare out of them, and I had a feeling that they would come to a terrible end.

On the next day Reb Yuzel preached again, but I had had enough. Someone said later that Zeitzl had come up to him after the sermon and invited him to be her guest. Many people asked him to their homes, but he went with Zeitzl. Nobody knows what they spoke about. I don't remember whether he had stayed there for the night. Probably not; how could a man remain with two women? Although it's true the Lithuanians have an argument for everything. They interpret the Law as they like. That's why they are nicknamed "heathens." My grandfather, may he intercede for us, used to tell of a Lithuanian Jew from Belaya Tserkov who had married a Gentile woman and had gone on studying the Talmud.

After Reb Yuzel left, the town was quiet again. By then the summer was over.

One winter night, long after all the shutters had been closed, we heard a wild outcry. People ran out in panic. They thought the peasants had attacked. The moon was bright, and we saw a strange sight—Fivel the butcher carrying Rickel in his arms. She screamed and struggled and tried to scratch his eyes out. He was a giant of a man and he brought her straight into the rabbi's judgment chamber. Reb Eisele sat up late, studying and drinking tea from a samovar. Everybody shouted, and Rickel kept fighting to break away and run out. It took two men to hold her. The rabbi began to question her.

I was there myself. Ordinarily I went to bed early, but that night we had been chopping cabbage and all the girls had gathered at our house. This was the custom in our town. We chopped cabbage for pickling in barrels, and everybody ate bread

with cracklings and told stories. One day the girls would gather in one house, the next in another. Sometimes they'd break into a dance in pairs. I had a sister-in-law who could play all the dances on a comb: a Scissor Dance, a Quarrel Dance, a Good Day.

When we heard the uproar, we all ran out.

At first Rickel would not say anything. She merely screamed to be allowed to go. But Fivel testified that she had wanted to throw herself into the well. He had caught her when she had already flung her leg over the edge.

"How did it come into your head to do such a thing?" the rabbi asked, and Rickel answered: "I am sick of this world. I want to know what goes on in the next." The rabbi argued: "Those who lay their hands upon themselves do not share the rewards of the next world." But Rickel said: "Hell is also for people, not for goats." She screamed: "I want to go to my mother and my father, my grandmother and grandfather. I don't want to keep wandering in this vale of tears." Those were her words. It was clear at once that she had learned all this from Zeitzl, because the other knew the texts printed in small letters too. Somebody asked: "Where is Zeitzl?" And Rickel answered: "She is all right, she is already up there. . . ." My dear folks, Zeitzl had thrown herself into the well a moment earlier. She had gone first.

Half the town came running. Torches were lit, and we went to the well. Zeitzl lay with her head in the water, her feet up. A ladder was lowered, and she was dragged up, dead.

Rickel had to be watched, and the men of the burial society took her to the poorhouse. She was turned over to the caretaker, who was told to keep an eye on her. Zeitzl was later buried outside the fence. Rickel pretended that she had come to her senses and regretted her deed. But the next day at dawn, when everybody was asleep, she rose from the bundle of straw and went to the river. It was frozen, but she must have broken the ice with a stone. It was only in the afternoon that people realized she was

gone. They found her footprints in the snow and ran down to the river. Rickel had followed Zeitl. She was buried near the other one, without a mound, without as much as a board to mark the place.

The burgomaster locked and sealed Zeitl's house, but later on, a letter she had written was discovered. She explained why she was leaving the world: she wanted to know what went on in the hereafter.

Who can tell what goes on in another's head? A person gets hold of some melancholy notion and it grows like a mushroom. Zeitl was the leader, and Rickel drank in every word she said. Forty years have gone by since their deaths, and they have probably suffered their allotted share.

As long as I was in the town, Reb Yisroel's house was boarded up and nobody moved into it. People saw lights flickering in the windows. A man said that he was passing by at night and heard Zeitl speak and Rickel answer. They kissed, laughed, cried. Lost souls remain on earth and do not even know they don't belong. . . .

I was told that an officer had later moved into the house. One morning he was found hanged.

A house is not simply a pile of logs and boards. Whoever lives there leaves something behind. A few years later the whole marketplace burned down. Thank God for fires. If it were not for them, the stench that would accumulate would reach high heaven. . . .

Translated by Mirra Ginsburg

The Warehouse

In a warehouse in heaven, a number of naked souls stood around waiting for the issuance of their new bodies. Bagdial, the angel in charge of such goods, was a trifle late that morning. To be precise, Bagdial handed out a card entitling the spirit to receive a body but did not hand out the body itself. In heaven there is as much red tape as on earth, the dignitaries finding it necessary to make work to keep unemployed angels busy. But angels who have got used to an easy life resent having to do anything too strenuous.

It was now ten o'clock in the morning. The angelic choirs had long since finished chanting their lauds. The righteous in paradise had already had their second helping of leviathan. The

I can go anywhere I please, but where should a demon like me go? To the murderers?

I found a Yiddish storybook between two broken barrels in the house which once belonged to Velvel the Barrel-maker. I sit there, the last of the demons. I eat dust. I sleep on a feather duster. I keep on reading gibberish. The style of the book is in our manner: Sabbath pudding cooked in pig's fat: blasphemy rolled in piety. The moral of the book is: neither judge, nor judgment. But nevertheless the letters are Jewish. The alphabet they could not squander. I suck on the letters and feed myself. I count the words, make rhymes, and tortuously interpret and reinterpret each dot.

Aleph, the abyss, what else waited?
Bet, the blow, long since fated.
Geemel, God, pretending he knew,
Dalet, death, its shadow grew.
Hey, the hangman, he stood prepared;
Wov, wisdom, ignorance bared.
Zayeen, the zodiac, signs distantly loomed;
Chet, the child, prenatally doomed.
Tet, the thinker, an imprisoned lord;
Jod, the judge, the verdict a fraud.

Yes, as long as a single volume remains, I have something to sustain me. As long as the moths have not destroyed the last page, there is something to play with. What will happen when the last letter is no more, I'd rather not bring to my lips.

*When the last letter is gone,
 The last of the demons is done.*

Translated by MARTHA GLICKLICH AND CECIL HEMLEY

I. B. Singer

yentl the yeshiva boy

After her father's death, Yentl had no reason to remain in Yanev. She was all alone in the house. To be sure, lodgers were willing to move in and pay rent; and the marriage brokers flocked to her door with offers from Lublin, Tomashev, Zamosc. But Yentl didn't want to get married. Inside her, a voice repeated over and over: "No!"

What becomes of a girl when the wedding's over? Right away she starts bearing and rearing. And her mother-in-law lords it over her. Yentl knew she wasn't cut out for a woman's life. She couldn't sew, she couldn't knit. She let the food burn and the milk boil over; her Sabbath pudding never turned out right, and her *challah* dough didn't rise. Yentl much preferred men's activities to women's. Her father Reb Todros, may he rest in peace, during many bedridden years had studied Torah with his daughter as if she were a son. He told Yentl to lock the doors and drape the windows, then together they pored over the Pentateuch, the Mishnah, the Gemara, and the Commentaries. She had proved so apt a pupil that her father used to say:

"Yentl—you have the soul of a man."

"So why was I born a woman?"

"Even Heaven makes mistakes."

There was no doubt about it, Yentl was unlike any of the girls in Yanev—tall, thin, bony, with small breasts and narrow hips. On Sabbath afternoons, when her father slept, she would dress up in his trousers, his fringed garment, his silk coat, his skull-cap, his velvet hat, and study her reflection in the mirror. She looked like a dark, handsome young man. There was even a slight down on her upper lip. Only her thick braids showed her womanhood—and if it came to that, hair could always be shorn. Yentl conceived a plan and day and night she could think of nothing else. No, she had not been created for the noodle board and the pudding dish, for chattering with silly women and pushing for a place at the butcher's block. Her father had told her so many tales of yeshivas, rabbis, men of letters! Her head was full of Talmudic disputations, questions and answers, learned phrases. Secretly, she had even smoked her father's long pipe.

Yentl told the dealers she wanted to sell the house and go to live in Kalish with an aunt. The neighborhood women tried to talk her out of it, and the marriage brokers

said she was crazy, that she was more likely to make a good match right here in Yanev. But Yentl was obstinate. She was in such a rush that she sold the house to the first bidder, and let the furniture go for a song. All she realized from her inheritance was one hundred and forty rubles. Then late one night in the month of Av, while Yanev slept, Yentl cut off her braids, arranged sidecloaks at her temples, and dressed herself in her father's clothes. Packing underclothes, phylacteries, and a few books into a straw suitcase, she started off on foot for Lublin.

On the main road, Yentl got a ride in a carriage that took her as far as Zamosc. From there, she again set out on foot. She stopped at an inn along the way, and gave her name there as Anshel, after an uncle who had died. The inn was crowded with young men journeying to study with famous rabbis. An argument was in progress over the merits of various yeshivas, some praising those of Lithuania, others claiming that study was more intensive in Poland and the board better. It was the first time Yentl had ever found herself alone in the company of young men. How different their talk was from the jabbering of women, she thought, but she was too shy to join in. One young man discussed a prospective match and the size of the dowry, while another, parodying the manner of a Purim rabbi, declaimed a passage from the Torah, adding all sorts of lewd interpretations. After a while, the company proceeded to contests of strength. One pried open another's fist; a second tried to bend a companion's arm. One student, dining on bread and tea, had no spoon and stirred his cup with his penknife. Presently, one of the group came over to Yentl and poked her in the shoulder:

"Why so quiet? Don't you have a tongue?"

"I have nothing to say."

"What's your name?"

"Anshel."

"You *are* bashful. A violet by the wayside."

And the young man tweaked Yentl's nose. She would have given him a smack in return, but her arm refused to budge. She turned white. Another student, slightly older than the rest, tall and pale, with burning eyes and a black beard, came to her rescue.

"Hey, you, why are you picking on him?"

"If you don't like it, you don't have to look."

"Want me to pull your sidelocks off?"

The bearded young man beckoned to Yentl, then asked where she came from and where she was going. Yentl told him she was looking for a yeshiva, but wanted a quiet one. The young man pulled at his beard.

"Then come with me to Bechev."

He explained that he was returning to Bechev for his fourth year. The yeshiva there was small, with only thirty students, and the people in the town provided board for them all. The food was plentiful and the housewives darned the students' socks and took care of their laundry. The Bechev rabbi, who headed the yeshiva, was a genius. He could pose ten questions and answer all ten with one proof. Most of the students eventually found wives in the town.

"Why did you leave in the middle of the term?" Yentl asked.

"My mother died. Now I'm on my way back."

"What's your name?"

"Avigdor."

"How is it you're not married?"

The young man scratched his beard.

"It's a long story."

"Tell me."

Avigdor covered his eyes and thought a moment.

"Are you coming to Bechev?"

"Yes."

"Then you'll find out soon enough anyway. I was engaged to the only daughter of Alter Vishkower, the richest

man in town. Even the wedding date was set when suddenly they sent back the engagement contract."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. Gossips, I guess, were busy spreading tales. I had the right to ask for half the dowry, but it was against my nature. Now they're trying to talk me into another match, but the girl doesn't appeal to me."

"In Bechev, yeshiva boys look at women?"

"At Alter's house, where I ate once a week, Hadass, his daughter, always brought in the food. . . ."

"Is she good-looking?"

"She's blond."

"Brunettes can be good-looking too."

"No."

Yentl gazed at Avigdor. He was lean and bony with sunken cheeks. He had curly sidelocks so black they appeared blue, and his eyebrows met across the bridge of his nose. He looked at her sharply with the regretful shyness of one who has just divulged a secret. His lapel was rent, according to the custom for mourners, and the lining of his gabardine showed through. He drummed restlessly on the table and hummed a tune. Behind the high furrowed brow his thoughts seemed to race. Suddenly he spoke:

"Well, what of it. I'll become a recluse, that's all."

2

It was strange, but as soon as Yentl—or Anshel—arrived in Bechev, she was allotted one day's board a week at the house of that same rich man, Alter Vishkower, whose daughter had broken off her betrothal to Avigdor.

The students at the yeshiva studied in pairs, and Avigdor chose Anshel for a partner. He helped her with the lessons. He was also an expert swimmer and offered to teach Anshel the breast stroke and how to tread water, but

she always found excuses for not going down to the river. Avigdor suggested that they share lodgings, but Anshel found a place to sleep at the house of an elderly widow who was half blind. Tuesdays, Anshel ate at Alter Vishkower's and Hadass waited on her. Avigdor always asked many questions: "How does Hadass look? Is she sad? Is she gay? Are they trying to marry her off? Does she ever mention my name?" Anshel reported that Hadass upset dishes on the tablecloth, forgot to bring the salt, and dipped her fingers into the plate of grits while carrying it. She ordered the servant girl around, was forever engrossed in storybooks, and changed her hairdo every week. Moreover, she must consider herself a beauty, for she was always in front of the mirror, but, in fact, she was not that good-looking.

"Two years after she's married," said Anshel, "she'll be an old bag."

"So she doesn't appeal to you?"

"Not particularly."

"Yet if she wanted you, you wouldn't turn her down."

"I can do without her."

"Don't you have evil impulses?"

The two friends, sharing a lectern in a corner of the study house, spent more time talking than learning. Occasionally Avigdor smoked, and Anshel, taking the cigarette from his lips, would have a puff. Avigdor liked baked flat-cakes made with buckwheat, so Anshel stopped at the bakery every morning to buy one, and wouldn't let him pay his share. Often Anshel did things that greatly surprised Avigdor. If a button came off Avigdor's coat, for example, Anshel would arrive at the yeshiva the next day with needle and thread and sew it back on. Anshel bought Avigdor all kinds of presents: a silk handkerchief, a pair of socks, a muffler. Avigdor grew more and more attached to this boy, five years younger than himself, whose beard

hadn't even begun to sprout. Once Avigdor said to Anshel:

"I want you to marry Hadass."

"What good would that do *you*?"

"Better you than a total stranger."

"You'd become my enemy."

"Never."

Avigdor liked to go for long walks through the town and Anshel frequently joined him. Engrossed in conversation, they would go off to the water mill, or to the pine forest, or to the crossroads where the Christian shrine stood. Sometimes they stretched out on the grass.

"Why can't a woman be like a man?" Avigdor asked once, looking up at the sky.

"How do you mean?"

"Why couldn't Hadass be just like you?"

"How like me?"

"Oh—a good fellow."

Anshel grew playful. She plucked a flower and tore off the petals one by one. She picked up a chestnut and threw it at Avigdor. Avigdor watched a ladybug crawl across the palm of his hand. After a while he spoke up:

"They're trying to marry me off."

Anshel sat up instantly.

"To whom?"

"To Feitl's daughter, Peshe."

"The widow?"

"That's the one."

"Why should you marry a widow?"

"No one else will have me."

"That's not true. Someone will turn up for you."

"Never."

Anshel told Avigdor such a match was bad. Peshe was neither good-looking nor clever, only a cow with a pair of eyes. Besides, she was bad luck, for her husband died in the first year of their marriage. Such women were husband-killers. But Avigdor did not answer. He lit a cigarette, took

a deep puff, and blew out smoke rings. His face had turned green.

"I need a woman. I can't sleep at night."

Anshel was startled.

"Why can't you wait until the right one comes along?"

"Hadass was my destined one."

And Avigdor's eyes grew moist. Abruptly he got to his feet.

"Enough lying around. Let's go."

After that, everything happened quickly. One day Avigdor was confiding his problem to Anshel, two days later he became engaged to Peshe, and brought honey cake and brandy to the yeshiva. An early wedding date was set. When the bride-to-be is a widow, there's no need to wait for a trousseau. Everything is ready. The groom, moreover, was an orphan and no one's advice had to be asked. The yeshiva students drank the brandy and offered their congratulations. Anshel also took a sip, but promptly choked on it.

"Oy, it burns!"

"You're not much of a man," Avigdor teased.

After the celebration, Avigdor and Anshel sat down with a volume of the Gemara, but they made little progress, and their conversation was equally slow. Avigdor rocked back and forth, pulled at his beard, muttered under his breath.

"I'm lost," he said abruptly.

"If you don't like her, why are you getting married?"

"I'd marry a she-goat."

The following day Avigdor did not appear at the study house. Feitl the Leatherdealer belonged to the Hasidim and he wanted his prospective son-in-law to continue his studies at the Hasidic prayer house. The yeshiva students said privately that though there was no denying the widow was short and round as a barrel, her mother the daughter of a dairyman, her father half an ignoramus, still the whole

family was filthy with money. Feitl was part-owner of a tannery; Peshe had invested her dowry in a shop that sold herring, tar, pots and pans, and was always crowded with peasants. Father and daughter were outfitting Avigdor and had placed orders for a fur coat, a cloth coat, a silk *kapote*, and two pair of boots. In addition, he had received many gifts immediately, things that had belonged to Peshe's first husband: the Vilna edition of the Talmud, a gold watch, a Chanukah candelabra, a spice box. Anshel sat alone at the lectern. On Tuesday when Anshel arrived for dinner at Alter Vishkower's house, Hadass remarked:

"What do you say about your partner—back in clover, isn't he?"

"What did you expect—that no one else would want him?"

Hadass reddened.

"It wasn't my fault. My father was against it."

"Why?"

"Because they found out a brother of his had hanged himself."

Anshel looked at her as she stood there—tall, blond, with a long neck, hollow cheeks, and blue eyes, wearing a cotton dress and a calico apron. Her hair, fixed in two braids, was flung back over her shoulders. A pity I'm not a man, Anshel thought.

"Do you regret it now?" Anshel asked.

"Oh, yes!"

Hadass fled from the room. The rest of the food, meat dumplings and tea, was brought in by the servant girl. Not until Anshel had finished eating and was washing her hands for the Final Blessings did Hadass reappear. She came up to the table and said in a smothered voice:

"Swear to me you won't tell him anything. Why should he know what goes on in my heart! . . ."

Then she fled once more, nearly falling over the threshold.

The head of the yeshiva asked Anshel to choose another study partner, but weeks went by and still Anshel studied alone. There was no one in the yeshiva who could take Avigdor's place. All the others were small, in body and in spirit. They talked nonsense, bragged about trifles, grinned oafishly, behaved like shnorrrers. Without Avigdor the study house seemed empty. At night Anshel lay on her bench at the widow's, unable to sleep. Stripped of gaberdine and trousers she was once more Yentl, a girl of marriageable age, in love with a young man who was betrothed to another. Perhaps I should have told him the truth, Anshel thought. But it was too late for that. Anshel could not go back to being a girl, could never again do without books and a study house. She lay there thinking outlandish thoughts that brought her close to madness. She fell asleep, then awoke with a start. In her dream she had been at the same time a man and a woman, wearing both a woman's bodice and a man's fringed garment. Yentl's period was late and she was suddenly afraid . . . who knew? In *Medrash Talpioth* she had read of a woman who had conceived merely through desiring a man. [Only now did Yentl grasp the meaning of the Torah's prohibition against wearing the clothes of the other sex. By doing so one deceived not only others but also oneself. Even the soul was perplexed, finding itself incarnate in a strange body.]

At night Anshel lay awake; by day she could scarcely keep her eyes open. At the houses where she had her meals, the women complained that the youth left everything on his plate. The rabbi noticed that Anshel no longer paid attention to the lectures but stared out the window lost in private thoughts. When Tuesday came, Anshel appeared at the Vishkower house for dinner. Hadass

set a bowl of soup before her and waited, but Anshel was so disturbed she did not even say thank you. She reached for a spoon but let it fall. Hadass ventured a comment:

"I hear Avigdor has deserted you."

Anshel awoke from her trance.

"What do you mean?"

"He's no longer your partner."

"He's left the yeshiva."

"Do you see him at all?"

"He seems to be hiding."

"Are you at least going to the wedding?"

For a moment Anshel was silent as though missing the meaning of the words. Then she spoke:

"He's a big fool."

"Why do you say that?"

"You're beautiful, and the other one looks like a monkey."

Hadass blushed to the roots of her hair.

"It's all my father's fault."

"Don't worry. You'll find someone who's worthy of you."

"There's no one I want."

"But everyone wants you. . . ."

There was a long silence. Hadass' eyes grew larger, filling with the sadness of one who knows there is no consolation.

"Your soup is getting cold."

"I, too, want you."

Anshel was astonished at what she had said. Hadass stared at her over her shoulder.

"What are you saying!"

"It's the truth."

"Someone might be listening."

"I'm not afraid."

"Eat the soup. I'll bring the meat dumplings in a moment."

Hadass turned to go, her high heels clattering. Anshel began hunting for beans in the soup, fished one up, then

let it fall. Her appetite was gone; her throat had closed up. She knew very well she was getting entangled in evil, but some force kept urging her on. Hadass reappeared, carrying a platter with two meat dumplings on it.

"Why aren't you eating?"

"I'm thinking about you."

"What are you thinking?"

"I want to marry you."

Hadass made a face as though she had swallowed something.

"On such matters, you must speak to my father."

"I know."

"The custom is to send a matchmaker."

She ran from the room, letting the door slam behind her. Laughing inwardly, Anshel thought: "With girls I can play as I please!" She sprinkled salt on the soup and then pepper. She sat there lightheaded. What have I done? I must be going mad. There's no other explanation. . . . She forced herself to eat, but could taste nothing. Only then did Anshel remember that it was Avigdor who had wanted her to marry Hadass. From her confusion, a plan emerged: she would exact vengeance for Avigdor, and at the same time, through Hadass, draw him closer to herself. Hadass was a virgin: what did she know about men? A girl like that could be deceived for a long time. To be sure, Anshel too was a virgin but she knew a lot about such matters from the Gemara and from hearing men talk. Anshel was seized by both fear and glee, as a person is who is planning to deceive the whole community. She remembered the saying: "The public are fools." She stood up and said aloud: "Now I'll really start something."

That night Anshel didn't sleep a wink. Every few minutes she got up for a drink of water. Her throat was parched, her forehead burned. Her brain worked away feverishly of its own volition. A quarrel seemed to be going on inside her. Her stomach throbbed and her knees ached.

It was as if she had sealed a pact with Satan, the Evil One who plays tricks on human beings, who sets stumbling blocks and traps in their paths. By the time Anshel fell asleep, it was morning. She awoke more exhausted than before. But she could not go on sleeping on the bench at the widow's. With an effort she rose and, taking the bag that held her phylacteries, set out for the study house. On the way whom should she meet but Hadass' father. Anshel bade him a respectful good morning and received a friendly greeting in return. Reb Alter stroked his beard and engaged her in conversation:

"My daughter Hadass must be serving you leftovers. You look starved."

"Your daughter is a fine girl, and very generous."

"So why are you so pale?"

Anshel was silent for a minute.

"Reb Alter, there's something I must say to you."

"Well, go ahead, say it."

"Reb Alter, your daughter pleases me."

Alter Vishkower came to a halt.

"Oh, does she? I thought yeshiva students didn't talk about such things."

His eyes were full of laughter.

"But it's the truth."

"One doesn't discuss these matters with the young man himself."

"But I'm an orphan."

"Well . . . in that case the custom is to send a marriage broker."

"Yes. . . ."

"What do you see in her?"

"She's beautiful . . . fine . . . intelligent. . . ."

"Well, well, well. . . . Come along, tell me something about your family."

Alter Vishkower put his arm around Anshel and in this

fashion the two continued walking until they reached the courtyard of the synagogue.

4

Once you say "A," you must say "B." Thoughts lead to words, words lead to deeds. Reb Alter Vishkower gave his consent to the match. Hadass' mother Freyda Leah held back for a while. She said she wanted no more Bechev yeshiva students for her daughter and would rather have someone from Lublin or Zamosc; but Hadass gave warning that if she were shamed publicly once more (the way she had been with Avigdor) she would throw herself into the well. As often happens with such ill-advised matches, everyone was strongly in favor of it—the rabbi, the relatives, Hadass' girl friends. For some time the girls of Bechev had been eyeing Anshel longingly, watching from their windows when the youth passed by on the street. Anshel kept his boots well polished and did not drop his eyes in the presence of women. Stopping in at Beila the Baker's to buy a *pletzl*, he joked with them in such a worldly fashion that they marveled. The women agreed there was something special about Anshel: his sidelocks curled like nobody else's and he tied his neck scarf differently; his eyes, smiling yet distant, seemed always fixed on some faraway point. And the fact that Avigdor had become betrothed to Feitl's daughter Peshe, forsaking Anshel, had endeared him all the more to the people of the town. Alter Vishkower had a provisional contract drawn up for the betrothal, promising Anshel a bigger dowry, more presents, and an even longer period of maintenance than he had promised Avigdor. The girls of Bechev threw their arms around Hadass and congratulated her. Hadass immediately began crocheting a sack for Anshel's phylacteries, a *challah* cloth, a matzoh bag. When Avigdor heard the news of Anshel's betrothal, he came to the study

house to offer his congratulations. The past few weeks had aged him. His beard was disheveled, his eyes were red. He said to Anshel:

"I knew it would happen this way. Right from the beginning. As soon as I met you at the inn."

"But it was you who suggested it."

"I know that."

"Why did you desert me? You went away without even saying goodbye."

"I wanted to burn my bridges behind me."

Avigdor asked Anshel to go for a walk. Though it was already past Succoth, the day was bright with sunshine. Avigdor, friendlier than ever, opened his heart to Anshel. Yes, it was true, a brother of his had succumbed to melancholy and hanged himself. Now he too felt himself near the edge of the abyss. Peshe had a lot of money and her father was a rich man, yet he couldn't sleep nights. He didn't want to be a storekeeper. He couldn't forget Hadass. She appeared in his dreams. Sabbath night when her name occurred in the Havdala prayer, he turned dizzy. Still it was good that Anshel and no one else was to marry her. . . . At least she would fall into decent hands. Avigdor stooped and tore aimlessly at the shriveled grass. His speech was incoherent, like that of a man possessed. Suddenly he said:

"I have thought of doing what my brother did."

"Do you love her *that* much?"

"She's engraved in my heart."

The two pledged their friendship and promised never again to part. Anshel proposed that, after they were both married, they should live next door or even share the same house. They would study together every day, perhaps even become partners in a shop.

"Do you want to know the truth?" asked Avigdor. "It's like the story of Jacob and Benjamin: my life is bound up in your life."

"Then why did you leave me?"

"Perhaps for that very reason."

Though the day had turned cold and windy, they continued to walk until they reached the pine forest, not turning back until dusk when it was time for the Evening Prayer. The girls of Bechev, from their posts at the windows, watched them going by with their arms round each other's shoulders and so engrossed in conversation that they walked through puddles and piles of trash without noticing. Avigdor looked pale, disheveled, and the wind whipped one sidelock about; Anshel chewed his fingernails. Hadass, too, ran to the window, took one look, and her eyes filled with tears. . . .

Events followed quickly. Avigdor was the first to marry. Because the bride was a widow, the wedding was a quiet one, with no musicians, no wedding jester, no ceremonial veiling of the bride. One day Peshe stood beneath the marriage canopy, the next she was back at the shop, dispensing tar with greasy hands. Avigdor prayed at the Hasidic assembly house in his new prayer shawl. Afternoons, Anshel went to visit him and the two whispered and talked until evening. The date of Anshel's wedding to Hadass was set for the Sabbath in Chanukah week, though the prospective father-in-law wanted it sooner. Hadass had already been betrothed once. Besides, the groom was an orphan. Why should he toss about on a makeshift bed at the widow's when he could have a wife and home of his own?

Many times each day Anshel warned herself that what she was about to do was sinful, mad, an act of utter depravity. She was entangling both Hadass and herself in a chain of deception and committing so many transgressions that she would never be able to do penance. One lie followed another. Repeatedly Anshel made up her mind to flee Bechev in time, to put an end to this weird comedy that was more the work of an imp than a human being.

But she was in the grip of a power she could not resist. She grew more and more attached to Avigdor, and could not bring herself to destroy Hadass' illusory happiness. Now that he was married, Avigdor's desire to study was greater than ever, and the friends met twice each day: in the mornings they studied the Gemara and the Commentaries, in the afternoons the Legal Codes with their glosses. Alter Vishkower and Feitl the Leatherdealer were pleased and compared Avigdor and Anshel to David and Jonathan. With all the complications, Anshel went about as though drunk. The tailors took her measurements for a new wardrobe and she was forced into all kinds of subterfuge to keep them from discovering she was not a man. Though the imposture had lasted many weeks, Anshel still could not believe it: How was it possible? Fooling the community had become a game, but how long could it go on? And in what way would the truth come to the surface? Inside, Anshel laughed and wept. She had turned into a sprite brought into the world to mock people and trick them. I'm wicked, a transgressor, a Jeroboam ben Nabat, she told herself. Her only justification was that she had taken all these burdens upon herself because her soul thirsted to study Torah. . J.

Avigdor soon began to complain that Peshe treated him badly. She called him an idler, a shlemiel, just another mouth to feed. She tried to tie him to the store, assigned him tasks for which he hadn't the slightest inclination, begrudged him pocket money. Instead of consoling Avigdor, Anshel goaded him on against Peshe. She called his wife an eyesore, a shrew, a miser, and said that Peshe had no doubt nagged her first husband to death and would Avigdor also. At the same time, Anshel enumerated Avigdor's virtues: his height and manliness, his wit, his erudition.

"If I were a woman and married to you," said Anshel, "I'd know how to appreciate you."

"Well, but you aren't. . . ."

Avigdor sighed.

Meanwhile Anshel's wedding date drew near.

On the Sabbath before Chanukah Anshel was called to the pulpit to read from the Torah. The women showered her with raisins and almonds. On the day of the wedding Alter Vishkower gave a feast for the young men. Avigdor sat at Anshel's right hand. The bridegroom delivered a Talmudic discourse, and the rest of the company argued the points, while smoking cigarettes and drinking wine, liqueurs, tea with lemon or raspberry jam. Then followed the ceremony of veiling the bride, after which the bridegroom was led to the wedding canopy that had been set up at the side of the synagogue. The night was frosty and clear, the sky full of stars. The musicians struck up a tune. Two rows of girls held lighted tapers and braided wax candles. After the wedding ceremony the bride and groom broke their fast with golden chicken broth. Then the dancing began and the announcement of the wedding gifts, all according to custom. The gifts were many and costly. The wedding jester depicted the joys and sorrows that were in store for the bride. Avigdor's wife Peshe was one of the guests but, though she was bedecked with jewels, she still looked ugly in a wig that sat low on her forehead, wearing an enormous fur cape, and with traces of tar on her hands that no amount of washing could ever remove. After the Virtue Dance the bride and groom were led separately to the marriage chamber. The wedding attendants instructed the couple in the proper conduct and enjoined them to "be fruitful and multiply." ✕

At daybreak Anshel's mother-in-law and her band descended upon the marriage chamber and tore the bed-sheets from beneath Hadass to make sure the marriage had been consummated. When traces of blood were discovered, the company grew merry and began kissing and congratulating the bride. Then, brandishing the sheet, they flocked outside and danced a Kosher Dance in the newly fallen

snow. Anshel had found a way to deflower the bride. Hadass in her innocence was unaware that things weren't quite as they should have been. She was already deeply in love with Anshel. It is commanded that the bride and groom remain apart for seven days after the first intercourse. The next day Anshel and Avigdor took up the study of the Tractate on Menstruous Women. When the other men had departed and the two were left to themselves in the synagogue, Avigdor shyly questioned Anshel about his night with Hadass. Anshel gratified his curiosity and they whispered together until nightfall.

5

Anshel had fallen into good hands. Hadass was a devoted wife and her parents indulged their son-in-law's every wish and boasted of his accomplishments. To be sure, several months went by and Hadass was still not with child, but no one took it to heart. On the other hand, Avigdor's lot grew steadily worse. Peshe tormented him and finally would not give him enough to eat and even refused him a clean shirt. Since he was always penniless, Anshel again brought him a daily buckwheat cake. Because Peshe was too busy to cook and too stingy to hire a servant, Anshel asked Avigdor to dine at his house. Reb Alter Vishkower and his wife disapproved, arguing that it was wrong for the rejected suitor to visit the house of his former fiancée. The town had plenty to talk about. But Anshel cited precedents to show that it was not prohibited by the Law. Most of the townspeople sided with Avigdor and blamed Peshe for everything. Avigdor soon began pressing Peshe for a divorce, and, because he did not want to have a child by such a fury, he acted like Onan, or, as the Gemara translates it: he threshed on the inside and cast his seed without. He confided in Anshel, told him how Peshe came to bed unwashed and snored like a buzz

saw, of how she was so occupied with the cash taken in at the store that she babbled about it even in her sleep.

"Oh, Anshel, how I envy you," he said.

"There's no reason for envying me."

"You have everything. I wish your good fortune were mine—with no loss to you, of course."

"Everyone has troubles of his own."

"What sort of troubles do *you* have? Don't tempt Providence."

How could Avigdor have guessed that Anshel could not sleep at night and thought constantly of running away? Lying with Hadass and deceiving her had become more and more painful. Hadass' love and tenderness shamed her. The devotion of her mother- and father-in-law and their hopes for a grandchild were a burden. On Friday afternoons all of the townspeople went to the baths and every week Anshel had to find a new excuse. But this was beginning to awake suspicions. There was talk that Anshel must have an unsightly birthmark, or a rupture, or perhaps was not properly circumcised. Judging by the youth's years, his beard should certainly have begun to sprout, yet his cheeks remained smooth. It was already Purim and Passover was approaching. Soon it would be summer. Not far from Bechev there was a river where all the yeshiva students and young men went swimming as soon as it was warm enough. The lie was swelling like an abscess and one of these days it must surely burst. Anshel knew she had to find a way to free herself.

It was customary for the young men boarding with their in-laws to travel to nearby cities during the half-holidays in the middle of Passover week. They enjoyed the change, refreshed themselves, looked around for business opportunities, bought books or other things a young man might need. Bechev was not far from Lublin and Anshel persuaded Avigdor to make the journey with her at her expense. Avigdor was delighted at the prospect of being rid

for a few days of the shrew he had at home. The trip by carriage was a merry one. The fields were turning green; storks, back from the warm countries, swooped across the sky in great arcs. Streams rushed toward the valleys. The birds chirped. The windmills turned. Spring flowers were beginning to bloom in the fields. Here and there a cow was already grazing. The companions, chatting, ate the fruit and little cakes that Hadass had packed, told each other jokes, and exchanged confidences until they reached Lublin. There they went to an inn and took a room for two. On the journey, Anshel had promised to reveal an astonishing secret to Avigdor in Lublin. Avigdor had joked: what sort of secret could it be? Had Anshel discovered a hidden treasure? Had he written an essay? By studying the Cabala, had he created a dove? . . . Now they entered the room and while Anshel carefully locked the door, Avigdor said teasingly:

"Well, let's hear your great secret."

"Prepare yourself for the most incredible thing that ever was."

"I'm prepared for anything."

"I'm not a man but a woman," said Anshel. "My name isn't Anshel, it's Yentl."

Avigdor burst out laughing.

"I knew it was a hoax."

"But it's true."

"Even if I'm a fool, I won't swallow this."

"Do you want me to show you?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll get undressed."

Avigdor's eyes widened. It occurred to him that Anshel might want to practice pederasty. Anshel took off the gaberdine and the fringed garment, and threw off her underclothes. Avigdor took one look and turned first white, then fiery red. Anshel covered herself hastily.

"I've done this only so that you can testify at the courthouse. Otherwise Hadass will have to stay a grass widow."

Avigdor had lost his tongue. He was seized by a fit of trembling. He wanted to speak, but his lips moved and nothing came out. He sat down quickly, for his legs would not support him. Finally he murmured:

"How is it possible? I don't believe it!"

"Should I get undressed again?"

"No!"

Yentl proceeded to tell the whole story: how her father, bedridden, had studied Torah with her; how she had never had the patience for women and their silly chatter; how she had sold the house and all the furnishings, left the town, made her way disguised as a man to Lublin, and on the road met Avigdor. Avigdor sat speechless, gazing at the storyteller. Yentl was by now wearing men's clothes once more. Avigdor spoke:

"It must be a dream."

He pinched himself on the cheek.

"It isn't a dream."

"That such a thing should happen to me . . . !"

"It's all true."

"Why did you do it? *Nu*, I'd better keep still."

"I didn't want to waste my life on a baking shovel and a kneading trough."

"And what about Hadass—why did you do that?"

"I did it for your sake. I knew that Peshe would torment you and at our house you would have some peace. . . ."

Avigdor was silent for a long time. He bowed his head, pressed his hands to his temples, shook his head.

"What will you do now?"

"I'll go away to a different yeshiva."

"What? If you had only told me earlier, we could have . . ."

Avigdor broke off in the middle.

"No—it wouldn't have been good."

"Why not?"

"I'm neither one nor the other."

"What a dilemma I'm in!"

"Get a divorce from that horror. Marry Hadass."

"She'll never divorce me and Hadass won't have me."

"Hadass loves you. She won't listen to her father again."

Avigdor stood up suddenly but then sat down.

"I won't be able to forget you. Ever. . . ."

6

According to the Law Avigdor was now forbidden to spend another moment alone with Yentl; yet dressed in the gaberdine and trousers, she was again the familiar Anshel. They resumed their conversation on the old footing:

"How could you bring yourself to violate the commandment every day: 'A woman shall not wear that which pertaineth to a man?'"

"I wasn't created for plucking feathers and chattering with females."

"Would you rather lose your share in the world to come?"

"Perhaps. . . ."

Avigdor raised his eyes. Only now did he realize that Anshel's cheeks were too smooth for a man's, the hair too abundant, the hands too small. Even so he could not believe that such a thing could have happened. At any moment he expected to wake up. He bit his lips, pinched his thigh. He was seized by shyness and could not speak without stammering. His friendship with Anshel, their intimate talk, their confidences, had been turned into a sham and delusion. The thought even occurred to him that Anshel might be a demon. He shook himself as if to cast off a nightmare; yet that power which knows the differ-

ence between dream and reality told him it was all true. He summoned up his courage. He and Anshel could never be strangers to one another, even though Anshel was in fact Yentl. . . . He ventured a comment:

"It seems to me that the witness who testifies for a deserted woman may not marry her, for the Law calls him 'a party to the affair.'"

"What? That didn't occur to me!"

"We must look it up in Eben Ezer."

"I'm not even sure that the rules pertaining to a deserted woman apply in this case," said Anshel in the manner of a scholar.

"If you don't want Hadass to be a grass widow, you must reveal the secret to her directly."

"That I can't do."

"In any event, you must get another witness."

Gradually the two went back to their Talmudic conversation. It seemed strange at first to Avigdor to be disputing holy writ with a woman, yet before long the Torah had reunited them. Though their bodies were different, their souls were of one kind. Anshel spoke in a singsong, gesticulated with her thumb, clutched her sidelocks, plucked at her beardless chin, made all the customary gestures of a yeshiva student. In the heat of argument she even seized Avigdor by the lapel and called him stupid. A great love for Anshel took hold of Avigdor, mixed with shame, remorse, anxiety. If I had only known this before, he said to himself. In his thoughts he likened Anshel (or Yentl) to Bruria, the wife of Reb Meir, and to Yalta, the wife of Reb Nachman. For the first time he saw clearly that this was what he had always wanted: a wife whose mind was not taken up with material things. . . . His desire for Hadass was gone now, and he knew he would long for Yentl, but he dared not say so. He felt hot and knew that his face was burning. He could no longer meet Anshel's eyes. He began to enumerate Anshel's sins and saw that he too was implicated, for he had sat next to Yentl and had touched her

during her unclean days. *Nu*, and what could be said about her marriage to Hadass? What a multitude of transgressions there! Wilful deception, false vows, misrepresentation!—Heaven knows what else. He asked suddenly:

"Tell the truth, are you a heretic?"

"God forbid!"

"Then how could you bring yourself to do such a thing?"

The longer Anshel talked, the less Avigdor understood. All Anshel's explanations seemed to point to one thing: she had the soul of a man and the body of a woman. Anshel said she had married Hadass only in order to be near Avigdor.

"You could have married me," Avigdor said.

"I wanted to study the Gemara and Commentaries with you, not darn your socks!"

For a long time neither spoke. Then Avigdor broke the silence:

"I'm afraid Hadass will get sick from all this, God forbid!"

"I'm afraid of that too."

"What's going to happen now?"

Dusk fell and the two began to recite the evening prayer. In his confusion Avigdor mixed up the blessings, omitted some and repeated others. He glanced sideways at Anshel who was rocking back and forth, beating her breast, bowing her head. He saw her, eyes closed, lift her face to Heaven as though beseeching: You, Father in Heaven, know the truth. . . . When their prayers were finished, they sat down on opposite chairs, facing one another yet a good distance apart. The room filled with shadows. Reflections of the sunset, like purple embroidery, shook on the wall opposite the window. Avigdor again wanted to speak but at first the words, trembling on the tip of his tongue, would not come. Suddenly they burst forth:

"Maybe it's still not too late? I can't go on living with that accursed woman. . . . You. . . ."

"No, Avigdor, it's impossible."

"Why?"

"I'll live out my time as I am. . . ."

"I'll miss you. Terribly."

"And I'll miss you."

"What's the sense of all this?"

Anshel did not answer. Night fell and the light faded. In the darkness they seemed to be listening to each other's thoughts. The Law forbade Avigdor to stay in the room alone with Anshel, but he could not think of her just as a woman. What a strange power there is in clothing, he thought. But he spoke of something else:

"I would advise you simply to send Hadass a divorce."

"How can I do that?"

"Since the marriage sacraments weren't valid, what difference does it make?"

"I suppose you're right."

"There'll be time enough later for her to find out the truth."

The maidservant came in with a lamp but as soon as she had gone, Avigdor put it out. Their predicament and the words which they must speak to one another could not endure light. In the blackness Anshel related all the particulars. She answered all Avigdor's questions. The clock struck two, and still they talked. Anshel told Avigdor that Hadass had never forgotten him. She talked of him frequently, worried about his health, was sorry—though not without a certain satisfaction—about the way things had turned out with Peshe.

"She'll be a good wife," said Anshel. "I don't even know how to bake a pudding."

"Nevertheless, if you're willing. . . ."

"No, Avigdor. It wasn't destined to be. . . ."

It was all a great riddle to the town: the messenger who arrived bringing Hadass the divorce papers; Avigdor's re-

maining in Lublin until after the holidays; his return to Bechev with slumping shoulders and lifeless eyes as if he had been ill. Hadass took to her bed and was visited by the doctor three times a day. Avigdor went into seclusion. If someone ran across him by chance and addressed him, he did not answer. Peshe complained to her parents that Avigdor paced back and forth smoking all night long. When he finally collapsed from sheer fatigue, in his sleep he called out the name of an unknown female—Yentl. Peshe began talking of a divorce. The town thought Avigdor wouldn't grant her one or would demand money at the very least, but he agreed to everything.

In Bechev the people were not used to having mysteries stay mysteries for long. How can you keep secrets in a little town where everyone knows what's cooking in everyone else's pots? Yet, though there were plenty of persons who made a practice of looking through keyholes and laying an ear to shutters, what happened remained an enigma. Hadass lay in her bed and wept. Chanina the herb doctor reported that she was wasting away. Anshel had disappeared without a trace. Reb Alter Vishkower sent for Avigdor and he arrived, but those who stood straining beneath the window couldn't catch a word of what passed between them. Those individuals who habitually pry into other people's affairs came up with all sorts of theories, but not one of them was consistent.

One party came to the conclusion that Anshel had fallen into the hands of Catholic priests, and had been converted. That might have made sense. But where could Anshel have found time for the priests, since he was always studying in the yeshiva? And apart from that, since when does an apostate send his wife a divorce?

Another group whispered that Anshel had cast an eye on another woman. But who could it be? There were no love affairs conducted in Bechev. And none of the young women had recently left town—neither a Jewish woman nor a Gentile one.

Somebody else offered the suggestion that Anshel had been carried away by evil spirits, or was even one of them himself. As proof he cited the fact that Anshel had never come either to the bathhouse or to the river. It is well known that demons have the feet of geese. Well, but had Hadass never seen him barefoot? And who ever heard of a demon sending his wife a divorce? When a demon marries a daughter of mortals, he usually lets her remain a grass widow.

It occurred to someone else that Anshel had committed a major transgression and gone into exile in order to do penance. But what sort of transgression could it have been? And why had he not entrusted it to the rabbi? And why did Avigdor wander about like a ghost?

The hypothesis of Tevel the Musician was closest to the truth. Tevel maintained that Avigdor had been unable to forget Hadass and that Anshel had divorced her so that his friend would be able to marry her. But was such friendship possible in this world? And in that case, why had Anshel divorced Hadass even before Avigdor divorced Peshe? Furthermore, such a thing can be accomplished only if the wife has been informed of the arrangement and is willing, yet all signs pointed to Hadass' great love for Anshel, and in fact she was ill from sorrow.

One thing was clear to all: Avigdor knew the truth. But it was impossible to get anything out of him. He remained in seclusion and kept silent with an obstinacy that was a reproof to the whole town.

Close friends urged Peshe not to divorce Avigdor, though they had severed all relations and no longer lived as man and wife. He did not even, on Friday night, perform the kiddush blessing for her. He spent his nights either at the study house or at the widow's where Anshel had found lodgings. When Peshe spoke to him he didn't answer, but stood with bowed head. The tradeswoman Peshe had no patience for such goings-on. She needed a

young man to help her out in the store, not a yeshiva student who had fallen into melancholy. Someone of that sort might even take it into his head to depart and leave her deserted. Peshe agreed to a divorce.

In the meantime Hadass had recovered, and Reb Alter Vishkower let it be known that a marriage contract was being drawn up. Hadass was to marry Avigdor. The town was agog. A marriage between a man and a woman who had once been engaged and their betrothal broken off was unheard of. The wedding was held on the first Sabbath after Tishe b'Ov, and included all that is customary at the marriage of a virgin: the banquet for the poor, the canopy before the synagogue, the musicians, the wedding jester, the Virtue Dance. Only one thing was lacking: joy. The bridegroom stood beneath the marriage canopy, a figure of desolation. The bride had recovered from her sickness, but had remained pale and thin. Her tears fell into the golden chicken broth. From all eyes the same question looked out: why had Anshel done it?

After Avigdor's marriage to Hadass, Peshe spread the rumor that Anshel had sold his wife to Avigdor for a price, and that the money had been supplied by Alter Vishkower. One young man pondered the riddle at great length until he finally arrived at the conclusion that Anshel had lost his beloved wife to Avigdor at cards, or even on a spin of the Chanukah dreidl. It is a general rule that when the grain of truth cannot be found, men will swallow great helpings of falsehood. (Truth itself is often concealed in such a way that the harder you look for it, the harder it is to find.)

Not long after the wedding, Hadass became pregnant. The child was a boy and those assembled at the circumcision could scarcely believe their ears when they heard the father name his son Anshel.

Translated by MARION MAGID AND ELIZABETH POLLET

enlightened ones and the reformers who imperil the existence of our people have discovered that through blatant unbelief they will not succeed in driving Israel from its faith and from its religion. Therefore they have thrown off their garment of assimilation and put on a cloak of zeal, so that they appear to be zealous on behalf of Judaism. But they are in fact digging a mine beneath our faith, and seeking to lead Israel from beneath the wings of *Schechinah*.

From all that has been said it emerges that the Zionists and their rabbis are in error when they assert decisively that were it not for the Zionists many of our brethren would have

converted. They deceive themselves. The heretics and the transgressors within the camp of Israel do more damage to us than those who have left the community.

Can heretics be regarded as great men? May there not be many like them in Israel! As for us, we need the audacity of holiness and the spirit of self-sacrifice. The counsel to be given to the House of Israel is that they should dissociate from the Zionists and hold themselves apart from this advancing plague. Through the merit of this separation, may we enjoy all the salvations and the comforts and may the Holy One, blessed be He, comfort Zion and build Jerusalem.

NOTES

1. Rabbi Zadok Ha-Cohen Rabinowitz (1823-1900), Hasidic rabbi, known as Zadok Ha-Cohen of Lublin, with a reputation as an outstanding talmudic scholar. Preferring a secluded life of study and devotion, Zadok Ha-Cohen became the spiritual leader of the Hasidim in Lublin after the death of his friend, Rabbi Yehuda Leib Eiger, in 1888. In 1890, following the death of his second

wife, Zadok Ha-Cohen sought to immigrate to Palestine, but was discouraged from doing so by his disciples. The letter presented here was written toward the end of his life.

2. Mishnah, tractate *Sotah* 9:15.

3. Lev. 19:17.

4. Eccles. 11:4.

5. Jer. 9:12.

MAX NORDAU¹

7. Jewry of Muscle

Two years ago, during a committee meeting at the Congress in Basle,² I said: "We must think of creating once again a Jewry of muscles."

Once again! For history is our witness that such a Jewry had once existed.

For too long, all too long have we been engaged in the mortification of our own flesh.

Or rather, to put it more precisely—others did the killing of our flesh for us. Their extraordinary success is measured by hundreds

of thousands of Jewish corpses in the ghettos, in the churchyards, along the highways of medieval Europe. We ourselves would have gladly done without this "virtue" [i.e., the Christian virtue of corporal mortification]. We would have preferred to develop our bodies rather than to kill them or to have them—figuratively and actually—killed by others. We know how to make rational use of our life and appreciate its value. If, unlike most other peoples, we do not conceive of

[physical] life as our highest possession, it is nevertheless very valuable to us and thus worthy of careful treatment. During long centuries we have not been able to give it such treatment. All the elements of Aristotelian physics—light, air, water and earth—were measured out to us very sparingly. In the narrow Jewish street our poor limbs soon forgot their gay movements; in the dimness of sunless houses our eyes began to blink shyly; the fear of constant persecution turned our powerful voices into frightened whispers, which rose in a crescendo only when our martyrs on the stakes cried out their dying prayers in the face of their executioners. But now, all coercion has become a memory of the past, and at least we are allowed space enough for our bodies to live again. Let us take up our oldest traditions; let us once more become deep-chested, sturdy, sharp-eyed men.

This desire of going back to a glorious past finds a strong expression in the name which the Jewish gymnastic club in Berlin has chosen for itself.³ "Bar Kochba" was a hero who refused to know defeat.⁴ When in the end victory eluded him, he knew how to die. Bar Kochba was the last embodiment in world history of a bellicose, militant Jewry. To

evoke the name of Bar Kochba is an unmistakable sign of ambition. But ambition is well suited for gymnasts striving for perfection.

For no other people will gymnastics fulfill a more educational purpose than for us Jews. It shall straighten us in body and in character. It shall give us self-confidence, although our enemies maintain that we already have too much self-confidence as it is. But who knows better than we do that their imputations are wrong. We completely lack a sober confidence in our physical prowess.

Our new muscle-Jews [Muskelljuden] have not yet regained the heroism of our forefathers who in large numbers eagerly entered the sport arenas in order to take part in competition and to pit themselves against the highly trained Hellenistic athletes and the powerful Nordic barbarians. But morally, even now the new muscle-Jews surpass their ancestors, for the ancient Jewish circus fighters were ashamed of their Judaism and tried to conceal the sign of the Covenant by means of a surgical operation,⁵ . . . while the members of the "Bar Kochba" club loudly and proudly affirm their national loyalty.

May the Jewish gymnastic club flourish and thrive and become an example to be imitated in all the centers of Jewish life!

NOTES

1. Max Nordau (1849-1923), physician, avant-garde literary critic, novelist. One of the most controversial and influential authors of his day, he was among Herzl's earliest supporters.

2. Congress in Basle, i.e., the Second Zionist Congress, held in Basle, Switzerland during the summer of 1898.

3. At the Second Zionist Congress, Nordau and Max Mandelstamm. (a Russian ophthalmologist and Zionist leader who supported Herzl) proposed a program to promote the physical fitness of Jewish

youth. In response, the Bar Kochba gymnastic club was founded in Berlin in 1898. Similar clubs were soon established throughout Europe.

4. Bar Kochba, Simeon (d. 135 C.E.) led the Jewish revolt against Hadrian that broke out in 132 C.E.

5. According to Josephus (a Jewish historian), Hellenized Jews, who in accordance with Greek custom wrestled in the nude, would often undergo surgery in order to disguise their circumcision.

N'ima Sassoon Writes Poems

Amalia Kahana-Carmon

Do tears know who sheds them?
And hearts know who tills them?
They are tilled by light entering the turf
And the turf does not know what's within.

—"Lament" by Yehuda Halevi, 1075-1142

Our teacher, Mr. Havdala, said, among other things: "Our pupil N'ima Sassoon has given us great pleasure with her splendid poem, 'Dear Teacher,' which is at the top of the latest issue of our wall-newspaper."

Amalia Kahana-Carmon was born in Kibbutz Ein Harod in 1930. She was raised in Tel Aviv, and she studied philology and library science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She has lived in England and Switzerland, and for many years has resided in Tel Aviv. In 1966 her first collection of stories, *Under One Roof*, was published to great critical acclaim. She has since published four novels, as well as novellas, short stories, and critical essays. Her work has received many of Israel's major awards. She is a three-time recipient of the Prime Minister's Prize for Literature, and in 1994 she was awarded the Bialik Prize.

Now, our whole school, the Tent of Sarah School for Orthodox Girls, would read the poem.

We went up to our classrooms in pairs. I passed teacher Ezekiel, who was standing with the headmistress. I did not know what they were discussing. I could hear him saying in his unique voice, a voice that was full of pith though it was broken, like Louis Armstrong's, "There's nothing to it," and her replying, "Let's see you do it, then," while he answered, "What do you want me to do? Leap about on one leg?" and she replied, "Look who's talking!" And as I hear him being spoken to like that, I feel torn.

Teacher Ezekiel is our form teacher. We have learned that a man should not be joyful among those who are weeping, or weep among those who are rejoicing, nor should he keep awake among those who are sleeping or sleep among those who are awake, etc. Yet teacher Ezekiel sits all day at his desk on the little platform in front of the blackboard, and never raises his eyes from his worksheets, his books, and his registers. Mid-morning break. How was it, for an instant, a dream come true—by chance, was it, or was it absent-mindedness—that he noticed me again for a moment, that the green eyes rested on me. And I could not contain myself. I approached. The sun was beaming through the window, and I was wearing a new summer frock which I thought was full of promise. Teacher Ezekiel was now sitting motionless. As though he was trying to turn his annoyance into good humor. And, I told myself, as though he was braced to receive a blow, and I realized again that all was lost. I walked right past him, at full tilt. I tumbled the stones of the blue plums into the wastepaper basket, as teacher Ezekiel, over there at his post, unwrapped a sandwich and began eating. Reflected in him, sitting there, I see the most handsomely dressed young man of his day, languid, a ballet prince, with the profile of Ivor Novello. And then I understand, no, neither is it like that; but that you are a hard man with an extraordinary gentleness. And I am a silly girl. Sick all year. With a kind of blind determination I have brought on myself, let us say, a certain type of cold. A cold with a high fever. And I don't want to be cured. And I no longer have the power to decide. And I am not happy any more. Not happy. Or sensible any more. Not sensible. And because of you, twice a day, I take the wrong bus.

On two occasions there was no vacant seat, except the one beside him. I sat down beside him.

At the first stop he got up. He offered his seat to a woman, who was not young, yet the wrinkled skin on her sun-tanned chest and arms was quite attractive. She sat down, opened her bag and took out a packet of cigarettes. She struck a match, like a man. One of those feeble matches that snap when you strike them, shoot off at all angles, and drop back to burn a hole in your trousers. But since then, whenever I catch sight of her, I don't take my eyes off her, so as to relive the scene once more:

I turned my head toward him. Teacher Ezekiel is standing clutching the leather loop hanging from the bar above. Other people can see a dark moon of a face; green eyes shine clearly out of the face. And none of these people could imagine what strength this young man has stored up in him. But he is like a boxing champion who wouldn't hurt a fly.

"I'll hold your briefcase for you," I tried to stammer out.

Teacher Ezekiel put his briefcase down on the floor between his shoes, stood over me, and the air between us quivered.

And there was another time. By then he would no longer talk to me.

In front of us sat Mr. Havdala, the teacher whom the girls called Mr. Abdullah behind his back. I see him in my mind's eye shaped in the image of Hillel the sage, a pastor of Israel. Next to Mr. Havdala, a man was sitting upright, looking as though he was asleep, reading a newspaper propped up in front of him. Mr. Havdala, fussily self-important, turned to me and kept up a conversation the whole way:

"You're lucky to have curly hair," he said, "you don't need to comb it."

And then: "What do you do when you get home?"

"Nothing. Read."

"Read. What do you read?"

"Nothing. Daddy's books."

"How's your Daddy been doing lately?"

"Nothing. He's ill."

"So what will happen?"

"Nothing. We're selling the business."

"And what are your plans, little lady?"

"I shall study."

Throughout this conversation teacher Ezekiel was looking out of the window. When we came to his stop, I took a chance. I got up and left the bus.

Teacher Ezekiel stayed in his seat and did not get off.

As I stood on the pavement I could see Mr. Havdala, and as he yawned his face looked as it must have done when he was a baby. The man asleep was still sleeping seated. But teacher Ezekiel was no longer looking outward.

Having gone past his proper stop, he must now really be going home. I tried unsuccessfully to cheer myself up. And I reflected: he will get home. He will put on comfortable clothes. His slippers. His wife will be in her chair by the window. Sometimes when I pass by there I see her. She is older than he is. She's got a dog. She is tiny and fragile, with a mouth drawn in pink, only her throat reveals age, and she sits viewing the street. She takes up half the window, a curtain fills the rest. It is elaborately patterned, and if you look at it closely, you can make out among the netting and webbing the shapes of birds in flight like bats, or birds of paradise at rest. And below their flat is a workshop that specializes in embroidery, drawn-work, and plissé. I saw her once coming out of a shoe shop. On her breast she was wearing a locket with a photograph set in it. Was it teacher Ezekiel's photo? A photo of the dog? Now she will probably get up from her chair, and go to put on her locket for teacher Ezekiel. Only the curtain will be left.

Yet, I, however, am still here. The mirror sky is shimmering over the city like a sheet of water. It is brighter now than at any time of day. Zion Square looks as though it is resting on the bed of a calm, translucent sea. Civilians, soldiers. Through this hour made his by the poet Lebensohn the neon-signs fire their cheerful flashes of light: Have you managed to get home all right, teacher Ezekiel? You deserved to break a leg on the way, teacher Ezekiel. And there are the alternating hues of the traffic lights. Even on the flanks of passing vehicles there are multi-colored lights gleaming like precious stones. It's uncanny, how such brisk movement is possible underwater. Only I, with the weight of that transparent sea in my breast, am choking.

"Are you tired, N'ima Sassoon?" he once said to me. "So many mistakes in one math problem." "July. Called after Julius Caesar." There was all the explicitness in the world, in his wonderful, broken voice, and in his look. Together with the pleading, the hopelessness. Which is also a token. But I no longer knew if even that still existed. Now, that was all I asked to know.

Women were driving their cars, women who had beautiful jaws, arched necks. They all had a hard kind of charm, selfish and sharply whetted. A big embassy car, driven by a uniformed chauffeur, went past, with only a child in it. And the lights in the square, up Ben Yehuda Street, and along Jaffa Road, like those of great cities and seaports that never existed, shining seven times more brightly in this twilight hour, in electric splendor, an alien scarlet of wanton jubilation and thriving prosperity smelted into a red river, in untempered orange of sulfur and gold ore, in untempered green, in pellucid sapphire which shone like the terrible ice, in blue and in deep purple, constantly proclaimed the power of red, green and blue worlds, to which one need only find the path. And perhaps none of it is serious. Perhaps it is just meant to enhance the brief life-span of the pearly evening. It is, the evening, like a transparent leaf, etched with thin tracings of colored veins, the first to fall in the autumn, flitting about like a butterfly a long while. An evening which will never be matched in clarity or purity. Or in its quintessential anguish. And there is this vicious circle: I performed an act, offered a gift. And the gift was declined. Why does he never reprove me for my impertinence? Perhaps he has not yet found the words. Perhaps there is some natural reticence: after all, who is one to tell others what to do. Perhaps he lacks the nerve, hopes it will all sort itself out. Perhaps he hasn't the heart to do this to me. Perhaps he is thinking of himself, and is afraid to lose me. But in my heart I knew it was none of these things. It was simply this: there are those who, without meaning to be, are a torch to show others the way.

After that evening he was careful not to sit near me. Or ask me questions. Or look at me. What else had he left to deny me, I asked myself.

And it is already the end of the school year. The last few days.

Days like weak winter flies, that you could touch even while they are flying around. There is the usual commotion and din of the girls. Desk lids are slammed shut noisily. Benches are dragged along. Yet the air is filled with a slow poison, as though the walls have been smeared with arsenic. The accustomed drabness has some new element in it. Like acrid ammoniac fumes dispersing. Something is draining away. And the girls, who look suddenly overgrown in their blue, childish pinafore uniforms, write keepsakes in each other's albums, prepare in groups for the finals hanging over us, get together on Friday nights at this or that one's home, and then go out together, arms linked, dreaming aloud their visions of what is to come.

None of this has anything to do with me. I take no chances. All my evenings I reserve for teacher Ezekiel, sitting at the iron table on our back verandah. At night the blades of the eucalyptus look like tin leaves. In the dry exhalation of the pine tree leaning over from our neighbors' yard, there is some vague, scented guaranty, cool and quickening like the taste of licorice. Beyond the fence is a stony, rocky slope. The nights are lukewarm. In the housing estate on the shoulder of the hill across the wadi, dogs are barking. Its lights are like holes punched out so that you can peer at the fire under the earth's thin rind. Teacher Ezekiel does not come. He never comes. I draw closer to the fence. Some other teacher Ezekiel begins ascending into the space that is between the heavens and the earth. He gazes everywhere, cloaked in a blazing garment. And every night, as I read out the terrible letters inscribed on the crown on his forehead, my heart fails within me, as I know the moment has come, and I can hardly keep from falling into a swoon. Teacher Ezekiel vanishes behind the curtain of the sky. He has reached the place where glory is the bread of the dead. And grief is their water. Streams of suffering, that bear affliction and sorrow like myriad huge leaves in their currents, form their boundaries. All this, I, N'ima Sassoon, have written in the exercise book of my poems, from which I submitted the poem called "Dear Teacher" to the wall-newspaper of our school.

Yet all day, blear-eyed, it seems, I keep muttering to myself. All day I am in his presence, at a distance. It is a teacher Ezekiel of flesh and blood. As though in a dream, he comes in, sits down, gets up at the bell, leaves, comes back with the bell, sits down again. Moving

with the conviction of a sleepwalker, with the astonishing trust of a piece of seaweed flung around by the flow. I for a long time now have been unaware of what is happening to me. Teacher Ezekiel comes toward me. He stops at my desk:

"N'ima Sassoon, the bell has gone. Lessons are over," he says, about to leave.

"Teacher Ezekiel," I cry out to him, abasing myself for the millionth time, though the first in weeks. "I wanted to tell you. Something odd happened to me yesterday."

One elbow is resting on the windowsill, and his other arm hugs its opposite shoulder. Teacher Ezekiel stands still, as though he is observing the window frame, or the exposed electric wiring, or the distempered walls. Or is it the hills, the misty eventide hills, like traces of tidemarks, layer upon layer and against the sky, while a distant road winds and rises in the mist as into a future.

But Alfandary, the school janitor, comes in to ask for keys. Teacher Ezekiel does not linger to hear what happened to me yesterday.

Teacher Ezekiel does not turn back to me. Over there by his desk he squats. His pale-blue shirt is taut on his back, his belt almost snapping, as he slips a wedge of folded wastepaper under one of the legs of the desk, to stop it wobbling. And for some reason, seeing him so young, so well-knit, that which I have discovered in him flashes out and pierces me afresh. The wild cub fastened to my heart for many days now, whose claws are in my flesh, frets to rub, and strains at its ropes.

Last try. I went and stood beside him.

Teacher Ezekiel continues staring complacently at his desk's firmness. Fly, O bird, away to your mountains. But instead: "Yesterday I was walking down the street," I say, with lips that seem to be groping, to the back of the neck of the man pretending to be occupied with some meaningless task.

Teacher Ezekiel rests his hand on the flap of his desk, and straightens himself, non-committally.

But illusion has a sham-sweet taste:

"I was wandering along the street," I continued, and having had no sign of encouragement I wasn't sure how to, "and there was a

woman there, all untidy. Her head had recently been shaved, and the hair was just starting to grow again, her clothes were all in tatters, and her lips were very swollen. She was trying to strike up a conversation with two small children, who looked as though they were terrified of her. 'I'm mad,' she said to them, like in confidence. 'And she's mad, too.' She pointed at me, and I was amazed. I asked myself how she could have known. But in fact, I was asking you. Because I had this urgent feeling, the sense that this was in direct line with something that turned topsy-turvy," that how is it that I am here, for you to notice me, and you don't, I wished to say but didn't, "or did I make it all up."

"Make it up, make what up, little girl?"

"You ask make what up. That shows it is all made up." My spirits drooped.

And so the school year might have ended: teacher Ezekiel clutching at the sides of his desk, his face the face of an enemy, "I asked what you made up to avoid the question. You didn't make it up," he says, and I stare at him thunderstruck.

From that day onward teacher Ezekiel has behaved as though my place in class were empty. It would never have occurred to me, not even in a dream, to tell him about my poem "Dear Teacher." But it has happened, like this. It is during a lesson and I am sitting listlessly, on my own in my place at the back of the class. "Rabbi Sa'adya Gaon was a very strong-headed man, which did not make for an easy life," teacher Ezekiel was declaring. Idly, I try to sketch his features: the ears that seem attached not quite in place, the lovely green eyes, clear, with a darker rim around the iris. I try to capture them and fail. I give up in despair. But to leave no room for doubt, I have written at the top of the page "Teacher Ezekiel," unaware that the lesson has ended and that teacher Ezekiel has approached and is standing over me.

"N'ima Sassoon, the bell has gone. Lessons are over."

He had not spoken to me for many days, and now he was speaking softly, leaning on the back of my chair, and on my desk, inclining forward a little, to look at my exercise book. Hurriedly, I covered up my sketch, my handiwork, with both hands. But teacher Ezekiel straightened up, reached out for the exercise book and my hands fell away. Then, all shattered—and only because I felt all

shattered—without knowing why or wherefore, I said:

"I submitted a poem to the school paper."

Teacher Ezekiel, still examining the sketch, asked preoccupied: "Was it accepted?"

"Mr. Havdala liked it. The headmistress, too, stopped me and praised it. But, Teacher, the credit should not go to me. I had a very special subject. I called the poem 'Dear Teacher.'"

At once teacher Ezekiel dropped my exercise book. He went back to his desk and gathered up his worksheets, his books and his registers, without lifting his head.

I followed him.

"And if you care to read the poem, you will see you are wrong about me," I whispered.

I do not now whether it was my whispering which moved him. I do not know, indeed, what he meant when he answered: "Maybe it's you who are wrong."

"I wish it were," I whispered, as he picked up his briefcase and fled.

A raised threshold, extended arches, each with the verse "For thy Law is my delight" in iron open-work, over an elongated Star of David, rivets in the shape of large-petalled flowers, fluted rods, and a kind of butcher's hook shaped like a clenched fist, as a knocker: the massive gate of our school. One of the doors in the gate, incredibly, is fitted with a smaller door, that has a peephole. Like a toy broody hen, with a broody hen inside it, and, inside that an egg. We were standing, both of us, the next day, which was a Friday, at the bus stop by the gate. Teacher Ezekiel could not have known. As I watched him going out, striding, as he did, rather like a sailor, I summoned up my courage and went out in step with him. Now teacher Ezekiel had assumed the impatient look of someone waiting for the bus to arrive, and was lightly tapping his briefcase against his knees. But it looked as though a shadow was hovering round the edges of his mouth. He must have caught it from me. I was possessed, and my heart was pounding so much:

"Teacher," I said, "ever since yesterday I have talked nothing but rubbish to you, and I can only regret it. But now I would like to ask you a question. Just one. And you will tell me the truth, won't you?"

And I let cross my lips the notion over which in class, and in my bed at night, I have been eating my heart out: teacher Ezekiel is no longer concerned about me, he is concerned with Bathsheba. He always treats her so well. (The idea! Bathsheba is as black as the devil. And it wasn't Bathsheba that I wanted to talk about.)

Teacher Ezekiel looked quite taken aback.

"A new caper. Bathsheba Hayun is it? Why Bathsheba Hayun, of all people? What a surprise. As if things aren't complicated enough without that. No one gets special treatment. Neither Bathsheba Hayun, nor anyone else. Get this clear: there's no special treatment for anyone."

"Why Bathsheba Hayun. I must be having hallucinations now. It must be my imagination," I sighed, and teacher Ezekiel gave me a brisk look. But I added, "I've got another recurring hallucination. Generally, I know you're like everyone else, but sometimes—and this is the hallucination—I think you are different. Apart. Singled out. One more question. Please, just one. Tell me, teacher Ezekiel, are you really singled out?"

The last girls to leave were passing us. "Yesterday I went to the pictures. All of a sudden, a tiger. It sees Jane. Jane starts saying 'The Lord-is-my-shepherd-I-shall-not-want. He-maketh-me-to-lie-down-in-green-pastures. He-leadeth-me-beside-the-still-waters....' Then suddenly: Tarzan. Leaps from the treetop on to the tiger's back. Strangles it. Jane puts her hand on the dead tiger and says, 'This fur coat.' Tarzan says, 'Coat. What-that?' Jane says, 'Never mind. A barbarian trimming.' Tarzan says...."

As usual, teacher Ezekiel takes his time before answering.

"I don't think I'm singled out. But everyone is unique to himself. So I probably don't qualify as a witness."

What was the spell cast over us that moment? Like the innocent moon, waxing and rising. Generosity and goodwill surround us shield-like. The heart rests from its battering. What was devoured is made whole. And for a moment it is as though I too come near the secret which makes the faint-hearted heroic.

A street urchin blowing pan-pipes made of slate went past, stuffed the instrument in his pocket, and bent to pick up a cigarette end from the gutter. He stuck it in his mouth with a very grown-up air. In

the distance we could see the bus approaching, lurching from side to side. And I said:

"Teacher, special treatment or not, for me you will always be, how shall I put it, one, unique, and I am so happy that I am lucky enough to know that someone like you exists. I don't know how to say it in words. So I tried to express it in writing."

Till that moment I did not know whether I dared show him my exercise book of poems which I had brought for him. Now I propped my satchel against one of the doors in our school-gate, against the identical copies of a rabbinic proclamation, laid out in thickly clustered lines of print, like samples of type-face, all ranges, all sizes. A manifesto denouncing some disgraceful conduct, terrible enough, it says, to make ears ring at the sound of it. And a condemnation: "Their house is rich and nothing lacks / But mice will dance upon their backs." I tried to unfasten the catch but could not manage it. I felt ashamed that he might notice my fingers trembling. Teacher Ezekiel smiled a little smile, and assuming I meant to take out my purse, rested his briefcase between his shoes, and opened my satchel for me. A joint enterprise. Like two people with a common purpose. But I took out the exercise book, and proffered it to him without looking at his face.

A father, on his way home, got off the bus, and halted: his small offspring was running to greet him, baring his chest that was spotted and scrawled over with a ball-point pen, exclaiming proudly, "Look, tattoo!" I left teacher Ezekiel, and started making my way home on foot. The toddlers had moved on to the pavement out of the way of the bus, abandoning their dust castles that had matchbox balconies and date-stones instead of flags, and approaches made out of wooden splinters laid out crookedly. One infant in a wooden crate was making believe he was a motor car, and his lips were working at the speed of electric fan blades. A schoolboy was bowling a hoop along, running after it. A young bride, in thick stockings, sleeves down to her elbows, her hair tied up in a kerchief, passed by, carrying a basket on her arm. Her face was freckled, and like milk. There was a light shining in her eyes. A little girl was carrying a broad tray on her head, with two Sabbath loaves and assorted pieces of dough on it, toward the bakery. She was taking a short-cut across an empty building site, that had only

some derelict foundations on it, a signpost that a Talmudical College was shortly to be erected there, and piles of rubbish. A newspaper was fastened to the side of a kiosk by a thumb tack, and a man drinking orange juice was standing reading it. Above the newspaper was pinned an announcement telling of a most sorrowfully arousing oration to be delivered at eight o'clock, European time, by an exalted member of the rabbinical court, at a memorial service for a distinguished rabbi who had been killed in a road accident. There was a sign saying, "Ice Cream—Family Size—To Take Away." And on the marble counter, a picture of a red watermelon cut in half. Beside it, like a reflection, a real red watermelon, halved. Behind my back I could hear: "I met him in the street. He said, 'What's this, going about now without a hat?' So I answered, 'Just show me where in the Bible it says you must keep your head covered.' 'Heretic!' he screamed." In a backyard children were jeering, "Run-away-cowardly-cow," and a tearful babyish voice cried, "I'm not a cow."

A delicatessen with cuts of cured beef, minced meat, potato-salad, and borscht in tureens, in the sloping refrigerator in the shop window. A small sign with an arrow, pointing to the public baths. A large sign with an arrow, pointing to the charitable institution of Rabbi Meir the Miracle-Worker. A fruit and vegetable store. Crates outside. Spinach leaves. The aroma of over-ripe bananas with a hint of vanilla in it. The aroma of ripe melon and guava, like sweat. A dumpy woman, holding a brown paper bag with pears in it, and counting her money as though she were telling slanders. Then suddenly workmen pounding at the pavement with pneumatic drills. Their muscles jerking, as though in the throes of seizures. And suddenly they break off. Men shouldering a load that is visibly dear to them: An Ark of the Covenant. "And I'll tell you this: the boundary line between the tribe of Benjamin and the tribe of Judah must have run along Jaffa Road," asserts one first lieutenant to another first lieutenant, "that is to say along King David Street, past Rosh Rehavia and the Bezalel buildings, Mazkeret Moshe, Mahane Yehuda market, and Jaffa Road as far as Mei Naphtoa. Romema was the highest point. The Tenth Roman Legion, 'Arteniz,' was stationed where the National Assembly Hall is now." Through a barred window can be seen a mysterious hall, looking most fitting for an orthodox Burial Society. There is a black

varnished grandfather clock in there, with Hebrew letters instead of numbers, and a copper pendulum.

A labyrinth of human nesting places. On lower, middle and upper levels. With countless partitions, and outside stairways, as steep as ladders. A burnished frying-pan rests on a window sill. Hard, green tomatoes are ranged on a window sill. A starched curtain is fastened with a light blue ribbon. In the darkness of a corridor gleams the red eye of an electric boiler. An upper beam of a door with a plant pot hanging from it in a cascade of violet-colored leaves. On a sofa by a wall, a woman is lying, with medicine jars and a glass and spoon on the radio beside her. One door of the wardrobe is not shut properly, and the girl at the table doing her homework is tucking her hair behind her ear. On a bench in front of a doorway a big girl is feeding a baby, who is darting out his lips like a baby bird. And now there is the Yemenite synagogue in a cellar: carpets striped in many colors, benches, cushions, and an old man snoozing, with a scrap of paper sticking to his cracked lip, while under the pierced beaten tin chandelier a small boy is waiting with infinite patience.

And I reflected: pick any street. Add some indefinable quality to it. Is it only by the power of sight—the vision of aspiration in eyeless things, humble things, struggling to be realized? I shall atone for them. And I reflected: an enchanting life. All in all, a mountain. Swarming with people, coming in and out like ants, making their living in the bowels of the earth. But each one of them knows: Jerusalem, that art builded as a city that is compact together—and it is Jerusalem where I am. How singular, how wondrous, how privileged. To be so close to the central pivot of things. What a rare privilege, indeed. Everyone senses the miracle in his heart. But I, please God, when I grow up, will find out how to say this miracle, all the miracles, in writing. I have to. Otherwise, my life is no life.

On Sunday I set out early for school.

Coming through the wide, vaulted entrance hall, with its marble plaque in everlasting memory of the charity of the virtuous Mistress Estella Assa blessed shall she be above women in the tents who laid the foundations of and established this house as a sacred memorial to her righteous mother Mistress Sarah who perished in the earthquake at Kirkagac near the town of Izmir, there was teacher Ezekiel at the

other end of the corridor coming through a side door.

Seeing me, he veered into a small side corridor, and did not appear till the bell. Perhaps he had something to attend to there.

Lessons were over. Each girl had up-ended her chair on her desk. Everyone had gone.

"Teacher, about the poems. Forgive me, I did not know. This morning you seemed shocked, so to speak."

Teacher Ezekiel turned to look at me, and stayed silent. And as if he had counted to ten, replied, like an actor who had rehearsed his part:

"Your poems. I started to read them. I must have read about two pages and then I fell asleep."

I am not here, I told myself. I am on the distant road that winds up to the hills. A pool of stagnant water, like a gray lake, the color of olive leaves. Rocks at the roadside. Clefts in a tree trunk. Olive trees. The meager strips of land at the base of the hill are narrow furrows of plowed, curving lines. Low fences of heaped-up stones. Heavy clusters of dark grapes swelling in the lap of the outspread, emerald leaves, clinging to the wire. A mulberry tree. Dark cypresses. And it is already autumn. The air is laden, glittering. There is a mercury sheen on everything. On the skyline there is a row of aged pines, disheveled, drooping. Their foliage touches the sky. In the valleys the numbers of the turned-over fields increase. I shall not see the standing corn. For I shall not pass this way again. I shall no longer see Jerusalem. The road winds up and up. Now there is a gray sky, with torn strips of red and very dark gray in it. I am carried, as on an escalator, toward a city. At the end of the street the sun was setting. People were hurrying toward it. People were coming away from it. As though they were coming away from a fire. I who am being swept along at the edge of the pavement, have my hands over my breast, like someone who has lost her child. Gradually, the sky grew all lit up, spilling over the earth its blood-like radiance. The radiance of the End of Days. Its thick glow lasting for a long time. Only the needling rows of the street lamps, spaced out at neat intervals, like a coiling serpent of light, pierced and wounded the russet glow. Until nothing remained except the cloud stallions, galloping on two legs, across the orange horizon. Now people's faces are draped with knotted cloths to cover

the eyes that saw. Then there are no more people. Only the stallions of darkness, stallions of the valley of the shadow, stallions of great gloom, stallions of hail, stallions of iron, stallions of mist. The road ran through winter, emerged and reached the bridges. It is noon. And flames are rising and leaping between each bridge and bridge, with great smoke and swirling of cinder dust. My hands are over my eyes.

By chance, was it, or was it absent-mindedness. Teacher Ezekiel is sitting there eating his sandwich. Since morning, some of his hair has shifted to the wrong side, and he looks as though he's playing one of the earlier pioneers of the American West. And in this novelty is an unlooked-for freshness, piquant charm. The handsome cheekbones, the chin, look as though they have been newly carved.

Someone comes up to him with her book. She tells him: "Can't get the hang of this." He takes out his pencil. Points to an earlier passage. "And this, you get? Read it. See if you get this." The patience, the impermeable remoteness. A man totally detached, governed only by hidden, unknown summons. How long ago had I once plucked up courage and said to him, blushing and helpless, "Teacher, you should tell your barber from me to make a better job of it next time," and he felt the back of his clipped head awkwardly and gave a little smile. Long, long ago. When he could still say, passing among the desks and catching sight of the towering palace I had drawn in the margin of my exercise book: "In an excellent neighborhood. Comfortable three-roomed flat. Easy terms."

I finished tumbling out the plum stones. I went back to my seat. Through the window came the counting up voices of the little girls, playing with jump ropes. Bathsheba came into the classroom, and began conferring secretly with the other girls. My heart flutters. It's about my poem. The chestnut, apricot, and peach faces are assessing, examining, murderously. Now it occurred to me, even the headmistress had been speaking to me with great compassion, as though I were ill. And this morning, as she stood there with teacher Ezekiel, as I passed by them, she stared at me and at teacher Ezekiel, and again at me and at teacher Ezekiel. Only Mr. Havdala is color-blind. I folded my napkin. "No, the wormwood tree is not a tree with worms," teacher Ezekiel was replying in the even-tempered voice. "It's a kind

of bitter herb. Well then, why precisely wormwood? I don't know. He is a writer. He writes what he feels like." And he went on, "We are concerned only with the idea."

In the corridor I passed dear old Mr. Havdala. Mr. Havdala put his hand on my head. "We must, and please God, we will, send the poem to the papers, to the *Blast of the Ram's Horn*," and talking to someone over my shoulder, he said with pride, "The whole staff-room agrees. N'ima Sassoon is going to be a poet." Now I could see who had been coming up behind me. It was teacher Ezekiel. But teacher Ezekiel did not reply, and walked on.

As soon as Mr. Havdala let me go, I hurried after him. "Teacher, I would like to talk to you."

Teacher Ezekiel shook his head, refusing. He strode on, laughed, and said, wildly gesticulating, unusual for him: "What a morning. Like nothing on earth."

"What does it matter, teacher," I pleaded. "Look. Just now when you laughed and talked with your hands, I didn't recognize you. You were like Bathsheba and the rest of the girls. You were like a man who is shown a picture of, let's say, a statue of Venus, and he giggles and points and says, 'Look, Venus isn't wearing anything.' But that doesn't matter, either. And I told you, Mr. Havdala and the headmistress spoke well of the poem. And that doesn't matter either. It was nice to hear. But I only wanted your opinion, because, 'they are tilled by light entering.' Still, I am not asking."

"N'ima Sassoon. A girl who is altogether too clever for me." Now he stopped. Like a man carved out of chalk, like a pillar of salt, with white lips, and the shadow settled round his mouth, he said, "Cleverness is a real virtue. But it's only one of many. And not one of the most important. And another thing, it isn't always easy to tell, even for you, when or why a man laughs. Besides, you keep pressing me to tell you something. You must see that I can't. I can't," and here he rebelled, "and I don't want to."

Hurt and humiliated, my self-respect means nothing to me: "Why?"

"Because it is not done," he concluded. He pursed his lips.

A hard man. With an extraordinary gentleness. A hard man. Even in hell you would not burn.

"Fine," I said. To my own astonishment, I pointed to the staff-room. "You can go. You're free to go."

"I go this way," he said quietly, and pointed angrily in the opposite direction.

I did not stir. Teacher Ezekiel walked away. But then he stopped, turned his head, shot me a ferocious look, and walked on.

"Teacher," I hurried after him, again, "'They are tilled by light entering the turf / And the turf does not know what's within.' Oh, teacher."

I do not know if he heard. Because while I was still speaking, he turned to me:

"Today, it's school. Tomorrow, life. Listen, and bear this in mind. Limits are set. We are not living in the days when there was no king in Israel, and every man did that which was right in his own eyes. A certain N'ima Sassoon, a certain Ezekiel Da Silva. Will they please stick to the rules. That's how it is here. And that's how we want it." And he turned away.

Oh, my heart seethed within me. Oh, I told myself, if he should bring me my exercise book I would tell him, "Do you see that trash can over there—fling it in there." Oh, I wish I had never written the poems, I told myself, and I couldn't hold back my sobs. The title of a play I had once seen advertised on a billboard came back to me, *The Taming of the Shrew*. And the sleeve of a record album in a shop window, a picture of a whip decked with roses. Then, all at once, I was in alarm at a sudden recognition, as though plucked up by my hair and lifted onto another plane, my eyes struck by flashes of light. It has been spoken. The secret that makes the faint-hearted heroic. I already knew it. I have always known it. How could I not have known I knew it.

"And the Lord answered Job from the whirlwind ... where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding. Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest ... for who shut up the sea with doors, when it brake forth ... the cloud the garment thereof, and thick darkness a swaddlingband for it. And brake up for it my decreed place, and set up bars and doors. And said, Hitherto shalt thou come, but no farther: and here shall thy proud waves be stayed.... Where is the way where light dwelleth? and as for

darkness, where is the place thereof.... That's how it is here. And that's how we want it." With the terror of soaring, which for an instant was touch and go, the light that had once begun to break forth like the innocent moon, waxing and rising, now became a blinding glare.

Halfway along teacher Ezekiel stopped in his tracks. Swung round. Came back toward me.

What are the strings that keep tugging at us? He walked. I hurried toward him. He walked. Stopped. Walked. I did not stir. Hurried toward him. He stopped. He walked again. I stood still. He walked, then spun round again. Started coming back. What is the flute we dance to? Now he was standing still, not knowing what to say. Nor did I know what to say. I rubbed my eyes with my fist. Teacher Ezekiel looked at my new frock. "You have got thinner, N'ima Sassoon, you've lost weight," he finally let out in a poor voice, making for the staff-room, crestfallen. I stood where I was, and saw him go in and sit down at the big table covered with a velvet cloth. He sat alone, apart, underneath the oil-painted mural, which showed the biblical tree that was pleasant to the sight with a scroll saying "It is a tree of life for them who put their trust in it" drawn like a curling ribbon below its roots. Someone was describing something. Someone said, "Aspera bré." The books are locked up in a bookcase delicately wrought with iron: *The Duties of the Heart*, *The Book of Principles*, *The Correction of the Soul*, *Examination of the Universe*. Does anyone read them? Sitting on his own, teacher Ezekiel was toying aimlessly with the large, square, china ashtray, the one with the crest and inscription "Palace Hotel" stamped on it in blue. He sat like someone on whose head the blow has finally fallen. His hair shifted to the wrong side now had a touch of mockery in it. Alfandary came in, bringing him a demi-tasse of Turkish coffee. Asleep among those who were awake, awake among those who were asleep, teacher Ezekiel worked his lips in Alfandary's direction, and without looking drew the demi-tasse toward him. But his hand did not let go of the ashtray, did not stop. Oh, don't dear teacher, please don't. There is an enormous wall of water suspended before the event, any event. Now suspended, now falling, this way or that. Which way has it fallen? A moment of birth. What has been born? And if all the sky were parchment, the whole world scribes, and all the forests quills,

they could not write down all I have learned from my teachers. "Albert," called the headmistress to teacher Albert, though she turned to look at the door. I quickly slipped away to avoid being seen. And the flute is still blowing. The spirit strives to follow, comprehend, the melody. My ring is in your nose, the bit is between your teeth, and still the spirit yearns.

He never gave back my exercise book. I do not know what became of it. Perhaps he burned it.

I bought a new one.

In the evening I draw a chair up to the iron table on the verandah. A most precious moon is traveling across the sky. Jerusalem slumbers. In me alone phantoms perform. Flying, they reel and wheel: image after image rises, and alters without sound, only with movement and gesture. They plead for their lives, for the stress, the dazzle, the glowing halo, the breath of life of the living, bleeding moment. To rescue it. To redeem it. In safe-keeping. Before everything vanishes, departs from the region of light to the region of darkness.

We have learned, over the bed of King David a lyre hung, and when midnight came the north wind blew and caused it to play by itself. And King David rose and immersed himself in the study of the Law till the morning star appeared in the sky.

But I, with a faltering pen, scribble down and stumble and start again:

"Our teacher, Mr. Havdala, said among other things...."

1966

Translated by Arthur Jacobs

Questions for Discussion

1. Amalia Kahana-Carmon sets N'ima Sassoon's story in a religious girls' school. Why? How do the school's moral teachings¹ emerge in N'ima's thoughts? How does the school itself remind N'ima of the behavior that is expected of her?
2. The author uses a richly lyrical prose that interweaves biblical and religious allusions² with candid sensuality. Show how the Jewish and the sensual elements work within the story.
3. The images of water and fire here represent the passions that must be dammed or extinguished. Show how these images are used in the story.
4. Read chapter 38 of the Book of Job. How is God's response to Job pertinent to teacher Ezekiel's rebuke ("Listen, and bear this in mind. Limits are set.... That's how it is here.")? How do God's words and teacher Ezekiel's words coalesce in N'ima's thought? Do you find this an appropriate use of the Book of Job?

1. The titles of the four books mentioned at the close of the story are particularly suggestive. These books are moral treatises written by four of the great medieval Jewish philosophers. *The Duties of the Heart*, written approximately 1080 CE by Bahya ibn Pakuda of Spain, stresses the Jew's inner ethical obligations. *The Book of Principles*, by Joseph Albo of Castile, completed in 1425 CE, enumerates the articles of Jewish faith. *The Correction of the Soul* was written by Solomon ibn Gabirol of Spain in approximately 1045 CE; the English translation of the title is commonly given as *The Improvement of the Moral Qualities*. *The Examination of the Universe*, written by HaPenini (Jedaiah ben Abraham Bedersi) of Provence in the early fourteenth century CE, uses florid prose and rich imagery to show the benefits of intellectual and religious pursuits. Also suggestive is the reference to Rabbi Sa'adya Gaon, 882-942, head of the *yeshivah* (academy) in Sura, Babylonia. Sa'adya was greatly influenced by contemporary interpretations of Plato and Aristotle, and he was the first to comprehensively describe Jewish thought in rational terms. As "a very strong-headed man" governing one of the foremost Jewish institutions of his day, he became embroiled in extensive debates, so that he did not have "an easy life."

2. Several passages are direct quotations from the Bible: "For thy law is my delight," Psalms 119:77; "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters," Psalms 23:1-2; "Jerusalem, that art builded as a city that is compact together," Psalms 122:3; "there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes," Judges 17:6; 21:25; "The Lord answered Job," etc., Job 38; "a tree of life," Proverbs 3:18.

5. Is N'ima's contact with reality distorted? If so, in what ways? Is she, as she asks, "mad"?
6. N'ima's artistic and psychological maturation bursts forth as the story reaches its end, with "the light that had once begun to break forth like the innocent moon" becoming "a blinding glare." The rejection by teacher Ezekiel leads N'ima not to insanity or to despair but to a knowledge of her worth as an artist, so that in the final paragraphs, she dares to compare herself, albeit humbly, to King David.³ Show how the author prepares us for this climax.
7. "N'ima Sassoon Writes Poems" is enriched by depictions of the streets and people of Jerusalem. Re-read several of these scenes, and note which details N'ima chooses to record. What thematic and literary significance do these descriptions of Jerusalem have?⁴
8. N'ima Sassoon feels that writing is, for her, like a religious calling: "Everyone senses the miracle [that is Jerusalem] in his heart. But I, please God, when I grow up, will find out how to say this miracle, all the miracles, in writing. I have to. Otherwise, my life is no life." Similar views of the artist are common in modern Western society. What is your own view? Is the artist's need to produce art analogous to a religious calling? If so, how do women's responses to the calling differ from men's?
9. Adolescent girls sometimes feel a painfully intense affection for their teachers. What is your own experience? Have you felt such adoration for a teacher? Have your friends? Your daughter(s)? How would you rate Ezekiel da Silva in handling the situation? What was the outcome in your own case? What behavior is appropriate? Have you ever been in teacher Ezekiel's position yourself? How would you rate your own behavior?

3. The story of King David's lyre is told in the Babylonian Talmud, *Berakot* 3b.

4. For instance, in the description of Zion Square at dusk, N'ima imagines that the city is under water, watches the neon signs "fire their cheerful flashes," sees the multi-colored traffic lights, and mentions Micah Joseph Lebensohn, 1828-1852, a Romantic poet, born in Vilna, who wrote on biblical and historical themes, on the longing for Zion, on nature, and on love. Images of fire, water, and light are used symbolically throughout the short story, and the reference to the great Hebrew poet presages N'ima's future artistic realization.

10. "N'ima Sassoon Writes Poems" depicts a universal theme, one which could be read in translation by readers anywhere in the world. Nonetheless, allusions to Jewish literature, culture, and ethical teachings give the story its deepest meaning. Which aspects of the story are universally appealing and which aspects are intrinsically Jewish?

Program Suggestions

1. The staff and students at N'ima Sassoon's school represent the spectrum of Israeli Sephardic society.⁵ Invite a scholar of Hebrew literature or of Sephardic culture to discuss the story. How do the characters' names allude to their roles? Does Mr. Havdala in any way differentiate between sacred and profane, or is his name ironic? (The *havdalah* ceremony at the end of Shabbat differentiates between the sacred time of the Sabbath and the profane time of the rest of the week.)
2. Analyze one or two passages from the story in depth, discussing Judaic references as well as allusions to Western literature and contemporary culture. How do the allusions work together with the plain meaning of the text? The excerpt below is given as one example; an in-depth exploration of almost any of the lyrical passages in "N'ima Sassoon Writes Poems" would yield a remarkable web of Jewish and Western sources.

"Teacher Ezekiel does not come. He never comes. I draw closer to the fence. Some other teacher Ezekiel begins ascending into the space that is between the heavens and the earth. He gazes everywhere, cloaked in a blazing garment. And every night, as I read out the terrible letters inscribed on the crown on his forehead, my heart fails within me, as I know the moment has come, and I can hardly keep from falling into a swoon. Teacher Ezekiel vanishes behind the curtain of the sky. He has reached

5. In addition, the lessons and books mentioned in the story frequently allude to the teachings of the great medieval Sephardic rabbis. And the exclamation "Aspera bré," which N'ima overhears near the end of the story, means "Wait!" or "Hold it!" in the Judeo-Spanish language.

the place where glory is the bread of the dead. And grief is their water. Streams of suffering, that bear affliction and sorrow like myriad huge leaves in their currents, form their boundaries."

First, what is the literal meaning of the passage? Does N'ima imagine teacher Ezekiel as the prophet Ezekiel? Is this a vision? A dream? Is N'ima creating a sexual fantasy—as suggested by "the moment has come" and "falling into a swoon"? Second, the excerpt is richly allusive. (A) "The space that is between the heavens and the earth" refers to Ezekiel 8:3. Fire imagery (like the "blazing garment") is prominent in the vision of the prophet Ezekiel (chapters 1 and 8) and in the verses of the Merkabah mystics—a school of Jewish mysticism in the early talmudic period that drew upon the imagery of Ezekiel. For N'ima, Ezekiel is no longer her teacher, but has become "some other" Ezekiel who ascends upward, assuming awesome, near-divine proportions. (B) "Cloaked in a blazing garment" is also somewhat reminiscent of Psalm 104:2, as is "the curtain of the sky." The Psalm extols the natural world as the work of God, which again hints at the mixture of earthiness and spirituality in N'ima's attitude toward teacher Ezekiel. (C) The "terrible letters" refer to the Tetragrammaton (YHWH), the name of God, which is believed to have ultimate power. The crown most likely refers to the High Priest of the Temple. Again, the images are of holiness and power. (D) The blazing cloak also alludes to one of the trials of Hercules, a fiery shirt that Hercules was compelled to wear. The parallel to teacher Ezekiel is clear. (E) The water imagery of the concluding lines is reminiscent of Danté's vision in *The Inferno*. Here the images are of unending grief and sorrow, which form the boundaries that separate N'ima from teacher Ezekiel.

Apples from the Desert

Savyon Liebrecht

All the way from the Orthodox quarter of Sha'arei Hessed in Jerusalem to the great stretch of sand where the driver called out "Neve Midbar" and looked for her in his rear-view mirror, Victoria Abravanel—her heart pounding and her fists clenched—had only one thing on her mind. She took some bread in brown paper and an apple with a rotten core out of her string bag and joined the blessing on the fruit to the prayer for travel, as prescribed. Her eyes were fixed on the yellowing landscape spread out in front of her—and her heart was fixed on her rebellious daughter Rivka who left the Orthodox neighborhood six months ago and went to live on a kibbutz of secular Jews. Now, Victoria had found out from her sister Sara that Rivka was sharing a room with a boy, sleeping in his bed and living as his wife.

Savyon Liebrecht was born in Munich, Germany in 1948, the child of Holocaust survivors, and came to Israel as an infant. She began writing seriously at age 18, while serving in the Israeli army, and later studied philosophy and literature at Tel Aviv University. Her work, however, failed to attract a publisher until, at age 33, she began attending a weekly writing workshop led by Amalia Kahana-Carmon, who gave one of her stories to an editor. Savyon Liebrecht has published three collections of short stories, and has also written scripts for television. She lives in Tel Aviv with her husband and two children.

survivors), Cynthia Ozick's "Rosa," and Shulamith Hareven's "Twilight"¹ all contrast sharply with "La Promenade." What does each writer achieve through the use of a particular style? For a three-part program, you might also include a seminar on the Holocaust itself as portrayed in literature, perhaps comparing American and Israeli authors, as well as a seminar on Holocaust survivors as portrayed in other media—especially movies.

2. Approximately 333,000 Holocaust survivors settled in Israel, a nation of 3.5 million Jews. How did this massive immigration influence Israeli society? What influence did the immigration of approximately 140,000 Holocaust survivors have upon 5.5 million American Jews? Invite a scholar of Jewish sociology or demographics to speak to your group about survivors, their lives, and their impact upon Israel and America. (A number of survivors and survivors' children are themselves expert speakers on these topics.) Discuss William B. Helmreich's *Against All Odds: Holocaust Survivors and the Successful Lives They Made in America*.² What do similar studies show for Israeli Holocaust survivors? In Michal Govrin's story, all the characters have successful businesses (and some are extraordinarily prosperous), and most have children who, the reader can infer, are leading full lives of their own. Is this typical?
3. Adam Dickter asks in *Hadassah Magazine*: is American Jewry suffering from "A Holocaust Obsession?"³ Many of the educators and community leaders whom Dickter interviews regret our nearly exclusive focus upon commemorating the Holocaust. Read the article and arrange for a debate. Ask study group members to argue the different sides, or invite leaders of your community to debate the issue.

1. David Grossman, *See Under Love*, translated by Betsy Rosenberg (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989); Cynthia Ozick, "Rosa," in *The Shawl* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989); Shulamith Hareven, "Twilight," translated by Miriam Arad, in *Twilight and Other Stories* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1992).

2. William B. Helmreich, *Against All Odds: Holocaust Survivors and the Successful Lives They Made in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

3. Adam Dickter, "Monumental Question: A Holocaust Obsession?" *Hadassah Magazine*, vol. 75, no. 8 (April 1994), pages 19-21.

A Room on the Roof

Savyon Liebrecht

That summer she sat on the patio under the rounded awning of the Italian swing, as the straw fringes intertwined with the edges of the cloth dome rustled softly, sounding like forest noises, her eyes on the red glow flowing from the western horizon at sunset, her baby already standing on his own two, widespread legs, his fat fingers grasping the bars of the square playpen made of interlocked wooden bars. The lily-like hibiscus waved its circlet of toothed leaves bound in an envelope of buds, only their heads looking out of the long, laden calyxes, pouting like the lips of a coquettish girl, the abundant tranquillity all about deluding merely the part of her that was asleep in any case, not the part that was driven, tensed toward something beyond the apparent silence, knowing the restlessness of someone under eyes constantly prying but always unseen.

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That early winter—the mud, the puddles of cement, and the rusty fragments of iron—already seemed distant and impossible, with the three Arab men giving off the stench of wood smoke and unwashed flesh. The men with their bad teeth and mouths, with high-heeled shoes that were once fashionable, now looking over-sized, with the leather crushed under the heels.

In her dreams they still visited her sometimes, coming too close to her, which, perhaps, where they live too, could be interpreted as what they might have meant to hint, though perhaps it was done inadvertently. For a long time she wondered about it: did Ahmad draw close to her unheeding, touching her legs with his rear as he dragged a sack of cement, with his back to her? And later, was it by chance that his elbow touched her breast when he passed by her, balancing a bag of lime on his shoulder, while she raised her arms to the lintel of the door to check the concrete rim as it dried? And did Hassan really believe that she would invite him inside the apartment on that black night when he came back for his coat?

That summer, for a long time after they went off without ever reappearing, she avoided the roof when it was dark, fearing that they might pop up from behind the high potted plants. Sometimes, when she happened to wind up in the back corner, which was imprisoned within three walls and used, for the moment, as a storage area, and she saw the tools they left behind and never came back to collect, a chill would climb her back like a crawling creature with many legs, stirring a column of water in the depths of her belly like the pitching that afflicts you when you're seasick.

But there was no one to accuse. She had brought the thing down on her own head. And if her baby wasn't slaughtered, and her jewels weren't stolen, and nothing bad had happened to her—she should bless her good fortune and erase those two winter months from her memory as if they had never been.

Yoel, her husband, had been opposed to the idea from the moment she had brought it up, still just an idle word in her mouth and still lacking that fervor, that stubbornness, and that unyielding feeling of necessity which were later to possess her.

"A room on the roof?" He twisted his face and took off his glasses as he did when he was angry. "Do you know how filthy construction

is? Do you have a notion how many tons of soil and rocks will fall on your head when they break through the ceiling for the stairs? And I don't see why we need another room. There are already two unused rooms in the house. And if you want sunlight—you have half a dunam of private lawn." Against her rebelliously pursed lips, which for a long time, until his patience first broke down, were to emit a defiant silence, he added: "How is it you suddenly got the notion of building? What do you need that for, with a four-month old baby?"

"So why did we take the trouble of running to the engineer and the municipality to get a building license?" she countered his argument. "And didn't we pay all the fees and the property improvement tax and all that?"

"So we'd have it in hand," he replied, "so that if we want to sell the house one day—it will be more valuable, with the license already in hand."

But the idea had already struck root, twisting up inside her with its own force, like an ovum which had embraced the sperm and was now germinating, and the fetus was already stretching the skin of the belly, and there was no way of putting that growth to sleep.

All that time she was wrapped up in her first-born son Udi, who summoned her from her dreams at night. She would come to him with her eyes almost closed, as though moon-struck, and her hands turned over the tiny baby clothes of their own volition. On her walks, pushing the baby carriage across broken paving stones, past piles of sand, she found herself lingering around houses under construction, raising her head to see the men walking with assurance on the rim of high walls, amazed, learning how stories grow, windows square themselves in dark frames, shutters fan out panel by panel from an enormous yellow device looking like arm-bones with the flesh scraped off them.

From one of the yawning holes that would be a window, someone shouted at her with an oriental accent: "You looking for someone to service you, lady?" She blushed as though doing something wrong and pushed her baby away in a panic. Near a building which she often passed, as he looked into the carriage, a contractor told her, "Excuse me for saying this, but this is no place to wander around with a baby. Dirt and cinderblocks or pieces of iron sometimes fall around here, and it's very dangerous."

After she started leaving Udi with a baby-sitter in the mornings, a woman who took a few infants in her home, she would go to those places in her old trousers, worn at the knees, climb up the diagonal concrete slabs, supporting herself on the rough rafters, grope in the darkness of stairwells still floored with sand. Here, she would later say to herself, she saw them face to face for the first time, in the chill damp peculiar to houses under construction. They came toward her from corners that stank of urine, all of them with the same face: dark, boiling eyes, sunk in caves of black shadows, hair cut in the old-fashioned way, shoes spotted with lime and cement, and dusty clothes. Here too their peculiar odor came to her nostrils: sweat mingled with cigarette smoke and soot. While she exchanged words with the Jewish foreman, the Arab workers would cast oblique glances at her; down on all fours laying floor tiles; panting as they transported sacks of cement or stacks of tiles; running to ease the effort; ripping out hunks of food with their teeth; half a loaf of bread in one hand, an unpeeled cucumber in the other.

Some foremen were irritable, refusing to answer her questions, dismissing her with a contemptuous gesture and continuing to give directions to their workers, ignoring her as she stood behind them, abashed, feeling how the Arabs were laughing at her inwardly, in collusion with their Jewish foreman. But sometimes the foremen answered her willingly, watching as she took down what they said in her notebook, like a diligent pupil. As she turned to leave they would say with amusement, "So we have to watch out for you, huh, you're the competition!"

In her notebook the pages were already densely packed with details about reinforced concrete, the thickness of inner and outer walls, various gauges of iron rods, a sketch of the way the rods had to be fastened for casting concrete pillars, the ceiling, plaster, flooring, conduits for electricity and water, tar, addresses of building materials manufacturers. She hid her notebook from Yoel in a carton with her university notebooks. Once, when he said, "What's going on? Zvika said he twice saw you coming out of the building they're putting up on Herzl Street," she looked straight at him and said in her usual tone of voice, "Probably someone who looks like me." And he responded, "It's about time you changed your hairdo. Last week I saw someone

from behind, and I was sure it was you. She even had the same walk and the same handbag."

Afterwards, when everything was ripe, like a girl come of age, Yoel came back from work one day, and his eyes were troubled. He said: "They want me to go to a training course in Texas for two months. We're getting a new computer. I said I couldn't leave you alone with the baby. Let them find someone else." She answered firmly, alarmed at the swift feeling that leapt up in her like the shock wave of an explosion: "I'll be quite all right—you should go." And when the tempest had died down within her she thought: a sign had been sent from heaven.

The day after she saw him to his plane, David, the Jewish foreman, came accompanied by three Arab workers, members of the same family, looking amazingly like each other. They all wore old woolen hats. They sat on the edges of the chairs, careful not to dirty the upholstery, with their eyes cast down most of the time. Only occasionally would they raise their eyelids and cast a quick glance at her and the apartment, squinting at the baby on her lap. David wrote down some kind of agreement on a piece of paper, explaining some sentences in Arabic, and they nodded their heads in consent. David copied their names from a form he'd brought with them and their identity numbers from the creased documents they took out of their pockets, a description of the dimensions of the room they were to build, detailing the thickness of the walls, the number of electric sockets and their place in the room, the break through the opening for the stairs, the type and color of the plaster, and beside these, the amounts to be paid as the work progressed. Before signing, she insisted that a final date be clearly written, obligating them to finish the work within two months, before Yoel's return.

Then the three of them stood up at the same time and headed for the door. There, on the threshold, after she thanked him for his good offices, David answered: "Think nothing of it, dear lady. It's because I can see you're a fine girl, with a sporting character. Not many women would do something like this. So here's to you! And if you need something—ask for David in the Herskovitz building any time. Good luck! They're good workers, up on scaffolds from the age of fifteen," and in her ear softly, "Better than ours, believe me."

Sitting on the open roof that summer opposite the sky spread above her with rows of painted white clouds, hearing her baby babble, his voice rising and falling as he tried out his vocal cords, she thought: how did things go so far that those men, whose gaze avoided her eyes, who shrank in her presence with shoulders bowed, as though narrowing their bodies, answering her questions with a soft voice, as though forever guilty, how did it happen that in November they sat on the edge of the chairs that first evening, and by December they were already marching through her house like lords, turning on Yoel's radio transmitter, opening the refrigerator to look for fresh vegetables, rummaging through the cabinet after fragrant shaving cream, and patting her baby on the head?

At first they still seemed to her like a single person, before she learned that Hassan had elongated eyes, whose bright color was like the band of wet sand at the water's edge. Ahmad had a broad nose, sitting in the middle of his flattened face, between his narrow eyes his lips thick like those of a Negro. Salah's ears pricked up and his cheeks were sunken. Only the pimples on his face gave it some thickness, making it look like the thick skin of an orange.

On the first day, they arrived in an old pickup truck that had once been orange, but now on its dented face there were only islands of peeling paint, and its windows were missing. They got out and unloaded gray cinderblocks near the parking lot. Then the truck pulled away with a grinding noise, returning in a short while with a long wooden beam on top. After a short consultation among themselves, the truck was parked in the parking lot and the beam laid on an angle, the lower part leaning on the back of the truck and the top rising above the edge of the roof. Until the baby started crying inside the house, she stood at a little distance, her hands in the pockets of her slacks, and watched how one of them drew out a tangle of ropes with a saddle-shaped yoke at the end. He stood on the roof and harnessed himself with knots, looking like a coolie in a historical film. One of his mates loaded block after block in the basket on the rope, and the worker on the roof pulled them up along the flat beam, while the third worker, standing on the edge of the roof, leaned over and gathered the bricks one by one. Examining them from below, she saw how their

faces grew sweaty with the effort, and their hands got dusty and were scratched by the rough blocks. By the time she had put the baby to bed and come out again, she saw they had unloaded the rest of the blocks on the lawn and disappeared with the truck, though she hadn't heard the sound of the motor. The next day, after turning the matter over during sleepless hours, she decided she must demonstrate her authority over them, and she was ready and waiting for them in her window, cradling the baby in her rounded arms, anger breathing force into her movements. From the window she shouted at them as they approached: "Why did you leave work in the middle yesterday? And today...." She looked at her watch with a clumsy movement, stretching her neck over the baby lying at her breast. "Today you come at nine! You said you'd start working at six! This way you won't finish in ten months!"

"Lady," said the one with the gilded eyes, insulted, "Today was police roadblocked. Not possible we leave early before four morning, lady."

Something in her recoiled at the sight of the beaten dog's eyes he raised up toward her in her window, at his broken voice. But she, tensing her strength to suppress the tremor that awoke within her, threatening to soften her anger, shouted: "And yesterday what happened? Was also roadblocked?" Maliciously she imitated his grammatical error. "You went away and left half the blocks down there on the grass."

For the first time she saw the movement that was later to become routine: the jaws clamping down on each other as though chewing something very hard, digging a channel along the line of his teeth. Later she was to learn: that's how they suppress anger, hatred. They clench their teeth to overcome the wild rage that surges up, that only rarely breaks out and flashes in their pupils.

"Yesterday my friend Ahmad, he hurted his, the nail his finger."

Behind him his companion raised a bandaged hand, and she looked out of her pretty window, framed with Catalan-style curtains, feeling how the three men in their tattered work clothes were defeating her, looking up at her from their places.

And two hours afterwards, when she had fed and changed the baby and put him to sleep in his cot, her mind was constantly on the

uncomfortable feeling that had dwelt in her ever since her conversation with them, when she had spoken to them with cruel irony. Now, knowing full well she was doing something she shouldn't, but still letting the spirit of the moment overcome the voice of reason, she went out of the front door carrying a large tray, with a china coffee pot decorated with rosebuds, surrounded by cups with matching saucers and spoons with an engraved pattern, and a plate of round honey cakes. She stood there holding the heavy tray, her head raised, debating whether to put the tray down on the marble landing of the stairs and climb up the wooden ladder that leaned against the building, reaching the edge of the roof, and to invite them down for coffee, or perhaps it would be better to call them from where she was. Constantly aware of her ridiculous position, she suddenly discovered she didn't remember any of their names. Then a head peeked over the edge of the roof, and she found herself calling to him quickly, before he disappeared: "Hello, hello, I have some coffee for you." Ashamed of the shout that had escaped her, she put down the tray and got away before one of them came down and brought her offering up to his companions.

That afternoon, placing her wide-awake baby in his cot, she put on old jeans and Yoel's army jacket and climbed up to the roof to see how they were getting along with the work. The tray with the rosebud pattern coffee pot and the pretty cups stood in a corner of the roof, cigarette butts crushed in the remainder of the murky liquid in the saucers. She stood and looked for a long while at the sight, which she would recall afterwards as a kind of symbol: the fine Rosenthal china from the rich collection her grandmother had brought from Germany heaped up carelessly, lying next to sacks of cement and heavy hammers.

"We finished the concrete rim," said Hassan, who seemed to have taken upon himself the task of spokesman. "Now we have to put water and it dry."

"Is it twenty centimeter?" she spoke like them.

"It twenty to the meter," he took a metal measuring tape out of his pocket.

"Is it two centimeters over the edge of the floor?"

It seemed to her they exchanged hurried glances, as if they had conspired together before she came, and she grew tense and suspicious.

"Did you bring it up two centimeters above the floor?" she repeated her question, her voice sharp and higher than at first.

"It twenty to the meter," he told her again.

"But does it come out above the floor or not?"

"Level with the floor," he spread out his hand to emphasize his words, with a satisfied expression, like a merchant praising his wares.

"That means it's no good," she said.

"Why no good, lady?"

"Because the rain will leak in," she said impatiently, her anger rising at the game he was playing with her while the concrete band was drying steadily. "It has to be two centimeters higher. That's what David said to you, and that's what's written in the contract."

"We say David twenty centimeter."

"At least twenty centimeters," she corrected him, her voice rising and turning to a shout. "And of that, two centimeters above the floor."

"There is twenty centimeter, lady," he said again, his voice like a patient merchant standing up to a customer making a nuisance.

She pursed her lips as if to demonstrate the conversation was useless. She threw her legs over the low wall around the roof and placed her feet on the rungs of the ladder.

"I'm going to get David," she said to the three men standing and looking at her, anxious to see how things would turn out. "If that's the way you're starting—then it's no good," she added. She went down the ladder with a rush to show them the bellicose spirit that animated her steps, inwardly calculating how long it would take her to get to the building on Herzl Street and locate David, and whether it would be better to take Udi with her, or leave him in his cot and hope he was asleep. Planting her feet on the ground, she strode vigorously toward her car, determined to call David in before the concrete band dried. Then she heard a thick voice calling to her from the roof: "Lady, you don't need David. We add two centimeters."

She turned her face upward, suppressing the feeling of relief and

victory that surged up through her anger, seeking the three dark heads bunched together. "Quickly then, before it dries," she said in a loud, hard voice.

That evening, her sister Noa told her, her voice coming from Jerusalem mingled with those of other people: "You made a mistake about the coffee. Let them make it themselves, and don't serve them anything any more. If they get into the house—you'll never get rid of them."

"Don't worry. No one gets into my house without an invitation," she shouted, over the strangers' voices.

But the next day, in the doorway, smiling to her with his eyes as yellow as the winter sun, Hassan, whose name she had learned, said to her, with gentle bashfulness in his voice: "Yesterday lady make coffee. Today I make coffee like in my house." From a plastic bag he withdrew a container of coffee that gave off a fragrance like that in cramped spice shops where coffee grinders crush the dark beans into aromatic grains.

Taken aback by the friendly gesture, as though they hadn't sparred with each other the day before, as though she hadn't been racked all night long with worrying how she would mobilize the police and the courts if they tried again to violate the agreement they had signed, she took a step backward, and before she grasped what was happening, he slipped through the space between her body and the doorjamb, stepped over to the range, and put the plastic bag on the marble counter. With precise, expert movement, he took out a long-handled blue coffee pot and a spoon, took a spoonful of coffee, added sugar that he poured out of another bag, and filled the pot with water. Then after fiddling lightly with the lighter and the knobs on the stove he lit and placed the coffee pot on the glowing ring. She observed his motions with astonishment, stunned at the liberty he took in her kitchen, her eyes drawn to his graceful, pleasing movements, knowing danger was latent in what was happening in front of her.

He stood on one foot, his other foot to the side, like a dancer at rest, peeking into the coffee pot now and then. A hissing rose from it, heralding the onset of boiling, and the spoon in his hand stirred without cease, with a fixed circular movement. He said: "We put two more centimeter of cement from yesterday." And she answered:

"Fine. I hope there won't be any more problems. David told me you were good workers—so do things right."

Then she combed her hair and washed her face, and before she could change out of her soft mohair shirt, that had once been burned in the front by a cigarette, so she only wore it around the house, she found herself sitting at the table with his two fellow workers, for whom Hassan had opened the door with a hospitable gesture while she was spreading a cloth on the table in the breakfast nook.

"That's coffee like in our house," he said, looking at her, the smile on his lips not reaching his eyes. She sipped the thick, bitter beverage, and smiled involuntarily: "You mean the coffee I made yesterday wasn't good?"

"It was good," he answered quickly, drawing the words out, alarmed at her insult. "Thank you very much. But we like it this way, strong coffee." He clenched his fist and waved it toward her with a vigorous motion, to emphasize his last word.

She heard Udi crying in the next room. This was when he usually had his first bottle of cereal. She excused herself and got up, feeling their eyes on her. She took Udi out of his cot, wrapped in a blanket decorated with ducklings, and carried him into the breakfast nook. Then she placed the bottle of cereal that had been standing on the windowsill in his hands, and it was already lukewarm. Ahmad looked as though hypnotized at the sapphire ring Yoel's parents had given her for their engagement, and the others looked at the baby curled up at her breast in his bright blanket, drinking the cereal with his eyes shut. Hassan suddenly smiled, and his eyes brightened. He enjoyed the sight of the tranquil baby, and he brought his face close to him and said fondly, "You eat everything—you be strong like Hassan."

Months afterwards she would remember that morning with dismay, when she had sat with them for the first time, as though they were at home there, drinking from cups like welcome guests, eating off the violet lace tablecloth her mother-in-law had brought from Spain, looking at her baby over their cups. She sipped the bitter liquid and only part of her, the part that didn't laugh with them, thought: could these hands, serving coffee, be the ones that planted the booby-trapped doll at the gate of the religious school at the end of the street?

Her heart, which had been on guard all the time, began to foresee something, but it still didn't know: this was just the beginning, appearing like a figure leaping out of the fog. From now on everything would grow clear and roll down like boulders falling into an abyss. The future would clearly be a fall—and no one could stop it.

In the afternoon, as she gathered up the toys Udi had scattered on the carpet, there was a knock on the door. Hassan appeared with a sooty aluminum pot in one hand and a plastic bag imprinted with the name of the supermarket on the main street in the other, a friendly smile of familiarity on his lips, and he said: "Excuse. Can put soup on fire, lady?"

She stood in the doorway, guarding the border, with her hand extended overhead on the doorframe as if halting all entry. But the warm smile on his face and the way he had asked the question didn't leave room for refusal. The blocking arm slipped down, and with cordial hospitality, as though to mask her first hesitation, she moved her hand in an arc and said, "Please, please." Anger at herself welled up inside her for treating him, despite herself, as a welcome guest.

She went back to gathering up the toys, stealing a look at the way he put the pot under the tap with steady movements, like an expert, boiling water in the blue coffee pot that he pulled out of the bag, finding the barrel-shaped salt cellar in the right-hand drawer, knowingly manipulating the knobs of the range. While she arranged the toys in Udi's room, as he slept between the duckling blanket and the Winnie the Pooh sheet, there stole into her—still faint, still resembling discomfort—the fear born of having people trespass, pushing her boundary back and pretending they were unaware.

When she returned, the other two were already with him in the kitchen. One was cutting vegetables into her new china bowl. The other was standing at the open refrigerator, his hand in the lower vegetable drawer. By the look on his face she could tell he'd been caught in the act. His hand, rummaging among the vegetables, stopped where it was.

"Need cucumber, lady," he said, stepping back.

She went to the refrigerator, slammed the drawer home and took a cucumber out of a sealed bag in the rear of the upper shelf.

"Take it," she said.

"Thank you very much, lady." He took the cucumber from her hand. "Lady drink coffee?" asked Hassan from the stove, stirring his coffee pot and smiling at her from the side.

Confused, fighting to control the muscles of her face, she said, "No thanks."

"Is good coffee," Salah, who spoke only seldom, tried to persuade her.

"Thanks, I don't drink coffee in the afternoon."

"Afternoon, morning—is good coffee." He wouldn't let up. She, already feeling the teeth of the trap closing on her, said, almost shouting: "No!" She saw Hassan open the china cabinet and take out three plates.

A moment before she abandoned her house and her baby, fleeing to the bedroom and locking the door behind her, breaking out in silent, suppressed, helpless weeping, into which dread was already creeping, she told Hassan in a soft, commanding voice: "I'll thank you not to make any noise—my baby is asleep." A few minutes afterwards, when she left her room, her eyes already dry and her voice tranquil, though her heart pounded within her, she said: "Maybe you could cook your soup up there. I'll give you a small camping stove. It's inconvenient for me here." Salah threw a malevolent glance at her over his steaming bowl of soup. And Hassan said politely, "If you please, lady, thank you very much."

For five days she heard them arriving, but by the time she had fed Udi and put him to sleep in his cot, her workers were no longer on the roof. Angrily she calculated that in the past two days they hadn't raised more than a single row of blocks above the stone rim on top of the window. Suspicion stole into her heart that they had taken on another job and, so it wouldn't slip through their fingers before they finished in her house, they had taken it and bound themselves to another boss. That was the way they did things, as the bank teller who knew about her project had taken the trouble to warn her. But in the afternoon, shaken at hearing the familiar noise of the pickup truck and, in her head composing a few harsh sentences to reproach them with, she saw the truck was laden with iron rods, thin and thick. The three of them got out of the cab and set about unloading the truck and

passing the iron rods from hand to hand up to the roof. Calm now, from her window, she watched them at their work. She decided to rest until Udi awoke from his afternoon nap.

For a while she heard them walking around the roof, dragging loads, their voices reaching her through the closed blinds of her room. Later, there was a lot of stubborn knocking which she first took to be part of a dream, and then she heard them at the door. When she opened it the three of them were standing close to each other, with Hassan half a footstep in front. He said, "Hello, lady, how are you?"

Inwardly bristling at the familiarity he permitted himself in asking that polite question for the first time, and keeping her face frozen, she ignored his question and asked: "Yes?" guessing they would ask permission to heat up their meal.

"Lady, we need money."

Her sister had warned her about that in their last conversation: you mustn't pay them before they've done the work as agreed. She tensed. Her voice rasped more than she intended: "Did you finish putting the iron in place for pouring the concrete?"

"We put band around roof."

"You did the band, but I'm asking about the iron. Did you get the iron ready for pouring the concrete?"

"That's tomorrow, lady."

"You'll get your money tomorrow."

"We need some. Maybe you'll give us lady...."

"Tomorrow," she said firmly. "Anyway I don't have so much now. I have to go to the bank."

"Really, lady," Hassan said, looking straight in her eyes and pounding his chest with his fist. "Lady believe. We coming tomorrow, money or no money."

"No money," she said, knowing how Yoel would smile when she told him about this occasion. Hassan turned to his friends, and they put their heads together and whispered. From where she was she saw the back of his neck, his dusty hair, looking gray under the woolen hat with the tattered edges, frayed yarn twisting down. His mates' brows darkened. They put their heads close to each other, taking counsel. One of them pulled a creased wallet from his pocket and seemed to be counting the bank notes in it. He had a worried expression. Within

her she was already prepared to withdraw her position and say: "Look, if it's something pressing, I'm prepared to give you what I have in my purse now...." He suddenly turned to her and asked, "Can wash hands in water?" He surprised her so much with the question that, like the morning when he had stood before her with a cooking pot in his hands, she said: "Certainly, certainly," pushing the door open wide, while her only wish was to slam the door in their faces.

They entered hesitantly. Now she saw that Salah was holding a large army knapsack, the kind that Yoel used to extricate from the storeroom when his unit was called for maneuvers. Hassan led the way to the bathroom, looking at her as though asking permission, and the three men made their way in and locked the door: for a long while she heard the sound of running water and the men's boisterous voices. She, walking to and fro in the living room, looked out at the large garden, across from which no other house was visible, and was gripped by sudden fear, thinking of what might be in that big knapsack. Perhaps they were assembling weapons there, spreading the steel parts out on the carpet, as Yoel had done once, kneeling on the floor and joining the shining parts one to another. Maybe they would come out in a little while with their weapons drawn and threaten her and her son? Perhaps they would take them as hostages in their pickup truck? And what about Udi? She had already run out of his special flour, and she wouldn't be able to feed him when they kept them there in their broken-down shacks in Gaza, among the muddy paths. They had shown those shacks on an American television documentary. Maybe, the thought flashed through her like lightning, she should snatch Udi out of his cot and flee with him, lay him in the back seat of her car and drive immediately to the police station on the main street.

Hassan came out first, and she was startled at his appearance. For a second she imagined a stranger had come out. For the first time she saw him without the woolen cap pulled down over his forehead. His hair, surprisingly light, freshly combed and damp, was brushed to the side, well-combed, and pulled over his temples. He wore a dark, well-pressed jacket over a white shirt and tie. His black dress shoes were highly polished.

He told her: "My friends come out minute, lady."

"Aren't you going home?"

"Have wedding from our aunt in Tulkarem. We today in Tulkarem."

At that moment the baby let out a screech more piercing than any she'd heard since the morning he had burst out of her in the maternity ward: high and prolonged, followed by a sudden silence. She herself let out a scream and rushed to the room, pushing his rolling highchair out of the way as she ran. Udi was prostrate on the floor, lying on his stomach, his face on the carpet spread at the foot of his crib, with a toy between his fingers. She bent down and picked him up, carrying him in her arms, and he looked at her with cloudy eyes. She hugged him close to her body and started murmuring things without knowing what she was saying, her heart pounding wildly, making her fingers tremble. After a long while he burst out crying, resting his head on her shoulder in sobs.

"Is okay, lady," Hassan said from the doorway, and she looked around in panic, not realizing he had followed her.

"What?" she asked fearfully.

"Is okay he like so, lady," he traced his finger along his cheek and made a crying expression. "Is nothing. He good that way."

"What's good?" she asked as the baby trembled in her arms.

Hassan approached her and gently lifted Udi from her arms. "Lady get water," he said softly. "He need drink."

In the kitchen, her hands still trembling, she stood still for a long time, trying to remember where the sugar bowl was. She heard Hassan talking softly to the baby in Arabic, like a man who loves to talk to his child, in a caressing voice, the words running together in a pleasant flow, containing a high beauty, like the words of a poem in an ancient language which you don't understand, but which well up inside you. Udi, lying tranquilly on his chest, reached out toward Hassan's dark face, and Hassan put his head down toward the little fingers and kissed them. She, stunned by the sight, stood where she was and looked at them, as the tremor inspired by fear gradually died down, and another, new kind of trembling, arose within her, seeing something which, even as it happens, you already long for from a distance, knowing that when it passes, nothing like it will happen again, and, as though dividing themselves, her thoughts turned to Yoel, whose eyes exam-

ined his son from a certain distance. He was careful not to wrinkle his clothes or have them smell of wet diapers.

Hassan looked up at her and said, "Hassan have like this at home in Gaza."

"You have a baby?" She was astonished. "You're married?"

"Also like this. Four years," he said proudly, placing his hand parallel to the floor to measure the height of his son.

"You okay," Hassan said in his soft voice, turning his face to the baby. "You big—you doctor like daddy, yes?"

With the bottle of tea in her hand, she was shaken as though by a distant alarm. Troubled by the suspicion that he knew more than he should, she said, "You can read Hebrew?" and he laughed. "I read one word, another word. I see Doctor on door in English."

"You can read English?" There was some mockery in her voice, like an adult talking to a child about grown-up things.

"I can," he answered in English, smiling, for the first time, with another smile, hidden, without the forced humility she was familiar with.

"Where from," she asked, also in English.

"From the University."

"Which one?"

"The American University of Beirut." She recognized his good accent from having heard it on television when Arabic-speaking intellectuals were interviewed. She hadn't been able to shake off her Israeli accent in the two years she had lived in Texas, while Yoel finished his degree.

"Really?" She returned to Hebrew.

"Really, lady. I in Beirut two years. Maybe I be doctor that way, of babies."

"Why didn't you complete your studies?"

"Hard. Can't talk." He looked down at his hands, whose nails were free of lime. "Life like that."

Shortly after he left, joining his comrades who were waiting for him and watching him from the door, also scrubbed. She thought: they're nameless and ageless for me, in their faded black sweaters and their dirty elbows and stocking caps. They had a single face and uncouth words came from their mouths. Suddenly they were differ-

ent: in white collars and jackets, their cheeks shaven, with a wife and baby and a child of four at home.

Even before she heard the bell ring she knew he had returned.

"My jacket, lady," he said and went to take his jacket, folded carefully on the back of the chair. And, at the door, with his back to her, he turned around with a carefully planned motion that made itself out to be spontaneous. "If lady want I stay now."

"Where?" she asked in astonishment.

"With lady," he answered seriously. "Mister of lady no here. Maybe need something...." And she, stunned at the very words and frightened that he knew of her husband's absence, wondered if he meant what she thought she had heard. She said, "But you're going to a wedding, aren't you?"

"Going to wedding. But if lady want—I can be here...."

After she had locked the door, still staggered at his suggestion, she suddenly noticed: Yoel's smell had come from the delicate odor of the fragrance on the shelf of the right hand cabinet next to the mirror. They had used her husband's toiletries, dried themselves on her towels. She carefully put Udi down in the cot and hurried to the bathroom.

With convulsive movements, like a madwoman, she gathered up the towels and threw them all, averting her head with a bilious feeling, into the washing machine, throwing the new soap into the garbage pail. She began polishing the taps and sink and scouring with disinfectant the floor which their bare feet had trod on.

But toward evening a tense quiet descended on her, something new. At night, before falling asleep, she remembered how Hassan had held Udi close to his chest and spoken to him in Arabic that sounded like a song; his long fingers, clean for the first time of spots of paint; the English he had spoken, sounding like human language for the first time instead of the broken phrases he knew in Hebrew. Only she preferred to set aside his offer to stay with her and not consider it. She thought back over things, seeing that she had been hard on them. They had gone to a wedding in Tulkarem. Maybe they had asked for money to buy a present for the newlyweds, and she had behaved unfeelingly with them. The unease that gripped her was assuaged when she promised herself that early the next morning she would take Udi in his

carriage and go out to the main street and, in the elegant store that had recently opened, she would buy clothes for his two children. Then she thought: it would not be right to offer him a gift, as a declaration of a special relationship, and not to honor his cousins. Generously she decided she would buy something for them as well. Maybe cologne like the kind Yoel kept on his shelf. If the weather was stormy, she'd take Udi in the car. An hour later, she suddenly interrupted herself as she read: if it rained hard, she'd leave Udi at the baby-sitter's.

She waited for them until noon, their gifts in pretty wrapping paper, tied with curling ribbon, lying on the cabinet next to the front door, and the white envelope with their money next to the packages.

At noon she began to worry: maybe they had drunk too much and had an accident. What if the police came? She panicked. Maybe it wasn't legal for her to employ them. If they were badly injured and couldn't continue the job, the construction would be delayed and maybe not completed by the time Yoel returned. In the afternoon, tired and angry at her helplessness and concern about the future, she decided to go to the building where David was working. Maybe some members of the same family were working for him, and they too had been invited to the wedding in Tulkarem, and she could find something out from them. For a long time she waited for David, pushing the carriage back and forth on the battered pavement in front of the building site. When he came he told her that the wedding hadn't been in Tulkarem at all, but in a village near the Lebanese border. They would be coming as usual the next day, he reassured her, seeing her worried face. Afterwards he scratched the nape of his neck and asked: "So it's okay, the job they're doing?"

"I hope so," she said.

"What are they doing now?"

"They're setting up the iron rods to pour the concrete."

"Are they doing it right?"

"I don't know. I trust them."

The next day, anger making her fingertips tremble, so troubled her breathing was affected, she waited for them on the roof in the morning after leaving Udi with the baby-sitter and arranging to do so

again during the coming days. Hassan got out of the cab and smiled brightly at her. With his filthy woolen cap and his shoes down at the heel he was once again what he had been.

"Something happen, lady?" His voice betrayed his surprise at finding her on the roof at that early hour.

"A great deal has happened," she shouted to him, leaning over the wall at the edge of the roof.

"What's the matter, lady?" he asked, climbing the ladder on his way up to her.

"First of all, you lied to me."

"Lied?" The shadow of his smile was erased.

"The wedding was in Tulkarem?" She flung out the words, her hand on her hips, like a mother arguing with a child caught out in a lie.

"No lady. Wedding not in Tulkarem."

"That's what you told me."

"I said: my aunt from Tulkarem. The wedding not. There in village near Kibuss."

He turned to face his comrades, as though asking, and Ahmad said, "Kibuss Ga'aton."

"Ga'aton," Hassan repeated the name of the kibbutz, looking at her again.

"But you didn't say you wouldn't come to work yesterday."

"We think sleep in Tulkarem and come work yesterday. No possible."

"That's one thing," she ignored the explanation. "Another thing, David was here yesterday and he said you didn't do anything well. You didn't raise the concrete band two centimeters the way we said. And you put in number eight iron rods instead of number twelve, and you made one wall with fifteen centimeter blocks instead of twenty centimeters...."

"That wall has window, lady. Must be little."

"You need a number three block near the sliding window," she exploded at his effort to fool her. "But the wall is an outer wall. You were supposed to use twenty centimeter blocks...." she added, scolding him, watching the color ebb from his face, and how his comrades froze behind his back.

"We do everything good. Lady want—David come here. We talk."

"I don't want you to talk!" she screamed. "I want you to work. You've been working for a month. What you've done could have been done in a week. You just drink coffee, slip away, and work somewhere else."

"Somewhere else?" he asked in amazement.

"On Monday. Where were you?"

He wrinkled his forehead in thought. "Monday we bring iron."

"Fine," she said, raising her chin and walking forward with vigor and sitting on the edge of the wall. "I want to see how much you get done today."

For seven hours she sat on the wall, without moving, not going down to turn off the water heater she had lit in the morning, suppressing the hunger that awoke within her, the need for a cup of coffee at the hour when her body was used to one, and, in the afternoon, fighting the pain in her back, which cried out for something to lean on, watching as they worked angrily, talking little, boiling water in an empty can on the camping stove she'd lent them, sitting down to eat with their legs crossed, close to each other, whispering to each other. All those hours she watched them as though riveted to the spot, only occasionally looking away from them, allowing her eyes to wander to the tops of the cypress trees and the purple mountains in the distance, the view of which, at a peaceful hour, she would enjoy. Later, when she recalled that morning, she would tremble as though the event were not irrevocably in the past: how had she had the courage to treat them that way been born within her? They could easily have come and pushed her, and she would have fallen and broken her neck. By the time anyone found her among the iron rods in the backyard, she would no longer be alive.

Occasionally Ahmad cast a glance at her, like a fearful child checking to see whether the ghost he had seen was still hovering in the area. But Hassan didn't look at her once. Seeing him, his clamped lips, and the line drawn behind his jaw, above his clenched teeth, she knew she had deeply wounded him, but she felt no remorse for doing so. Only the sweet consolation of someone who deals justly with

himself, a feeling that rose and fell within her great anger.

They raised the iron rods over the edge of the masonry walls and laid them crisscross at regular intervals, tying them with thin wire. Afterwards they crowded steel struts into the room to support the wooden forms under the network. When they finished, they consulted among themselves for a moment and headed for the ladder, parting from her with a slight nod.

"Wait," she called to them. "You've earned your money." She followed them down the ladder and went into the house. When she came out she put the envelope in Hassan's hand. Only after they had left without a word did she remember she hadn't asked them to sign a receipt for the money or given them the wrapped parcels from the cupboard.

The next day, after leaving Udi with the baby-sitter despite a reddish rash on his skin showing he hadn't been changed in time, she was already waiting for them on the roof as though spoiling for a fight. Today, she thought, stunned at the idea, they'll pour the concrete for the roof. The network of iron rods was prepared and the steel struts were in place. The wooden forms were raised, the buckets of gravel and sand were covered under plastic sheets, and the sacks of cement were arranged next to them. Today they would pour the roof, and the weather was fine. The transparent clouds didn't herald rain.

When she heard the sound of the pickup truck she leaped to the edge of the roof, and even before she actually saw them she noticed his absence. Three men sat in the cab, and he wasn't one of them. Salah and Ahmad got out of the left door, wearing gray woolen hats. Then a man with a shaven head got out of the truck, looking like a fugitive she had seen in an Italian movie, who had made his way to a widow's home in a village and laid siege to it. In one look she took in his black eyes, like the maw of a coal mine. His eyebrows meeting over the bridge of his nose. A strange feeling overcame her, like when all her girlfriends had been asked to dance, and she was left alone sitting by the wall, looking at the legs moving in the dark.

"Where's Hassan?" she asked Ahmad.

"Hassan no come. This one come, Muhammad."

Observing from her corner on the wall, trying to repress the desolate feeling that grew stronger within her, she watched them put

on rubber boots and mix the concrete with shovels, adding sand and gravel and pouring water, stirring it to produce a thick gray mixture in the square they had enclosed with wooden beams. Then Muhammad climbed up to the edge of the roof. Ahmad handed him bucket after bucket, brimming with the gray concrete and he swung and emptied them in big arcs over the network of iron rods, while Salah quickly filled in the space between the two wooden planks below, to stop the concrete from dribbling out.

Sitting erect on the edge of the roof, her knee swinging, her arms crossed, she felt her anger give way to disappointment at Hassan's absence. Suddenly it became clear to her that he had come between her and them, serving as a kind of protective barrier for them. Here she stood exposed to the three of them: Salah stole furtive glances at her, as though already hatching a foul plot in his mind; Ahmad smiled right at her, baring his yellow teeth like the fangs of a beast; and the new worker, standing high on the upper concrete band, his body tense, his hands on his hips, stared at her openly. From where she sat his figure looked mighty, and his shaven head resembled a crooked egg against the background of the sky above him.

She sat where she was for hours, no longer strong with the anger that had gripped her the previous morning, making her decide to sit and see with her own eyes how well they would work under supervision, but now out of fear to get up and raise her legs over the edge of the roof in front of them. They worked without stopping, diligently, bringing up the contents of the big pool of concrete and spreading it on the network of rods. From time to time they would consult each other, exchange shouts in Arabic, sing a line or two, laughing out loud into their hands. And she, sensing they were laughing at her, was angry, insulted, and fearful. She watched them cook their meal, kneeling next to each other on the torn mat, tearing with their teeth at loaves of bread they held in their hands.

"What now?" She turned to Ahmad, keeping her voice steady.

"Now must dry."

"If it rains?"

"Now two hours—good. Not two hours—no good."

"The roof is twenty centimeters?"

"Yes, yes," he said, and she thought since that morning she

hadn't heard them say "lady." She turned, pointed at the floor they had left spotted with cement. "Wash that down before it dries," she ordered, pretending she still had strength.

"No dry. We put water."

She stepped to the edge of the protruding ladder and grasped the wooden rung and, as though incidentally, turned to them, "What's the matter with Hassan?"

"Hassan no come."

"I see that."

"This one Muhammad come."

"Will Hassan come tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow—Hassan no come."

"Did something happen to him?"

"He not here."

She carefully raised her legs, and when she had descended, even before her feet touched the ground, she heard their deep, guttural laugh, and she blushed. That's how men laughed at women when they spoke ill of them.

The next day, waiting at the window, she knew why her legs had taken her there, why she had arisen early to prepare the kitchen, why she had checked how much coffee was left in the bag he had brought with him from home.

Salah and Ahmad came alone. She, knowing in her heart she wouldn't see Hassan again, was glad the shaven-headed Muhammad wasn't with them. Swallowing her pride she went out and stood before them.

"Is Hassan sick?" she asked.

"No sick."

"He won't come to work?"

"He work someone."

"Why isn't he working here? Three will finish faster."

Salah, perhaps seeing through her deceptive sentences, smiled somewhere in the depths of his eyes, the mockery of someone careful not to be tripped up.

"He no want come to lady."

"He doesn't want to get his money?"

"No want," said Salah, and she imagined she heard an echo of triumph in his voice.

"He doesn't want to get his money?"

"No want money, no want lady," he said. She no longer had anything to say after that sentence, but she spoke in her normal voice: "Very well, then finish by yourselves. You can make coffee in the kitchen if you want. There's still some of the coffee you brought."

Salah and Ahmad kept coming for a few more days after the concrete on the roof had dried, removing the steel struts that held up the forms. They put in the door and bars over the window and broke through the upper room into the breakfast nook. She didn't ask about Hassan again, but they sometimes volunteered that they had met him. She, stirred by the sound of his name, gave in and made the final payment before they finished the work. Perhaps they would run into Hassan and tell him of her generosity. But they never came back. They left the walls unplastered and forgot their tools behind the wall. Shaken with fury, again pushing her baby carriage, she roamed among the construction sites and hired workers to finish the plastering: they tarred the roof, and installed the electric wiring.

By the time Yoel returned she had a new hairstyle. They stood on the stairs leading to the bright, pleasant room on the roof, with three barrels in the corners from which palm trees sent up sharp bayonets all about, their fronds growing like a conjuring trick. He stood in amazement before the new structure and then burst out laughing. "Well, I'll be.... You leave a woman for two months, come back—and the world's changed!" On the roof, his arm around her shoulder in a gesture of respect, he wandered from one corner of the roof to another, inspecting the landscape, and sliding his hand along the walls: "I didn't want to do it, I admit, but it's really nice. Was it very dirty?"

"Not so terrible."

"You found the workers?"

Stroking the rough wall unawares she said, "They were relatively decent, workers from the territories."

"What, Arabs?" he asked, looked at her reproachfully, getting serious.

"Arabs. You can't find anyone else. But every day a Jewish foreman came to keep an eye on them, the one working in the building at Herzl Street."

"They behaved all right? They didn't make trouble?"

She took a quick, deep breath, with a whistling sound, and—restraining the whirlpool of emotions stirring within her, looking away, clearly seeing Muhammad standing on the edge of the upper roof, staring at her with hatred, and the flash in their eyes when she got up and stood in this very place and accused them—seeing Hassan's fists clench and the crease along the line of his jaw when he clasped his teeth shut, hearing the rumble of the men's laughter when she raised her legs to climb down the ladder—she said, "They were fairly decent. Once Udi fell down and I was really alarmed. One of them picked him up so gently and calmed him down, you wouldn't believe it. He spoke to him softly and kissed his fingers. Then it turned out he had studied medicine for two years. He wanted to be a pediatrician but for some reason he didn't finish his degree. He has a baby Udi's age and another boy of four...." Suddenly she noticed the softness flowing into her voice, betraying herself to herself, and she added loudly, more stridently than she intended: "But once they made some trouble about the money and tried to trick me by putting in iron rods that were too thin. Arabs, you know...."

1986

Translated by Jeffrey M. Green

Questions for Discussion

1. The central theme of "A Room on the Roof" is the personal relationship between Israeli Jews and Arabs. How do you react to the protagonist's treatment of the workers? How does your attitude toward Arabs affect your attitude toward her?
2. Do you sympathize with the Arab construction workers? What is your opinion of the men's characters?
3. The protagonist lets "the spirit of the moment overcome the voice of reason" and she brings the workers coffee and cakes. Later, "anger at herself welled up inside her for treating [Hassan], despite herself, as a welcome guest." Comment on the protagonist's struggle between her desire to maintain a superior, authoritarian status and her desire to treat the workers as equals. (Mark Twain explored this theme in *Huckleberry Finn*. Huck believes that he is damning his soul when he helps Jim escape from slavery. Yet Huck does help Jim, because his own knowledge of right and wrong is more powerful than the slave-owning morality that Huck has been taught. Discuss parallels to "A Room on the Roof." For thought: Huck is a young boy and Liebrecht's protagonist is a woman. How might the conflict between social conscience and inner conscience be portrayed if the main character were a grown man?)
4. Both Palestinians and women are "the other" in Israeli society. In what ways does Liebrecht emphasize the similarities between the position of the Arab workers and that of the woman protagonist and in what ways does she emphasize the differences?
5. The urge to build an extra room is first described as a "fetus [that] was already stretching the skin of the belly," and later, as "ripe, like a girl come of age." Why is the growth of human babies and children used as a simile for an idea about home improvement?
6. The protagonist favorably compares Hassan's tenderness toward the baby to her husband's coolness and distance. Comment on men's involvement in child care. Consider also the stereotypes about child care in different social classes. Do we expect that the "primitive" father will be more familiar with babies, while the "civilized" man will have more important responsibilities? Yet are we also more likely to expect that the primitive father will beat his children?
7. What is the significance of Hassan offering to stay the night? Why does the protagonist put the proposition out of her mind?
8. Consider the protagonist's lie to her husband: "every day a Jewish foreman came to keep an eye on [the construction workers]." What are we to make of this?

9. Compare the mother in "A Room on the Roof" to the childless Dolly in "Loneliness." Both are the wives of well-to-do professional men, and both feel a passionate need for something out of the ordinary. Why?

Program Suggestions

1. Organize a joint Zionist Affairs/Jewish Education program on relations between Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews. Consult the National Speakers Bureau or your regional Speakers Bureau.
2. In 1991 Hadassah and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith produced a three-part package of materials on Arab-Israeli relations that provide historical background for today's challenges in the Middle East: the videotape *Search for Solid Ground: The Intifada Through Israeli Eyes*; the revised Hadassah study guide *Between Arab and Jew: Unraveling the Knot* by Yosef Olmert; and the pamphlet *After the Gulf War: The Arab-Israeli Conflict Revisited*. Arrange for a showing of the videotape, and discuss some of the questions raised. (All materials are available through the Hadassah National Order Department.)

Umami Fi Shurl

Orly Castel-Bloom

One morning I couldn't stay in the house any longer and I went out. The walls were closing in on me, the living room got me down. I went outside and began walking. Look, I'm paranoid—no question about it. Stuck at home, I suffocate. A plane flies over, and I freak out.

I sat down on a bench, arms stretched along the backrest, legs crossed, and stared in front of me in infinite boredom. I was sitting on a lawn, one of those plentiful in my neighborhood. Lawns you're allowed to step on, but not to spoil. It was ten o'clock, and I knew that the day would pass, and that I had to make it pass quietly until night came. At night I was allowed to take a tranquilizer.

So I sat on the bench and thought to myself what kind of a world was it with nobody on the lawn except for me. Winter, I thought to myself. Clouds. Yesterday it rained. Not today. Maybe tomorrow. Winter. Cold. Coats. Umbrellas. Mushrooms. Winter. Nothing special. Ordinary, everyday thoughts, until I felt something stinging

Orly Castel-Bloom was born in 1960 in Tel Aviv, where she lives today. She studied film at Tel Aviv University. She has published three collections of short stories as well as two novels, *Where I Am* which received the 1990 Tel Aviv Prize for Literature, and *Dolly City*. In 1992 she was awarded the Prime Minister's Prize for Literature.

עומד על הכביש בלילה האיש הזה
שהיה בשכר הימים אבא שלי.
וחיבת אני לגשת אליו למקום עמדו
מפני שאני הייתי הבת הבכורה שלו.

ובכל לילה וליל הוא עומד לבדו במקומו
ואני חיבת לרד למקומו ולבוא.
ורציתי לשאל את האיש עד מתי חיבת אני.
וידעתי זאת מראש שתמיד חיבת אני.

במקום שהוא עומד ישנו חשש סכנה
כביום שהלך בכביש ודרסה אותו מכונית.
וכך הפרתי אותו ונתתי בו סמנים
שזה האיש עצמו היה פעם אבא שלי.

והוא אינו מדבר לי מלת אהבה אחת
למרות שהיה בשכר הימים אבא שלי
ולמרות שאני הייתי הבת הבכורה שלו
הוא אינו יכול לדבר לי מלת אהבה אחת.

בלילה הנה הייתי בבֵּה מְכֻנֶּת
 וּפְנִיָּתִי יְמִינָה וְעִמָּאלָה, לְכָל הָעֲבָרִים,
 וְנִפְלָתִי אֲפִים אֶרְצָה וְנִשְׁבַּרְתִּי לְשִׁבְרִים
 וְנִסּוֹ לְאַהוּת אֶת שְׁבְרִי בְּיָד מְאֻמָּת.

וְאַחֲר־כֵּן שָׁבְתִי לְהִיּוֹת בְּבֵה מְתֻקֶּנֶת
 וְכָל מְנַהֲגֵי הָנָה שָׁקוּל וְצִיָּתָנִי,
 אִוְלָם אֲזִי כָּבֵר הֵיְיִתִי בְּבֵה מְסוּג שְׁנִי
 כְּמוֹ וְמוֹרָה תְּבוּלָה שֶׁהִיא עוֹד אַחוּנָה בְּקִנּוּקֶנֶת.

וְאַחֲרֵ כֵּן הִלְכֵתִי לְרִקְדַּת בְּנִשָּׁף הַמְּחֻלּוֹת
 אֶךְ הַנִּיחוּ אוֹתִי בְּחִבְרַת תְּחֻלִּים וְכִלְבִּים
 וְאַלּוֹ כָּל צְדִי הָיוּ מְדוּדִים וְקַצּוּבִים.

וְהָיָה לִי שֶׁעַר זָהָב וְהָיוּ לִי עֵינַיִם כְּחֻלּוֹת
 וְהִיָּתָה לִי שִׁמְלָה מְצֻבַּע פְּרָחִים שֶׁבָּגָן
 וְהָיָה לִי כוֹבֵעַ שֶׁל קֶשׁ עִם קֶשׁוֹט דְּבִדְבָן.

CLOCKWORK DOLL

That night, I was a clockwork doll
and I whirled around, this way and that,
and I fell on my face and shattered to bits
and they tried to fix me with all their skill.

Then I was a proper doll once again
and I did what they told me, poised and polite.
But I was a doll of a different sort,
an injured twig that dangles from a stem.

And then I went to dance at the ball,
but they left me alone with the dogs and cats
though my steps were measured and rhythmical.

And I had blue eyes and golden hair
and a dress all the colors of garden flowers,
and a trimming of cherries on my straw hat.

HOVERING AT A LOW ALTITUDE

I am not here.
I am on those craggy eastern hills
streaked with ice,
where grass doesn't grow
and a wide shadow lies over the slope.
A shepherd girl appears
from an invisible tent,
leading a herd of black goats to pasture.
She won't live out the day,
that girl.

I am not here.
From the deep mountain gorge
a red globe floats up,
not yet a sun.
A patch of frost, reddish, inflamed,
flickers inside the gorge.

The girl gets up early to go to the pasture.
She doesn't walk with neck outstretched
and wanton glances.
She doesn't ask, Whence cometh my help.

I am not here.
I've been in the mountains many days now.
The light will not burn me, the frost
won't touch me.
Why be astonished now?
I've seen worse things in my life.

I gather my skirt and hover
very close to the ground.
What is she thinking, that girl?

Wild to look at, unwashed.
For a moment she crouches down,
her cheeks flushed,
frostbite on the back of her hands.
She seems distracted, but no,
she's alert.

She still has a few hours left.
But that's not what I'm thinking about.
My thoughts cushion me gently, comfortably.
I've found a very simple method,
not with my feet on the ground, and not flying—
hovering
at a low altitude.

Then at noon,
many hours after sunrise,
that man goes up the mountain.
He looks innocent enough.

The girl is right there,
no one else around.
And if she runs for cover, or cries out—
there's no place to hide in the mountains.

I am not here.
I'm above those jagged mountain ranges
in the farthest reaches of the east.
No need to elaborate.
With one strong push I can hover and whirl around
with the speed of the wind.
I can get away and say to myself:
I haven't seen a thing.
And the girl, her palate is dry as a potsherd,
her eyes bulge,
when that hand closes over her hair, grasping it
without a shred of pity.

Hovering... P. C

For a moment she crouches down,
her cheeks flushed,
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בשמות מין יש לאנגלית כל האפשריות
כל אני - בפעל
הוא כל אפשרות במין
וכל את היא אתה
וכל אני הוא בלי מין
ואין הבדל בין את ואתה
וכל הדברים הם זה - לא איש לא אשה
לא צריך לחשב לפני שמתחסיים למין
עברית היא סקסמניאקית
עברית מפלה לרעה או לטובה
מפרגנת נוחנת פריבילגיות
עם חשבון ארץ מהגלות
ברבים יש זכות קדימה להם
עם הרבה דקות וסוד כמוס
ביחיד הסכויים שוים
מי אומר שכלו כל הקצים
עברית היא סקסמניאקית
רוצה לדעת מי מדבר
כמעט מראה כמעט חמונה
מה שאסור בכל התורה
לפחות לראות את המין
העברית מציצה מבעד לחור המנעול
קמוני לאמא שלך ולך
כשהייתן מתרחצות אז בצרף
לאמה היה תחת גדול
אכל אף פעם לא הפסקתי לחשב
הימים עברו כחלף הטושים
נשאת ילדה רזה ומסכנת

אחר כך סתמתו את כל החורים
 סתמתו את כל הפרצות
 העברית מציצה לה מחור המנעול
 השפה רואה אותה עירמה
 אבי לא הרשה לי לראות
 הוא סובב את גבו כשהשתין
 אף פעם לא ראיתי אותו טוב ממש
 תמיד הוא החביא את המין
 כמו שרבים מחביא אשה
 כמו שקהל הוא זכר בגופים
 כמו שמלה היא זכר ונקבה
 אין כמו אלו דברים מתוקים
 העברית היא אשה מתרחצת
 העברית היא בת־שבע נקיה
 העברית היא פסל שלא פוסל
 יש לה נקודות חן קטנות וסימני לדה
 ככל שהיא מתבגרת היא יותר יפה
 השפוט שלה הוא פרהיסטורי לפעמים
 נזירונה כזאת היא לטובה
 תגיד לי בזכר תגיד לי בנקבה
 כל אני ילדותי ביצית בטרם הפריה
 על מין אפשר לפסח
 על מין אפשר לותר
 מי יגיד מינו של אפרוח?
 האיש שהטבע יוצר
 לפני שהטבע בו פעל מטה.
 זכרון הוא זכר
 יוצר מינים
 תולדה העקר
 כי היא החיים
 עברית היא סקסמניאקית

ומה שתגדנה בטרוניה פמיניסטיות
 המחפשות גרזנים מחוץ לשפה
 באינטונציה הנוחנת פרוש לדברים
 סימנים רק של זכר ונקבה במשפט
 יתנו יחסים מיניים משנים
 על כל נקבה סימן, על זכר סימן אחר
 כשגם כל פעל ובנין מסמנים
 מה עושה האיש לאשה
 מה הוא מקבל בתמורה
 איזה כח היא מפעילה עליו
 ואיזה סימן נתן לעצם
 ולשם עצם מפשט ולמליות
 נקבל מין משחק טבע
 התרחשות נפשית כיצר צעיר
 משחק של כחות טבע כלליים
 שמהם נגזרים כל הפרטים
 סימנים כלליים לכלל הארועים
 שאפשרי שיקרו בזמן מן הזמנים
 תראה איזה גוף יש לשפה ומדות
 אהב אותה עכשו כלי כסות לשון

TEFILLIN

trans. Linda Zisquit

Come to me
don't let me do anything
you do it for me
do everything for me
what I even start doing
you do instead of me
I'll put on tefillin
I'll pray
you put on the tefillin for me too
bind them on my hands
play them on me
move them with delight on my body
rub them hard against me
stimulate me everywhere
make me swoon with sensation
move them over my clitoris
tie my waist with them
so I'll come quickly
play them in me
tie my hands and feet
do things to me
against my will
turn me over on my belly
and put the tefillin in my mouth
bridle reins
ride me I'm a mare
pull my head back
till I scream with pain
and you're pleased
then I'll move them onto your body
with unconcealed intention
oh how cruel my face will be
I'll move them slowly over your body
slowly slowly slowly

around your neck I'll move them
I'll wind them several times around your neck, on one side
and on the other I'll tie them to something solid
especially heavy maybe twisting
I'll pull and I'll pull
till your soul leaves you
till I choke you
completely with the tefillin
that stretch the length of the stage
and into the stunned crowd.

תפילין

תבוא אלי
אל תתן לי לעשות כלום
אתה תעשה בשבילי
כל דבר תעשה בשבילי
כל דבר שרק אתחיל לעשות
תעשה אתה במקומי
אני אניח תפלין
אתפלל
הנח אתה גם את התפלין עבורי
כרף אותם על ידי
שחק אותם בי
העבר אותם מעדנות על גופי
חבד אותם בי היטב
בכל מקום נרה אותי
עלה אותי בתחושות
העבר אותם על הדגדגני שלי
קשר בהם את מתני
כדי שאגמור מהר
שחק אותם בי
קשר את ידי ורגלי

עשה בי מעשים
למרות רצוני
הפך אותי על בטני
ושים את התפלין כפי רסן מושכות
רכב עלי אני סוסה
משך את ראשי לאחור
עד שאצוח מכאב
ואתה מענג
אחר כך אני אעביר אותם על גופך
בכונה שאינה מסתרת בפנים
הו עד מה תהיינה אכזריות פני
אעביר אותם לאט על גופך
לאט לאט לאט
סביב צווארך אעביר אותם
אסובב אותם כמה פעמים סביב צווארך, מיצר אחד
ומהצר השני אקשר אותם למישהו יציב
במיוחד כבד מאוד אולי מסתובב
אמשך ואמשך
עד שתצא נשמתך -
עד שאחנק אותך
לגמרי בתפלין
המתמשכים לארץ הבמה
ובין הקהל המכה תדהמה.

בשמות מין יש לאנגלית כל האפשריות
כל אני - בפעל
הוא כל אפשרות במין
וכל את היא אתה
וכל אני הוא בלי מין
ואין הבדל בין את ואתה
וכל הדברים הם זה - לא איש לא אשה
לא צריך לחשב לפני שמתחילים למין
עברית היא סקסמניאקית
עברית מפלה לרעה או לטובה
מפרגנת נוחנת פריבילגיות
עם חשבון ארץ מהגלות
ברבים יש נכות קדימה להם
עם הרבה דקות וסוד כמוס
ביחיד הסכויים שונים
מי אומר שקלו כל הקצים
עברית היא סקסמניאקית
רוצה לדעת מי מדבר
כמעט מראה כמעט תמונה
מה שאסור בכל התורה
לפחות לראות את המין
העברית מציצה מבעד לחור המנעול
כמוני לאמא שלך ולך
כשהייתן מתרחצות אז בצריך
לאמך היה תחת גדול
אכל אף פעם לא הפסקתי לחשב
הימים עברו כחלף הטושים
נשארתי ילדה רזה ומסבנת

אחר כך סתמתן את כל החורים
 סתמתן את כל הפרצות
 העברית מציצה לה מחור המנעול
 השפה רואה אותך עירמה
 אבי לא הרשה לי לראות
 הוא סוכב את גבו כשהשתין
 אף פעם לא ראיתי אותו טוב ממש
 תמיד הוא החביא את המין
 כמו שרבים מחביא אשה
 כמו שקהל הוא זכר בגופים
 כמו שמלה היא זכר ונקבה
 אין כמו אלו דברים מתוקים
 העברית היא אשה מתרחצת
 העברית היא כת-שבע נקיה
 העברית היא פסל שלא פוסל
 יש לה נקדות חן קטנות וסימני לזה
 ככל שהיא מתבגרת היא יותר יפה
 השפוט שלה הוא פרהיסטורי לפעמים
 נזירונה כזאת היא לטובה
 תגיד לי בזכר תגיד לי בנקבה
 כל אני ילדותי ביצית בטרם הפריה
 על מין אפשר לפסח
 על מין אפשר לותר
 מי יגיד מינו של אפרוח?
 האיש שהטבע יוצר
 לפני שהטבע בו פעל מטה.
 זכרון הוא זכר
 יוצר מינים
 תולדה העקר
 כי היא החיים
 עברית היא סקסמניאקית

ומה שתגדנה בטרוניה פמיניסטיות
 המחפשות גרזיים מחוץ לשפה
 באינטונציה הנוחנת פרוש לדברים
 סימנים רק של זכר ונקבה במשפט
 יתנו יחסים מיניים משנים
 על כל נקבה סימן, על זכר סימן אחר
 כשגם כל פעל ובנין מסמנים
 מה עושה האיש לאשה
 מה הוא מקבל בחמורה
 איזה כח היא מפעילה עליו
 ואיזה סימן נחן לעצם
 ולשם עצם מפשט ולמליות
 נקבל מין משחק טבע
 התרחשות נפשית כיצור צעיר
 משחק של כחות טבע כלליים
 שמהם נגזרים כל הפרטים
 סימנים כלליים לכלל הארועים
 שאפשרי שיקרו בזמן מן הזמנים
 תראה איזה גוף יש לשפה ומדות
 אהב אותה עכשו בלי כסות לשון

HEBREW

English has all the possibilities for gender
every I - in effect
is every possibility of sex
and every you (feminine) is you (masculine)
and every I is sexless
and there's no difference between you (feminine) and you (masculine)
and all things are it - not a man not a woman
you don't have to think before referring to sex
Hebrew is a sex maniac
She discriminates against or in favor
doesn't begrudge grants privileges
with an account longer than the Exile
in the plural the he's have priority
with great subtlety and secrecy
in the singular opportunities are equal
who says all hope is lost
Hebrew is a sex maniac
she wants to know who's speaking
almost a vision almost an image
what's forbidden in the whole Torah
at least to see the sex
Hebrew peeks through the keyhole
like me at your mother and you
when you were both bathing then in the shack
your mother had a large ass
but I never stopped thinking
the days passed like shower stalls
you (feminine) remained a thin and soapy girl
afterwards you (feminine plural) sealed all the holes
sealed all the cracks
Hebrew peeks at you (feminine singular) from the keyhole
the language sees you naked
my father didn't permit me to look
he turned his back when he peed

I never really had a good look at him
he always hid the sex
the way the plural hides a woman
the way a crowd is male in conjugations
the way word is male and female
there's nothing like those sweet things
Hebrew is a woman bathing
Hebrew is a clean Bathsheba
Hebrew is a carving that doesn't cut out
she has small dimples and birthmarks
as she grows up she gets prettier
her judgment is sometimes prehistoric
such a neurosis is for the best
tell me in the masculine tell me in the feminine
every childish I is an unfertilized egg
it's possible to pass over sex
it's possible to give up sex
who will tell the sex of a chick?
the man whom nature creates
before he's implanted with his conjugated verb.
Memory is masculine
creating sexes
begetting's the main thing
for she is life
Hebrew is a sex maniac
and whatever those feminists complain about
who seek stimulation outside language
with an intonation that interprets things
signs only of the masculine and the feminine in a sentence
will mark strange sexual relationships
on every female a sign, on every male a different sign
when every verb and conjugation pattern is marked
what the man does to a woman
what he gets in return
what power she exerts over him
and what mark is given to the object
and to an abstract noun and prepositions and particles