

Last Star in the Night

Abraham Sutzkever, 1913-2010 by Catherine Madsen

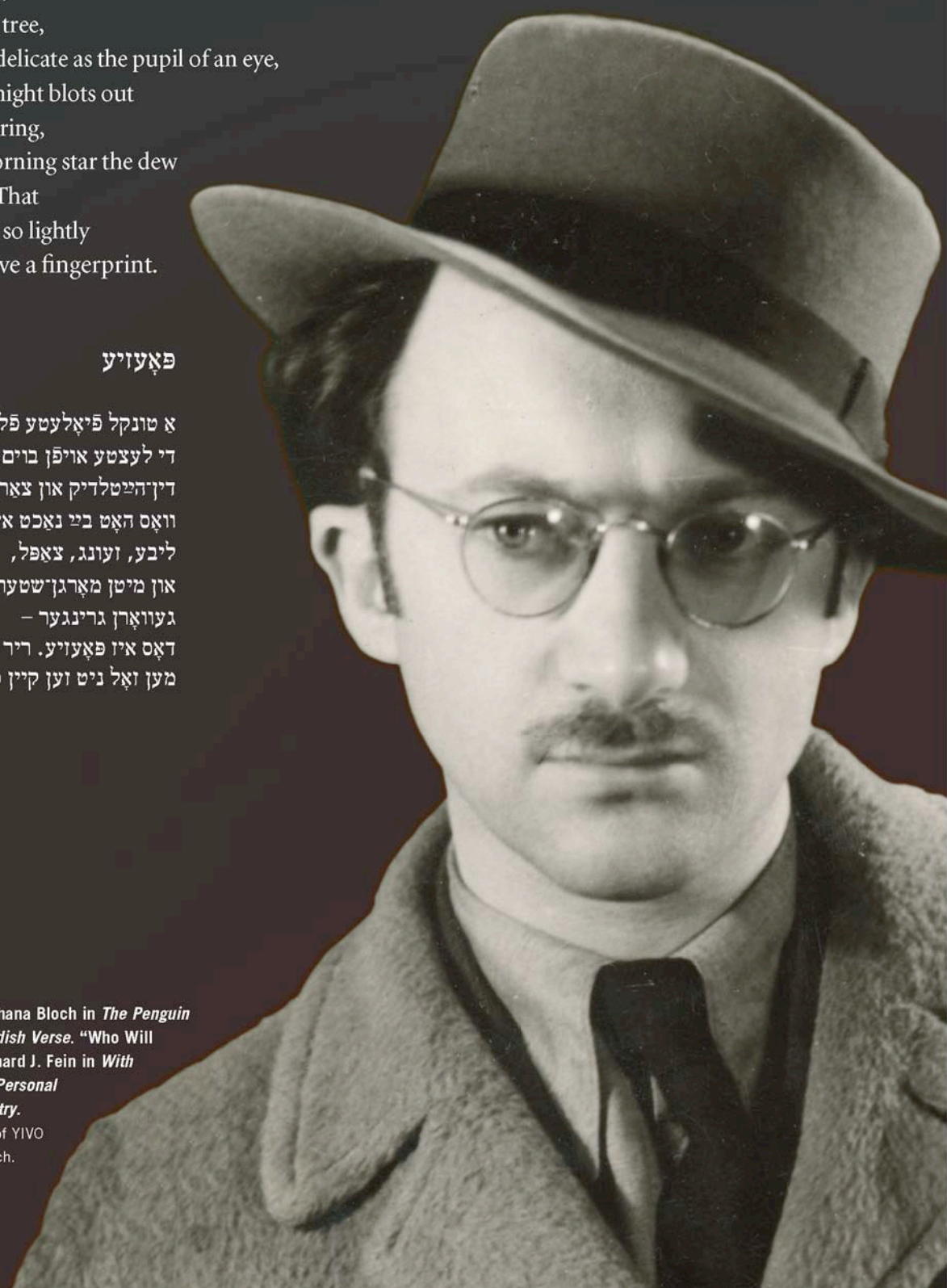
Poetry

A dark violet plum,
the last one on the tree,
thin-skinned and delicate as the pupil of an eye,
that in the dew at night blots out
love, visions, shivering,
and then at the morning star the dew
grows weightless: That
is poetry. Touch it so lightly
that you don't leave a fingerprint.

פּאָעזיע

א טונקל פּיאַלעטע פֿלוים
די לעצטע אויפֿן בוים,
דין הייטלדיק און צאַרט ווי אַ שוואַרצאַפֿל,
וואָס האָט ביי נאַכט אין טוי געלאָשן
ליבע, זעונג, צאַפֿל,
און מיטן מאָרגן־שטערן איז דער טוי
געוואָרן גרינגער –
דאָס איז פּאָעזיע. ריר זי אָן אַזוי
מען זאָל נישט זען קיין סימן פֿון די פֿינגער.

"Poetry," translated by Chana Bloch in *The Penguin Anthology of Modern Yiddish Verse*. "Who Will Last?," translated by Richard J. Fein in *With Everything We've Got: A Personal Anthology of Yiddish Poetry*. Photo used by permission of YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.



In conventional Jewish terms, Abraham Sutzkever, who died January 20 at age 96, was a man of contradictions. His early childhood in Siberia – what he called his “blond beginning” – gave him a keen responsiveness to ice and light and stars and flowers that critics have considered pagan. His early reputation as an apolitical lyric poet in Vilna would not seem to predict a risk-taker and a rescuer. But when the war came to Vilna, the “Ariel of Yiddish literature” – his nickname, from the “airy spirit” of Shakespeare’s *Tempest* – became *Ari-el*, the Lion of God. He smuggled rare books and documents out of the YIVO archive and weapons into the Vilna ghetto. When the ghetto was liquidated, he escaped with his wife to the partisans in the forest. Airlifted to Moscow, he reported on the genocide in progress and later testified at the Nuremberg trials. After the war he returned to Vilna, dug up the hidden books and papers, and arranged for their smuggling to New York. He settled in Tel Aviv and founded the journal *Di goldene keyt* (*The Golden Chain*), publishing Yiddish literature in the heart of modern Hebrew culture.

Sutzkever saw no conflict between the love of art and nature and an absolute commitment to the Jewish people. He continued to write his elegant and exacting poems throughout the war years. He composed with a strict eye to form: the “Angel of Poetry,” he imagined, would guard his life only if he wrote poems worthy of protection. His task, as poet and hero, was to save the fragments of culture, language, and experience: he worked, in Ruth Wisse’s words, “to make each fragment yield the sensation of the whole.”

“It seems rather mischievous,” says Wisse of the poem “Who will last?,” “to locate permanence in wind and foam; and the second stanza, reducing poetry to a language of grass and flowers, takes us all the way back to a prehistoric landscape and forces us to confront the possibility of having to begin there again.” But this is what a poet with a Siberian childhood knows: that the prehistoric is not so remote as civilization imagines, and is regenerative.

The least blade of grass reconstitutes a landscape, even in the horror and misery of the Vilna ghetto. Sutzkever’s finely crafted lyricism was not escapism but resistance. In his work, nature and art joined forces to sustain the Jewish soul against the annihilating powers of a cruel enemy. His metaphor of the “fiddle rose” imagines a fiddle – his father’s instrument – growing and blossoming from the grave, playing its own music. ♦

Who will last, what will last? A wind will last.
The blind will die, their blindness last.
The ocean’s raveled foam will last.
A cloud snagged by a tree will last.

ווער וועט בלייבן, וואָס וועט בלייבן? בלייבן וועט אַ ווינט,
בלייבן וועט די בלינדקייט פֿונעם בלינדן וואָס פֿאַרשווינדט.
בלייבן וועט אַ סימן פֿונעם ים: אַ שנירל שוים,
בלייבן וועט אַ וואַלקננדל פֿאַרטשעפעט אויף אַ בוים.

Who will last, what will last? A syllable will last,
as Creation seeds again and lasts.
For its own sake, a fiddle rose will last.
Seven blades of grass that know the rose will last.

ווער וועט בלייבן, וואָס וועט בלייבן? בלייבן וועט אַ טראַף,
בראשיתדיק אַרויסצוגראָן ווידער זיין באשאַף.
בלייבן וועט אַ פֿידלרויז לכבוד זיך אליין,
זיבן גראָן פֿון די גראָן וועלן זי פֿאַרשטיין.

Longer than all the northern stars will last
the star that falls in a tear will last.
In the jug, a drop of wine will last.
Who will last, what will last? God will last.

מער פֿון אלע שטערן אַז פֿון צפֿון ביו אַהער,
בלייבן וועט דער שטערן וואָס ער פֿאַלט אין סאַמע טרער.
שטענדיק וועט אַ טראַפֿן וויין אויך בלייבן אין זיין קרוג.
ווער וועט בלייבן, גאָט וועט בלייבן, איז דיר נישט גענוג?

Isn't that enough for you?