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## Reading Yiddish

*Richard Fein*

Far from sheer flourish—like Arabic  
or Hindi—your meaning  
hinges on dents and hooks—  
sense still welded to frame—  
my eyes like fingertips on braille—  
couriers of shapes to the brain—  
and in reading you I span the years  
back to a charactery of childhood—words  
on butcher shop windows countering  
the flow of English—transliteration  
on the drygoods sign—your sounds estranged  
in the very characters which conveyed them—  
trapping me at family councils—your fecund rasp  
perplexing—useless—European—But now  
my need to kiss you and change  
you into a princess—or at last—  
the veil lifted—to see the beauty  
you always were—to love that jaw  
I once feared to touch—to feel  
my fingers graze your throat—And now  
I see your shapes always lurked  
within—claiming and re-claiming—sounding  
my old distress and disavowal—  
all that bewilderment

become a source—and out of abasement  
emerges your lush runic intelligence—  
my native intelligence—as if  
I write in a boustrophedon of Yiddish  
and English—the Yiddish line unseen—  
like the secret-agent letters I wrote  
in invisible ink during childhood



Richard Fein lives in Cambridge, MA. His collection of poems, *Kafka's Ear*, won the *Maurice English Award*. His other collections of poetry are *At the Turkish Bath*, *To Move into the House*, *Ice like Morsels*, and *I Think of Our Lives: New and Selected Poems*. Other books are *Selected Poems of Yankev Glatshteyn (translations)*; a memoir of Yiddish, *The Dance of Leah*; and a critical study, *Robert Lowell*.