

## Alan Williamson

*Swimming in the Rain: New and Selected Poems, 1980-2015* by Chana Bloch (Autumn House Press). Published January 1, 2015. 221 pages, \$19.95 paperback.

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*Swimming in the Rain* brings together almost forty years of work by the distinguished poet and translator Chana Bloch. Bloch's is a good poetry that also speaks to a wide range of readers. Her subject matter is what is ineluctable, intractably complex in life: parents and children; loves and marriages; the inevitable approach of aging, and of death. Her work isn't "confessional" in the usual sense, since these entanglements are universal, and are treated as such. Though the poems record moments of happiness, as well as misery and ordinary apprehension, they are always aware that "There's no way to change / without touching / the space at the center of everything." Bloch's style brings together a wide range of poetic resources. There is tough Jewish humor: "Your mother wanted me dead or alive" or "Glue Factory Road, all rocks and hard places." But this worldly wisdom does not prevent the poems from being heartbreakingly compassionate:

*Eighty years  
to complete the course from  
"I can button this all by myself"  
to "I can still button."*

Often, the sudden flash of an illuminating image brings some deeper insight to the surface, as in "Twenty-Fourth Anniversary":

*We're like the neoclassical façade  
on a post office. Every small town  
has such a building.  
Pillars forget they used to be  
tree trunks, their sap congealed  
into staying put.*

Rooted in the body (notably in an extraordinary erotic poem like "Beaux Arts"), and skeptical of easy spiritual promises, the poetry finds its affirmation in a willingness to stick with whatever arrives, somewhat akin to what Buddhists call "mindfulness." As the last poem in the book puts it,

*And what does the heart hold in that tight little fist?  
The string of its one life on earth,  
taking the tug of it, letting it fly,  
not letting it fly away.*

(One of the great pleasures of Bloch's poetry is that it says wise things with a poignant personal intonation that avoids sententiousness.)

Bloch is a distinguished translator of recent Israeli poetry, so it's not surprising that the shadow of the Holocaust can often be detected behind her sense of the insecurities of life. A painter does her versions of Auschwitz in a mixture of "flour and ash" (what sustains life, what life becomes in the end). Using such a fragile medium, Bloch suggests, she wants to leave herself the option "to brush against it / and wipe it out," and with it, perhaps, the knowledge it records. Yet Bloch's most memorable poems on this theme have to do with what sustained the Holocaust survivors she has actually known: the man who attributes his ability to risk sneaking away from a "death march" in 1945 to the fact that "I was loved... when I was a child." The poem ends, with a perhaps unnecessary overemphasis, "I tell his story every chance I get." But the choice to tell that story rather than others perhaps resonates with Bloch's ability, in her other life as an activist, not to let the traumas of the past cloud a clear-eyed view of the Israel/Palestine situation.

The idea that suffering can be good for us, teaching life-lessons that cannot be learned in any other way, is more commonly a Christian than a Jewish theme. But Bloch has engaged with that religious tradition as well; her first published book was a study of George Herbert. On this subject, I'm particularly fond of a poem on "The Little Ice Age" that afflicted Europe in the late Renaissance. The poem concludes:

*That's why the Stradivarius cries so convincingly,*

*It's the wood remembering,*

*the stunned wood shuddering,*

*too numb to grow,*

*the tree rings huddled close against the cold.*

Chana Bloch's poetry has always been strong, but, like Stradivarius's wood, it has gotten stronger the harder the material life has thrown in her path. *Mrs. Dumpty* (1998), chronicling the dissolution of a marriage in the wake of her long-time husband and collaborator's recurrent manic-depression, brought a new urgency to her work. In the most recent poems, as Henri Cole writes, "Death is the Great Master hovering in the distance." ("Inside Out" hints at a cancer diagnosis.) In the face of all this, one can only wish Chana Bloch long life, to continuing chronicling whatever she faces with such fearlessness and eloquence.

**Alan Williamson** is Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the University of California at Davis. His most recent books are *The Pattern More Complicated: New and Selected Poems* (University of Chicago Press) and *Westernness: A Meditation* (University Press of Virginia).