

# JEWISH REVIEW *of* BOOKS

## It Is Either Serious or It Isn't

By Robert Hirschfield | Fall 2015

### *Swimming in the Rain: New and Selected Poems 1980-2015*

by Chana Bloch

Autumn House Press, 240 pp., \$19.95.

CHANA BLOCH is celebrated for her translations of Yehuda Amichai, Dahlia Ravikovitch, and the Song of Songs, but her own poetry has sometimes been overlooked. Her volume of new and selected poems should remedy that. For years, Bloch said recently, she had tacked to her bulletin board a quote by the Objectivist George Oppen: "Clarity, clarity, surely clarity is the most beautiful thing in the world . . . I have not and never did have any motive of poetry / But to achieve clarity." The poems collected in this volume were certainly crafted in this spirit. In "Hester Street, 1898," she writes:

No one told them to smile  
and they're too busy anyway  
with their wooden pushcarts:  
*Aprons! Prayerbooks! Pickles in brine!*  
They regard the camera with suspicion.  
Butting, shoving, elbow and shoulder,  
they tilt the street off-frame.

This is the world they dreamt of  
when they slept in mud and misery?  
If you climb the skyscrapers up to the sky  
you can feel the moon on your cheek,  
cool and shivery, like calf's-foot jelly.

A Bloch poem is like a stone thrown deep into the well of experience. The strong, contained sound it makes as it sinks below the surface takes its place inside the silences of real poetry.

Bloch, who is 75, has lived for many years in Berkeley, California, where she is professor emerita of English at Mills College. The poems in *Swimming in the Rain* focus on family, sensuality, the Bible, Jewish history, and mortality. Sometimes, as in her poem "Brothers," themes overlap. In this case, family and the Bible, her two young sons, and Cain and Abel. After reading a deliciously chilling witch's tale to them, she chases after her sons: "I catch you, I eat you." But instead of the expected ritual laughter, horror:

The stricken voice that cried: *Eat him!*  
*Eat my brother.*

Bloch assembled this volume while undergoing treatment for cancer, and many of the poems address mortality: roadside lilac's, her father's, her own:

It is either serious or it isn't.  
The indeterminate mass, 14.8 cm long,  
is either a cyst or a tumor.  
If a tumor, either benign or malignant.  
If malignant, either slow-growing  
or aggressive, in which case  
they may contain it. If not, no one else will recall  
this unseasonable day of waiting  
exactly as you felt it, from the inside out  
—the way the heat of your mind  
dropped a few degrees  
and grew very quiet. The sediment  
settled. You managed to divert  
yourself with words. Then  
you consulted the uncommon  
clarity of the sky. . . .

The reader of this poem, “Inside Out,” is brought along slowly, as if by the hand, to a genuinely portentous moment, “this unseasonable day of waiting.”

The poems originally collected in *Mrs. Dumpty* (1998), and well represented in this collection, have a similar movement. Employing Bloch's simple, stark, trademark strokes, they map the futility of a life lived in the service of a husband's mental illness.

All year I dropped words into the well  
of his silence. I could hear them  
falling, could measure  
the darkness they displaced.  
I bent over the water and saw  
my own face looking down.

Now he won't look at me.  
He is watching the light  
puddle on the floor: *I'm not listening.*

Bloch was raised on 167<sup>th</sup> Street in the Bronx by Ukrainian-Jewish parents whose split-level notions of observance foreshadowed her own: “Every Friday night my mother would light the *Shabbes* candles and my father would light his cigarette from the candles, *the candles.*” She was sent on weekends to learn Yiddish at the Sholem Aleichem Folkshul while in high school and sometimes spoke Yiddish with her grandmother who spoke little English. Hebrew, which would become central to her literary career, came later (Cornell, Brandeis, Jerusalem), but her earliest translations

were from the Yiddish. In her 20s, she workshopped translations of the great Yiddish poet Abraham Sutzkever with Robert Lowell, who told her “You can learn to write from your own translations.” She has said that it was the best writing advice she ever received:

You might say that translation is a form of apprenticeship—not to a master craftsman, but to the genius of language itself. When you translate you are constantly choosing among alternatives in order to convey meaning, register, image, mood, music; each time you choose, you are exercising muscles that you need in shaping your own work.

In the poems assembled in *Swimming in the Rain* it is easy to find the marks of the translator. The Yiddish vein, perhaps inevitably, stands out most clearly. She has referred to Yiddish as the “*mame-loshn* of home and the market place, of everyday life.”

“You have seven gray hairs,” says my son,  
my firstborn,  
and lifts me off the floor.  
Pokes an accusing thumb into  
Mama Pudding,  
fixes a beam of truth and refuses  
to gentle it.

Bloch’s collaboration with Yehuda Amichai in the 1980s and her translation of the Song of Songs in the 1990s fed an altogether different stream in her poetry. Bloch is not a theological reader and she approaches the Song as a “model for a boldly secular eroticism.” Like Amichai’s love poems, Bloch’s can be both joyous *and* jaundiced in the same poem, as in these lines, originally published in *Blood Honey*:

Sometimes I want to sink into your body  
with the fever that spikes inside me  
to be a woman  
who can open a man.

Why must I be only softness and haunches,  
a satin cul-de-sac?

Given Bloch’s deep exposure as a translator to various poetic styles, it is remarkable that her own style has over the years remained so singularly her own. It is a style supple enough to embrace the lyrical and reflective strains in her poetry, and the emotion that runs through all of it. It is a privilege to be rowed by the oars of Bloch’s poetry through her many worlds.

## About the Author

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*Robert Hirschfeld is a New York writer whose work appears in The Jerusalem Report, Tablet, European Judaism, and The Writer.*

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