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A Daughter of the Mother Tongue

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I tried. I did try.  
First held with Yiddish but you know it’s hard. You write gas and street echoes back.  
No resonance. And — let’s face it — memory falters.  
You try to keep track of the difference like got and god or hayz and house but they blur and you start using alley when you mean gesele or avenue when it’s a bulevar.

And before you know it you’re on some alien path standing before a brick house the doorframe slightly familiar.  
Still you can’t place it exactly. Passers-by stop. Concerned they speak but you’ve heard all this before the vowels shifting up and down the subtle change in the guttural sounds and now it’s nothing more nothing more than babble.

You’re lost. This time you really don’t know where you are.  

Land or sea the house floats before you. Perhaps you once sat at that window and it was home and looked out on that street or gesele. Perhaps it was a dead end perhaps a short cut. Perhaps not.  
A movement by the door. They stand there beckoning mouths open and close: Come in! Come in! I understood it was a welcome. A dank! A dank! I said till I heard the lock snap behind me.  

Irena Klepfisz
A Daughter of the Mother Tongue

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conscience of an internal rift, "Etelke verter oyf mame-loshn," A Few words in the Mother Tongue is a poem that defines individual Yiddish words before being transformed into a fully Yiddish sequence. It opens with seemingly random terms, as if emulating a Yiddish lesson:

lemonshl: for example
di kurev the whore
a woman who acknowledges her passions
di yidene the Jewess the Jewish woman
ignorant overbearing
let's fact it: every woman is one
di yente the gossip the busy-body
who knows what's what
and is never caught off guard
di leibianke the one with
a roommate though we never used

the word
dos waybl the wife
or the little woman

Klepfisz examines language and its implicit stereotyping of women; later in the poem she comments that

a froy kholt a woman
dreams ir ort oyf der velt
her place in this world
un zi hot mogre and she is afraid
so afraid of the words

The poet marks the highly charged point of contact between her verbal craft and her identity, fixed in established languages that are at times unyielding.

In the companion volume to "A Few Words in the Mother Tongue," entitled Dreams of an Insomniac, Ms. Klepfisz confronts and renders more explicit many of her underlying poetic themes. At the same time, she views the essay format, like casual disputation, as a "free associative, open-ended, unpredictable and always unstructured process." No admirer of "seamless" essays, she suggests that "by retaining the difficult process by which we reach conclusions (through digressions, free association, interruptions, new beginnings, reiteration) we endow ideas with a three-dimensional reality which makes them accessible and operative in the world."

The primary tone of Ms. Klepfisz's essays is personal, autobiographical. She explores the choices she has made — from remaining childless to writing "bilingual Yiddish/English poetry," and from maintaining a secular Jewish identity to rejecting current Israeli policies on the West Bank. Her experiences have enabled her to share diverse perspectives: after she received a doctorate in English literature at the University of Chicago, she worked as an assistant professor until financial pressures eliminated her position, became an office worker for a decade in "what seems an infinite number of jobs," taught Yiddish in the Summer Program sponsored by YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, edited lesbian/feminist publications, and continually wrote poetry.

There is a poignant symmetry between her early education by the Workmen's Circle school and her mature grasp of the hardships encountered by office workers.

Ms. Klepfisz is intensely aware of the problems of American Jewish identity. She briefly muses on this divisive issue, asking: "Who is the real Jew in this room? The orthodox Jew? The Biblical scholar? The Holocaust survivor? The child of Holocaust survivors? The one who lived on a kibbutz for two years? The one who speaks Yiddish? Hebrew? Ladino? The one who knows the shabes prayer? The one who studied at a yeshiva for six months? The heterosexuality? The Ashkenazi? The sabra? The one with the Jewish mother? The convert who learned what most born into Jewishness never bothered with?" With such penetrating questions Ms. Klepfisz probes the hidden insecurities that often disrupt Jewish communal life.

Ms. Klepfisz also resists the way of nostalgia. She strongly supports the Yiddish institutions that advance secular Yiddish culture, yet she comments that they "unfortunately often foster the nostalgia in which Yiddish is becoming increasingly enveloped." She likewise rejects an approach to the Holocaust that would make it "the core of Jewish identity." Steering between these inadequate options, Ms. Klepfisz proposes an enhanced educational program: "We will guarantee another generation a Jewish future if we educate ourselves about the history of the Jews, ancient and modern, about Jewish literature — probably in translation from Ladino, Yiddish, Hebrew and all the languages in which secular Jews and observant Jews wrote." She hopes for changes that will bring about Americans' deeper and broader knowledge of Jewish culture, in turn facilitating new artistic expressions.

Ms. Klepfisz is a ventriloquist, poet and essayist with a wide range of voices. Increasingly recognized in feminist circles, her work is now receiving the attention it deserves among American Jewish readers.

Ms. Frieden teaches Yiddish literature, Hebrew literature, and Jewish literature in other languages at Emory University.

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