

How Long Does It Take?

“How long, on average, does it take to write a poem?” a friend of my parents asked when I was in college, just beginning to write. *On average?* No point in trying to answer a question like that. Looking back after more than fifty years of immersion in poetry—as a writer, translator, scholar, and teacher—I realize it’s even more complicated than I thought at the time.

A poem may start from something arresting one has seen, felt, heard, read. In my case, the initial impetus is often buried in a notebook, where it germinates for a while. Once I commit it to paper, the revisions begin, the slow (Marvell’s adjective is “vegetable”) process of growing the poem by paring it down to essentials. Then I turn to family and friends for their sobering criticism. My idea of a good time is an afternoon spent with a poet-friend reading each other’s new work, blue pencil in hand. “Finishing” a poem can take years. I keep dated drafts in a file folder to teach myself patience.

The four poems of those I submitted for the Meringoff Literary Awards that were selected by *Literary Imagination* for publication in Volume 15, Issue 1 entered the world in much this way, though “Siege” had an unusually quick finish. More than once, I had contemplated the colors of the lab specimens that reveal the state of our health—the deep crimson

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of blood in a test tube, the bright gold of a urine sample. Waiting anxiously for test results, I found it oddly consoling to think of these as royal colors, a conceit that got the poem going. I wasn’t at all sure I had the right ending, however, till I found myself in the hospital on the eve of major surgery. Most poems are not subject to so stringent a test.

“Death March, 1945” recounts a conversation I had with the survivor of a concentration camp. His unforgettable response to a question of mine has shaped my understanding of courage, endurance, and the lasting effects of childhood experience. I’ve been moved to retell his story to many friends, one of whom challenged me to make a poem of it. The subject—the ultimate disruption of order that we know as the Shoah—demanded a tight-fitting container, and I chose the sonnet form because of its firm boundaries.

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The two poems about human origins began in the quiet of museums, where the shock of the unexpected can register with particular force. “The Hall of Human Origins” is named for a wing of the American Museum of Natural History, where I happened upon a diorama of two hominids leaving the site of a disaster, walking side-by-side, the male with his arm around the female’s shoulder. That tableau was based on an archaeological find, evidence of the bipedalism of early humans: two parallel trails of fossilized footprints in Laetoli, Africa, preserved in volcanic ash for 3.6 million years and excavated in 1978. The sex of the figures, their posture, the tender gesture, were all conjectures of the artist, a creator with a revised version of Adam and Eve, a commentary on the loss of paradise.

The fourth poem, “The Origin of the World,” is a radically different take on origins. I had seen a postcard reproduction of Courbet’s provocative *L’Origine du monde*, but it was quite another thing to encounter his close-up of a female nude—in the flesh, as it were—at the Musée d’Orsay in Paris, and to discover how much can be conveyed by a single brushstroke.

These poems are from “Cleopatra’s Nose,” the manuscript of my fifth collection of poetry. The title poem starts with an epigraph from Pascal: “Le nez de Cléopâtre, s’il eut été plus court, toute la face de ta terre aurait changé.” (If Cleopatra’s nose had been shorter, the whole history of the world would have been different.) In this



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collection, drawing upon personal history, biblical history, European history, and human history, I write about the death of Socrates, the Little Ice Age, Rembrandt, Beethoven, the immigrant era that brought my parents to this country, and tourism at Auschwitz. And reflecting on the binary oppositions set forth with such majesty in the first chapter of Genesis, I think back to a time “before the dividing began.”

Of the various forms my immersion in poetry takes, translation has been the most steadily important to me. Years ago Robert Lowell told me in a poetry workshop, “You can teach yourself to write from your own translations.” It was some of the soundest advice about writing I have ever heard. The practice of translation sharpens one’s ability to choose between possible phrasings, an essential skill for a writer.

During the many years I spent translating Yehuda Amichai’s work, I studied his use of irony and allusion, and a seeming simplicity that reaches deep. Another singing master was George Herbert. Writing a critical study of his work, *Spelling the Word: Herbert and the Bible* (University of California Press, 1985), I learned from Herbert’s unsparing scrutiny of his inner life, and from the way he makes the biblical sources speak with his own voice. Finally, I had the good fortune to have been a teacher for half my life, which in the first instance always means teaching oneself. The deepest immersion comes when I am alone with a poem. As in any serious relationship, the poem and I get to know each other well and try to meet each other’s needs. How long does it take? As long as it has to. Some poems take a lifetime.

To read Ms. Bloch’s poetry, click the titles of the poems that appear in this article. They are embedded with hyperlinks to take you to the *Literary Imagination* site. For additional information about Ms. Bloch, visit <http://www.chanabloch.com/>