

# 8 GREAT HEBREW SHORT NOVELS

EDITED BY

Alan Lelchuk and  
Gershon Shaked

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

Alan Lelchuk

*The Toby Press*

# Contents

Introduction, *xi*

Bibliographic Note, *xxvii*

*Uri Nissan Gnessin*, Sideways, *1*

*Yosef Haim Brenner*, Nerves, *33*

*Yitzhak Shami*, The Vengeance of the Fathers, *69*

*S.Y. Agnon*, In the Prime of Her Life, *189*

*David Vogel*, Facing the Sea, *249*

*Amos Oz*, The Hill of Evil Counsel, *311*

*Yehoshua Kenaz*, Musical Moment, *367*

*A.B. Yehoshua*, The Continuing Silence of a Poet, *413*

About the Editors, *455*

*Uri Nissan Gnessin*

Sideways

TRANSLATED BY HILLEL HALKIN

**T**he first time that Nahum Hagzar set foot in that pleasant house at the far end of the quiet street was due to some trivial reason that was forgotten by him no sooner than it had occurred. Much to his surprise, he met his stout neighbor there, young Hanna Heler, with her unnaturally loud staccato laugh, and conversed with her for the first time, too. Yet he didn't stay long on that occasion, for he was dreaming of other things; feverishly, his coattails flapping behind him, he hurried home to await the new job and the challenging life that would begin the next day, here in this provincial town to which he had chosen to move from Vilna.

The next morning, however, turned out to be leaden and dull. The walls were cheerless, the ceiling was low, and the windowpanes were streaked as though with sweat. He sat chin in hand for a long while, biting his lips; then suddenly he roused himself, found some excuse to call on his neighbor, and went together with her to that house at the end of the street. Inside were new faces. Sitting back a bit from the round table was a lively young man in a semi-Oriental position, his two arms hugging his out thrust knee while he rocked back and forth and made everyone laugh at his jokes. This time Hagzar stayed longer. Indeed, as he passed through the entrance hall on his way out, a new peal of laughter from the room he had left

so intrigued him that, after briefly regarding the gray windows, he turned around and rejoined the company inside.

His third visit to the house was prompted by the same young man. One morning the latter dropped in on him for a while, and after a friendly chat suggested that they pay a call on Rosa. By then Hagzar knew that his new friend was the only son of one of the town's leading citizens; donning his coat while thinking of Rosa's pretty face and her pale, pure smile in the misty glow of the shade-spreading lamp, he reflected, not for the first time, what strangers all these people still were to him.

Subsequently he stopped by several more times. He often saw Ida, the pale lycée student, and her older sister Manya, who planned to resume her studies soon as well and was forever wandering in and out and looking for something while humming jerkily under her breath. Rosa was rarely there, except when once or twice he found her laughing prettily and with infectious gaiety at the jokes of the lively young man.

The mother of these three sisters had passed away early in the spring of that year, and their father, Simha Baer, was away on an extended business trip in the Ukraine. At the time Hagzar's large wicker trunk, which was filled with books and manuscripts, still stood unopened by the door, exactly as it had arrived from Vilna two weeks before, for he had not yet finished arranging his room. He had come to the provinces hoping to find the leisure to carry out his many literary projects, and afterward to travel in Europe, as had always been his dream.

Before long the trunk was opened and he had set to work. He had four pupils to tutor every morning, the hours of which were divided among their houses; afternoons were free for his own pursuits. That summer a Hebrew journal had published a long article of his on Hebrew literature, replete with copious citations. Much of the summer was taken up with founding a local literary society, a long-standing ambition of his; in addition, he was hard at work on a second article, upon completion of which he expected to be paid for both contributions together. In fact, he was already making plans for studying abroad the following year; yet after some brief financial

negotiations with the editors of the journal, he was forced to admit that he had made a slight but regrettable miscalculation—and so he turned his attentions instead to the composition of an outline for a major series of essays on the modern Hebrew novel, which boded no end of work.

Afterward, when autumn came and—buttoned up in his bulky overcoat and wearing his high boots—he had to knead with his feet several times each day the thick quarter of mud into which the town square was transformed, he occasionally passed Rosa in the street, acknowledging her when he did with a brief nod of his head. Once, however, when they chanced to be going in the same direction, he learned from her that they had a mutual...well, not exactly a friend, but an acquaintance: Gavriel Carmel, who had himself been a teacher in the same town several years before. In those days Rosa had been staying with an aunt in the country and had come home only infrequently, so that she and Carmel did not meet more than a few times. Hagzar, for his part, told her that his friend had been abroad for at least two years now, and that he himself had lost all track of him, having last seen him in Vilna before his departure.

On the same occasion he was also informed that Ida had been his friend's pupil. And so that evening found him sitting at the round table in the pleasant room, where he had not been for many days, while Rosa stood beside him, one hand on the back of his chair and the other on the red tablecloth. By the misty glow of the shade-spreading lamp the two of them studied the brave, youthfully chaste face that looked up at them from a page of the handsome album. Hagzar's own face, which had worn a slight smile before Rosa opened the album, was now an image of excitement concentrated on the two large, innocently self-assured eyes that stared back at him from the picture. How distant this face seemed to him—yet how it drained the blood from his own. The trace of laughing mockery upon it, which seemed reminiscent of something and cut to the heart's quick—that subtle trace that kept reappearing and vanishing into the mystery of those unsullied lips, reappearing with triumphant insolence and vanishing, as though tauntingly, with the cunning of a cat—that laughter haunted him, like the forgotten end of a dream.

Later, while calculating that the photograph must be at least eight years old, he listened to Rosa chatter on about Carmel: how fond he had been of her little sister Ida, whom he had helped prepare for the lycée; how unrecognizable he was in the picture; and how her middle sister Manya, who was two years older than Ida, always used to hide from him, ha ha... There followed a melancholy silence in which the oil lamp burned and the samovar boiled on its yellow stand and was poured bubbling out into glasses, while Hagzar sat quietly staring at the other lamp, the one reflected in the dark glitter of the window by the night outside. By ten o'clock his boots were sinking one by one into the mud of the strange, dark street, his body bent slightly forward as he thought of the warm room and its misty, penumbral glow, of his distant friend Carmel, of Rosa with her kind, intelligent eyes, and of life as a scroll that was pleasantly being unrolled. For a moment, too, he recalled the weak, suffering groan that had reached him as he stood in the dark hallway at twilight—that groan that had seemed, as it were, to solve some problem in arithmetic—and the vexed, secretive whisper that had followed it. He thought of plump, dark-eyed Manya, and of Ida, weak and pale; and upon arriving home he went straight to work, humming a mischievous tune.

After that he began coming often, as a rule in the evenings when Rosa was alone in the room. Jumping up from her dimly lit corner to greet him, she would silently hold out her small, kind hand to him and heighten the penumbra of the lamp. The corners of the room became dimmer, the tall flowers grew indistinct, and the windowpanes gleamed blackly through the parted curtains. Their harmless chatter flowed quietly between them, although by the time he had to leave, the sound of his laughter might often be ringing out loud.

The lively young man was seldom seen anymore. Once or twice he dropped by with an older sister; they sat, joked for a while, and departed. Hagzar no longer felt that these jests were malicious. On the contrary: the young man was careful to hurt no one's feelings and was certainly no worse than most youths his age. If one compared him to Rosa, who took part in these contests of wit, Hagzar pleausurably observed, with an almost feverish passion, she was far the more venomous of the two: her barbs were so nimble and never failed to

strike home. Yet such evenings left him ill at ease, and having walked the guests to the door he gladly forgot them at once.

As soon as they were gone, Rosa would begin to talk volubly about herself, Manya, Ida, her father, or whatever else was on her mind. Her speech had a feverish intensity, which she broke now and then with a softly enigmatic laugh while regarding him with confident affection. Hagzar rose at such times to his feet, tucked his hands behind his back beneath the skirts of his frock coat, and paced step by step across the soft carpet, absentmindedly enjoying each squeak of his shoes as they sank into the pliant fabric. When Rosa had finished, it was his turn to confide his thoughts to her, and so they chatted and laughed, or perhaps even sang quietly to themselves or went out for an evening stroll.

Occasionally they were joined in the room by plump, virtuous Manya, whose small, dark eyes had a look in them of mocking suspicion. Placing her open book before her on the table and slipping her hands beneath her black smock, she sat wordlessly on the edge of the couch as if proudly waiting for something. The conversation ignored her, except that now Hagzar fingered the ends of his lead-colored mustache and wrinkled his high forehead repeatedly. The first few times that this happened Manya soon rose again and returned to her room with a bitter air of injured pride, while Hagzar continued to pace back and forth and hum snatches of old melodies to himself, unconsciously biting his bottom lip. Gradually, however, Manya's visits grew longer; as though out of spite she sat silently facing him, while he slowly took on the look of a man struggling with a toothache. He was aware by then that neither Ida nor Manya had been in good nervous health since their mother's death; yet whereas Ida had taken a leave of absence from the lycée on doctor's orders, Manya had insisted on continuing her preparations for acceptance to the school's fifth form, which had already ended unproductively several times in the past. More than once Hagzar tried talking in her presence of the unhealthy effects of too much study, which could waste the best years of one's life and "nip in the bud" the "springtime of one's youth." At first glancing obliquely up at him with half-lifted eyes, then slowly revolving toward him her full, spiteful face, whose look neatly dis-



sected him in two, Manya casually jiggled one leg on its toes and coughed deliberately to announce that none of this concerned her in the least. As soon as Hagzar paused for breath she rose and returned to her room, while the conversation went on as before.

That winter Hagzar's literary work proceeded slowly. There were several reasons for this. The outline that he had begun for the series of essays was interrupted in the middle by a long, critical article that he had decided to write on a novel that had recently appeared, in which he hoped to focus on certain issues that, although the best of Jewish youth was concerned with them, Hebrew literature had unaccountably overlooked. Yet the literary society that he had started, which had fallen on difficult times, and a fifth pupil whom he was forced to take on, consumed nearly all his free time, so that he could only jot down some preliminary notes regarding the article's content. In addition he was busy making entries in his journal, which he hoped one day to transform into a new set of essays that he was already at work on.

That spring the brother of the three sisters, a bookkeeper for a trading firm in the south, came home for several weeks of vacation. More than ever, Hagzar was a visitor in the house, which now had a different ambiance. Manya, though still as spiteful as ever, began appearing more often and at times even joined the conversation, addressing her remarks at first exclusively to her brother, and then, little by little, to the rest of the company as well. Soon Ida, an open book in one hand and a white pillow in the other, began to join them too, half-sitting and half-reclining on the couch. Friends of both sexes dropped by to talk, joke, drink tea, and toss nutshells at each other. Each time they had left, Rosa, her fastidious features and gestures prettily graced by fatigue, would complain of what bores they had all become and of how she had nothing to say to them anymore. What a wit her brother Shmuel could be, though! He had been the evening's saving grace.

Shmuel, a dandyish young man of about twenty-five with a sallow, bloodless face that could have enabled him to pass for sixteen, would regard the pince-nez that his thin, petite hands were wiping with a snowy-white handkerchief, and exclaim with open disdain:

“Small-town intellectuals!”

And Manya would look at him, curling her lips with forceful assurance, and repeat:

“Small-town!”

After which Shmuel would put back his glasses on his nose, tilt his head slightly backward, and recall with a gleeful guffaw how he had “really put” that “dumb blond” or that “fat tub” in “her place.” Had anyone noticed how she had turned up that trumpet that served as her nose? Then Rosa would make a crack of her own, Manya would cast all caution to the winds, and Shmuel would interrupt them again with more of his recollected repartee. And so, in giggles, gossip, jesting, and song, the time went by.

Within a few weeks the season arrived for merry walks in the marvelous woods, gay boat rides on the river, poetic campfires beneath dark, satiny skies, boisterous breachings of the silence of the before-dawn-and-after-midnight sleeping streets. Now they were joined by a newcomer, another former acquaintance of Hagzar’s, who had come to look for pupils in the provinces too, although only for a few months. This was a devil of a fellow with pointy brown eyes, black Gogolesque hair, and a repertoire of comically rendered folk songs, itinerant synagogue sermons, monologues of peasants called to testify in court, and soliloquies of drunkards cadging drinks from Jewish innkeepers that reduced them to helpless laughter in the end. That summer was an unforgettable time for all of them, the memory of which lingered on for many a long month after.

And so when one day long, slender cobwebs spiraled down through the air and yellow leaves dropped from the trees and littered the paths in the parks, Hagzar trampled on them with a joyous burst of savage energy unleashed. He stood straighter now, his chest had broadened and his face was more alert. In another week or two the skies would cloud over; the wind would howl; windowpanes and tin roofs would rattle once more in the gloom: hurrah! His mood would be defiant then; his mind free of fetters; his heart brimful; his work crowded with satisfying new discoveries.... Yes, a week or two would bring black nights pierced by a few quivering streetlights, torrents of rain, mud up to the ankles...but that dear, pleasant house would

be warm and well lit. Beneath its spread of red velvet the couch would be spacious and soft; the lively eyes of the three pretty sisters would glow with a tender light; Rosa's pleasing chatter would flow self-indulgently on; Manya's deliberately spiteful outbursts would interrupt him as usual, break off in the middle as they always did, and resume again; and pale little Ida—Ida with her wondering look and her soft, lovely braid, who stubbornly refused to sit in his lap or rest her dear head against him until he grabbed her by her soft, warm underarms, which were no longer the arms of a child, and placed her there forcefully—would docilely cling to his chest like a newborn lamb, her dear, rich, smooth hair his to play with as he pleased.

One autumn day Hagzar went to the public library and borrowed an absorbing new book that he took that same night to the pleasant house and read aloud there in a single sitting. When he went the next day to return it, Rosa accompanied him in the hope of finding "something else just as nice" which they might read the following night. The sky was covered with clouds. The wind raged, the mud reached their ankles, and raindrops spattered down.

At first they formed a trio for these readings. Gradually, though, Ida joined their little group too. Palely holding her white pillow, she would enter the room and sit listening silently in one of the corners with her arms crossed before her. Manya sat on the couch's edge, one arm draped over the windowsill, while Rosa leaned against the back of the rocking chair, swaying slowly with it back and forth. Ensnared in red velvet, Hagzar read clearly and with controlled emotion from the volume that he held in his hands. Sometimes Manya asked a spiteful, disjointed question, which he did his best to answer without showing his distress. Sometimes Rosa challenged him too. In the beginning he deferred to her by blithely, almost shyly agreeing, yet soon he took to arguing back. And when she refused to back down—not with any great show of logic, to be sure, but with in an adamant way that spoke for itself—he concluded that she was a person with a mind of her own and rare properties of soul such as belonged only to those who have been through a great deal in life. If then he thought of that lively young man and of Rosa's venomous barbs, he had to admit that she was deucedly attractive. If only, he mused bitterly, women's

souls were not such closed books to him, and this were not always fated to be the case, since his relations with the opposite sex were one irreparable mistake from the start.

For a moment he thought of his stout neighbor, whose buxom arms collided with his own whenever they walked side by side. Like the shadows of owls on frozen, moonlit nights, fleeting images arose and vanished in his mind. Though it made no sense at all, when he looked at Rosa's pure, noble face her eyes reminded him for some reason of his own gray cat, which liked to sit perched on the red commode in his bedroom. Curiously, the thought of this amused him. Rosa had stopped rocking with the chair; her eyes shone and her cheeks were slightly flushed. Her voice, which trembled when she spoke with the excitement of the pleasures of the mind, brought him back to himself. At once he began to refute her, none too logically himself, stopping repeatedly to ask:

“Do you follow me? Well, do you?”

And when she did not he turned to face Manya, who sought at first to return his direct gaze. Soon, however, she had to lower her eyes; yet immediately this annoyed her; so that spitefully she stared back at him again until he began to falter and felt suddenly so stupid that he forgot what he was saying and turned back to Rosa once more, who still refused to concede the point, which compelled him to start all over again from the beginning.

Upon returning home late that night he climbed into bed and lay there reviewing the day's thoughts and feelings and his hopes for the months ahead. He wished the winter would come. He was eager to get back to his work again, which had lately been neglected—although the fault was not his own but that of the circumstances in which he lived. As soon as the month was out he would rent a larger room in which it would be easier for him to concentrate, and everything would fall into place.

Thus the autumn went by. And one morning when the first gleaming coat of new snow lay upon the broad, empty streets and the gleeful caw of the crows sounded over the low, whitened roofs, Hagzar and Rosa, wrapped in a long woolen shawl, walked down the long street together until they came to a farmyard. A large, chained

dog began to bark at them, while a fat sow squealed from beneath a summer cart that lay lamely in the middle of the white yard. A tall, sun-bronzed peasant woman came out to greet them. Her sleeves were rolled back and the edge of her apron, which was slick with grease, was tucked into her waist. With her tongue she kept searching for something in her gums or between her teeth, while burping repeatedly with a harsh, ringing sound that was accompanied by a smell of half-digested herring and onion.

Rosa addressed her by her patronymic. She spoke to her briefly, and they followed her to a large, low-ceilinged room with simple but ample furnishings, a clean white floor, lots of flowers, and a high bed standing in one corner beneath a mountain of pillows. Numerous pictures of generals on horseback galloped over the walls, and a few gloomy icons hung darkly in the corners.

That same day Hagzar moved in. In the evening Rosa and the girls came to visit. They praised the room and joked with the peasant landlady, laughing especially when she paused on her way out, pointed with a finger to the pillowy mountain, and declared:

“I do believe you’ll sleep well here...”

Then they took Hagzar back with them to their house. They read, talked, sang, and went out for a stroll again until it was well past midnight.

The next morning was overcast. Yesterday’s snow had turned into a gray gruel on the ground. The winds pounded on the shutters. Hagzar felt as though his soul were incubating within him. For a long time he sat on his new bed with his feet tucked beneath him and one hand supporting his head. Then he rose, turned up the collar of his buttoned frock coat, and paced slowly back and forth in the room, his left hand holding the collar in place while his right hand braced his left against his chest. After a while he sat down at his desk and remained immobile there with his pen aimed at a blank sheet of paper. Yet when he began to write, the round, carefully formed letters raced handsomely across the page. His face grew intense and excited. His breath came and went irregularly, and his movements were nervous and quick. With dizzying speed he filled lines and whole pages, and he did not stop to rest until he had finished a large and crucial sec-

tion of his new article. Only when he had marked the final period with a large, black ink stain and had drawn a black line beneath the last sentence did he throw down his pen on the table with a sigh of relief. He leaned back in his chair, clasping his head from behind with both hands, and sat there with his eyes shut as though he were frozen stiff.

That evening he was hurrying home from the house of an acquaintance in order to get back to work. There was a bite to the distilled air outside. The last of the snow was turning gray on the eaves of the roofs. Far on the horizon the sky was streaked with a pale, congealed red. He strode vigorously over sharp, frozen clods of mud, thinking of how gay and relaxed spiteful Manya had been the day before. He thought of what he had written that day, and of what he planned to add to it that night, and felt heartened by the winter with its sleighs, its gleaming roofs, its raucous crows, and its snows that came from afar. When he decided to look in on the three sisters he found Rosa setting glasses out for tea. He rubbed his hands pleurably together, stamped forcefully with his foot, and exclaimed in a triumphant voice:

“So it’s winter after all, Rosa!”

## 2.

Though the winter had barely begun, Manya was already hard at work. Having failed to gain admission to the fifth form the previous spring, and having spent the whole summer “in a perfect fit” about it, she was determined to take the examinations for the seventh form the following spring, it being senseless to try forever for the fifth. For a tutor she had engaged the same young man who was a former acquaintance of Hagzar’s. To be sure, he was due to leave town soon, though no date had been announced for his departure; yet meanwhile a good deal about him was known in the pleasant house, both regarding his down-at-heel past with its tale of penury, privation, mad binges, police vans, artist friends sent to Siberia, and more yet that was shrouded in mystery, and the glorious future that lay strung out

before him on a long chain of light, life, space, freedom, achievement, and renown. (In addition Manya alone knew of a certain pistol shot in a dark orchard and of a shirtsleeve with a bullet hole that he still happened to possess.) In any case he was a fine sight to behold when, his curls tumbling over his forehead, he sat perched like a drunk on the edge of his chair in the middle of the room with one hand on his knee and the other in the air, poised to fall on his second knee as soon as the Delphic mood possessed him and he began to quote from Nekrasov with a windy, excruciating sigh:

*“Ekb, priyát’el! I ty, vidnó, goré vidál...”*

“What a rascal of a fellow!” someone would be sure to exclaim then.

On winter evenings, sitting by himself or together with Rosa in the drawing room, Hagzar would listen as the insistent, slightly vexed drone of study coming from Manya’s room repeated for the thousandth-and-first time, so it seemed to him, some perfectly trite phrase or cumbersome but trivial formula that was frequently interrupted by an irritable “the-devil-take-it!” At such times Ida, who had recently been forced by her health to stop attending the lycée again, might pass before him on her way out of Manya’s room. Her face pale and annoyed beneath its head of mussed hair, her faithful pillow in one hand and her heavy book open in the other, she would direct a silent, melancholy smile at him, as if to say:

—You know, and I know, that the poor child is wasting her time...but what good would it do to tell her?

Then she would slip into the other bedroom, whose half-ajar door opened onto the drawing room too, lie down diagonally across the two beds that stood there side by side, and read. Rosa would sit on the ledge of the stove, her knitting or a book in her lap, and Hagzar would sink deeper into his corner of the couch, or pace back and forth in the room, while they chatted and joked and fell silent again before beginning to hum some old tune. Sometimes, still swearing by the devil, Manya entered the room to inquire what time it was and worry why her tutor had not come yet. Hagzar would stare at her face, which warned against trespassing, and at her full, handsome shoulders beneath the blouse of soft muslin that caressed her alluring

back, and would seek an excuse to converse with her; yet Manya, for some reason already on the defensive, would stare suspiciously back at him and answer as sharply as she could. Once, the Lord knew why, he asked her what her dreams were and who the lucky young man in them was. With wounded hauteur she turned her back on him, replying to him from the doorway in a harsh voice that seemed to bore upward from a hidden cavern in her chest:

“He’s not like the likes of you, I promise you that...”

Which made him break into an uncharacteristically loud laugh.

In the weeks before the Russian holidays, Ida made a supreme effort to return to school, so as to be able to be promoted with her classmates, and succeeded so well that she even finished the term with honors. Yet soon afterward the pains in her head and chest grew worse again, and often Hagzar found himself standing by her bed with a glass of water in one hand while Rosa quietly rubbed down her bare arms and chest with pungent spirit and Manya searched for something along the windowsills and under the couch with a stifled groan. In a barely audible voice Ida chattered by fits and starts; she whimpered about her dead mother, about skies like none she had ever seen and some great storm at sea, and about something else, something terribly important, that everyone kept taking for himself and leaving nothing of for her. She went on hysterically, laughing and crying at once, until Rose had to beg her in a frantic whisper to calm down and Manya’s movements grew still more exasperated.

At such times Hagzar grunted and twitched fretfully, alternately sipping cold water from the glass in his hand and sprinkling it over the pale face that was suddenly frozen in a spasm of new distress. Such crises did not last long, however. Soon Ida dozed off and they returned to the drawing room, where everything was as before. For a while they sat there in silence, letting the tension drain; then Manya went to her room while Rosa curled up on the stove ledge again and Hagzar settled into the couch. The door to the bedroom remained half-open, so that the shade-spreading lamp cast a dim light over the end of one of the beds and caused it to gleam in the dark. From her sickroom Ida continued to groan in her sleep, while Hagzar and



Rosa sat talking and laughing in quiet tones before falling silent or breaking into hushed song.

At about nine o'clock Manya's tutor would arrive. Now the intervals of silence were themselves intermittently broken by his rude oaths that drifted out of Manya's room to dissipate in the hushed space of the drawing room. Later he might appear for a while to sit and banter with them, or to challenge Hagzar to wrestle. Sometimes he asked Hagzar whether he remembered this or that friend before turning to the others and relating to them with relish some comical incident from the time that the two of them had briefly shared a room in the city of H.

"One night when we were starving," he would begin gustily, savoring his deliberately coarse speech, "I went to see a pal of mine, a real sport. He was busted himself but he offered to take us to some sausage and a small loaf of bread. So I took the grub and brought it back to Hagzar. The professor was lying in bed when I came, licking his chops. 'On your feet,' I said, 'it's chow time.' You should have seen him jump out of bed. 'What? Did you say food? Excellent, let's have it. But...*sau-sa-ge?*...'"

Everyone burst out laughing.

The tutor raised his voice and concluded with brio:

"And what do you think happened in the end? My vegetarian friend ate a sandwich of bread on bread and went right to sleep!" With a merry cry he turned at last to the hero of his story. "I can see that by now you've had better sense drummed into you, eh? Come, let's wrestle!"

And seizing Hagzar beneath the arms, he sought to throw him; while the latter struggled to squirm free and cried quits. Then all laughed again and talked some more and enjoyed themselves until late into the night. Even Manya grew gay and spirited, and her eyes shot sparks.

Yet when the tutor rose to go at last and Manya chose to walk him part of the way, a brooding silence descended again on the room, a silence that pressed on the heart like a soft caress, and squeezed, squeezed away at it with a mild, gently narcotic pain. Hagzar and Rosa sat dreamily, waiting to hear the noisy creak of the front door and the

squeak of boots being hastily removed—which were sometimes followed by a low, defiant voice singing chestily from Manyá's room:

*Ekh, ló-opnul obrùch*  
*Ókolo maznitsy:*  
*Trai-trrai-ti-ra-rai...*

When it was finally time to bid Hagzar goodnight too, Rosa put on her large woolen shawl and, shivering a bit from the cold, accompanied him along the empty street that ran in front of the house. Sapphire crystals winked and glittered from the pure blanket of snow that had whitened the world. A dusky, reddish wreath festooned the moon. The trodden snow underfoot turned to slush with a merry squish and a light, amusing puff of smoke materialized with each breath. Hagzar talked in muted tones while she walked by his side and thought as she listened of how kind he was and of how agitated he grew each time he had to grope for a word; he was a person, she felt, who lived in a splendid world, and thought splendid thoughts, and had work that was splendid too. Guilelessly she began to tell him about the Bible tales she had studied as a girl with her brother at some rabbi's; about the stories of Mikhailov-Scheler that had supplanted them as she grew older and become her constant companion; about books in general, for which she had such a passion; about her friends, who made fun of this; and about the strange sense of remoteness, the missing sympathy, that she felt nowadays when she met them. The more she talked, the more enthralled she became with her own account, every detail of which seemed so splendid to her, so full of life and enhancing of her own past, that she actually began to believe with all her heart that she too had had a past without knowing it. Not until her words began to fail, yielding to little gasps of weary, jagged laughter, did she notice Hagzar's frequent grunts, which he struggled ineffectually to emit in token of his interest in her tale. Then her speech lost the last of its flow to ever longer silences, until it trailed off completely in the end—although not before one last, pitiable grunt on his part had prompted her to laugh weakly and to conclude as well as she could:

“Yes, time certainly has flown...”

By February of that year it began to thaw. In the morning hours the sun peered out, causing the snow to soften, the rooftops to drip, and the dazzling ponds to fissure and crack; yet toward evening fingers froze once more, jaws stiffened, and tasseled icicles reformed along the eaves. It was an hour at which Hagzar liked to visit the leafless park in the center of town. The snow lay in milky-white drifts there and the branches of the trees were stiff and bare. Crows screamed over the bright, desolate expanse. He wandered untrammelled along the winding paths, tracing sinuous lines with his stick in the virgin snow and sometimes stopping to amuse himself by scrawling words in it.

Once he went for a walk in the park with Rosa. Her face was prettily flushed and the sound of her laughter rang like a child's at play. The golden fringes at the ends of the white scarf that she had tossed back over her shoulders blew against the snug collar of her jacket. Hagzar was in a quick, gay mood that day. They laughed at everything they saw and spoke about, most hilariously of all at Rosa's account of a dream that had woken Manya from her sleep the night before. Just imagine: darkness all around her, not a person in sight, so quiet you could hear a pin drop—and all of a sudden:

“This drunken rascal of a fellow appears. He chases after her with a revolver, and begins to shoot, ha ha...”

It really was so absurd...at which point Hagzar stepped to one side without warning, spread his arms wide, and flung himself with a playful cry backward into the pure snow, which collapsed beneath his weight. As soon as she recovered from her fright Rosa burst into such gales of laughter that she scared all the crows, which filled the park with their caws and noisily shook clumps of white snow down from the treetops. Hagzar looked into her bright eyes and called from where he lay with gay pathos:

“Man overboard! Why don't you save me, Rosa?”

Rosa laughed even harder. She bent until her flushed, bright face nearly touched his own and seized the hands he stretched out to her. Slowly he pulled himself up, digging his heels into a hollow of snow and muscularly gripping her small palms; yet before he could regain his footing she stumbled herself and would have pitched

helplessly forward had she not quickly grabbed his waist and sunk her head with a merry shriek into his overcoat at a point beneath his chest. He seized her beneath the arms and continued to hold her there for a moment after helping her up—until a sudden shiver ran through him at the changed sound of her laugh, which had grown strangely contorted, and he released her. Then, without looking back at the “snowman” that his fall had made, the two of them walked home in silence.

On the way Rosa teased him with a strange venom, reminding him with fleet hints of things long repented and best forgotten, such as the time he had clumsily tried to undo the kerchief on her head while they had sat by the window of the drawing room looking out at a stormy night. Mockingly she mimicked his helpless cry of alarm when she had been about to fall in the park, his pointless, repetitive grunts. When he finally left her for the house of a pupil, his legs took him back to the park instead. He climbed the circular railing of the gazebo that stood at one end of the long, straight promenade running from the old castle to a view of the stream at the foot of the park and of a spreading willow tree beyond it. He leaned against the shaky grating, staring down at the round well-house by the stream and at the nearby bin of frozen ashes left over from holiday pig roasts. The white willow was a blur in the thick mist. The cries of the crows assailed and stunned him, told him with a bitter vengeance that people like him could never take what life offered them, had no business living at all. *Ka-a ka-a ka-a*. He suffered from the childishness, or worse yet, from the simple blind idiocy of the eternal student, which was why he drew a line between his own inner life and his life in the world outside. *Ka-a ka-a*. Lies, lies. A person was one and the same, forever and aye. Whoever he was in the street outside he was also within his own walls.

After a while he left the park and started back through the marketplace. Breathless men hurried by him and a tall, stocky woman wiped her nose on the back of her hand. At home he took out his notebooks, dimly aware of a throbbing lump in his chest that made him want to cry, and sat down with them at his desk. For a long while he stared at them, nibbling at the cap of his pen while grunting

at odd intervals with an effetely nasal sound. And when the spindly, crooked, rat-tailed letters ran from his pen at last, their sickliness so filled him with loathing that he broke off in the middle, threw himself on his bed with a suffering noise, and lay there for hours grunting and tossing in turn.

Yet soon it was nearly spring and the days were filled with light. Patches of soft blue showed through the clash of silvery cymbals in the sky. The sun was new and warm again; golden puddles gleamed underfoot and glimmering streams bubbled gaily. The cows, newly let-out to pasture, rubbed against the walls of the houses, seeking their stored warmth. Hagzar cut back on his lessons. Whenever he could, he went for long walks through the paths and fields, splashing pleasurably through the slick bogs from which a damp glitter arose, breathing in the soft decay of the rutting earth as it warmed, surrendering himself to the steamy mist exhaled by the fat, rank soil.

Now little Ida often dropped by. She was still pale and not yet all over her illness, but there was color in her face and she seemed prettier; her chest had filled out and she was taller too. Wrapped in her shawl she would knock on his door and announce with a fetching smile that she simply could not have stayed indoors a minute longer. It was so, *so* good to be out in the fresh air now. One might almost... *ah!* And Hagzar would sit her down by his side and stroke her hair and ask whether Rosa was free yet, and had the three of them lunched, and what was Manya doing, and was her tutor there, and would she please tell Rosa for him that he would soon come himself.

He and Rosa now went walking a great deal outside of town. Lightheartedly they leaped over the ruined snow that still lay piled in the ditches, chatting gaily as they sank into the slick mud of the dark, steaming fields. By the time they tramped home again they were pleasantly numb and their fingers were frozen to the bone; shivering they warmed themselves indoors and swore how good it had been. Sometimes they found Manya standing before the door, half-whistling, half-puffing some Russian tune, the lapels of her black jacket that she had draped over her back held with one hand at the throat.

“Whistling, eh?” Hagzar would jeer dryly.

And Rosa would smile while Manya looked spitefully back at him and puffed through her lips even more.

Yet when she was alone in the house with Ida, Manya spoke often about spiritual suffering that no words could describe; about doubts that preyed on the mind; about gifts gone to waste and dark nights of the soul; about the horrors of drink and the lower depths; about great cities; about freedom, life, and strong wings; and about the need to escape—yes, to escape in the name of all that was holy since she could not go on living like this anymore.

Sometimes her tutor still appeared. Despite the gleam in his restless eyes and his hair that was as charmingly ruffled as ever, his face was drawn and he walked with an unsteady gait. Wearily he harangued them, smelling of brandy and beating his chest with one fist. Not for the first time he declared that only a worm would spend all its days in the dirt; anyone with the breath of life in him, with a bit of pluck and independence, would leave a swamp like this as fast as he could. Where was he bound for then? For a moment a lock of loose hair tumbled gorgeously down. Ha! They needn't worry about that. Wherever he fell, he would always land on his feet...and meanwhile, was he really such a bad sort to have around?

And he would dramatically raise one hand and declaim with artistic flair:

*Myórtvii v gróbe mírno spi  
Zhíznyu pólzuisya, zhivói!*

Who among them did not know those immortal lines of Nadson's?

At such times Hagzar would glance at Manya, who sat perfectly still while the faint reflection of her tutor's smile struggled over her face, and decide that she was not nearly so attractive as he had once thought. On the contrary: her features were on the coarse side and even annoyingly dull. One look at the rapt stare with which she regarded that chest-thumping brute was ample proof of what a dunce she was.

Later, on his evening walk with Rosa, he would murmur to

her how detestably mean he found Manya, how put off he was by her vulgarity, how depressed she left him feeling each time. Gradually he shifted to how quickly young people grew up nowadays, how nothing ever stayed the same, and how little there was in human life to hold on to. Even when you considered what still might lie ahead...to say nothing of what you had already seen, heard, and knew...even then life always seemed to slip sideways and to come to nothing in the end. Was that all there was to it?

Did she understand him?

Wasn't it like this?

And Rosa would cough a gentle cough and murmur shyly and not at all clearly:

“Mm-hmmm.”

Which made him turn even more crimson. His breath came in spurts, one hand pawed the air, and there was unspoken anguish when he said:

“Lately I...it's not just that I can't write...it's...everything. And yet it's not anything either, eh? It's just that the more you look at things, the less they are what you think. Something is wrong with them...or perhaps nothing is...and yet there you are...”

Generally he broke off at this point to add after a while in an exasperatedly tormented whisper, shrugging his shoulders in despair: “Unless that's simply how it's meant to be...”

At which he spat loudly and exclaimed under his breath: “Phheww...the devil knows!”

And fell silent. An evening gloom cloaked the dull fields and was woven into the cold mist that arose from them. Here and there a solitary willow still stood out. They walked without breaking the silence, treading the soft earth. Now and then he hummed through his nose a quiet, plaintive air that her thin, quavering voice took up. Once she stopped to tell him that her fingers were numb and that she had forgotten to bring her gloves. Yet when he tried putting one of her hands in his pocket, the pocket proved too small, so that his own hand was left outside, holding the sleeve of her coat. Soon they felt how unnatural this was, since it forced them to walk with

a limp. After a while she pulled her hand free, and they walked on humming to themselves.

3.

Simha Baer came home before Passover. For several days Hagzar stayed away from the house. The day after her father's return Ida dropped by. Her face was pale and wistful, as in the old days. She flitted from one thing to another, did not stay long, and giggled when she left that her father was eager to meet him.

Then Manya came by. She kept glancing out the window, inquired about some book whose name she instantly forgot, whistled, promised to come back again soon, and dashed home. When she returned she sat by the window again before remembering that she had left her father by himself and must attend to him. Soon she came back a third time, yet before long she spied her tutor passing by on his way to her house. She ran out to greet him and disappeared for the rest of the day.

But Rosa did not come at all, which left Hagzar feeling as once he had felt when the mailman had delivered a letter to her and she had sat reading it silently to herself in his presence before slipping it into her pocket without comment. An injured, contrary mood settled darkly over him and spewed its bile of loneliness into his blood.

That night he paced endlessly up and down like a man with a toothache, from time to time emitting a sickly, irascible cough that sounded more like a groan. And when he went to bed at last, pulling the blanket over him, the despairing thought assailed him that his surroundings had won in the end, and that the mark they had left on him could never be removed.

The next morning he rose early, thinking of his work. The crooked, rat-tailed letters flashed before him and he stalked the room some more, trying to shake off the scaly sensation of tedium that afflicted him at such times while groggily pondering a dream he had had in which he had finished a long article and was about to set forth on a European tour. At last he picked up an old essay and



leafed through it, absently searching for a certain passage that never failed to bring a modest smile to his lips. He thumbed the notebook rapidly, threw it down, picked it up again, put it down once more, and finally opened it a third time and let his glance fall on a page. Slowly his face brightened. His eyes began to glow and his steps grew quicker; feverishly he tugged at his mustache with shaky fingers while making little, resolute grunts in his chest. When his legs wearied at last from their forced march he sat down to work at his desk, humming little snatches of a tune beneath his breath; yet just then the mailman came with a postcard, whose arrival so pleased him that he read it over three times. He rose and paced some more until his head spun, then put on his coat and went out.

In the distance he saw Rosa coming toward him in the company of Hanna Heler. She greeted him like a long-lost friend, and he extended the postcard to her with a sheepish grin before turning in his dry manner to Hanna and advising her to peruse it as well, since it appeared to pertain to her too; they might look at it all, he replied, when both asked at once how much they should read of it. So Rosa read the whole card out loud, already smiling before she began, while Hanna stared at her with a wide-open mouth in whose wings a smile waited too. Then both shrieked with laughter and Hagzar joined in heartily. Now they all knew that Gavriel Carmel, who was once a tutor in this town, had written from abroad to announce that he wished to see his Naples one more time before he died, to which end Hagzar should prepare for him:

1) Attractive quarters; 2) Attractive young ladies; 3) Two or three pupils if possible.

Still the same joker as ever!

Then Hagzar retraced his steps with them and listened to Hanna assure him that she remembered Carmel quite well: a tall, dark young man who had seemed to her rather odd but certainly clever enough. The three of them chatted until Rosa went her way, and Hanna hesitated a moment before accepting Hagzar's invitation to come back with him to his room. There she kept rising every few minutes to go and sitting down again, the tower of dark hair on her head describing a weak arc around her ample bosom with each loud,

staccato laugh. And when Hagzar rose to walk her to the door the thought crossed his mind that she was in fact a dear thing and really very feminine at that. For a second he thought of Manya's dull stare, of her irritating whistle, and of her jacket draped around her back. Outside the sun was celebrating spring. Rivulets of water splashed gaily by, puddles gleamed like gold, metal shovels scraped against the ice. Roly-poly children frolicked and sang, and Hagzar cried with roguish glee:

“How much light and life there is, Hanna! No, I won't allow you to go home now.”

Soon they were walking in an orchard high above town. Fresh blades of grass pushed up through the earth and the sodden trees stood resurrected from their sleep. The scattered tin roofs and white churches beneath them shrank and all but vanished in the great expanse of open fields that ran in all directions as far as the dew-bright woods that ringed the broad horizon. The scent of the wakened hills in their lungs roused them too. They grew gay, and he cuffed her lightly on the nose in a giddy burst of affection and called in a whinnying voice:

“Ho, Hanna!”

Which made her laugh loudly and ask if he had taken leave of his senses and would he please—but how strangely in earnest she seemed!—“act his age.” Yet in the end she had to slap his hand and order him to behave. Then his face lost its shape and his eyes darted moistly.

“But a kiss, Hanna...” he lisped, cocking his head to one side. “What's wrong with one little kiss?”

Again her laugh rang out, propelling the top half of her forward: she could not, for the life of her, control herself any longer, she would simply split her sides, so help her! What kind of strange creature was he? She would give a pretty penny to know who had taught him such tricks. Was it Rosa and her brood? And to think that she had always thought...well, well!

For a moment she looked at him reproachfully; yet his flushed, sheepish face forestalled her with a guilty smile and he seized her full palm with a timorous hand and stammered out:

“But what have I done to you, Hanna?”

Followed more boldly by:

“After all, why not?”

And then in jest:

“A person might think that I had bit you!”

With which he was in fine fettle again. They wandered along the bare paths, laughing each time they collided while vigorously trampling the dead growth beneath their feet. He strode now in triumph beside her, his right arm the master of her shoulder and hair, thinking distractedly at the same time, exactly why he did not know, that with Rosa, let alone Manya, such a thing could never have happened, even though life was the same all over and all the women in the world were simply one great woman in the end.

Hanna Heler returned the squeeze of his hand and looked up at him brightly. Soon they found a fallen log to rest on...

Later that day Hagzar descended with large steps the several stairs leading up to Hanna's house and stopped at the bottom of them to regard the fair sight of the broad, empty, reposeful street, the low houses alongside it, each neatly in its place, and the tranquil, pure, untroubled sky above. He thrust out his chest and turned with slow, sure strides to go home. Before long he felt as though a thin layer of something were peeling away inside him—peeling, flaking, and breaking up into small bubbles that slid quickly upward to press against his chest and burst into his throat. With surprising ease they tumbled out and he muttered to himself with satisfaction:

“So it's done then.”

The words sent a rush of blood to his cheeks. He quickened his pace and clapped his hat on his head with one hand. Stubbornly he growled:

“And yet what nonsense, though!”

Despite the speed with which he walked it was already evening by the time the marketplace was behind him. Coal fires gleamed with a ruddy warmth in some of the stores. Farmers urged home their horses, shutters slammed with a metallic bang. He slowed down again, locking his hands behind his back and dragging his stick in the mud. From time to time he squeezed a stubborn cough from his

chest, and when he reached home he shut the door behind him and repeated out loud to the still, dark room:

“Yes, what nonsense!”

He glanced at the house across the street, whose drawn curtains were lit from within. He removed a box of matches from his pocket, cast it on the table, made his way in the dark to his bed, and sank into the mountain of pillows upon it; then he rose and walked about the room until his knees were weak and his chest began to ache. An enervating slackness spread through his limbs and his brain felt stupidly blank. Again he collapsed on the pillows and lay there a long while without moving, feebly musing how pointless was the life of self-denial and how some people were born to it nonetheless—which seemed to console him, so that he fell asleep thinking of the subtle, soapy odor given off by Hanna Heler’s white breasts.

On his way home one day during the Passover holiday he passed by the pleasant house and saw Simha Baer and Rosa sitting together on the bench that stood in the front yard by their gate. He greeted her without stopping; yet she jumped quickly up from her seat and called to him to come in. Where had he disappeared to lately? She introduced him to her father, made room for him on the bench, and coughed gently all in one breath. Hagzar stammered an embarrassed apology and sat by her side, while Simha Baer proffered a hand, stared down at the ground, and said as though explaining to himself:

“Aha...so this must be your Hagzar...”

Rosa laughed embarrassedly too and confessed:

“Yes, papa, it’s our Hagzar.”

Whereupon Simha Baer grunted contentedly and began to inquire into Hagzar’s past and present life. He listened carefully to the answers with his head studiously bowed, picking mildly at his bearded chin, until something appeared to please him and he broke in:

“I...just a minute there, slow down...why, you must be Leivik Hagzar’s son, is that right? Whew! Why, your father and I used to play tag together when we were small boys. On Goat Street in Mogilev, where we lived.”

Did he know Leivik!

“But...just a minute...tell me, wasn’t Rabbi Shmulka, may he rest in peace, your uncle? Of course he was.” Did Hagzar remember him? That was a fine Jew? Who could forget the funeral he was given when he died? Not an infant stayed home in its crib...

Hagzar sat on the bench for nearly an hour, answering Simha Baer’s queries and listening to him reminisce. The mellower her father’s mood grew, the less inhibitedly Rosa laughed and the more her eyes shone with pleasure. At last, enjoying his own joke, Simha Baer inquired which synagogue Hagzar attended and had he said his evening prayers there—adding without waiting for an answer that it would have broken Rabbi Shmulka of Mogilev’s heart to have lived to see his nephew’s sinful ways. What a Jew that man was, what a Jew!

Simha Baer rose, excused himself, and told Hagzar to come by more often.

Then Hagzar and Rosa strolled up and down the street, in which the mud had dried. Rosa’s spirits were high. Laughingly he twitted her that God was less wicked than she, since He at least had sent him Hanna Heler for his loneliness, and when she laughed back he talked about Hanna some more. Did she know that the two of them met every day and never had a dull or cross moment? Then he discussed his friend Carmel, whom he hoped he would not disappoint. She listened keenly as he told her about Carmel’s life, about the relations between them, and about his pleasure that his old friend from *beder*, and later, from Vilna, was soon about to arrive...

Besides which, nothing really was new...

Subsequently he began to visit the house again daily as once he had done; yet now he made a point of first saying hello to Simha Baer. Generally the latter could be found sitting between the table and the window with a floppy silk skullcap on his head, peering over the tops of his glasses at a book that he held away from himself at arm’s length. He welcomed Hagzar warmly, laid his book on the table, carefully folded his glasses, placed them on the book, pulled out a handkerchief, blew a trumpet blast into it, and commenced by declaring “We-ll now” in the tone of an experienced man of affairs

who is adept at getting along with the “younger set.” Then he would chat with Hagzar about this or that latest fashion, spoofing it with a knowing air and humorously quoting scriptural chapter and verse, or citing rabbinic texts, in proof that it was nothing new. Finally his hand crept back toward his glasses and he familiarly ended the audience by replacing them on his nose.

“Well now...I don’t imagine that you came here in order to be preached to by an old man like me. If you’re looking for the sisters, you’ll find them in the cloister...”

And, pleased with his recondite jest, he returned to his book.

In the “cloister,” the large room that had been their father’s until he had recently bequeathed it to them in order to banish their “reign of terror” from the drawing room, Hagzar would find the three sisters together with Hanna Heler, who had taken to slapping him sonorously on the back when they met. Uncomfortably he tried making small talk with Rosa; yet she sat with her face twitching moodily and refused to respond. Then he sang along with the others, sprawled out with them on the beds, talked until he was hoarse, and returned home in the early hours of the morning to grunt, spit, mop his brow, and grunt some more. Only the comforting thought of the approaching spring and of the imminent arrival of his friend could induce him to go to bed in the end.

At last Carmel came. In the beginning, Hagzar spent whole days and nights with him. Carmel lay on his back amid a wreath of blue smoke that spiraled up from the fat cigarette that spluttered between his lips, while Hagzar sat by his side, or paced stammering and laughing up and down, both enjoying his own excitement and wishing that there were less of it. Now he saw his long stay in town in a new, rewarding light that made him feel much better about it—although each time he asked Carmel to tell him about Europe, an urgent, almost physical desire arose within him to finish his work and depart for there at once. The more casually he tried listing the obstacles that had detained him so far, the more annoyed with himself he became at his inability to explain them, especially as they all had seemed so perfectly clear beforehand...

Yet afterward, when Carmel became a steady guest in Simha Baer's house, where he liked to loll on the couch puffing lazily on his cigarette while Rose crossed her arms beside him, the lips chill-cornered on her dear, sad face, and Manya sat across from them, hardly speaking but whistling often at odd times, and Ida half lay on the edge of the bed with a wistful longing in her eyes, Hagzar could feel his skin crawl. His head and chest ached, and he talked such a streak of loathsome, incurable rot that he had to escape to Hanna Heler's in the end, cuffing her nose to make her laugh and then returning home to grunt and brood some more. Once he found Manya's tutor there, talking loudly and horsing around. He pinned Hanna's arms behind her back and taunted Hagzar, who sat behind a large newspaper reading an ad placed by a doctor in Vilna.

Later that same day he stood by Ida's bed with a glass of water in his hand. A smell of valerian had been in the room when he entered; Manya bent over her sick sister, rubbing down her chest, and told Hagzar that Rosa was not in. Ida laughed and cried, too weak to open her eyes. She gasped like an animal and made delirious sounds, until a sudden tremor seized her and she cried:

"To hell with it! The ship is sinking...and I...only wanted..."

Manya was a nervous wreck. Seething with pent-up anger, she burst out:

"She went traipsing off just like that...with Carmel!"

Whereupon Hagzar felt a pain like a blow in his chest. The hot blood rushed to his face and stung his eyes. What was he doing here? He stood reeling beneath the memory of Carmel's smug smile, of Hanna Heler's arms pinned behind her, of the boisterous laugh of Manya's tutor as he held them. The ad placed by the doctor in Vilna flashed before him. Then came mighty Vilna itself with its halls of learning, its bookstores, its public library in which he had worked, its long, monumental nights of writing in his room there, its companions whose dreams had resembled his own. He felt that he was going to choke. Something hummed in his ears and he could hardly see. Dazedly he laid the glass on the chair and stumbled toward the door. Not until he was out in the fresh air again did his vision clear. His temples throbbed and his heart went on pounding as he walked

down the street to the end of the town and continued beyond it. He ambled slowly now, staring with melancholy detachment at the long, endless railroad track that stretched flatly out before him, quite faint and desolate in the heat of the day.

*Translated by Hillel Halkin*