Chana Bloch: “The Poem Begins to Shape You” [1]

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TW Interview by Carol Dorf

An Award-Winning Poet Talks About Art as Nourishment

UPDATED (June 10, 2017): *Chana Bloch passed away on May 19, 2017. She will be dearly missed by her many devoted readers and all of us at TW.*

Chana Bloch gets to the heart of the matter, whether through her own poems or in translating the charged work of Yehuda Amichai. Born in the Bronx in 1940, Bloch has lived in Berkeley, California, most of her adult life. A professor emerita of Mills College in nearby Oakland (she taught at Mills, a women's college, for over thirty years), she brings insights from teaching into her consideration of poetry.

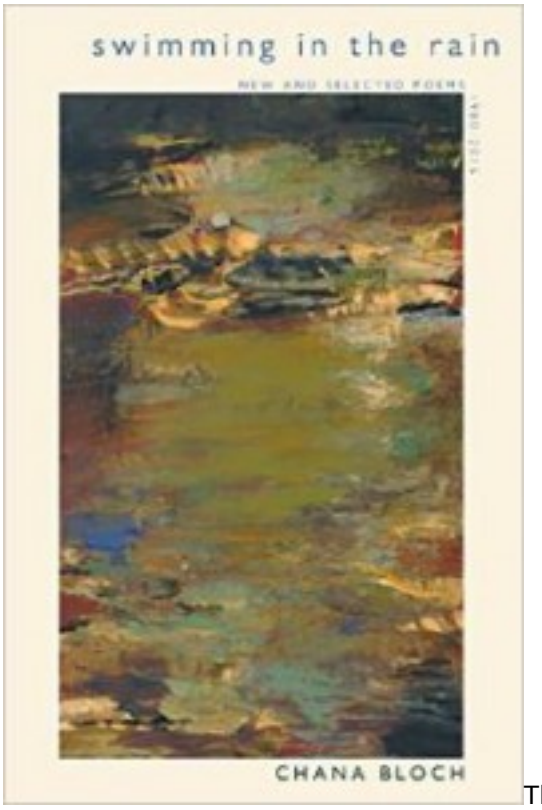

photo by Peg Skorpinski

Bloch has been writing since the early 1980s, often covering provocative topics like a husband's mental illness (her 1998 book *Mrs. Dumpty* won the Felix Pollak Prize that year, selected by Donald Hall) and her bouts with cancer. Her *Swimming in the Rain: New and Selected Poems, 1980-2015* will be published this January by Autumn House Press.

I was familiar with Bloch's work and had met her a couple of times, most recently two years ago at a reading given by

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some mutual friends in the Bay Area. After her latest cancer diagnosis in 2013, I became one of the many people who helped in small ways. During that time, we became friends, and when I found out about *Swimming in the Rain*, I realized it would be fantastic to have work by Bloch and an interview with her in *Talking Writing*.



The interview took place over the course of a long afternoon at Bloch's home in Berkeley last May. I followed up our original conversation with more email questions this fall, and Bloch has since made a few additions to the interview transcript.

Even the dining room of her Berkeley house has bookshelves. In her comfortable living room, a coffee table was piled with more books. As we talked, I found myself thinking about poetry on a deeper level, as Bloch—who says she has “an aggressive sarcoma”—appears to be doing all the time. When I asked how she put together *Swimming in the Rain*, she responded later by email:

> I was aware of my cancer diagnosis as I worked on the book. If I don’t survive, this is what I will leave behind me. That was a powerful incentive to work hard. I wanted to include poems that would show the range of my work—poems about family and children, intimate relationships, sex, language, art, memory, aging, and death.

This TW interview has been condensed and edited.

Don't miss “At the Border” and “The Innocents,” [5]Chana Bloch’s two poems in this TW issue. They also appear in her forthcoming *Swimming in the Rain*.

TW: **What do you see as your responsibilities as a poet?**

CB: To tell the truth about life. Not to record the facts as a journalist, but to reach for a deeper truth with the power of the imagination. You bring many experiences together and make of them an amalgam that’s richer, closer to the

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essential truth.

I personally value poetry that appeals to my feelings, to my mind, my body, my soul. I want it to reach other people. I want it to be a source of nourishment. The process of writing is nourishing to me, and I want my poems to be nourishing to others.

TW: **What topics are most important to you? I notice that you write about very difficult experiences—a husband’s nervous breakdown, your own cancers.**

CB: Initially, I wrote mostly about my family, and that's still a major subject for me—parents, sons, husbands. After writing *Mrs. Dumpty*, about the dissolution of my first marriage because of my then-husband’s mental illness, I wanted to write about history—human origins, the Little Ice Age, the pogroms that brought my family to this country from Russia, my own personal history as seen from the perspective of a woman in her seventies.-

The greatest difficulties are often the things that generate the strongest poetry. When you write about the turmoil inside you, as you begin to shape the material, the poem begins to shape you. *Mrs. Dumpty* was written out of three different breakdowns that I combined into one for the sake of the dramatic arc. Writing that book, over four summers, helped restore my own sanity.

TW: **Do you devote a lot of time to poetry?**

CB: When I was teaching full-time, with small children and a depressed husband, I didn't have much time for poetry, except in the summer. This past year and a half, since my cancer diagnosis, I’ve had to spend hours and hours on body maintenance. But the time I managed to spend on poetry has invariably brought with it a healing energy. I was able to focus on words and line breaks instead of worrying about the pain in my leg or the results of the latest scan. I found that I could actually distract myself from pain and anxiety.

TW: **I'm a slow writer.**

CB: Slow is not necessarily bad. There’s no point in wanting to be a different kind of a writer than you are, though I must admit I’ve envied poets who are quicker, more prolific. I myself rarely stay with my early drafts. I tend to go over and over a poem—revising, distilling, trying to get at the essence.

TW: **Most of your poems are brief lyrics. How do your longer sequence poems function compared with those that represent a single moment?**

CB: I tend to write very short poems. Most of them fit on one page. Sometimes, a group of those poems asks to be stitched together. For example, I wrote a number of poems about my experience of ovarian cancer in 1986 that were then published in various journals. At some point, I realized that, by bringing them together in a sequence I called “In the Land of the Body” (from *The Past Keeps Changing*, Sheep Meadow Press, 1992), I could offer differing perspectives on the experience: that of my then-husband, our children, the radiologist, the surgeon.

TW: **Which poets have been especially important to you?**

CB: George Herbert, Emily Dickinson, Yehuda Amichai, Tomas Tranströmer, Elizabeth Bishop, Zbigniew Herbert, Wislawa Szymborska, Charles Simic, Gerard Manley Hopkins—not necessarily in that order.

George Herbert was an early influence. In grad school, I fell in love with his work. We made a very odd couple. I was a Jewish girl from the Bronx, and he was a seventeenth-century Anglican minister. But his poetry was about the inner life, and that drew me. There was a human depth in his poems that I found very appealing. He wrote about the self with an unsparing candor—about his irresolution, his inner contradictions. And I loved the music in his poetry.

I wrote my Ph.D. dissertation about his work, and then a book—*Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible* (University of California Press, 1985)—about how he transforms the biblical sources in his poetry. Seeing him take a verse from the Bible and combine it with something from his life was like watching a mind in the very process of

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creation.

TW: **What about translation? How has that influenced your writing?**

CB: When you grow older, you see that fragmentary parts of the self are parts of the whole. One doesn't obviate the other; it enriches the other. While I was an English major, I was taking courses in Judaic studies. Studying English, I would think, “I should really be doing Judaic studies.” And vice versa. But then I began to see that the two of them were not opposed. And both proved to be very important to my poetry.

I studied Yiddish and Hebrew, and I loved poetry, so it occurred to me that I should try to translate. Translating stories by Isaac Bashevis Singer was a challenge, but the real challenge for me came in translating poetry—and the difficulties were actually the most interesting places. I really love the process of translation.

Getting the tone of voice right is the hardest thing. It helps if you know the poet. I’ve actually known all the contemporary writers I've translated. I had Amichai's voice, in particular, in my ear. I could hear his crackling wit, his irony.

TW: **How did you like teaching at a college for women?**

CB: I loved it! Helping to empower women is a way of making a contribution. Mills had many “resumers,” students past the traditional age who come back to school after some kind of disruptive event. Some of the students I taught have gone on to be writers with major careers, such as Dorianne Laux and Rusty Morrison. It’s very exciting to me to read books by my students; I have a shelf in my study just for them.

I also love teaching for some of the same reasons I love being a mother. What you tell your students is often something you need to learn yourself. When you teach a workshop, for example, you will hear conflicting opinions from participants. I always told my students, “Whatever you say in this class has to be true, and it has to be useful. You need to put it in a form that the poet can hear. I don't want any blood on the walls.” But even when everyone followed that rule, there were almost always conflicting opinions, and the students were confused: “How can you tell who’s right?”

I would answer, “That kind of confusion may be hard, but it’s good for you. It throws you back on your own resources. It makes you take responsibility.”

Then I’d go to my own writing group and hear conflicting opinions about a poem of mine, and come home with a raging stomachache.

TW: **In the Bay Area, for years we’ve had lyrical vs. experimental poets. Sometimes in a group, another participant will suggest you can improve your poem by writing it the way he or she would.**

CB: I hate those labels! *Lyrical! Confessional! Experimental!* Either a poem is good or it’s not.

Still, whatever kind of poetry you write, it’s hard not to get discouraged. When the poem is still warm and new, you look upon it with affection and pride. It’s your beautiful baby, even when it’s ugly. You read it aloud and go to bed happy. Then in the morning, you gasp, “Oh, my God, did I write *that*? How can I possibly call myself a poet!” You have to play tricks on yourself to overcome whatever creates obstacles in your mind.

I told my students to save drafts of their poems because it can help in the process of revision. You may look back at an older version and find that you cut a good line, better than what you changed it to. It’s also a way to teach yourself patience. A form of self-encouragement. If I go back to the first draft, I can demonstrate to myself: “See, you started with nothing, but it was worth sticking with it. You’ve managed to make something out of it.

TW: **How do you find support for your writing?**

CB: I'm in a poetry writing group that has met for many years. Also, a poetry reading group and a film group. I’ve spent

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many summers at writers' colonies, where I almost always connect deeply with another poet. And, finally, my family has been very important to my poetry and not only as subject matter. When you get your family involved early enough—I like to say that I trained my sons in the cradle!—you can ask about a poem you’re working on even at midnight.

TW: **Can you say something about the two poems we’re publishing in TW?**

CB: “At the Border” is based on a photo. My son and daughter-in-law came to visit me in the hospital after cancer surgery. Nina was nine months pregnant, due any day. She pulled up her T-shirt, I put my hand on her belly, and Jonathan zoomed in with his cell phone. I kept that photo on my desktop and thought about it for almost a year before writing the poem, though I was probably working on it subconsciously.

There are biblical scenes in which a man blesses his son or grandson; this struck me as a feminist version of a blessing scene: three generations of women, as it turned out—and who knows?—maybe four, counting my granddaughter Liliana’s eggs. The original title was “A Blessing,” but I thought that gave too much away; I wanted to preserve some mystery in the beginning. The image of the border opens up a geographical dimension. I knew that border crossings can be scary, having traveled in Eastern Europe before the Iron Curtain came down.

In “The Innocents,” I changed the literal facts, combining my two sons into one. (I always wished I could do that in real life—put them in the blender, so each could have some of the qualities of the other!) In stanza 4, my role as a mother made me think of the haunting spiritual “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child” and the age of slavery, when children were often separated from their parents. And I was also remembering that Eve was motherless and, I think, blameless. In the Genesis story, she doesn’t deserve to be punished. The very definition of innocence is to have no notion of evil. You begin by not knowing what evil is. Life teaches you.

For more information, see Chana Bloch’s website *[6] and* Autumn House Press *[7]. The author photo of Chana Bloch (by Peg Skorpinski) is used by permission.*

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