

With the poem "Monish" Peretz made his debut as a Yiddish writer in 1888. This story of a pious Jewish boy, autobiographically inspired, as Peretz tells us in his memoirs, comments on the crisis of the Jewish artist who succumbs to the powerful attraction of Christian culture. The original version contained a discursive passage about the constraints of the Yiddish language, which "has no words for sex appeal / and for such things as lovers feel." Perhaps Peretz no longer felt these constraints as sharply in later years, because he omitted this passage in the final version of 1908, on which this translation is based.

MONISH



Life is like a river;
we are fish.
The water's wholesome and fresh
and we would swim forever,
but for a black figure
on the riverbank.

There Satan stands,
in his hands
a fishing rod,
and catches fish.

With a worm that eats the dust,
a little lust,
a moment's pleasure,
the line is baited.

Hardly a flick
and the pike flies in the pan
to be fried or roasted
on the flames of hell.

May his name be obliterated!
we know whose work it is—
Satan's—
and why it works so well.
The cause
is the little worm;
it draws and draws—

And so the story I'm about to tell.
Listen!

* * *

There was a prodigy,
precisely when or where is hard to say,
but in Poland,
in olden days,
and he was raised
in a pious house.

Pious father,
pious mother;
the family,
one after another,
scholars all,
known and praised
everywhere,
and those who know best
say they'll all be surpassed
by our hero—Monish.

He's only
seven, eight.

Yet always at his studies
day and night.

He laps up Torah like a sponge.
His mind is lightning;
it can plunge
from the highest
to the most profound,
and can sound the *Taz*
and the ocean of *Shas*;
however stony the *Rambam*,
he finds a cleft in the rock.

And he's beautiful.
Black as night, his locks;
his lips are roses;
black arching eyebrows
and sky-blue eyes,
fire-bright.

A joy to see.
Ah, the blushes and sighs
when the maidens see Monish
go by.

The young *rebetsin* at *kheyder*
watches Monish, nothing else,
and she melts;
and the pots in the oven
spill and burn
as she sits,
her hands in her lap,
seeming to hear
how the children learn.

And the neighbor, pretty Odl,
lets her needle fall
as she listens to Monish:
her hand on her heart,
her ear to the wall,
tears rolling down her cheek.

But Monish is as good as gold;
he knows nothing of this!
What does Monish seek?

His love—Gemara,
 reason and hypothesis:
*shor shenoygakh es hapora*¹
 “If an ox should gore a cow . . .”
 He’s as good as gold—

♦ ♦ ♦

And in those days
 Monish was renowned.
 Scholars from abroad,
 rabbis near and far,
 came to hear him out,
 “A new star!”
 say the silver beards dancing for joy—
 “Happy the mother who bore him,
 happy the father and the place!”
 (I say only what I heard, word for word.
 But is that what they would say
 on Ararat?)

Those were the days
 of the worthy men of old:
 brass-rimmed spectacles,
tfiln housed in silver,
talis crowned in gold,
 and their minds were as towers.
 Other times,
 other powers.

The house of study full,
 and the people overflowed
 to the entry and the step;
 the lamp burned steady
 past the middle of the night,
 and judgment and Torah
 abundant as the light.

♦ ♦ ♦

Now mountain peaks are plentiful,
 but the Bible’s Ararat
 is not the average snowy

peak;
 Ararat’s unique,
 for there when the flood waters crested
 Noah’s ark rested,
 and the One Above Us drew the line;
 and, as we’ve heard,
 granted life forever to the earth.

“Dear people,” He said, “steal, betray, and slaughter.
 You will not be drowned in water,
 for I avert my eyes,”
 and in the sky he hung a bow
 for a sign.

That was once, a pack of years ago,
 but the ark is still buried deep in snow,
 and there live Sammael and Lilith—man and wife—
 grateful for the chill,
 and to pass the time away,
 far away from Gehenna,
 and isn’t it a pretty tête-à-tête?

One morning
 as Sammael lay in bed smoking cigarettes,
 and Lilith saw to her toilette
 by the light of the *tsoyer*²
 (the gem that lights the ark),
 the doorbell tinkled in the foyer:
 “Enter!”
 and there a trembly demon stood,
 teeth all a-clatter,
 who flung himself flat on his face and then flatter.

“My lord and sire,
 You’ve hidden your face
 from your people.
 You’ve heard
 and seen nothing,
 and now it’s too late!
 Your throne is going to topple!”

Satan leaped up. “Sir Baron,
 what transpires?”

"In the kingdom of Poland
where the border is drawn
stands a *shtetl*
as big as a yawn.

The place doesn't matter,
it's rarely mentioned,
houses like nutshells,
prayers are their mansions!
The Jews drift around
as if these were their last days,
with nothing to eat,
living on fast days.

No business to do,
and so Torah can flourish,
and all the genius
its study can nourish.

A boy who lives there
will shame and hush
Lithuania, Poland,
Bohemia, and Prussia.
Let him mature
undiminished,
and we go under—
you're finished!
We'll be thrashed
with iron rods
and the flames of Gehenna
extinguished,
he'll pursue us
with frightening hate
to the end
and bring the Messiah,
Heaven forfend!"

The moment Satan heard these words,
the party was over; his passion stirred,
his eyes turned red,
and devil's sweat
rose like the mist
of a steaming cauldron,
and he rushed at Lilith wagging his fist.

"It's her fault, only hers!"
"The nut is hard,
good sirs," said Lilith,
"but wait.
A good set of teeth can crack it.
Victory's sweet.
Warm up the spit,
the meat
will come on its own!"
and she flew with the wind
and was gone.

♦ ♦ ♦

Tantivy-tan-ton!
What transpires?
Did somebody
see the Messiah?

When is the *shoyfer* blown?
Elul, not *Tamuz*.
Has he gone crazy,
the *shames*?

The rise and fall,
of the trumpet call,
whipcrack!
the wheels go round,
and a coach
rolls into town!
Trumpet blare
and *whipsnap!*
mouths drop open, people stare:
"What's up?"
What's up?
A German's come from Danzig.
And he's dealing in wheat, dealing in rye.
Everything's suddenly fine.
Now here's a client who knows how to pay!
The small change glitters, the dollars shine.
It's raining credit
all around,
the roads are full

of the wagon sound
 of peasants coming to town,
 and ah! the wheeling and dealing
 of slaughterers, judges, perpetual scholars
 chasing the dollars,
 buying and sending things on.
 God blessed the *shtetl* with luck!

Golden times and daily display
 of satin and silk, whatever impresses,
 weddings every day in the week,
 and every tailor up to his ears
 in orders for wedding dresses.
 All the musicians are worn out and weary,
 the *khupe* is torn, the poles are
 as dull as the guests, who haven't the strength
 to laugh at the *badkhn*,
 and there's no wax left for *havdoles*.
 Their hunger forgotten once and for all—
 who eats bread or bothers to bake it?
 Plum pastry, honey cake,
 and liquor—a lake of it.

Now the German brought
 an only daughter
 with him—a jewel.
 Golden hair falling to her feet,
 and eyes as bright as stars,
 so sweet,
 to hear her voice, so sweet.
 Dressed all in velvet,
 and when she spoke, to tell of it,
 it was a fiddle playing.
 Her laugh was a cascade of joy.
 The porter under his load,
 the hermit fasting and praying,
 laughed when she laughed, and their own music flowed
 when the music of her song came thronging,
 and the fiddle spoke and sang,
 sweet and full of longing.

Long, long, long,
 on his way to his studies at the *kloyz*

day by day,
 Monish passed her house,
 lingered at the gate,
 and his ears drank her song
 till like wine it made him drunk
 (an erring mortal, dust and ashes),
 and when he turns to *Rashi*,
 held by its power,
 he hums the tune she sang
 hour after hour.
 The *kloyz* listens stunned
 to such musical sorrow,
 neither shepherd nor folk song,
 so strong it draws the marrow
 from your bones.

Perplexed,
 Monish sits alone,
 trembling as if he'd caught
 a fever, his forehead white as chalk,
 gazing past the holy text
 at something far away.
 "What's wrong with you, Monish?" says his friend.
 "Tell me."
 And so it goes day after day
 after day.

His mother sees him pining away:
 "What's wrong, my child?
 What wind put out
 the light in your eyes,
 my bright *havdole* candles?
 Why are all the tunes you sing
 lamenting?"

"You used to sing other things.
 My heart would laugh
 When you sang with the cantor
 or at the Sabbath meal,
 free as a bird, clear as a bell.
 And now there's something else.
 What is it, child? Tell me!
 It frightens me!"

"Do I know, Momma, what song
is singing in me?
It's not that I want to sing;
it sings itself.
The sounds rise like birds
from the nest,
and these are the songs they bring me."

♦ ♦ ♦

Now from olden days
there was a ruin in that place—
(I won't attempt to say
whether church or castle;
let that much remain in doubt,
I can tell you only what I've read about it.)
There are goblins in the ruin,
imps that crow and laugh for spite,
bark, meow,
and haunt at night,
hurl stones through the air
from their lair
at the houses underneath;
and on the roof
in the dark
a wild dog with tangled fell,
always on the prowl,
who never has been heard to bark,
he only grinds his teeth.
Flesh and blood tremble.
Jews and Christians both
stay well away from that street
and its tumbledown houses overgrown with weeds.

One night in the shadow of the walls
a solitary figure creeps toward the ruin;
all along the street there's no one else:
it's Monish clutching his lapels.

Two angels go with him,
one on either side;

the evil on the left,
and the good, weeping tears, on the right.

His good angel whispers in his ear,
"Have pity on yourself,
fear the Lord your God.
He created all the world,
heaven, earth,
and the seventy nations
who live by the sword.
But the essence of all people
are the Jews, whom He treasured,
and for them He weighed and measured
six hundred and thirteen commandments.
Three hundred and ten worlds
are for those who guard His Torah.
Tell me that it's worth it
to lose them for a girl!"

His evil angel sneers
in his other ear:
"When it's over, repent.
He'll forgive you. Why should *you* fear?
Reuben sinned,
David and Bathsheba sinned,
yet without stint
He gave them paradise,
because He's good by nature.
A wretched look, a tear,
fasting on a winter day;
only groan and state your
never-ers,
and He'll believe anything you say."

Monish listened to his angels
but didn't ponder long.
She appeared in a window,
he was spellbound by her song.

He had hardly seen and heard her
and he flew to her;
and his fears

he left behind him
with the angel weeping tears.

♦ ♦ ♦

Their love in the ruin, how it burns;
the bats and spiders hear
how they sing, laugh, kiss,
and how they vow.

She tells him he must swear to her
and tell her true:

I'll never choose another,
I never will forget you.

He swears by his teacher,
by his father, by his mother,
and by all of them together.

"What else?" she whispers.

"What else?"

And he swears by his earlocks,
his fringes, his *ifln*.

And at every stage his
vow is more fevered, more outrageous.
"But what else, Monish? Tell me,"
and her smile compels.

"For a boy will mislead a girl
and leave her in the dark—"
And he swears by the curtain of the ark
that holds the Torah.

And she cries out: "Higher, higher!"
She so wants to be certain.
And her eyes are on fire,
magic as her lips are magic,
pure flowing magic,
and he barely stops to reason,
he swears by the Messiah
and his *shoyfer*.

"Higher! Higher!" The last prod—
he sinfully speaks the name of God
and is struck by the thunder of His rod.

Laughter in Gehenna,
a reek of sulfur in the room,
and fast as a bowshot
he flies through the air on a broom.

♦ ♦ ♦

Ararat goes crazy—
one hilarious, profuse
shrieking party in the ark,
all Gehenna breaking loose.

Ten Gypsy orchestras,
Gehenna's top musicians,
champagne by the bucket
while the demons do the can-can with precision.

Lamps—a thousand barrels full of pitch—
the wicked are the wicks—
and a special sexton with his scissors at the ready
goes a-trimming wicked wicks
to keep them burning steady.

Fire in her eyes,
the queen of all that place,
Lilith goes before, Sammael behind,
carrying her train of Spanish lace.

Monish stands at the side, nailed by his earlobe
to the doorway of the ark;
the fire's lit, the spit is ready,
and the rest is dark.

1888–1908 (translated by Seymour Levitan)