

The Poetry of a Jewish Humanist

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

by Chana Bloch
Autumn House Press, 2015

REVIEW BY PHILIP TERMAN

A CHILD OF IMMIGRANT parents who was raised in an observant Jewish household, poet Chana Bloch has absorbed the details of her ethnic and linguistic heritage; this includes what she has called “the habit of questioning,” which is “not only sanctioned by Jewish tradition, it’s an honored part of it.” As a poet, biblical scholar, and translator of ancient and modern Hebrew poetry, she has followed her teacher Robert Lowell’s advice to “learn to write from [her] own translations.”

Swimming in the Rain: New and Selected Poems demonstrates that Bloch has converted that important lesson into a unique poetic voice that modulates from the homespun to the literary and shifts from wit and humor to a pull-no-punches toughness. Spare and musical, intimate while open to history, intelligent and emotionally rich in the details of divisions and connections, Bloch’s poetry negotiates the complexities of her identity as a first-generation Jew, a woman, a child, a parent, a wife, a lover, and a citizen.

A self-proclaimed “Jewish humanist,” Bloch quarrels with tradition by asking why God has to make divisions. Some of the divisions she writes about include those between husband and wife, parents and children, illness and health, historical memory and momentary joy, and the contradictions within Judaism itself. Bloch critiques these divisions and, when she finds them, offers alternatives that are more inclusive and more humanistic. The advantage of a career-spanning

collection is that it shows how these themes echo and expand consistently within her work. In “Furniture,” from her first collection, *The Secrets of the Tribe* (1980), the speaker’s mother claims that “God will punish” her if she writes on Shabbos. The speaker responds: “When I wrote, I pulled down the shade.” A later poem, “The Dark of Day,” from *Blood Honey* (2009), is more explicit:

The rabbis taught us the mathematics
of dividing
this from that. They certified
the micro-moment when day tips over
into night: *When the third star presents
itself in the sky.*
They drew a line through that eye of
light, a longitude.
You’ve got to navigate the evening
blessing
with precision, not one star too soon.

Bloch immediately follows with the alternative perspective — that nature can’t be so evenly divided: “But night comes on slowly. / It takes all day.” The poem then takes a dramatic turn, shifting to the poet’s friend’s father, who was “killed / in a car crash”; though her friend “hadn’t seen him in years,” she nevertheless “tore out a stain” of blood she had found on his “open notebook . . . and took it into her mouth.” Bloch’s initial critique of rabbinic law opens to a devastating insight into the maze of emotions that we cannot navigate “with precision.” This powerful critique becomes self-referential in the title poem, “Swimming in the Rain,” in which the speaker, instead of “pulling down the shade,” can unabashedly declare: “Thank God / I’ve got the good sense at last // not to come in out of the rain,” as it “falls . . . onto the face of the deep as it did / on the first day // before the dividing began.” The poet is wise enough to know that “Half

the stories / [she] used to believe are false.” Though the connection — where the rain falls into the ocean — is momentary, Bloch’s wry phrasing expresses a hard-earned maturation of her singular and self-assured voice.

Though Bloch no longer lives in the religiously observant world embodied by her parents and ancestry, she captures it with affection and poignancy. “Exile” (from *Secrets of the Tribe*) and “Hester Street, 1898,” (a new poem from *Swimming in the Rain*), convey an innocence lost. In the older piece, it’s “the ten lost tribes,” who, she claims, by becoming modern Jews, have lost their chosen-ness. In the new poem, the loss is of a different kind: the immigrant’s hopeful dream of the future, which “they believed . . . they taught diligently / onto their children, / who taught it to me.” The speaker reflects to her sons that she “can’t give [them] that.” Loss of chosen-ness, loss of immigrant hope: Bloch skillfully preserves the vitality of that world and its inhabitants, tenderly capturing them in all their complexities and contradictions. In “The Converts,” the poet’s irony is in full force as she observes the converted Jews’ obsessive devotion at a Yom Kippur service, while the “normal” Jews dream of escaping: “If they go on loving that way, we’ll be here all night.” The poet asks: “did they think / we were happier?” Bloch is wise enough to know that Jews don’t have “the lost words / to open God’s mouth” any more than anyone else does, and she’s smart in the tartness of voice that says so.

On the subject of happiness, Bloch has much to say, perhaps because, given the realistic territory within which her poetry operates, “happiness” isn’t quite so simple as it seems. Particularly admirable is her voice — honest and intimate in its formal familiarity. In “Primer,” Bloch questions, with her

typically tragicomic wit, the nostalgia of the “happy childhood,” asking “If we were so happy, / why weren’t we happy?” When Bloch revisits the subject of happiness as reflected in her parents’ long marriage, she presents the subtleties and complexities by contrasting the “noisy bedsprings” with the “clashing-and-carping, nagging-and-clamoring.” In this poem, set “in the cancer ward,” she brings us inside her parents’ marriage with an irresistible joke:

Out in the corridor she outdid his story:
 “Daddy wanted to make love.
 I told him. But honey, your back!”
 You know what your father answered?
There’s nothing wrong with my front.”

The joke resonates in the last stanza, as the speaker watches her mother shave her father “in the hospital bed . . . stroking his cheek with the razor.” Here Bloch conveys the mishmash — arguments and jokes, delicacy and confusion — that makes up a marriage.

In Bloch’s fourth collection, *Blood Honey*, some of the strongest poems articulate the tension between the old and new world. As in all her work, she writes against sentimentality and nostalgia, depicting a world in which her uncle “killed a man and was proud of it.” Here, she provides a succinct, pungent description of the old country:

That’s the old country for you:
 they ate with their hands, went hungry
 to bed,
 slept in their stink. When pain
 knocked,
 they opened the door.

“The past keeps changing” becomes a central theme throughout Bloch’s oeuvre, as we follow the permutations of how the speaker attends to that past. Like an unknown friend, we learn the multifaceted details about Bloch’s first marriage and painful divorce, her happy second marriage, the birth and development of her children, and her responses to, among

other concerns, art, the environment, the Holocaust, friendships, love and sexuality, history, illness, and aging. Bloch’s *Swimming in the Rain: New and Selected Poems* is an epic compendium of one Jewish American woman’s poetic journey that reaches back to the Bible and into the present moment. It offers a deep appreciation of the present as an antidote to the divisions that often accost us, as a joy within our reach, as suggested in the poem, “Happiness Research”:

“Even in the slums of Calcutta
 people on the street describe
 themselves
 as reasonably happy.” Why not
 be reasonable? why not in Berkeley?
 why not
 right now, sweetheart, while the rain
 is stroking the roof?

In Bloch’s poems we hear echoes of Yehuda Amichai’s brilliant use of metaphor and Dahlia Ravikovitch’s mixture of the personal and political. We also hear echoes of Emily Dickinson’s clean, spare intensity, Elizabeth Bishop’s formalized wit, and Sylvia Plath’s controlled music. Though not a formalist, Bloch writes poetry that is formally shaped, offering a balance of story and song, keeping to language and truth in the way she describes her poet friend Mark O’Brien, who was paralyzed with polio and required an iron lung. As Bloch observes, O’Brien composed his poems:

. . . letter by letter
 on a propped keyboard, the
 mouth-stick
 wobbling between his teeth.
 That kind of speed keeps a poet
 accountable.
 He won’t ever say “The grass is very
 green”
 when it’s only green.

Likewise, Bloch’s poems are consistent in their concision, not often wavering from four to six self-contained stanzas of shortish lines. Much of the pleasure of reading her is coming across the

swimming in the rain

NEW AND SELECTED POEMS



CHANA BLOCH

epigrammatic lines that often surprise us, epiphany-like, at the poem’s end. “The Converts” provides a good example: “and I covet / what they think we’ve got.” In “Brothers,” the speaker reads a story to her two young children about the legendary witch, Baba Yaga, scaring them silly and chasing them around the house, threatening to eat them. Instead of the playful frenzy she expects, one of the boys cries in a “stricken voice” to her to “Eat him! / Eat my brother.”

Though Bloch is consistent in her use of form, there are variations and expansions in both theme and style from book to book; the poems in the new section offer new formal arrangements (“The Revised Version” and “Dispatches From the Tourist Bureau”) and a wider reach of subjects, especially those involving history (“The Hall of Human Origins,” “Hester Street, 1898,” “Summer in the City, 1947,” and “July in the Bronx, 1971”). Alongside her contemporaries Alicia Ostriker and Marge Piercy, Chana Bloch continues to provide a forceful

poetic critique of traditional Jewish identity and the limitations of divisions in a tone that registers the full range of experience. Ambitious in scope, wide-ranging in subject, and attentive to the fault lines of history and the human heart, *Swimming in the Rain* is an essential contribution to American poetry. ■

PHILIP TERMAN's recent book is *Our Portion: New and Selected Poems*. His poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Georgia Review*, and *The Sun Magazine*. He teaches at Clarion University and is codirector of the Chautauqua Writers Festival.

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Babel

They used to conspire in a brother tongue
no one else could parse.
They were its sole native speakers,
these sons of mine
who grew up talking their way to the table.

They come back as men to the keep
of my kitchen, the habit of food and talk,
leaving their rented rooms
half a life away.

Who are these children-in-disguise
with their beards and glasses,
smoking and joking, each in his own tongue,
about who knows what?

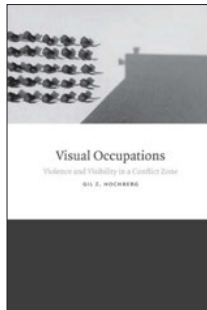
Don't get twin beds, I begged my mother, afraid
of the slightest space
between him and her—a nightstand
with its drawers and knobs,
foursquare and stolid as a gravestone,
the two of them
buried on either side.

These sons at my table: the slightest silence
and I rush to translate.
Let them speak one language again
the way they used to.
This is still my house.
When I die, they'll divide it.

—Chana Bloch

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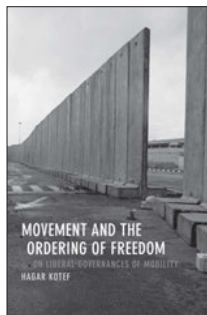
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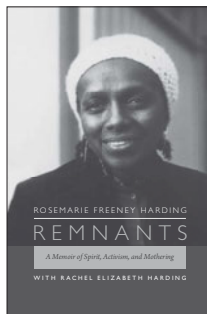
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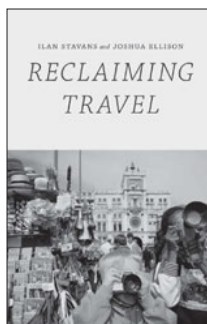
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