

A FEW WORDS
IN THE MOTHER TONGUE

NEW POEMS (1983 - 1990)

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IN THE
MOTHER
TONGUE

Poems Selected and New
(1971-1990)



IRENA
KLEPFISZ

Introduction by Adrienne Rich

I cannot swim

I cannot swim but my parents
say the land is less safe. And
the first day the water was smooth
like slate I could walk on.
It was a deception.

The sky greyed darkened
then grew bright as if it understood
our mood. I watched the land sink
and disappear. The boat was firm.
I sat holding onto my father's leg.
I was not sick like the others.

The sky was bright then grew
grey and dark. The days were
the same the water the same
and everyone's eyes the same.
We looked like a family but
we were all strangers. Nothing
but water and sky and the boat.
The world never existed I said.
I could not remember land nor
houses nor trees and I knew
I had not been born here
that once there had been another place.
And I said to my parents:
there are no more lands
and no more peoples. We are strange
creatures and must grow gills.
And my parents laughed as I cupped
my hands around my ears and the
children laughed and did the same
their bony fingers flapping.

And the water looked gentle
ready to receive us.

And one day we saw them and I
saw we were not alone and there
were others. Not sea creatures
but like us. I remembered.

And they boarded us and seized
the young girls like me and formed
a circle. And they were on us
when the leader shouted: Make
sounds of joy! And my parents' eyes
sealed like wrinkled walnuts.

And they changed places and new ones
were on us. And someone ordered:
Make sounds of joy! My parents moved
their lips like fishes their mouths
filled with silence. And it happened
again and again to me till I stopped
remembering it.

The blood clotted between the boards
and darkened though the women splashed
the sea on it. The smell stayed.

I said to my parents: I will grow gills
and tried to leap out into the water.
But my father held my wrists his fingers
iron nails piercing my bones. And he said:
you cannot swim.

The ocean was bleak and jagged
like an unscaled mountain daring
to be conquered. At dusk someone
spotted the land but I did not look
at it and watched my shadow below
on the rippled darkening bottom.

I thought about those who waited
on the shore. They were shouting
sharp not kind pointing at an empty
horizon. Wood splintered wood just
for one moment and then they pushed
us back. My mother pressed my head
against her breast. The day was ending.
It was almost dark.

Di rayze aheym / The journey home

1. *Der fentster / The window*

She looks out the window.

All is present.

The shadows of the past
fall elsewhere.

This is the wilderness
she thinks.

And our tongues have become
dry the wilderness has
dried out our tongues and
we have forgotten speech.

She looks out the window.
All is present.

2. *Vider a mol* / Once again

Vider a mol
she tries to rise above circumstances.

Too much is at stake
this morning
yedn frimorgn
every morning
to see what can be wrenched
from the unconscious
crowded darkness
fun ir zikorn
of her memory.

It is there
di gantse geshikhte
fun folk
the entire history
of the people.

Vider a mol
she reaches out
and tries to hold on
clinging
like a drowning
person
to a flimsy plank.

Ober der yam iz groys
but the sea is vast
un di velt
and the world
afile greser
even larger
afile greser.

3. *Zi flit* / She flies

Zi flit

vi a foygl

like a bird

zi flit

ibern yam

over the sea

iber di berg

over the mountains.

Tsurik

tsurik back

back

zi flit

and settles

oyf a boym

on a tree

lebn a moyer

near a wall

a moyer

fun a beys-oylem

a wall

of a cemetery.