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*The World According
to Itzik: Selected*

Poetry

and

Prose

ITZIK MANGER

TRANSLATED AND EDITED

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION

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Once, long ago, on a vacation to my grandfather, away from Czer-
nowitz. In the wagon of my grandfather, the wagon-driver, Abraham
Manger, dusk was descending. Darkening. The clouds were not prop-
erly clouds at all but rather strange creatures that hung over and lay
upon the willows beside the road, frightening to a child's mind.

A sweet terror in a child's mind! Whether my grandfather was driv-
ing me to the sacrifice?

My grandfather had sorrowful eyes. His whip had a red tassel. And a
piece of the hide of the horse that was harnessed on the right side had
been rubbed smooth.

THE SACRIFICE OF ITZIK

Rock me, blind fate, rock me
As I dream with open eyes
Of a bird with silver wings
Crossing the sea as it flies.

What does the silver bird bring me?
Only God in his Heaven can tell.
Sweet wine in my grandfather's cup*
From the Land of Israel?

But who has mentioned my grandfather's name,
That wagoner from Stopchet?
He says, as he strides toward me,
"The sacrifice is set."

Blazing at me are his eyes
Like two bright autumn stars;
His beard, disheveled by the wind,
Is moist with seven great tears.

Over cities, towns, and graves
He leads me by the hand.
The towns are large, the cities small
As we stride over them.

He says, "Do you remember
Itzik, those years gone by
When the angel revealed himself
And, Itzik, you survived?"

Our old God regrets that now
And wants his sacrifice,
Though I've lived many lifetimes
And many times have died.

Enough! Who needs His mercy?
He'd better not think, up there . . .
It's well for her, your mother's dead—
At least she's spared more tears."

Over cities, towns, and graves
He leads me by the hand.
The towns are large, the cities small
As we stride over them.

I PRAISE THEE LORD in Heaven, I praise / Thee God for
strengthening my days. / I thank Thee that with hand so weak /
I've finished just the same this work. / Diligence and care I've
taken / And the Patriarchs I've awakened / From holy texts and
silver dust / That hardened on them like a crust. / Here they stand,
prepared to give / You proof that they are now alive; / To greet, dear
readers, each of you / With a cheerful, "Howdy-do?" / They with
their holy mouths will tell / Of many wonders, all so still. / And he
who worked to make this book, / Days and hours and days he took.
/ Itzik Manger's is the hand, / The tailor from Wallachian land.

EVE AND THE APPLE TREE

She stands before the apple tree
While the red sun sets.
Mother Eve, what do you know,
What do you know of death?

Death, ah death's the apple tree
Whose weary limbs bend down,
It is the bird upon the branch
Singing an evensong.

Adam's to the wild wood gone
At dawn into the wood.
Adam says, "The wood is wild
And all that's wild is good."

But Eve is frightened of the wood,
Prefers the apple tree,
And when she does not go to it,
It comes to her in dreams.

It rustles; it leans over her;
It says, "Beloved Eve,
Not every warning Word God speaks
Has to be believed."

In love, she plucks an apple—
She feels strangely light.
Round and round the tree she goes
Like a butterfly in flight.

And God Himself who warned her
Says, "The tree is fair."
And keeps the sunset lingering
Another moment more.

This is what she dreams each night,
But what's the truth? A tear
Shed by the weeping apple tree
That falls into her hair.

"Lovely apple tree, don't weep,
I am your melody.
I know that you are stronger
Than the Word that's warning me."

Eve enfolds the apple tree,
She clasps it in her arms
While overhead, the pious stars
Tremble with alarm.

EVE BRINGS ADAM THE APPLE

The first man, Adam, lies in the grass,
And spits at a passing cloud,
Humbly, the cloud says, "Adam,
"Please, would you cut that out."
But Adam sticks out his tongue
And says to the cloud, "Too bad,"
Then spits a slender stream of spit
And says, "There's more of that."
Wiping the spittle with his sleeve
The cloud grumbles angrily,
"That's what comes of nothing to do,
And lying about all day."
The first man, Adam, laughs and laughs,
His teeth make a fine display
Just as Mother Eve comes back
From her walk in the apple allée.
"Where have you been, oh Eve, my wife,
My dear, where have you been?"
"Strolling about in the plum allée
And chatting with the wind."
"You haven't been to the plum allée,
It's a lie; you've not been there.
Your body smells of ripe apples
And there's apple smell in your hair."

"It's true, I've been in the apple allée—
What a poor memory I have;
You've guessed it at once, my dear husband,
God bless you, my darling love."
"What did you do in the apple allée,
My dear, where have you been?"
"I was chatting with the serpent
About a blessed-sin."
The apple trembles in her hand,
Gleaming scarlet red,
Foreshadowing, as she holds it,
Twilight and passion and death.
The first man, Adam, is puzzled by
The sweetness in her voice.
And he simply cannot understand
Her strange new loveliness.
Trembling, he puts his hand out—
"Stop, Adam. You're making me blush."
The night extinguishes their shapes—
H, U, S, H spells "Hush."

ABRAHAM SCOLDS LOT

Lot—it's disgusting—it's got to be said—
You and your nightly carouse—
Yesterday, in the Golden Hart . . .
What a terrible scandal that was.
Manger the tailor can do such things,
But it simply won't do for you.
You've a couple of daughters to raise, you're rich—
Knock wood—and besides, you're a Jew.

You've cattle and sheep and flocks of goats—
Take my advice—fear God.
Already, a swilling Gentile is said
To be "As drunk as Lot."
I know how it is, on a Friday night,
To drink a cup or two
Of wine with the fish, while the Sabbath lights
Shed their holy glow.
But how can one go on drinking
Day in, day out—like you?
It's all right for Havrillah, the Sabbath-goy,*
But certainly not for a Jew.
Consider what will be said one day—
That the Patriarch Abraham's kin
Was worse than a convert—steeped in wine
And other kinds of sin.
They're saying already—Listen to me!
My God, don't you care what they think?
And you're a father . . . the matchmaker
Avoids your house like a stink.
Even the humblest tailor's lad
Considers himself too fine
To marry your daughters—Shall their braids
Turn gray—for the sake of wine?
Lot—it's disgusting—it's got to be said—
You and your nightly carouse—
Yesterday, in the Golden Hart . . .
What a terrible scandal that was.
Manger the tailor can do such things,
But it simply won't do for you.
You've a couple of daughters to raise, you're rich—
Praise God!—and besides, you're a Jew.

LOT'S DAUGHTERS

Lot's daughters sit in the kitchen
Whispering among themselves.
One of them plucks a new-killed goose,
The other one mends a dress.

The first one says, "A week ago
It was my fortieth year.
Today when I looked in the mirror,
I saw my first gray hair.

Father carouses in taverns
And the years pass swiftly by.
My bridal shoes in the closet
Lie waiting, hopelessly."

The second lets her needle drop
And sits engrossed in thought.
"Sister," she says, "my bedclothes
At night grow feverish hot."

She says, her breathing parched, "I dreamed
A blue-clad soldier came
And slept all night between my breasts . . .
It was a lovely dream.

And then he left the dream and me—
He does not reappear—
As if no troops were garrisoned
Among us any more."

The first one says, "Now listen,
Because I have a plan.
If bridegrooms will not come to us—
A father is also a man."

Her cheeks are flushed, her breath is hot,
Her voice unsteady, dim:
"Sister, on this very night
I mean to lie with him.

Tomorrow, you. Why should we wait?
Our father is drunk as Lot.
And mother, in that cursed town
Of Sodom turned to salt."

They're both inflamed. Around their lamp
Beats a tardy butterfly . . .
"Sister, get ready. Our father comes
Stumbling heavily."

ABRAHAM AND SARAH

"Abraham, when will we have a child?
We're not getting younger, you know.
Other women my age would have had
Eighteen children by now."

The Patriarch Abraham puffs at his pipe
And waits, then he says with a smile,
"A broomstick, my dear, can be made to shoot
If the Lord thinks it's worthwhile."

"Abraham, love, each night I hear
My body sobbing for life . . .
Hagar is only your handmaiden
While I am your own true wife.

Often, it seems to me that the star
That gleams in the windowpane
Is the soul of my child that's wandering
Among shadows and wind and rain."

The Patriarch Abraham puffs at his pipe
And waits, then he says with a smile,
"A broomstick, my dear, can be made to shoot
If the Lord thinks it's worthwhile."

"When I see Hagar's son playing
With sunbeams in the sand
I find myself caressing him
And grief overwhelms my hand.
And when I take him in my lap
His smile's so bright and sweet,
I feel my blood turn strangely cold
And then my eyes are wet.
Abraham, when will we have a child?
We're not getting younger, you know.
Other women my age would have had
Eighteen children by now."
The Patriarch Abraham puffs at his pipe
And waits, then he says with a smile,
"A broomstick, my dear, can be made to shoot
If the Lord thinks it's worthwhile."

HAGAR'S LAST NIGHT IN ABRAHAM'S HOUSE

Hagar, the servant, sits in the kitchen;
A smoking oil lamp spills
The shapes of shadowy cats and dogs
To flicker on the walls.
She weeps because her master
Fired her today.
"Beat it, you bitch," he told her.
"Can't you let me be?"
It was Sarah who egged him on,
That proper deaconess,
Saying, "You get rid of the girl
Or give me a divorce."

Hagar takes out of her trunk
A summer hat of straw;
She takes her green silk apron
And her bloodred beads of coral.
These were the gifts he gave her
Once upon a day
When they strolled the meadow
By the railroad right-of-way.
"How like the smoke of a chimney,
How like the smoke of a train
Is the love of a man, dear mother,
The love of any man.
God knows where we will run to,
Myself and his bastard child,
Unless in some alien kitchen
We are allowed to hide."
She takes the kitchen broom up,
She sweeps the kitchen floor.
Under her blouse, her heart says,
"I love him." She sweeps some more.
Again, she does the dishes,
She scours the copper pan.
"How like the smoke from a chimney
Is the love of any man."

HAGAR LEAVES ABRAHAM'S HOUSE

The dawn is blue at the window,
Three times the rooster crowed.
Outside the horse is neighing,
Impatient for the road.

Hagar is worn with weeping;
Her child lies in her arms:
Once more she casts her eyes around
The gray, familiar room.

Outdoors, the teamster haggles
For his fare with Abraham:
"All right, six dollars, even,
For hauling both of them."

The pony scrapes the gravel
As if it were saying, "Come on!
Give me a chance to show you
How to make the highway tame."

"This is our portion, Ishmael;
Darling, dry your tears.
This is the way of the Fathers
With their long and reverend beards."

She foresees herself abandoned
In a railroad waiting hall
In a foreign country and she sobs
Into her Turkish shawl.

"Hagar, stop that sniveling—
Woman, do you hear me or no?"
Hagar takes her bundle,
Hagar turns to go.

He stands with his silken cap on,
The pious Abraham—
"Dear mother, tell me, does he feel
My heart's defeated pain?"

The whistle blows; they've started.
She sees, through tear-rimmed eyes,
The village houses slowly
Scrape backward in a haze.

She takes the earth and heaven
To be her witnesses:
This is the way of the Fathers
With their long and reverend beards.

HAGAR ON HER JOURNEY

Hagar, worn with weeping,
Sits on a highway stone.
She asks of every passing wind
The way that she must go.

One says, "Hagar, take the east."
Another, "West, that's where."
A third wind is a prankster
And plays among her hair.

Hagar asks the passing birds
Flying through the air.
One whispers, "You go north."
Another, "South, that's where."

She weeps, "For years, O God,
I served him faithfully.
See now how any bird or wind
Can make a fool of me?"

Hagar lifts her head
And sees a caravan
Led by the Turkish sultan
With a mantle all of green.

Nearer, he comes, and nearer,
Then speaks. His voice is firm:
"Tell me, are you Hagar,
Servant to Ibrahim?"

And your little baby boy,
Is Ishmael his name?
We have heard our prophet say
That we descend from him."

The sultan falls before her,
He kneels down in the dust.
"Our lineage finds its honor.
Allah, O Allah be praised."

Not knowing what the truth is,
She can only stare
While the moon is a silver crescent
Glistening in her hair.

ABRAHAM TAKES ITZIK TO THE SACRIFICE

The gray light of the dawning
Touches the earth with dawn.
Eliezer, the loyal servant, puts
The black team's harness on.

Taking the child up in his arms,
Old Abraham shuts the door.
Over his ancient roof, there gleams
A blue and pious star.

"Up, Eliezer"—the whip rings out,
The road has a silvery look.
"Sad and lovely," the poet says,
"Are the roads of the Holy Book."

The graying willows on the way
Run to the house again
To see if his mother stands beside
The cradle of her son.

"Daddy, where are we going now?"
"To Lashkev—to the fair."
"Daddy, what are you going to buy
At Lashkev—at the fair?"

"A soldier made of porcelain,
A trumpet, and a drum;
A piece of satin to make a dress
For mother, who waits at home."

Abraham feels his eyes grow moist
And the steel knife pressing, where
It scalds the flesh beneath his shirt . . .
"To Lashkev . . . the fair . . . some fair."

"Eliezer, stop at the water mill.
Stop for a while and wait.
Isaac, my son, and I will go
On from there on foot."

Eliezer sits and grumbles, and casts
Down the road an anxious look.
"Sad and lovely," the poet says,
"Are the roads of the Holy Book."

THE PATRIARCH ABRAHAM GETS A LETTER

The Patriarch Isaac walks in the field,
Serious, solemn, and grave,
And sees a butterfly perching on
A cornflower, where it waves.

A moment, two, and it's gone—
Far, far, without remorse—
Ah, has the charlatan at least
Given the flower a divorce?

In Isaac's eye there gleams a tear—
"The world is filled with sin."
Then slowly, gravely, Isaac goes
To his father Abraham's tent.

The Patriarch Abraham on the sill
Chats there with the postman,
Who has brought a letter, sealed,
For Abraham, Terah's son.

"The bride's well-dowered, lovely, too,
And everything's *all right*.*
Very soon I'll bring her home,"
True Eliezer writes.

"Yes, very soon, I'll bring her home
With camels, jewels, and cash.
Her name is Rivke, and she's famed
For the way that she cooks fish."

Abraham smiles and gives
The postman some baksheesh.
Ah, since his dear wife, Sarah, died,
Abraham's not tasted fish.

He shuts his eyes—Ah, he feels good
To hear the melody.
Of the Gemara* Yitshok sings—
He'll grow in piety.

Amar Abai,* how sweet it is.
The old man nods and smiles.
In his beard a sunset ray
Plays, trembling, for a while.

RACHEL GOES TO THE WELL FOR WATER

Rachel stands at the mirror and braids
The strands of her long, black hair;
She hears the sound of her father's cough—
His wheezing on the stair.

Swiftly, she runs to the alcove,
"Quick, Leah—it's Daddy, come."
Leah hides her *True Romance*
And slowly leaves her room.

Her face is weary, pale, and wan;
Her eyes red-rimmed with grief.
"Leah, you're ruining your eyes;
Haven't you read enough?"

Rachel takes the water jar
And starts off to the well.
The evening's enough to make you weep—
So pale . . . so beautiful.

She passes through the darkling field.
A hare goes darting, quick
As lightning . . . a little *lamed-dov**
Chirps in the grass—*Tshirik*.

A golden earring in the sky
Gives off a shimmering gleam.
"How I'd want them—ah, how much—
Were there but two of them."

Nearby, a piper's piping,
"Tri-li, tri-li, tri-li."
In the breath of every sheep and cow
Is the smell of dusk and hay.

She runs. It's late. The Bible says
A guest waits at the well;
Today, the cat has washed itself;*
Rachel is fasting still.

She runs, and the golden earring casts
Above her its bright gleam.
Ah, how she would want those rings
Were there but two of them.

THE PATRIARCH JACOB MEETS RACHEL

It's late in the evening. Weary,
The Patriarch plods his way.
"There's the well, the one to the left.
That's it, certainly."
He checks his pocket Bible.
"Of course, of course, right there!"
In that case, what's the reason
That the girl is not yet here?
She comes! The pitcher in her hand.
She runs. "Ah, what a girl.
More lovely than the Bible says.
She is a perfect jewel.
Bon soir, my pretty *mademoiselle*.
I am an *étranger*.
That is . . . perhaps . . . *vous comprenez*
I mean . . . I'm not from here.
However, Miss, know that I have
An uncle hereabouts.
It may be he's well known to you.
Vous comprenez, sans doute.
His name is Lavun. *C'est a dire*,
He's not just anyone.
He's said to be a millionaire
By all the folks back home."

"Laban Harami is, young man,
No one but *mon pappà*."
"Then, *mademoiselle*, unless I'm wrong,
You must be cousin Ra . . ."
"And you are Jacob, *mon cousin*."
She's ember red with shame
As Jacob, in his secret heart
Thinks, "Wow, oh what a dame."
Each takes the other by the hand.
A cooling evening wind
Swirls them in a firm embrace
One moment and is gone.

LEAH BRINGS MANDRAKES FROM THE FIELD

A handful of mandrakes* in her hand,
Leah makes her way
Across the field. The evening sprinkles
Gold on a hut of clay.
Running to greet her, a slender wind
Calls out breathlessly,
"Leah, your children are weeping
Behind the green nut-tree."
"A mother's troubles—" Leah runs,
Her dress stirred by the wind,
Passing the windmill on the hill
That stands with her outstretched vanes.
As if she, also, somewhere had
A Jacob and children of gold
Weeping behind a green nut-tree . . .
As if she, too, were called.

Past Dudyeh's roadside bar, she runs,
 Where the evening's first lamp burns.
 And here's the little chapel green,
 And here, the courthouse stands.

A moment's pause as she breathes deep.
 She sees her sister go—
 In Rachel's hand, an infant's shirt
 Of silk, sewn long ago.

Leah calls, "Dear Rachel, see
 The mandrakes that I've brought.
 Set them under your pillow
 When you go to bed tonight.

God willing, when nine months are gone,
 Then, sister—wait and see . . ."

The poet hears them whispering
 But not the words they say.

He turns his head discreetly.
 Though he can't hear a word,
 He knows it is a whispering
 Eternal as the earth.

JACOB TEACHES THE STORY OF JOSEPH TO HIS SONS

"What makes you all so silent,
 Reuben, my oldest son?"
 "Our Purim play, dear father,
 Is ready to begin."

"Come, put on your silken shirt,
 Joseph, my best-loved son.
 Your brothers need to sell you
 To strangers once again.

When they throw you in the pit,
 Weep, but not for long.
 It's not the first time that you act
 This play out, my dear son.

But when you pass your mother's grave
 That stands beside the way,
 Be sure you shed a real tear
 And softly, gently say

That gladly would old Jacob serve
 Another seventh year
 If once before his death he might
 Again caress her hair.

By now, you know the rest by heart—
 Your exits, cues, and bows.
 Again, in Pharaoh's dream there graze
 His seven fattened cows.

Unriddle his dreams without a fault,
 As truly as before;
 And don't forget, in Heaven's name,
 To send me a sack of flour.

And one thing more, in Heaven's name,
 Be virtuous, my dear . . .

Look out for the wiles of Pharaoh's wife,
 For she is young and fair.

Hey, now, my sons, why do you stand
 Without a word to say?"
 "Because, Father Jacob, you yourself
 Have spoiled the Purim play."

BATHSHEBA

Bathsheba looks at the brilliant ring
She's slipped onto her hand.
It isn't the ring he sent that counts,
But the king who rules the land.

Ah, not the ring but the note he sent,
The note that makes her weep.
"Your face, your walk, your graceful ways
Have robbed me of my sleep."

Bathsheba looks in the mirror and sees
She's lovely. That much is true,
But how can a faithful woman like her
Go to a rendezvous?

What of her aged father-in-law,
And her husband, the general?
And what about God? What will He say—
The Guardian of Israel?

Again, she reads the note. He writes,
"Your beauty is all I see.
As for God, we've worked things out.
I do what pleases me.

If I sing him a psalm from time to time,
He forgives me all of my sins.
As for your husband . . . trust me, dear,
I'll take good care of him."

A curtain rustles. "What's that? What's that?"
It's only the wind at play.
She hides the ring; she hides the note
And slowly makes her way
Into the garden. Her slow steps
Are muffled by yellow sands;
But all at once, at the garden gate,
A scarlet moonbeam lands.

One final twinge of shame and then
She opens the door with her hand.
It isn't the ring, the ring that counts,
But the king who rules the land.

KING DAVID AND ABISHAG

King David leafs his book of psalms;
(It's the middle of the night).
Outside, a soldier stands his watch
Before the palace gate.

Murmurs the king, "All-powerful God,
I know that you are here
Within me and my book of psalms
Each second of each hour."

He rises. That's enough for now,
This talk with blessed God.
Like a shadow, he drags himself
Slowly toward his bed.

Abishag sleeps gently
And talks out of her sleep.
From her dream there drifts the scent
Of a meadow with its sheep.

Of a river and a stand of pines
And a village moon that glows,
Of an ancient, pious linden tree
That guards her mother's house,

Of longing, and the gnawing pain
Of grief that leads away
Both from the king and from his psalms
To its own melody.