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The Poetry of Delight: Lessons from Chana Bloch

Judy Halebsky

The first thing I learned about poetry from Chana was delight—delight in the world around us, pain and all. I studied with Chana at Mills College in Oakland, California, from 1996 to 1998, in the Master of Fine Arts in English and Creative Writing Program. For a period, our workshops met at her house in the East Bay hills; I remember her living room with ornate red decorations and dark floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. We would sit in a circle as we read and discussed poems. However, the real focus of our class was on Chana's stories, anecdotes, and words of guidance. Once, when we were puzzling through the contradictory ending of poem, she explained, "It's not a real emotion unless you feel two conflicting things at the same time." This is one of Chana's teachings that has stayed with me most powerfully, because it applies equally to life and poetry. It speaks to how we bumble along messy paths. For the poem, it reflects the complexity that we are trying to articulate. From Chana, I learned that poetry can be both a guide and a diviner, that through poetry we can live more vivid and more present lives.

Chana taught us to write from the experience of the body—sex, food, the natural world, and emotions physically present in the body. The poem, she explained, is a vehicle that expresses not rational thought but lived experience. Images, sensory details, sonic elements are central to poetry because they elucidate the body's emotional life. One assignment for Chana's class was to choose ten favorite poems by published poets and write them out by hand in a notebook. This exercise was a way of bringing the poem into the body; thus, through our writing out the poems, she was teaching us to go from being a reader of poetry to being a transmitter of poetry, someone who could carry a poem, live with it, and later share it with others. From this, I learned to always bring a notebook and to read a poem over and over again until I could carry it within me.

Chana's poem "Afterlife" gives voice to a body-based interior world.[1] Here, emotional experience is not just voiced through the body, rather it is through the body that we experience emotions. The poem begins with an image of renewal, of pine trees "righting themselves" after a strong gust of wind; the poem proceeds from that image to the speaker's description of returning to herself after some kind of darkness or a death-like depression. The second stanza reads thus:

> To have died and come back again
> raw, crackling,
> and the numbness
> stunned.

These tactile descriptive words—raw, crackling—are no longer the trees of the first stanza but the body returning to awareness, to vitality. The cloak of numbness is stunned and stopped. The poem continues with a direct consideration of the emotional life of the body:

> That clumsy
> pushing and wheeling inside my chest, that ferocious
> upturn—
> I give myself to it. Why else
> be in a body?

Here the poem talks of an emotional storm and a return to the life of the living. The statement "I give myself to it" raises the possibility that this "ferocious" and very physical force of returning to full feeling is one that the speaker could turn away from and deny. She, however, chooses otherwise. Indeed, for Chana, poetry was the means to be most fully present in one's life, to not shy away or hide from all of it—pain, joy, tragedy, love. "Why else," asks the poem, "be in a body?"

The poem ends by reinforcing the idea that though we may emotionally shut ourselves off from the world, we can return to our emotional lives, our awareness of our physical beings in friendship, love, heartbreak,

sex, music, food, the landscape, the woods, the trees, the wind. The last stanza offers this metaphor:

> Something reaches inside me, finds the pocket
> that sewed itself shut, turns it
> precipitously
> out into the air.

At the poem's end, "something" in the speaker reaches deep inside her to let go of internal darkness, opening herself "precipitously" to the air, and to the world, with all its risks and uncertainties.

Chana taught us her practice of writing from the experience held in our bodies, which, at times, voices unbridled joy but is just as open to revealing pain. She encouraged us to search for the emotional chasm, the fault line of things we avoid and do not speak. The poem "Tell Me" is an example of this approach to writing.[2] The speaker in the poem asks an unnamed "you" to hear a family story of conflict and violence. The first stanza recounts the moment the "you," as a teenager, stands up to his drunk and violent father. After this altercation, father and son do not make amends or speak of the incident; instead, they return to their regular routine. The third stanza reads: "The words that slept in the house / were homeless and hungry. / You had all learned to step around them." Here the poem describes an angry conflict that was not verbalized or discussed. There is a shared knowledge of the events, but words about these events are never spoken, and those unspoken words become "homeless and hungry," hauntingly present. The family members need to step around them as one might step around a chair or suitcase. The unspoken words of this story assert a physical power and an enduring need to be expressed.

In the last stanza of "Tell Me," the speaker asks to hear the story again: "It's a story from hell / but I like it. Lie down with me, love, / and tell it from the beginning." The role of the poem is to give voice to these secrets, the things we try to bury that keep calling to us. The speaker compelling her lover to tell the story again is the poem as an art form and

practice insisting the story must be told and retold. The poem evokes sensory and emotional details that resonate with lived experience. Even raw and ugly, this resonance nourishes us emotionally and voices our human contradictions and blemishes. The work of the poem is to tell the body's lived experience—unvarnished, unadorned, and even scarred.

Once, in the last days of the semester, Chana told us that she wasn't keeping up with her piles of grading and other commitments. She was supposed to be fully engaged in her scholarly and professional work, but she kept getting ideas for poems, as if they were tapping on her window. She had to write instead of attending to these other more pedestrian tasks. Her lesson here was that the poem will not wait for later. The energy and idea for a poem, the words in one's mind, need to be written down as they arise. Another time, she came to class saying that she had been so inspired by our previous meeting that she had driven home from campus with a notebook on her lap, writing at stoplights and eventually pulling over to the side of the road. I remember clearly that Chana was delighted with this story. She savored it. She was thrilled that the poem, inspired by our poetry session, had found her.

Chana taught directly through the close readings of poems, but just as importantly, she taught indirectly through example and through stories. While her stories were instructive, she presented them to us as funny, quirky anecdotes with a fair amount of self-deprecation. One thing that came through in her stories is that the writing process is fragile. The poem itself is hardy with the lifeblood of interconnected roots of aspen trees or some microbiome that is in and all around us. However, the process of moving that poem from our lived experience to words on the page is fragile. If we fumble, it can slip through our hands. If we are inattentive and drop it, we may never get that specific poem back again. From Chana, I learned how looking for and being receptive to the poem when the poem calls may shape our attention and our days. This is where and how we move from writing poems as an activity to poetry as a way of being in the world.

On October 8, 2017, I attended Chana's memorial in the Mills College concert hall, where her two sons, Benjamin and Jonathan, in different ways embodied Chana's teachings. They spoke toward the end

of a beautiful memorial, during which we watched recordings of Chana reading, heard her poems, and shared our memories of her as a poet, teacher, sister, swimming-group member, translator, and beloved friend. Jonathan Bloch showed his pain throughout the service, sometimes holding his head in his hands. As he took the podium, he spoke through tears of all the platitudes around death that are well meaning but profoundly false. He talked about how we cannot hide from or evade the reality of death; he carried me into a place of mourning and of being open to pain. I realize now that he was carrying forward Chana's work as a poet. He was telling us again through his own actions: be here, be present, in this sorrow. He spoke with a care and elegance that I had seen so many times in Chana as she peppered her readings with illuminating commentary.

The memorial concluded with Benjamin and Jonathan performing Van Morrison's song "And It Stoned Me," the song they were singing while Chana left this world. The lyrics of the song tell a story of two kids who, while hitchhiking to a fishing hole, get caught in the rain. "Oh the water, hope it don't rain all day," sing the boys, expressing their worry that their fun will be ruined. They get soaking wet, but the sun comes out, they dry off and get a lift to a fishing spot. Thrilled with the water, they ignore their fishing gear and jump in for a swim. Later in the song, the lyric of hoping the rain stops changes to a lyric celebrating the rain: "Oh the water, let it run all over me." The song stresses the joy of sensation, full-body immersion in rain, in sun, and in sweet lake swimming. I would have thought that the closing note of Chana's memorial would have been a prayer or a poem. But if she were there, she might have pointed out that there are aspects of both in this song. More importantly, there's delight, a wild embrace of simply being alive, in a body swimming in the rain.

NOTES

1. Bloch, "Afterlife," first published as a discrete poem in *Poetry* and later incorporated into "In the Land of the Body" in *Swimming in the Rain*, 98–103.
2. Bloch, "Tell Me," in *Blood Honey*, 54.

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CONTRIBUTOR

Judy Halebsky is the author of *Tree Line* (New Issues Poetry & Prose, 2014) and *Sky=Empty* (New Issues Poetry & Prose, 2010), which won the New Issues Poetry Prize. Her chapbook *Space/Gap/Interval/Distance* (Sixteen Rivers Press, 2012) won the Poets-Under-Forty award from Sixteen Rivers Press. She holds a PhD in performance studies from the University of California, Davis and an MFA in English and creative writing from Mills College. Her honors include fellowships from the MacDowell Colony, the Millay Colony, and the Vermont Studio Center, as well as a Graves Award for Outstanding Teaching in the Humanities. She is an associate professor of English at Dominican University of California.

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