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by **Rokhl Korn**, translation by Pearl Abraham

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I Would Have Liked to See Your Mother Once

Rokhl Korn
translated by Pearl Abraham

Introduction: I encountered the work of the Polish-Canadian poet Rokhl Korn (1898-1982) only recently, in a translation class on women’s Yiddish poetry.¹ We read two of her poems and heard a [recording](#) of her reading “*Fun yener zayt lid.*” I was deeply moved by her voice, her Yiddish, and the poem, which ends on the image of a mother lost in thought in a doorway before calling her daughter in for the night. When I learned that Korn had published prolifically (including eight books of poetry) but remained little translated,² I started reading more of her writing. One of these works, [Bashertkeyt](#), published in 1949 in Montreal by a committee of poets (Masha Roskies, Ida Maze, and Melekh Ravitch among them), opens with the theme of *benkshaft* (longing and homesickness). The poems are often addressed to a distant beloved, with hope that he is on his way back, and perhaps even nearby.

The poem from this collection that I translate here, “*Ikh volt gevolt amol dayn mamen zen,*” delivers (in only 17 lines!) the complexity of an imagined relationship between two women who have in common their love for the same man, son to one, partner to the other. The speaker wishes to have seen her lover’s mother once, and conjures up such a meeting in which the two commune about the son in mere glances.

Extraordinary sight becomes the driving idea of this poem. The wonderfully evocative and impossible to translate Yiddish word “*blik*” appears in the first and last stanzas. In

¹ The class was called “*Froyen lider*” and taught by Mindl Cohen.

² Note from the editors: In addition to a small number of collections of poetry and prose in translation (*Lider un erd/Shirim ve-Adamah* (Poems and Land) (Yiddish/Hebrew). Trans. Shimshon Meltzer, 1966; *Generations: Selected Poems of Rokhl Korn*. Trans. R. Augenfeld, S. Mayne et al, 1982; *Paper Roses: Selected Poems of Rokhl Korn*, trans. Seymour Levitan, 1985) Korn’s poetry has been widely anthologized. A list of those publications can be found [here](#). More recently, several poems by Korn have been translated into English by Miriam Isaacs and [published on the website of the Yiddish Book Center](#).

the first stanza, when Korn introduces these silent communications, she begins with “*oygn*” then ends on “*blik*.” I resigned myself to the imperfect “gaze.” When the second “*blik*” appears in the third stanza, I replicated the “eyes” from the first to accompany “gaze,” to emphasize the powerful wordless exchange between these women.

At some point between drafts of the translation, Korn’s “eyes” and “*blik*” inspired my own (much lighter!) poem about a mother’s eyes. I have been writing fourteen-line sonnets with no stanza breaks. Under the influence of Korn’s structure, I started with a quatrain as she does, added two more, and ended up with a sonnet of three quatrains and a closing couplet. Re-reading my translation of the Korn poem, I felt the urge to set off her powerful ending lines as a couplet too.

I am grateful to Dr. Allan Coopersmith for granting me permission to translate his grandmother’s work. I am also grateful to Maya Pasternak of the Jewish Public Library in Montreal for directing my query to the right person, and to Miriam Isaacs for assisting with locating the heirs.

I Would Have Liked to See Your Mother Once

I would have liked to see your mother once
to kiss her hands—

She likely would have found you in my eyes,
all your words, hidden in my gaze.

She might have come toward me
with the kind of smile—smart & silent—
that blooms on a mother's lips
when she feels confirmed by another woman's
love for her own son.

And more than likely—
very likely she would have warned me with her eyes,
her gaze
(mothers always know more than other women)
of the wild grief
& hard luck it takes
to love her son.

I would have liked to see your mother once
to kiss her hands.

איך וואָלט געוואָלט אַמאָל דיין מאַמען זען

איך וואָלט געוואָלט אַמאָל דיין מאַמען זען
און איר קושן די הענט –
מסתמא וואָלט זי אין מינע אויגן דיך געפֿינען
און אַלע דינע ווערטער, וואָס כִּיהאַט אויסבאַהאַלטן אין
מיין בליק

און אַפֿשר וואָלט זי מיר אַנטקעגנגעקומען
מיט אַ שמיכל, אַ שטילן, אַ קלוגן,
וואָס בליט תמיד אויף ליפּן פֿון מאַמעס,
ווען זיי פֿילן באַשטעטיקט דורך אַנדערע פֿרויען
זייער ליבע צום אייגענעם זון.

און אַפֿשר גאָר –
און אַפֿשר וואָלט מיר געוואָרנט איר בליק,
(מאַמעס ווייסן שטענדיק מער, ווי אַנדערע פֿרויען)
פֿאַר דעם ווילדן צער
און דעם האַרבן גליק
צו ליבן איר זון.
איך וואָלט געוואָלט אַמאָל דיין מאַמען זען
און איר קושן די הענט.

Mothers Always Know

I had much to hide at 13, books, letters,
my locked diary where it felt safe to confide,
& still my mother knew before I knew,
before I'd done what I was going to do.

Don't you know, she said, mothers always know.
Annoyed, I promised I would never be
that mother. I promised I would never have
those quick, those spying eyes, an intuition

independent of ordinary sight.
Now I'm 4 years short of the age she died.
I have her quick eyes, a knowing I don't prize,
& yet I kept my promise. I did not become

a mother with eyes in back of her head.
I did not become a mother.