Shall I begin at the beginning?
Shall I, like Abraham
defying brotherhood,
smash all the idols?
Shall I let myself be translated while living?
Shall I plant my tongue in the earth
and wait
till it transforms
into our forebears’
raisins and almonds?
What jokes
nonsensical and absurd
does my fellow poet with his whiskers preach,
that soon my mother tongue will be out of reach?
A hundred years from now we may still be carrying on
this argument while sitting by the Jordan.
For a question
gnaws and claws:
if he knows exactly where
Levi Yitzhok’s1 prayer,
Yehoash’s2 poem
and Kulbak’s3 ode,
are drifting
to their oblivion —
could he please show me the location
where the language will succumb?
Maybe at the Wailing Wall?
If so, I shall come there, come,
open my mouth,
and shall like a lion
garbed in fiery crimson,
swallow the language that is passing on.
Swallow it and awaken all the generations with my roar!

Avrom Sutzkever 1948
Translated by M. Koral

1 Levi Yitzhok of Berdichev (1740 – 1809) was a Hassidic master and teacher known for his mystical tales.
2 Yehoash (1872-1907) was a Yiddish writer and poet.
3 Moshe Kulbak (1896-1937) was a Yiddish poet, writer, and educator murdered by the Soviets.