

A Little Light: Mary Jo Bang And the State of the Elegy

By Hadara Bar-Nadav

Book Review:

Elegy, by Mary Jo Bang. Graywolf Press, 2007.

“There’s nothing left but hope,” concludes Dean Young in his poem “Commencement Address.” In the last few years, it often has seemed that little else is left but hope. Consider the “War on Terror” into which soldiers, civilians, students, and neighbors keep disappearing; the Virginia Tech shooting; and the genocide in Darfur, not to mention the strangest weather: tsunamis, mudslides, earthquakes in China, the floodgate of New Orleans. Some strange weather. It is also the year my father died and the year my mother was diagnosed with cancer. Surgery after surgery, piece by piece, she is disappearing.

The question is: what thing is left for us, *who are left*, survivors of war, of weather, of family?

This question brings me to Mary Jo Bang and the state of the elegy. Contemporary scholars and poets prefer expansive models of the elegy that account for the current state of fracture and doubt. Jahan Ramazani defines the elegy as a rethinking of “the vexed experience of grief in the modern world,” and continues, “we should turn to it expecting not so much solace as fractured speech, not so much answers as memorable puzzlings.” This notion of the elegy—as the process by which the poet grapples with grief *and* the language that conveys grief—also has been noted by Mark Doty. The “elegy needs to fumble its way toward what sense it can make,” says Doty, “and that meaning wrested out of struggle—with the stubborn refusal of death to mean—is the only kind worth making.”

In *Elegy*, awarded the 2007 National Book Critics Circle Award,

Mary Jo Bang commits an entire book of poetry to the uneasy task of articulating the elegy:

The role of elegy is
 To put a death mask on tragedy,
 A drape on the mirror.
 To bow to the cultural

Debate over the aesthetization of sorrow,
 Of loss, of the unbearable
 Afterimage of the once material.
 To look for an imagined

Consolidation of grief
 So we can all be finished
 Once and for all and genuinely shut up
 The cabinet of genuine particulars.

Instead there's the endless refrain
 One hears replayed repeatedly
 Through the just ajar door:
 Some terrible mistake has been made.

What is elegy but the attempt
 To rebreathe life
 Into what the gone one once was
 Before he grew to enormity.

Come on stage and be yourself,
 The elegist says to the dead. Show them
 Now—after the fact—
 What you were meant to be:

The performer of a live song.
 A shoe. Now bow.
 What is left but this:
 The compulsion to tell.

The transient distraction of ink on cloth
 One scrubbed and scrubbed
 But couldn't make less.
 Not then, not soon.

Each day, a new caption on the cartoon
 Ending that simply cannot be.
 One hears repeatedly, the role of elegy is.

from "The Role of Elegy"

Here, Bang acknowledges the canned, gestural contrivances of mourning and of the traditional elegy. She also points to the failure of the elegy—the kind she has inherited and the kind she creates—in containing grief, dispelling loss, and reanimating the dead. However, she resists a definitive answer of what the elegy is or should be. The abrupt syntax and punctuation at the poem's end suggest that the elegy is continuously redefined by those who write it and that readers should look to poetry as a manifestation, versus a definition, of the elegy. Moreover, the reverberation of silence, exhaustion, and/or frustration that lingers after the final, clipped phrase and the reverberation of loss are underscored by a shift from quatrain to tercet; readers expect the final stanza to contain a fourth line that never arrives. Bang highlights both the struggle to articulate loss and to create art in the throws of grief.

The examination of art as a vehicle to express loss is the subject of Bang's "Three Trees." This poem also was included in her previous book, *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon* (Grove, 2004), which featured ekphrastic poetry, or poetry about visual art. The inclusion of "Three Trees" in *Elegy* signals that the elegy is open-ended and flexible: a poem that was not an elegy becomes an elegy when it speaks to the precarious nature of life in which the "day is dragged here and there but still / cannot be saved." "Every step is a dangerous taking" in this poem's apocalyptic landscape, even though the animated character Jimmy Neutron tries to save the day. Read in the context of the other poems in *Elegy*, Jimmy Neutron

might represent Bang's deceased son; private grief becomes public spectacle with an absurd and cartoonish edge. By the poem's end, however, the apparent subject is art and art's potential for consolation. "O Art / Still Has Truth Take Refuge. Where? There. / There, there, says someone." Though the anonymity of "someone" might refer to a generic scene of generic phrases spoken at a funeral, it also highlights the glaring flatness and emptiness of language in times of sorrow. "Someone" also might indicate the poem itself, rising up in consolation, albeit limited. That "Three Trees" is a painting by Bang's son, to whom her book is dedicated, reifies the author's gesture to honor him and his art through poetry. Perhaps, then, the elegiac poem is nothing more than a distraction from grief, a hopeful way to cope with loss through writing even when writing is not enough.

In the poem "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus," Bang alludes to Pieter Breughel's painting with the same name; Bang's poem also calls to mind William Carlos Williams' poem with the same name and W.H. Auden's classic ekphrastic poem "Musée des Beaux Arts," written in response to Breughel's painting. In that way, Bang pays homage to a literary and visual art lineage (she also is a visual artist) and to a mythic lineage: the story of the inventor-artist Daedalus who witnesses the death of his son. While Bang's poetry parallels Daedalus' story, her poetry contains its own genuine particulars, those luminous details that honor the individual life lost.

Bang's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" is a meditation on a visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art by the speaker and her son. The speaker remarks on the tangible evidence of the objects around them: "paint on canvas. A marble carving. / How can I not reach where you are." In Bang's comparison of visual art to poetry, poetry is cast as more ephemeral, much to the speaker's disappointment. "That dolorous day should be forever / Embedded in amber. / In garnet. In amber. In opal." Even though visual art commonly is considered more tangible than a literary work, in neither medium can a representation of a person return that person to life.

Bang's *Elegy* however *is* tangible, has objectness and weight. It contains nearly 90 pages of poems that are relentless, even fearless in the pursuit of the elegy. But they are no less generous, no less benevolent for their sorrow. This world still needs the elegy, the acknowledgement of grief and of a life lived. In Bang's poetry, the puzzling, struggling, writing, and rewriting of the elegiac poem come to life. Even if the elegy merely distracts us from pain, it might offer momentary and necessary relief. It might offer the possibility for human connectedness. Though the poems in Bang's *Elegy* might at times seem unyielding, they also play with language, imagery, and form in surprising and delightful ways that readers have come to enjoy in her work.

And strangely, suddenly, there is a little light.