

*By the Shores of Lake  
Michigan*, poetry by Pessie  
Hershfeld Pomerantz and  
Shloyme Shvarts, 1938–39

*Translated from Yiddish by Jessica Kirzane*



## Translator's Introduction

The works in this collection showcase the vibrancy of Yiddish poetry in Chicago and its specificity to Chicago itself—to both the city and its natural surroundings, especially Lake Michigan. These poems demonstrate an attention to the cultural life of the city (the Chicago symphony, for example) and beyond (with references to Chopin and Mozart) and prove the poets to be part of a community, writing to and for one another, as well as aware of their role in broader literary traditions.

Included in this collection are a selection of poems by Pessie Hershfeld Pomerantz (1900–1978) and Shloyme Shvarts (1907–1988). Both of these poets were leaders in the Yiddish literary and cultural landscape of Chicago in the mid-twentieth century.

Pessie Hershfeld Pomerantz (who later also published under the name Pessie Pomerantz Honigbaum) was born in Kamenobrod (Kam'yanobrid), in what is now Ukraine. She and her family came to the United States and settled in Chicago in 1913, where she worked in a sweatshop while continuing to study. She first began publishing poetry in 1918, in New York–based literary journals and newspapers such as *Fraye arbeiter shtime* and *Der fraynd* as well as in Chicago publications such as *In nebl*, *Yugend*, and *Ineynem*. These latter publications were small circulation poetry journals created by the Young Chicago poets. Both Pomerantz and Shvarts were central figures in this circle, and both of their works also appear in the group's 1922 anthology *Yung shikago*. Pomerantz was married to cultural activist Israel Chaim Pomerantz, who was a leader in secular Yiddish education in Chicago, and their home served as a meeting place and salon for Chicago's Yiddish cultural scene. She published several books of poetry: *Kareln* (1926), a book of short, graceful, Haiku-like poems with a keen attention to rhythm; *Geklibene lider* (1931) and *Royter toy* (1939), which included longer poems, several of which were about her natural surroundings and the city, as well as the notion of human mortality; and *Reges fun genod, geklibene lider* (1957), which turned to the fate of the Jewish people in Europe and the nationalist project of Zionism. After her husband's sudden death in 1962, which left Pomerantz deeply bereft, the poet moved

to Miami, Florida, where she published her final book of poetry, *Fun ale mayne lider* (1969), which included several pieces mourning the loss of her husband. Literary critic Avraham Patt described her writing thus: “Pessie Hershfeld-Pomerantz’s pearls of delicate, elegant poetry approach life with a raw, crystalized grief, pierced through with, and passionately breathing in, her living soul. They drip like crystal raindrops upon the wounded world.”<sup>1</sup>

The poetry selected here is indicative of Pomerantz’s attention to the natural world and her relationship with it, as well as shot through with the sense of melancholy and loneliness that pervades her larger oeuvre. In “Lake Michigan,” the speaker reflects on seasons of visiting the lakeshore and her own smallness next to the magnificence and youth of the lake. In “At a Symphony Concert,” she is once again alone and small, observing something grand—in this case a symphony concert. While other concertgoers fade into one in the darkness, her loneliness sets her apart, and her heart vibrates alongside the orchestra as though she were taking part in it. The music moves her, and yet the “too late” cymbal crashes suggest that still the music is somehow inadequate to quell the poet’s inner turmoil.

“Winds,” though it begins with the personal “I love to stroll on Michigan Boulevard / When the winds are on the move,” extends outward to the entire city, following the winds themselves as if they become a kind of flâneur observing the city in all its angles. The winds seem to have some kind of objective stance, but the poet follows them through geographies of economic disparity, offering a social critique, as the poorest city dwellers receive the most polluted air before the wind settles down in the broad parks of the near suburbs.

“Under Seven Masks,” like “Winds” and “Lake Michigan,” is a geographically specific poem. It takes place at Waldheim Cemetery in Forest Park, at the grave of the poet’s husband, Israel Chaim Pomerantz. The titular “seven masks” evokes the New Testament story of the execution of John the Baptist, in which Salome dances before the king in a dance that Oscar Wilde interpreted as the “Dance of the Seven Veils”—an imagined, erotic Middle Eastern

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<sup>1</sup> Patt, *Likht un Shotn*, 93.

dance and striptease. Such dances were part of a dance craze known as “Salomania,” popular in Europe and the United States, which included convulsive body language as part of a high-art performance of female madness and eroticism. The figure of Salome was that of a Jewish femme fatale, a terrifyingly sexually powerful Jewish figure who reveals herself before a titillated audience.<sup>2</sup> In Pomerantz’s inverted retelling, the mourning figure is the opposite of a Salome, who does not disrobe but hides—and mourns—inside her seven layers or is even smothered by them: her deep distress is not performative but internal, and all that can be visibly seen is her biting on a blade of grass as though to quell the sobbing within her body. This sense of isolation and encounter with intense emotion while in a public space is consistent with the other poems in this collection, especially “At a Symphony Concert,” though these feelings are heightened in “Under Seven Masks” due to the specificity of the poet mourning the recent loss of her husband.

Shloyme (Selwyn) Shvarts was a pivotal figure in the Yiddish and Jewish arts scene in Chicago. Born in Kobrin, in what is now Belarus, he immigrated to the United States in 1920. He graduated from the University of Chicago, studying journalism and literature, and went on to become director of sales for Helix, Ltd., a photographic equipment store. He was widely published in Chicago-based and international Yiddish newspapers and literary journals such as *Shikago*, *Idisher kemfer*, *Veker*, *In zikh*, *Kheshbn*, and *Literarische bleter*, as well as in several anthologies. His Yiddish poetry, often inspired by jazz music—incorporating elements of literary modernism and attentive to architecture, sculpture, and music—was published in several volumes: *Bloymontik* (1938), *Amerike* (1940), *Goldener goles* (1971), *Vundn un vunder* (1975), *Brondzener mabl* (1981), and *Harbstiker fayer* (1984). Shvarts was a prominent member of the Young Chicago group of poets, and while many of those poets disbanded and left the Chicago area, he continued to be known as the “poet of Chicago,” often writing about the cityscape, the lake, and its environs. He also published widely in English under the name of Selwyn Schwartz, including five volumes of poetry—some of

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<sup>2</sup> See Alston, “Dancing Decadence.”

which are self-translations of his earlier Yiddish versions: *The Poet in Blue Minor* (1942), *Passages of Refuge* (1942), *Preface to Maturity* (1944), *Letters to My Unborn Son* (1947), and *Horn in the Dust: Poems* (1949). In addition, his work was published in several modernist poetry journals in English, such as *Circle Magazine* and *Poetry* magazine, and he was a close associate of Harriet Monroe and others involved with *Poetry*. Described as “word-drunk” and “exuberant,” his poetry in both languages is known for its emotional intensity as well as its erudite allusions.<sup>3</sup> He received honors for his poetry from the World Jewish Cultural Congress Literary Foundation and the Comité Central Israelita de México and lectured on poetry at the University of Chicago and Northwestern University. Poet and editor John Ciardi called Shvarts “as volatile as boiling ether, a poet with an amazing gift of language that no one in poetry should overlook.”<sup>4</sup>

The poems selected here highlight Shvarts’s syncretic combination of jazz music and Jewish tradition, a merging of sounds and vocabularies in the urban environment.<sup>5</sup> In “Monday Blue,” the exuberance of poetry breaks through the “towering problems” of the marketplace during the Depression to create cool, smooth beauty amid the chaos. The frosted windowpanes through which the prairie sun sets in “Prairie Suns” are reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright’s art glass, chic and modern in its approach to the natural world. In “By the Waters of Michigan,” Shvarts gestures toward the halcyon days of the Young Chicago group of poets, who—like the “*In zikh*” poets of New York—were urbane modernists assertively creating new beginnings rather than pining nostalgically for a lost and sacred past. Already, by the time Shvarts composed the poem, which appeared in his 1971 collection, those hopeful days had been shattered by the devastation of Europe’s Jewish communities, and the poets themselves had grown old and more circumspect. Moyshe Ghitzis (1894–1986), to whom the poem is dedicated, was also a member of Young Chicago—a Yiddish poet, playwright, novelist, and short story writer in Chicago.

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<sup>3</sup> Shapiro, “Poet in Search of His Heritage.”

<sup>4</sup> Heise, “Selwyn S. Schwartz.”

<sup>5</sup> The translations of “Monday Blue” and “Prairie Suns” previously appeared in *Azonal: Poetry in Translation* 1 (2020).

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## Pessie Hershfeld Pomerantz

### Lake Michigan

It's been my fate now several times  
to listen to the play of your waves,  
to behold the rhythm of your ancient tide;  
I am a splinter, just a vestige  
of a tree full with branches;  
I sit here at your sandy shores  
thinking of young, hopeful times  
with longing in my lonely silence.

My fate is to see once again  
the shimmer of your waves  
now blue, now green, now spectral gray,  
to watch a sailboat on your back adrift  
and see how your shoulders shrug, lift,  
Lake Michigan, my young friend!

## At a Symphony Concert

The spacious hall is filled with concertgoers.  
The lamps dim.  
The people seem to shed their skin, become—  
One form.  
Each face—one face.  
But I am only memory now,  
I am just—belonging.  
An orchestra warbles a storm,  
a harp sobs,  
a cello—prays with every fret,  
my heart vibrates with cries of  
clarinet.  
The cymbals crash—  
too late, *tsu shpet*.

## Winds

A band of winds sweep through you, Chicago,  
And rush Lake Michigan at you,  
I love to stroll on Michigan Boulevard  
When the winds are on the move.

Winds search and crouch in all your corners,  
Shake your walls and windowpanes,  
Drive curls of smoke and dark clouds,  
And toss handfuls of dust in your eyes.

They chase down your trains and trams  
And laugh in the faces of your halls of wealth;  
They bear the stench of your slaughterhouses  
As gifts to your poorest quarters.

In dark nights, pitch black,  
They settle comfortably in your open parks  
And whistle out symphonic elegies to you,  
Bolstering your grand city symphony.

## Under Seven Masks

Under seven masks  
my shrill voice is stifled.  
I grow quiet, small,  
gray, forlorn, and silent.  
As seedlings sprout in springtime  
I'll come to you, I swear,  
and by your earthy hill  
I'll sit in silence there.  
As I cannot moan  
and I cannot howl—  
I'll tear out a blade of grass  
and chew on it in silence.  
Since death is all around  
and I cannot wail  
perhaps the blade of grass  
will speak somehow for me.  
And if a bird should come to me  
to comfort, with its twitter,  
I will say, "Bird,  
all I feel is a quiver."



# Shloyme Shvarts

## Monday Blue

Sunday sighs away  
its sanctity.  
My neighbor's saxophone  
has ceased its t'kiah-t'ruah-shvarim shofar calls.  
Only the night's stars,  
leopard lilies on a black velvet dress,  
still hang, gentle—  
alluring.  
Tallow from the fading holy day drips into me  
like Monday blue.  
Lamplighters turn on streetlamps  
mercilessly, on—on  
like gifts bestowed at the close of Sunday's wedding.

The week greets me with pointed walls, illuminated  
colorful fir trees,  
the clamor of Santa Claus,  
announcements of a rising stock market, announcing—  
Franklin D. Roosevelt.  
Towering problems  
wrap themselves around me, problems  
steel, spiraling.  
My Monday blue rock-a-byes  
with syncopation.  
For the sky hangs above me

workaday blue  
the blue of weekday festivals.

### **Prairie Suns**

My step, my stride—with ecstasy.  
My everyday gods hang  
on gallows of accounts  
and sums.  
But my pen is a sharp plow  
that cuts through the belly of time  
and words  
tearing from me image after image—panoramic.  
Winter, the naked master  
clever and melancholy  
crawls over my freshly-papered walls.

Polished frost from distant icy horizons  
rests on my windowpane,  
sits like a Senate President.  
The chilled joy  
of lonely, chiseled faces  
accentuates the rebellious messages  
under the city bridges.  
Just today, barefoot life  
knocked on my door  
reminding me of the Golem of Prague  
revealing himself  
in midnight lightning.

Streets wander under bridges, naked  
through the breadth of the city.  
The city's corset, the train  
hangs on wires  
its slippers, the colorful ships,  
are anchored on dry land.  
Prairie suns set, shadows threaten

at the banks of Lake Michigan  
and paint the prismatic walls of the Wrigley and Tribune towers.  
The chilled joy  
of lonely, chiseled faces  
hot with frost  
red with frost.  
And on my windowpane melancholy winter paints  
barefoot life, who just today  
knocked on my door.

### **By the Waters of Michigan**

*For Moyshe Ghitzis*

1.

By the waters of Michigan we sat,  
young poets with fresh verses.  
We sang and did not weep for dead poems  
in slumbering museums.

By the young shore,  
under rays of sunlight,  
we carried our songs of songs,  
the shared lines  
of our youth,  
in a net of prayertune rain.

By the pure waters  
we sang out the summer  
with birds and wind.  
And it was full of springtime,  
the song of our beginnings.

2.

Blessed was the beginning.  
The beginning was plump and full

of bunches of grapes;  
of doves flocking together,  
of sun, stars, and poems.

And something else—  
mercury waves  
between our toes,  
the mystery of other spheres.

And then:

The purified rain falling over all the trees  
over the sprouting grasses  
around the clear shores—  
Every letter branching out from  
the goodness of all the years.

Even the loneliness was richer  
by Lake Michigan  
soothed by our young lexicon.

3.

Then  
in that beginning  
bewinged with words,  
the winds, noisy virtuosos,  
called out  
through the sparse Jewish grove  
the prayer tunes  
of our “fear not” songs,  
the lightninged awakening  
of a new summer.

(That was when Mozart  
played through heavenly roses



in my young wife's eyes  
the deep secrets of tomorrow  
in the gold of her silence.)

Right there  
in a landscape of revived branches  
we swallowed whole apples, pears,  
in the deathly hunger of existing!  
On the hunched backs of the craggy stones  
we even youthfully carved out—  
our song.

4.

And there was light . . .  
It grew bright in the tents.  
God's loving kindness warmed our eyes.  
love at the fingertips  
of spring—  
we believed.

Summer with sun in its ears  
Chopin's funeral march: it didn't rise up, didn't amount to  
much . . .  
The birds, by one and by two  
accompanied by sails  
kissed all the snow upon the green grasses.

And then there was—  
with a new sound on the lips,  
a passionate longing—not to ask.  
Forbidden, the river forever a reflection  
of the sky—  
which sparkled with tidy poems.

5.

The colorful shores of song and youth.

The bridegroom's time, until it fades . . .

Until, my God, the silence of your Presence—

The end of summer paints us with slaughtered colors.