

Two Poems by Heinrich Heine, translated by Stephen Mitchell

Princess Sabbath

In Arabia's book of legends
There are heroes who, bewitched once,
Have recovered from the spell
And regained their former beauty.

The grotesque, repulsive creature
Has become a prince again,
Richly clad in silks and jewels,
Serenading his beloved.

Soon, though, the reprieve is over,
And we see His Royal Highness
Suddenly transmogrified
Back into a hairy monster.

Such a prince, with such a burden,
Is the subject of my song. His
Name is Israel. By some witch's
Spell he has become a dog.

Filled with doggish thoughts and instincts,
All week long he sniffs his way through
Life's assorted muck and rubbish,
Jeered and spat at by street urchins.

But each week, on Friday evening,
At the twilight hour, the deadly
Magic softens, and the dog be-
comes a human once again.

Human now, with human feelings
Dressed in pure and festive clothes, he
Stands before his Father's mansion
With uplifted head and heart.

"Greetings, O belovèd mansion
Of the Lord, my royal Father!
Tents of Jacob, with great fervor
I now kiss your holy door-posts!"

Through the house mysteriously
Moves a whispering, a murmur,
And at once the unseen Master
Breathes, uncanny, in the silence.

Silence! Now the sacristan
(Beadle, to use common parlance)
Bustles up and down and sideways,
Lighting all the holy lamp-wicks.

These consoling candelabra,
How they glitter, how they sparkle!
Proudly too the candles flicker

On the *bimah*'s wooden railing.

Near the shrine in which the Torah
Lies protected, richly curtained
With a costly silken cover
Shimmering with precious gemstones,

At his little polished prayer-desk
Stands the congregation's cantor,
Dapper little man. His black robe
Hangs demurely on his shoulders,

And, to show how white his hand, he
Fidgets with his neck quite oddly,
Index finger pressed to temple
And his thumb against his throat.

To himself he hums sedately,
Till at last his voice, exulting,
Bursts out in a joyful music:
Lécho, dódi, líkras kálle!

Lécho, dódi, líkras kálle –
"Come, my dear, the Bride awaits you,
Chaste and ready to uncover
To your eyes her blushing face":

A delightful wedding poem,
Written by the great and very

Famous Jewish troubadour
Don Yehuda ben Halévi.

In this song he celebrates
Israel's wedding ceremony
With Her Highness Lady Sabbath,
Who is called "the silent princess."

Pearl and flower of all beauty
Is the princess. Not more lovely
Was the far-famed Queen of Sheba,
Bosom friend of Solomon,

Ethiopia's bluestocking,
Whose ambition was to dazzle
With her clever riddles, but
In the end became annoying.

Princess Sabbath, who indeed is
The embodiment of stillness,
Hates and has contempt for such
Intellectual sparring matches.

Just as loathsome in her eyes is
Any ostentatious passion,
Pathos punctuated by the
Preacher's long locks, wildly shaken.

Modestly the silent princess

Hides her tresses in her bonnet,
Looks up softly with gazelle eyes,
Blossoms like the slender myrtle.

She allows her sweet beloved
Everything – except tobacco.
“Dearest, smoking is forbidden,
Since today we keep the Sabbath.

But at noon, in compensation,
You shall have a steaming bowl
Of a food divinely luscious –
You shall feast today on *cholent!*”

*Cholent, light direct from heaven,
Daughter of Elysium!*
Thus would Schiller’s Ode have sounded
Had he ever tasted *cholent*.

Cholent is the delicacy
That the Lord revealed to Moses,
Teaching him the way to cook it
On the summit of Mount Sinai,

On the very spot where the All-
High revealed His moral doctrines
And the holy Ten Commandments
In the midst of flames and lightning.

Cholent is God's strictly kosher
Certified and blessed ambrosia,
Manna meant for Paradise, and
So, compared with such an offering,

The ambrosia of the phony
Heathen gods of ancient Greece
(Who were devils in disguise) is
Just a pile of devils' droppings.

Once the prince has tasted *cholent*,
He lights up, as if transfigured,
And unbuttoning his waistcoat
With a blissful smile he muses:

"Don't I hear the Jordan murmur?
Aren't these the flowing fountains
In the palmy Beth-El valley
Where we have tied up our camels?

Don't I hear the sheep-bells ringing?
Aren't these the fattened rams
That the shepherd in the twilight
Drives down from Mount Gilead?"

But the lovely day is flying
Off, and with long shadow-legs the
Curse's evil hour strides toward him,
And the prince lets out a sigh,

Seems to feel the icy fingers
Of a witch around his heart,
Shudders at the fast approaching
Doggish metamorphosis.

Princess Sabbath hands her golden
Spice-box to the prince. Inhaling
Deeply, he luxuriates
In its fragrance one last time.

Then the princess offers him the
Drink of parting, and he drinks it
Quickly; in the silver goblet
Just a few last drops remain.

These he sprinkles on the table.
Then he takes a small wax taper
And he dips it in the moisture
Till it sputters and goes out.

Yehuda ben Halévi

I

“If I ever should forget thee,
O Jerusalem, let my right hand
Lose its cunning, let my tongue

Cleave forever to my palate –“

Words and music, without ceasing,
Swirl inside my head today, and
Now I seem to hear men's voices,
Ancient voices, chanting psalms;

Sometimes I can catch a glimpse of
Beards – of long beards wreathed in shadows.
Tell me, dream forms, which of you
Is Yehuda ben Halévi?

But they quickly hurry past me –
Ghosts will always shun the awkward
Consolations of the living –
Yet, in spite of that, I knew him,

Knew him by his noble forehead,
Pale and filled with lofty thoughts,
And his piercing eyes gazed deeply
Into mine, with boundless sorrow.

First and foremost, though, I knew him
By the smile, so enigmatic,
On those beautiful rhymed lips
That one finds with poets only.

Years keep coming and dissolving.
It is seven hundred fifty

Years already since the birth
Of Yehuda ben Halévi.

His birth city was Toledo
In the kingdom of Castile;
With its lullabies the golden
Tagus soothed him in his cradle.

His young mind's development
Was advanced by his stern father,
Who began his education
With the Holy Book, the Torah.

With his little son he read it
In the Hebrew text, whose lovely
Hieroglyphically graceful
Old-Chaldean square-script letters

Have descended from the very
Childhood of our world, and therefore
Seem to intimately smile upon
Anyone whose mind is childlike.

This authentic, ancient text the
Boy recited in the singsong
Measure, called the *trope* in Yiddish,
Passed down from primeval ages.

And he gurgled very sweetly

All those juicy gutturals,
And he trilled the cantillation
Of *shalshélet* like a bird.

And the Targum Onkelos —
Which was written in the curious
Antique Jewish dialect
That is known as Aramaic,

And that has the same relation
To the language of the prophets
That our Swabian has to German —
This eccentric homespun Hebrew

He learned also, very early,
And the knowledge came in handy
When the boy began his long and
Patient study of the Talmud.

Yes, his father early led him
To the pages of the Talmud,
And he introduced him to
The *halákha*, that tremendous

School of fencing, where the greatest
Of the dialectic athletes
In the town of Pumbedita
Did their intellectual jousting.

Here the boy began to study
Strict polemics, and he later
Showed his mastery of the subject
In his Book of the Kuzari.

But the heavens pour onto earth
Two quite different kinds of brightness:
The harsh daylight of the sun
And the milder moonlight – so the

Talmud also has two kinds of
Light, and it is thus partitioned
In *halákha* and *aggádah*.
Fencing school I called the former,

But the latter, the *aggádah*,
I would rather call a garden,
Planted with the strangest, most fan-
tastical of flowers, like that

Other garden which once sprouted
From the soil of Babylon: the
Garden of Semíramis,
The eighth wonder of the world.

This great queen, Semíramis,
Who was found and raised by birds
And retained, as she grew older,
Many birdlike traits and habits,

Didn't like to go out walking
On the ground, like all us other
Mammals, so she had her servants
Plant a garden in the air –

High up on colossal pillars
Cypresses and palm trees flourished,
Flower beds, wisteria,
Marble statues, fountains also,

The whole garden cunningly
Joined by countless hanging bridges
Made to look like vine and creepers
And upon which birds stood, swaying –

Large, bright-colored birds, deep thinkers
Who were too absorbed to sing, while
All around them fluttered flocks of
Little finches, warbling gaily –

All of them elated, breathing
Such pure air, a balmy fragrance,
Unpolluted by the squalid
Odors of the earth beneath them.

The *aggadah* is a garden
Made of such celestial whimsy,
And the young Talmudic scholar,

When his heart was stupefied

By the constant bickering
He would find in the *halákha*,
With disputes about the awkward
Egg the hen laid on a feast-day,

Or about some other question
Equally profound – the boy
Fled that part to seek refreshment
In the blossoming *aggádah*,

Where the beautiful old tales were,
Tales of angels, myths and legends,
Tranquil stories of the martyrs,
Hymns and epigrams and proverbs,

Comical exaggerations –
Yet these pages glowed with such great
Faith and passion, oh they shimmered,
Glowed with such exuberance –

And the young boy's noble heart was
Captivated by the wild
Sweetness, by the fearless daring,
By the wondrous aching rapture

And by the amazing shudders
Of that blissful secret world,

Of that mighty revelation
Known to us as poetry.

And the craft that makes it happen —
Cheerful knowledge, lovely power,
That we call the poet's art —
Deepened in his understanding.

Thus Yehuda ben Halévi
Grew to be not just a scholar,
But a master of his language
And a great and mighty poet.

Yes, he was a mighty poet,
Star and beacon for his people
And the light of that whole era,
An immense and wonderful

Pillar of poetic fire
Moving out in front of Israel's
Caravan of grief and anguish
In the wilderness of exile.

Pure and truthful, without blemish,
Were his poems, like his soul.
The Creator, when he made it,
Very pleased with his creation,

Kissed that lovely soul; the echo

Of His kiss kept resonating
Through the poet's lovely verses,
Consecrated by this grace.

As in life, in poems also
Grace is the surpassing virtue—
He who has it can commit no
Sin in either verse or prose.

Any poet open to the
Grace of God, we call a genius:
Monarch in the realm of thought and
Free of any human critics,

Answerable to God alone,
Not the public. For in art,
As in life, the public can just
Kill us, but they cannot judge us.

II

“By the streams of Babylon
We sat down and wept for Zion,
Hung our harps upon the willows.”
That old song—do you still know it?

Do you know the ancient lyric
That begins with such lamenting,

Groans and hisses like a kettle
Boiling over on the hearth?

Long – a thousand years already –
This dark woe has seethed inside me.
And Time comes and licks my wounds
Like the dog that licked Job's pustules.

Dog, I thank you for your spittle,
But it merely cools and soothes –
Only death can come and heal me,
But, alas, I am immortal!

Years keep coming and dissolving –
In the loom the spool keeps whirring
As it races to and fro, and
What it weaves, no weaver knows.

Years keep coming and dissolving,
And men's teardrops trickle slowly
Downward to the earth, and earth just
Sucks them in with silent greed –

Seething rage! The lid blows off now –
"Happy shall he be who pays you
Back, who takes your little ones and
Dashes them against the rocks."

Thanks to God, the boiling stops, the

Kettle cools, and gradually
Silence reigns. Now my dejection
Eases, my dark Jewish gloom –

And my precious wingèd horse now
Whinnies cheerfully and seems to
Shake off this whole horrid nightmare,
Looks at me and seems to ask:

“Shouldn’t we go back to Spain now,
To the little Talmud scholar
Who became a mighty poet –
To Yehuda ben Halévi?”

Yes, he was a mighty poet,
Ruler of a world of dream-forms,
Monarch of the spirit realm – a
Poet by the grace of Heaven,

Who in his devout sirventes,
Madrigals and pastorelas,
Canzonets, ghazals, ballatas,
Poured out all the fiery passions

Of his God-kissed poet’s soul.
Yes, this troubadour was equal
To the greatest of the poet-
Lutenists in all Provence,

Poitou, Roussillon, Guyenne,
Languedoc, and all the other
Sweet lands where the orange blossoms
Grow in gallant Christendom.

Lands of gallant Christendom,
Where the orange blossoms flourish!
How they smell and sound and glisten
In the twilight of remembrance!

World of nightingales, how lovely!
Where instead of the true God
Just the false god of erotic love was
Worshiped, and the Muses also.

Clergymen with wreaths of roses
On their shining pates sang hymns
In their cheerful Provençal;
And the noble knights and barons,

Trotting on their purebred horses,
Meditated on the verses
That would glorify the ladies
Whom their hearts so gladly served.

If no lady, then no love – so
To the troubadour, a lady
Was as indispensable as
Butter is to buttered bread.

Well, the hero whom I sing of,
Don Yehuda ben Halévi,
Also worshiped his beloved,
But she was a special instance.

For this lady was no Laura,
Whose bright eyes, like mortal stars,
In the Duomo on Good Friday
Set a poet's heart on fire –

Nor a lovely noblewoman
In the flower of youth, presiding
Over a great tournament and
Placing laurel wreaths on winners –

Nor was she a learned jurist
In the Court of Love, who lectured
On the law concerning kisses,
When and where they were allowed.

She, the one the rabbi longed for,
Was a poor, heart-shattered lady,
Mournful victim of destruction,
And was named Jerusalem.

Even in his early childhood
All his love was pledged to her,
And his soul already quivered

At the word *Jerusalem*.

Then the boy stood rapt and listened,
Cheeks and forehead flaming scarlet,
When a pilgrim journeyed from the
Holy Land and reached Toledo,

And described how devastated
And polluted was the city –
Though a trail of light still lingered
From the footsteps of the prophets,

And the air was still perfumed with
The eternal breath of God.

“Such a bitter desolation!”
Cried a pilgrim, whose white-silver

Beard flowed down below his waist, and
As it reached its tip, the beard-hair
Darkened, and it looked as if the
Beard had all at once grown younger.

Such an interesting, strange pilgrim
Must the man have been; his eyes
Peered out from a thousand years of
Gloom. He sighed, “Jerusalem,

“Once a crowded holy city,
Has become a wilderness

Where wood-demons, werewolves, jackals
Prowl and howl among the ruins.

Snakes, screech-owls, and scorpions
Nest in the decaying stonework;
From the windows' airy arches,
Foxes gaze and feel no danger.

Sometimes here and there a tattered
Desert-dweller will appear
And will let his humpbacked camel
Feed upon the wild grasses.

On the noble heights of Zion,
Where the golden fortress towered,
Bearing witness in its splendor
To a great king's majesty,

Weeds grow lush and tall, and over-
whelm the ruins still remaining,
Which look out at you so sadly,
You imagine that they're weeping.

And the story goes that truly
Once a year they *do* weep, on the
Ninth day of the month of Av –
I myself, my own eyes weeping,

Have beheld the heavy teardrops

Falling from the massive stones, and
I have heard the broken pillars
Crying out in lamentation.”

Such reports from saintly pilgrims
Wakened in his ardent breast
A profound and constant longing
For his love, Jerusalem.

It was dream-possessed, prophetic,
Ominous as was the longing
Which at the château de Blaye
Once possessed the noble prince and

Troubadour Jaufré Rudel,
Who, to knights returning home
From the Holy Land, amid the
Clang of goblets, loudly swore

That the paragon of virtue,
Pearl and flower of all women,
Was the lovely Melisanda,
Margravine of Tripoli.

Everybody knows how Jaufré
Rhapsodized about this lady,
Sung her praise, felt life too narrow
There in his ancestral palace.

So his longing drove him forth to
Seek her. He embarked at Cette,
But grew sick on board and, close to
Dying, came to Tripoli.

Here he gazed with love, ecstatic,
On the lady Melisanda,
But at that same moment, death
Poured its shade upon his eyelids.

Singing then his final love-song,
He expired at the feet of
His dear lady, Melisanda,
Margravine of Tripoli.

Strange the similarity
In the fates of these two poets!
Only, one was old already
When he left on pilgrimage.

Thus, Yehuda ben Halévi
At the feet of his beloved
Died, and laid his head upon the
Lap of his Jerusalem.

III

When the Battle of Arbéla

Ended, the great Alexander
Stuffed the wealth of King Darius —
Court and harem, women, horses,

Elephants and coins and gardens,
Crown and scepter, golden rubbish —
Stuffed them leisurely inside his
Baggy Macedonian trousers.

In the tent of the great monarch,
Who had fled, lest he himself be
Stuffed away like all the rest,
The young hero found a casket,

An exquisite golden coffer
Richly decorated with
Miniature portraits, precious
Stones, and ivory cameos.

This small chest, itself a treasure,
Of inestimable value
Was the case in which the king had
Stored his priceless body jewels.

Alexander gave these jewels
To the bravest of his soldiers,
Smiling that grown men, like children,
Valued little colored pebbles.

One of the most precious jewels
He bestowed upon his mother:
The great signet ring of Cyrus,
Which she made into a brooch.

And to Aristotle, his old
Bottom-thwacker, he dispatched a
Splendid onyx for his famous
Natural-history collection.

In the casket there was also
An amazing string of pearls, which
Once had been the gift of Smerdis
(The false one) to Queen Atossa.

But the pearls themselves were real,
And the cheerful victor gave them
To a very pretty Greek
Dancer by the name of Thaïs.

This girl wore them in her lovely
Hair that streamed like a bacchante's,
In Persépolis, that night when,
As she danced, she impudently

Flung her torch into the palace;
With a crackle, it blazed up and
Quickly started to explode like
Fireworks on New Year's Eve.

On the death of lovely Thaïs,
Who had caught the Babylonian
Clap and had expired there, the
Celebrated pearls were promptly

Sold off at a public auction.

A discerning priest from Memphis
Bought them, took them back to Egypt,
Where they later made their way to

Cleopatra's dressing table;
She plucked out the rarest pearl, dis-
solved it in some wine and drank it,
Just to tease Mark Antony.

After the Omáyyads conquered
Spain, the necklace found itself in
Cordoba and coiled around the
Caliph's turban, like a snake.

Ábderam the Third then wore it
As a breast-knot at the tourney,
Where he pierced through thirty golden
Rings and through Zuleima's heart.

When the Moorish kingdom crumbled,
The pearl necklace also passed on
Into Christian hands and wound up

In the crown jewels of Castile.

Their Most Catholic Majesties, the
Queens of Spain, would always wear them
At the court's festivities, at
Bullfights, and at Church processions,

And at the autos-da-fé, where
Sitting on their balconies, they
Fanned themselves and took refreshment
In the smell of old Jews roasting.

Later, Señor Mendizábal
Satan's grandson, pawned the pearls to
Cancel certain deficits that
Weighed upon the Queen's finances.

Last, the pearl-strand was presented
At the royal court in Paris,
Shimmering on the neck of the dis-
tinguished Baroness von Rothschild.

So much for the lovely pearls.
Less adventurous were the fortunes
Of the casket. Alexander
Kept it for his private uses,

And inside he put the epics
Sung by the immortal Homer,

His beloved, and at night, just
By his pillow, at his bedside,

Stood the chest; as he lay sleeping
Radiant forms of heroes rose up
From the parchment scrolls and glided
Into Alexander's dreams.

Other times have other birdsongs –
I too loved them, long ago, those
Songs about the noble actions
Of Achilles, of Odysseus.

Then my spirits were as golden
As the sun, my heart exulted,
And my brow was wreathed with vine leaves,
And the fanfares kept resounding.

Hush now! Fallen, smashed to pieces,
Lies my proud triumphal chariot,
And the panthers that once drew it
All are dead, the women also

Who with drums and clash of cymbals
Danced around me. I myself am
Writhing on the floor here, wretched,
Crippled and in anguish – hush now –

That's enough. We just were speaking

Of the casket of Darius,
And the thought occurred to me that
If I ever gained possession

Of that casket, and I weren't
Forced to turn it into cash,
I would keep enclosed within it
All the poems of our rabbi –

All Yehuda ben Halévi's
Songs for feast-days, lamentations,
Hymns, ghazals, the poems of his
Pilgrimage – and I would order

A great scribe to write them out, in
Black ink on the purest parchment,
And would lay the manuscript in-
side the little golden casket.

I would put it on a table
By my bed, and when my friends came
And they looked, astonished, at the
Splendors of the little casket –

At the precious bas-reliefs,
So minute and yet so perfect,
And at all the large and lustrous
Jewels that adorn the cover –

With a smile I would tell them,
What you see is a crude shell
That contains a finer treasure.
Here within this casket lie

Diamonds whose rare effulgence
Mirrors back the light of heaven,
Rubies glowing red as heart's blood,
Turquoises of flawless beauty,

Emeralds that shine with promise,
Pearls far purer than the pearls that
Once had been the gift of Smerdis
(The false one) to Queen Atossa

And that later ornamented
Many great celebrities
On this moon-encircled planet:
Thais first, then Cleopatra,

Priests of Isis, Moorish princes,
And the queens of old Hispania,
And at last the neck of the dis-
tinguished Baroness von Rothschild.

These world-famous pearls are just the
Hardened slime from some poor oyster
Suffering from some stupid illness
At the bottom of the ocean;

But the pearls inside this casket
Come forth from a rare and lovely
Human soul, a soul far deeper
Than the vast abyss of ocean –

For they are the bitter teardrops
Of Yehuda ben Halévi,
Which he wept for the destruction
Of his love, Jerusalem,

Pearl-like tears that, strung together
On the golden thread of rhyme,
Turned into a treasure when they
Later issued as a poem.

This great song, the poet's teardrops,
Is the famous lamentation
Sung in all the tents of Jacob,
Scattered throughout all the world,

On the ninth day of the month of
Av, the anniversary date
Of Jerusalem's destruction
By the Roman general Titus.

Yes, this is the song of Zion
That Yehuda ben Halévi
Sang about Jerusalem,

As he died among the ruins,

Barefoot, dressed in penitential
Garments, sitting on the fragment
Of a fallen marble pillar.

His hair reached below his shoulders

Like a withered, overhanging
Forest, casting ghostly shadows
On those pale and anguished features
With the otherworldly eyes.

There he sat among the ruins,
Singing, and he seemed an ancient
Prophet, as if Jeremiah
Had arisen from his grave.

And his song of wild bereavement
Tamed the birds amid the ruins,
And the vultures came and listened,
As if prompted by compassion.

But a savage Arab horseman
Galloped down that very pathway,
Rocked back on his lofty steed, and
Thrust his lance into the bosom

Of the poet as he sat there
Singing his heartbroken verses,

And then quickly galloped off and
Vanished, like a wingèd phantom.

Calmly flowed the rabbi's blood, and
Calmly did he sing his lyric,
Till he died there, and his very
Last word was *Jerusalem*.

But an ancient legend has it
That the evil Saracen was
Not, in fact, a human being
But an angel in disguise,

Who was sent direct from heaven
To deliver God's belovèd
From this earth and lift him, painless,
To the kingdom of the blessed.

Up there, we are told, was waiting
A reception for the poet,
Flattering to his amour-propre,
A celestial surprise.

Cheerfully a choir of angels
Came to meet him, playing music,
And the hymn they sang to greet him
Was his own: the very verses

He had written for the Sabbath,

Sung in all the synagogues, a
Wedding song, with the familiar
Joyful tune – but ah, what music!

Little angels played on oboes,
Others violins, still others
Drew their bows across the strings of
Cellos, or beat drums or cymbals.

And the song rang out so sweetly
And so sweetly resonated
Through the vast expanse of heaven:
“Lécho, dódi, líkras kálle!”

IV

My dear wife is not too happy
With the chapter I just finished,
Most especially with reference
To the casket of Daríus.

Almost bitterly she tells me
That a husband who was truly
Thoughtful would immediately
Turn the casket into money

So that he could purchase for his
Poor and lawful wedded wife

The attractive cashmere shawl
That she was so much in need of.

And Yehuda ben Halévi,
So she told me, would be honored
Quite enough by being kept in
An attractive cardboard box

With some elegant Chinese-y
Arabesques, just like those pretty
Bonbon boxes from "Marquis" in
Le passage des Panoramas.

It is awfully strange, she added,
That I never heard of him, if
He was such a famous poet,
Your Yehuda ben Halévi.

Dearest child, I answered, this quite
Charming ignorance of yours
Only shows the dreadful weakness
Of the education offered

In the boarding-schools of Paris,
Where the girls, those future mothers
Of a freedom-loving people,
Are supposed to be instructed.

Ancient mummies, stuffed Egyptian

Pharaohs, Clovis and the other
Merovingian shadow-kings,
Periwigs sans powder, and the

Pigtailed emperors of China
With their porcelain pagodas –
All of this they learn by heart, these
Clever girls. But oh, ye heavens,

If they're asked about the poets
From the glorious golden age of
Ancient Arab-Spanish-Jewish
Poetry, that school of genius,

If they're asked about the three great
Stars – Yehuda ben Halévi,
Solomon Gabírol, or the
Third one, Moses ibn Ezra –

If they're asked about these poets,
Then the little maidens stare, with
Great big eyes – a herd of heifers
Startled, looking up with cow eyes.

I advise you now, beloved,
To make up for this omission
And to learn the Hebrew language.
Leave your theater and your concerts;

After several years of study,
You'll be far enough along to
Read, in the original,
Ibn Ezra and Gabírol,

And, of course, the great Halévi –
The triumvirate of verse-craft –
Who upon the harp of David
Played the most exquisite music.

Al-Harízi – who, I bet, is
Just as unfamiliar to you,
Though he was as witty as a
Frenchman, and he overwitted

Al-Haríri in his word-games
And was a Voltairean, six
Hundred years before Voltaire was –
Well, this Al-Harízi said,

“In the realm of thought, Gabírol
Shines and gratifies the thinker;
Ibn Ezra shines through art, and
Is most pleasing to the artist;

“But Yehuda ben Halévi
Has embodied both these virtues,
And he is a mighty poet
Rightfully beloved by all.”

Ibn Ezra was a friend, and
Was as well, I think, a cousin
Of Yehuda ben Halévi—
Who laments that in Granada,

When he went there on a journey
Looking for his friend, he couldn't
Find him anywhere, but only
Found his brother, the physician

Rabbi Meyer, who was also
Father of that pretty girl who
Lit the flames of hopeless passion
In the heart of ibn Ezra.

To forget his little niece, he
Took his pilgrim's staff and wandered
Like so many of his comrades;
Lived for years unsettled, homeless.

Traveling to Jerusalem,
He was set upon by Tartars,
Who then strapped him to a nag and
Dragged him to their native steppes.

There he had to render service
Quite unworthy of a rabbi,
Still unworthier of a poet—

There, in short, he milked the cattle.

Once, at work, as he was leaning
Forward under a cow's belly,
Briskly pulling at the udders,
Splashing milk into the bucket,

An undignified position
For a rabbi or a poet,
He was overwhelmed with such great
Sorrow that he had to sing, and

He sang out so beautifully
That the Khan, the horde's commander,
Passing by, was moved and granted
Freedom to the wretched slave.

And he gave him gifts as well: an
Unused fox-skin, an ornate
Five-stringed Arab mandolin, and
All his traveling expenses.

Fate of poets! evil star that
Persecutes Apollo's sons
With your grudging, lethal rays and
Didn't even spare their father,

When he, in pursuit of Daphne,
Reaching for the nymph's white body

Threw his arms around some tree-bark –
Though a god, a true shlemiel!

Yes, the lofty Delphic god is
A shlemiel; the very laurel
That so proudly crowns his forehead
Is a sign of his shlemieldom.

Everybody knows the word *shle-*
miel. Chamisso long ago
Introduced it and secured its
Civil rights in Germany.

But its origin is still as
Little known as are the sources
Of the Nile – I have puzzled
Over this for many a night.

Years ago, in fact, I traveled
To Berlin to see Chamisso
And to ask for information
From the dean of all shlemiels,

But he couldn't satisfy me,
So he passed me on to Hitzig,
Who had been the first to tell him
What this man who sold his shadow's

Surname was. I took a droshky

Right away and rolled off to the
Court Investigator Hitzig,
Who was Itzig in the old days.

Back when he was still an Itzig,
In a dream he saw his surname
Blazoned in the heavens, and be-
fore it stood the letter H.

And he asked, "What is the meaning
Of this H? Perhaps *Herr* Itzig?
Holy Itzig? 'Holy' is a
Splendid title, but not suited

For Berlin." At last, exhausted
By this puzzle, he took on the
Name of Hitzig. (Just the faithful
Realize his saintly nature.)

"Holy Hitzig," I addressed him
When I saw him, "would you tell me
What the etymology
Of this Yiddish word *shlemiel* is?"

Then the saint began to hem and
Haw, he said he couldn't quite re-
member, piled excuses up
In his oh so Christian way,

Till at last I popped the buttons
On the trousers of my patience,
And I started swearing loudly,
With such blasphemous abandon

That the pious fellow grew
Deathly pale, his knees shook, and he
Promptly granted what I'd asked for
And delivered this account:

"In the Bible it is written
That the Israelites who wandered
In the desert often dallied
With the lusty girls of Canaan.

So it came to pass that one day
Pinkhas saw the noble Zimri
Having sex (to put it bluntly)
With a Canaanitish female.

Livid, he picked up his spear and
Walking up to Zimri, stuck it
Through his back and out his belly –
So the Holy Bible tells us.

But there is a legend, handed
Down for untold generations,
Saying that it wasn't Zimri
Whom the spear of Pinkhas killed:

Rather, blind with rage and striking
Randomly, he missed the mark and
Killed a total innocent
Named Shlemiel ben Zurisháddai.”

So this man, Shlemiel the First,
Is the patron ancestor of
All shlemiels. We’re all descended
From Shlemiel ben Zurisháddai.

No heroic deed has ever
Been reported of him; all we
Know about him is his name and
That he was a true shlemiel.

Still, one’s family tree is valued
Not because of its good fruit but
Its antiquity, and ours
Goes back for three thousand years.

Years keep coming and dissolving.
Three millennia have passed
Since the death of our first father,
Herr Shlemiel ben Zurisháddai.

Pinkhas has been dead a long time
Also, but his spear is with us
Still, and we can hear it whirring

Not too far above our heads.

And it stabs the noblest hearts,
Like Yehuda ben Halévi's,
And like Moses ibn Ezra's,
And Gabírol's heart as well,

This sincere and God-devoted
Troubadour, this passionately
Reverent Jewish nightingale, whose
Only true-love was the Lord –

Nightingale who tenderly
Sang out his resplendent love songs
In the densest darkness of the
Gothic medieval night.

Undiscouraged and untroubled
By the goblins and the phantoms,
By the maze of death and madness
Haunting people in that night,

This sweet nightingale thought only
Of the God whom he adored, to
Whom he sobbed his ardent love and
Whom his hymns of praise exalted.

Only thirty years Gabírol
Lived here on this earth, but Fame

Through all lands proclaimed his timeless
Glory with her golden trumpet.

In the town of Cordoba there
Lived a Moor, his next-door neighbor,
Who wrote verses too and envied
Our great poet's reputation.

When he heard the poet singing,
He would feel his bile rise, and
Every sweetness of the song was
Bitter wormwood in his mouth.

He enticed his hated neighbor
To his house by night and killed him,
And behind the house he buried
The dead body in the garden.

But behold now! From the ground
Where the body had been hidden,
Right away there grew a fig tree
Of an awesome loveliness.

Strangely long its fruit was, and its
Sweetness tasted strangely spicy.
Those who ate of it sank swooning
In an otherworldly rapture.

And because of this the people

Started whispering and talking,
Till before too long the rumor
Reached the Caliph's noble ears.

Single-tongued, the Caliph tested
This strange fig-phenomenon
And appointed a commission
To investigate more closely.

Right away they asked some questions
Of the neighbor, beating him
On his soles with sixty lashes,
And the man confessed his crime.

Then they hurried to the fig tree,
Pulled it from the gaping earth, and
There, beneath the tree roots, lay the
Murdered body of Gabírol.

This with pomp and circumstance was
Buried, amid universal
Mourning, and the murderer was
Hanged that day in Cordoba.