



Late Love

BLOOD HONEY

by Chana Bloch

Autumn House Press, 2009

Review by Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi

Everything we expect from the poet who tells our lives is here — and so much more. Documenting the decades, each of [Chana Bloch's](#) four volumes of poetry seems dedicated to another passage — the death of parents, the struggle with children, the breakdown of a spouse, and then of a marriage, and now, in our "Sixth Age" (if we should live so long and be so lucky) the grace and comedy of late love: "We were sitting on my sofa with his dead wife. / ... I was tired of the future already, and we hadn't / started yet. We hadn't even started." But wait! "Sex is a brisk new broom. Tough, efficient. / It knows all the corners. // And that's how, one autumn evening, we began / dropping this-and-that onto the drafty floor / — history with its pockets, ticket-stubs, torn seams, / husbands and wives ... Then that implacable broom swept us bare" ("The Naked Future").

Among the ticket stubs that get picked up and put back into deep pockets are — I hasten to add — old friends like me. In one form or another, Chana Bloch's voice has accompanied me along some of the major twists in my own road. But my impetus for writing comes not from my personal affection for the poet but from the poetic nature of our connection and the convergence of our two journeys at major crossroads on a trilingual Jewish map.

I met Chana Faerstein in Jerusalem in the 1960s. Although the language we were mastering was Hebrew and although Chana was to become an American poet, we met around a *tisch* at the home of the magnetic Yiddish writer, Leib Rochman. The walls of his house were covered with charcoal drawings of concentration camp figures by his adolescent daughter, who was to become the Hebrew poet and artist Rivka Miriam. But Leib's voice was warm and inviting, the atmosphere was joyous, and his eclectic community of American students searching for whatever-we-were-searching-for were inducted into the mysteries of Yiddish poetry and melodies that would haunt us for the rest of our lives.

Years passed and I lost track of Chana. Then one rainy day in the fall of 1989, while browsing through the library at Yaddo, where I had been granted a month's leave from my life, I came across a book of translations of Dahlia Ravikovitch's poems by someone named Chana Bloch. On a whim, I contacted the translator and asked if perchance she was aka Chana Faerstein. From that time on we have stayed in each other's sights, sharing a passion for Ravikovitch, for Yehuda Amichai, whom she translated with

Stephen Mitchell and with Chana Kronfeld, and for the *Song of Songs*, which she and Ariel Bloch translated, annotated, and interpreted for contemporary readers. And all along, there was Chana Bloch's own voice, appearing in poems scattered throughout poetry journals and collected in *The Secrets of the Tribe* (1981), *The Past Keeps Changing* (1992), and *Mrs. Dumpty* (1998). And now she has given us *Blood Honey*.

The poems in these volumes are informed by an economy of texts and emotions. Like recombinant DNA, new couplings send jolts of surprise and recognition that bind languages, continents, generations. In "Watching," an early poem from *The Secrets of the Tribe*, the poet addresses her dying father:

You and I used to talk about
Lear and his girls
(I read it in school,

you saw it on the Yiddish stage
where the audience yelled:
Don't believe them,

they're rotten) —
that Jewish father and his
suburban daughters.

Now I'm here with the rest,
smelling the silences,
watching you

disappear....

Which of Lear's daughters is speaking these lines? After so many years of asking ourselves which daughter we would be, when we encounter the question on the interactive Yiddish stage or in hospital room echoes, it doesn't seem to matter anymore.

Watching one's father disappear hardly prepares us for our own disappearance or that of our peers, who are beginning to dissolve before our eyes, part by part — the "half-moon smile in a glass of water," the "hearing aid" down in "the ashtray" ("Salvage").

And even if "death passed over us this time," even if, after a dear friend's sentence of "*brain tumor, malignant*," "we're still at large," we know that "if he's guilty / we must be guilty." These lines come from "Blood Honey," which gives the book its title. [The poem](#) is dedicated to the memory of Amichai Kronfeld, whose life is encapsulated in five prosaic words at the end of the volume: "philosopher, jazz musician, peace activist." In the poem he is still and always alive, if barely, "scooping sweetness from the belly of death / — honey from the lion's carcass," holding on, like Samson after his haircut, to small memories and appetites: "He can still taste and see. / *The world is good.*" "He drums out a jazz beat on the bedrail / with his one good hand / when the words stumble. / *See?* he says. *I can trick the tumor.*"

Those stumbling words leave tracks throughout this volume, as the honey leaves its stickiness everywhere. In the battle between words and music, between language and color, between poetry and art, language seems always to lose. In "Wild Honey" the infant moves inexorably from color to language, his progress into *homo sapiens* a cosmic diminishment:

A puddle of sun on the wooden floor.
The infant crawls to it, licks it,
dips a hand in and out,
letting the wild honey
trickle through his fingers.

Then that voice from on high —
Look at the pretty color! —
wipes up the glory with a rag of language.

Yet at "sixty o'clock," when aging reverses the process, dropping words "like cups and saucers / from soapy hands," the "rag of language" is sorely missed. Like searching for one's glasses, "how will I see my way to anywhere/ without my words? ... There must be words left / to go on searching for the ones I've lost."

Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi is professor of Comparative Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She is author of Booking Passage and won a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2007 for her project on "Jerusalem and the Poetics of Return."

Still, words are "the poor man's colors" and the fickle mind that forgets words appreciates even more those dark colors as life gets pared down to its elemental shades and shapes:

Flash after flash across the horizon:
tourists trying to take the canyon
by night. They don't know
every last shot will turn out black.

It takes sixty years for Rothko
to make his way to the rim.
He goes there only after dark.
As he stands at the railing, his pupils open
like a camera shutter at the slowest speed.

He has to be patient. He has to lean
far over the railing to see
the colors of darkness.
Purple, numb brown, mud-red, mauve
— a treasury of bruises.
At first he can see only black-on-black.
"Something you don't want to look at," he says.

As he waits,
the waves of color vibrate in the canyon
like voices.

*Pilgrim, bring back something
from the brink
of nothing*

to make us see.

("The Grand Canyon")

Who has won? Rothko, clearly. The "colors of darkness" he has simulated paper over the failure of our cameras and our words. And yet. Who is the pilgrim who brings back "something" from the "brink of nothing"? Who indeed has helped us *into words* out of the speechless wonder we all feel in the presence of a Rothko square of color? "There's no way to change / without touching / the space at the center of everything," Bloch wrote in *The Past Keeps Changing*. Those lines seem as necessary to our own self-understanding, to our own speechless space at the center, as "nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" became after we first stumbled upon it in graduate school. Stevens, Rothko, and our knowing entrails come together through the alchemy of Bloch's self-effacing and self-illuminating words.

BLOOD HONEY

Apprehended and held without trial,
our friend was sentenced:
brain tumor, malignant.
Condemned each day to wake
and remember.

Overnight, a wall sprang up around him,
leaving the rest of us
outside.

Death passed over us this time.
We're still at large. We're free
to get out of bed, start the coffee,
open the blinds.
The first of the human freedoms.

If he's guilty
we must be guilty; we're all made of
the same cup of dust —

It's a blessing, isn't it? To be able,
days at a time,
to forget what we are.

These numbered days
have a concentrated sweetness
that's pressed from us,
the dying man most of all.

Today we eat brunch at Chester's,
poached egg on toast,
orange juice foaming in frosted glasses.

He remembers the summer he packed blood oranges,
stripped to the waist,
drinking the fresh-squeezed juice in the factory
straight from the tap.
He cups his left hand under his chin
as if to a faucet, laughing.

He is scooping sweetness from the belly of death
— honey from the lion's carcass.

We sit with our friend
and brood on the riddle he sets before us:
What is it, this blood honey?

*
A shadow is eating the sun.
It can blind you
but he's looking right at it,
he won't turn away.

Already his gaze is marked
by such hard looking,
though just now he asked,
plaintive as a child,
Why won't it go away?

Day after day breaks
and gives him
back to us
broken.

Soon the husk of his knowing
won't know even that.

*
A man lies alone in his body in a world
he can still desire.
Another slice of pie? he asks.

As long as he's hungry
he's still one of us.
Oh Lord, not yet.

He drums out a jazz beat on the bedrail
with his one good hand
when the words stumble.
See? he says. *I can trick the tumor.*

He can still taste and see.
The world is good.

He hauls himself up in bed,
squinting his one good eye at the kingdom
through a keyhole
that keeps getting smaller
and smaller.
It is good. It is very good.

in memory of Amichai Kronfeld

— Chana Bloch

Visit Chana Bloch's web site at <http://chanabloch.com/>