DEMETER'S SONG

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

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Since Mary Jo Bang's first book of poems, *Apology for Want*, appeared in 1997 as the winner of the prestigious Bakeless Prize, she has produced several books of startling and distinct powers: *The Downstream Extremity of the Isle of Swans* (2001), *Louise in Love* (2001), and *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon* (2004). Collectively, these volumes have established Bang as a master of the post-modern aphorism, of dream-songs and ekphrasis, and as synthesizing talent who came to poetry after years of working as a clinician and as a professional photographer. Bang's latest work, *Elegy* (2007), shows her faceted sensibility working in a new range—if under the unenviable duress of psychic necessity. She composed this collection following the death of her thirty-seven year old son, Michael Donner Van Hook, from an overdose of a prescribed medication.

A finalist for the National Book Critics' Circle Award, *Elegy* is a concert of Bang's proven strengths, heightened and combined in collision with heart-breaking circumstance. If tragedy often leaves us silent or mumbling received clichés, it is seldom met with the powerful threnody of *Elegy*, which reinvents modern conventions of lyric grief and "family elegy" to mourn the beloved with both tenderness and precision, maternal love and an unflinching fealty to "the facts"—or the textures of material reality.[1] In the sixty-four elegies that comprise the book, Bang queries the metaphysics of loss, the nature of causality, the transitive burden of memory, and the arbitrariness of clock-time in relation to subjective temporality. Critics and readers who have admired the rewarding glints of light in her melancholic vision, her alliterative whimsy, and the precision of her syntactic leaps will be primed to appreciate this newest work, as she stretches the conventions of elegy to render a most private loss.

Bang gave herself one calendar year in which to write of her son's death, not wanting to follow the path of other, well-known poets whose work has taken a seemingly permanent memorializing turn. In many respects, it is this same sense of propriety and artistic stricture that marks her uncanny ability in the lyric mode: how it is that these poems often evoke an atmosphere more formal than formalism's prearranged furniture. Indeed, Bang's spare, columnar poems have the uncanny space-age fluidity of classical architecture, which accords with *Elegy*'s postmodern renovation of a poetic

mode rooted in antiquity. Consider the first poem in the book, "A Sonata for Four Hands":

> Causes and consequences line up,
> Ready for the next dawn
> With its blight
>
> Of glass bulbs.
> In the welled nothingness of definitely,
> There is another
>
> Sad sobbing day. Someone has seen you
> And says you were fine
> Just hours before you weren't. (3)

These closely hewn tercets achieve a diamond-tipped clarity that other poets often try to recruit externally, through the imposition of prosodic exoskeletons. Bang's lines, however, appear both organic and immutable, grown directly from their intimate subject matter towards an unalterable completeness. This intuitive formalism foregrounds syntactic subtleties such as the verbal paradox in the third stanza between "has seen you" and "you weren't," which draws the reader into the bizarre epistemological hinge of being and non-being, and towards death's bewilderment of the imagination.

The poem begins by striking an immediate note against the aubade tradition: it does not look to the *light* of "the next dawn" but to a "*blight* / Of glass bulbs" that signals "another/ Sad sobbing day" (3). Bang's displacement of emotion onto material objects and her use of hybridized (half-abstract, half-concrete) images such as the "welled nothingness of definitely," also becomes a stylistic motif in *Elegy*, as this reader of Eliot and Berryman updates the former's objective correlative and the latter's confessional song into a third subjective mode which avoids both the extreme removal and the extreme imposition of the "I." Readers will recognize that this third zone is not unlike the parent of the adult child, forced to respect her son's autonomy, while yearning to protect him from worldly pain and injury. Indeed, the poet poignantly describes the child's death as a disavowal of parental love, as the ultimate disobedience.

> I say Come Back and you do
> Not do what I want.
> The train unrolls its track and sends its sound forward.
>
> The siren unrolls its sound and sends itself

Forward. The first day of the last goes forward
As the last summer you'll see.

The dirge is all wrong for the season. Death remains
Wedded to mystery. How
Does the heart stop? On what

Moment's turning?
Which tick? And why? Only where
is settled. Behind an address. … (3)

Philosophical questions and a child's cartoon-like vision blend into this remarkable voice, reminding us that the poem is a "sonata," or a musical composition of three or four parts, for "four hands." Two personae, the bereaved and the beloved, are playing here.

It is the ratifying mystery of the addressee's final hours that showcases Bang's uncanny brand of imaginative reconnaissance: her ability to send language into the shadowy realms of the elliptical, the incomplete, and the inertly absurd. This skill has long been evident to readers of the poet's earlier collections, particularly her ekphrastic volume *The Eye Like the Strange Balloon*, which takes inspiration from the works of a wide range of artists including Odilon Redon, Willem de Kooning, Dorothea Tanning, Sigmar Polke, and Michael Van Donner Hook himself. Schooled in finding words for the unspoken, for visual art that might seem to resist verbal meaning, Bang writes in *Elegy* of what the ancients termed "infans," but with a concern for the metaphysical that stubbornly resists the prurient cheap-shots of so-called "confessionalism."[2] When at last the "doom door" of the son's apartment opens, the narrator scours the scene with the "sight" of her eyes and "I," as the motherly self is called in to interpret—and extrapolate—a narrative from scant clues. A poet who has successfully given voice and verbal dimension to dozens of abstract paintings confronts the thin detail, the silent resistance of the objects in the room that will not yield their full story.

And my I sees.
Police seal peeled back. Everything
As you left it. On and over and under.

Why are you not where you belong?
A black hat on a hook says nothing.
Ashes mirror ashes

In a mirroring window. And now how
Do we resolve this predicament?

The body becomes the art

Of identity. A face
In a photograph. The bas relief
Around the morgue door.

You, singularly you. And gone
Invisible. (4)

The narrator, who describes herself in a later poem as having an inveterate "love of precision" asks: "And now how/ Do we resolve this predicament?" with the coolness of an investigator (72, 4). But this detachment echoes in the reader's mind with the clamor of the audibly repressed, or the not-yet-processed emotion that will emerge as the authentic shock, anguish, and "quartz-pitched bewailing" in the poems' sequence (36). Here in the book's first poem, however, readers encounter tragedy within its immediate mise en scène: we join the poem's speaker in confronting death's intractable narrative--when the richness of the human individual shrinks to the lifeless body, to a poor and impoverished version of the formerly vital "art/Of identity" (4).

In Melanie Klein's famous description of a grieving mother, "Mrs. A.," the psychoanalyst describes grief as a wave-like process of emotional extremes. In the course of normative mourning, Klein argues, the bereaved is forced to recall virtually every association hitherto made with the beloved, each memory and token object.[3] Klein reiterates Freud's belief that the bereaved hypercathects and consolidates each of these *memento mori* into his or her psyche, slowly reconstituting the "lost loved object" as an internalized—or introjected—part of the self.[4] Bang's *Elegy*, in recalling token objects and aspects of the beloved, and in speaking sensibly from the half-deranged world of grief, seems to both manifest and contest this classic psychological model. In poems such as "You Were You Are Elegy," the poet portrays grief as an inescapable cognitive loop that does not progress towards solace (84-85). Anaphora and short, clipped lines enliven an immovable present tense freighted with phantasmagoria. Here memories exist as blunt mantras, and grief compels their involuntary meditation.

Fragile like a child is fragile.
Destined not to be forever.
Destined to become other
To mother. Here I am
Sitting on a chair, thinking
About you. Thinking

About how it was
To talk to you.
.....
How drugs when drugs were
Undid the good almost entirely
But not entirely
.....
Life is experience.
It's all so simple. Experience is
The chair we sit on.
The sitting. The thinking
Of you where you are a blank
To be filled
In by missing.... (84)

In an early poem, "September Is," the poet states that "physical things hide in the architecture/ Of the event," a phrase that suggests catastrophe's greedy elision of its object, its assumption of memory's material handholds (19). Whereas in poems such as "Worse" and "No More," the poet-speaker describes a process of recollection similar to Klein's model, in which the speaker confronts the ghost of personal history.

Rumination is and won't stop
With the stoppered bottle, the pills
On the floor, the broken plate
On the floor, the sleeping face

In the bassinette of your birth month,
The dog bite, the difficulty,
The stairwell of a three-flat
Of your sixth year, the flood

Of farthering off this all takes you
As thought and object become
What you are. My stoppered mind.
A voice, carried by machine,

Across a lifeless body. Across
A lacerating lapse in time. (8-9)

Bang's catalogue of biographic fragments suggests that mourning does involve a process of intellection, a gathering up and introjection of concrete associations. With their staccato caesuras and foreshortened concluding sentences, the headlong pressure of these lines also intimates the vast force of maternal grief. Death has not only removed the beloved, but it has, on

some fundamental level, removed the speaker from her former self. In the poem "Once," the speaker notes that life has lost its autonomous feel, its psychic self-possession: "Once there was my life and it was a thing/ Filled with difficulty but it was mine./ Now *Now* is a terrible ongoing..." (27). In other references to her own metamorphosis, the poet-speaker states that she has become "a member/ Of the fiasco's survivor's club," that she has been changed from "the slip/ Of a girl without a clue to someone / Who knew [...]" (32). Without sounding a false note of Blakean 'higher innocence,' these poems versify the Ovidian change that death can induce—how it can displace the bereaved from the familiar rooms, the gestures and habits, the interior furniture of selfhood carefully chosen in the course of a lifetime.

Bang measures the micro-changes of Self and Other, post-disaster, with seemingly infinite brocade and a contemporary pulse. Thus *Elegy* represents a significant departure—or evolution—in modern elegiac conventions, which underwent such radical upheaval in the long post-war period of the last century.[5] The poet takes the elegiac mode into this twenty-first century in two primary ways. She does not wholly repudiate standard methods of consolation or voice biographic screeds against the dead. Instead, she engages cultural meta-narratives of death and mourning to reveal and ameliorate their fundamental inadequacies. In doing so, she constitutes a metaphoric milieu attuned to the world of the nanosecond, to the complexities of relational life, to the audio-visual montage of global communication, and to a secular culture in which the mystical logic of science has eclipsed the myths of Genesis and Resurrection.

"The Role of Elegy" is perhaps the poet's most ironic engagement of the psychoanalytic paradigm of mourning and the decorative conventions of elegy. In this poem, four-line stanzas edge towards her asymptotic object, towards the ceaseless dirge playing behind a "just ajar door."

> 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. (63)

Bang sensibly mixes the concrete and the metaphysical, giving physicality to such abstract concepts as "Consolidation of grief," and "aesthetization of sorrow." Displaced between the stanza-breaks, we hear the empty echo of "the cultural/ Debate" and see the inadequacy of the psychoanalyst's neat cabinet in which the bereaved is supposed to incorporate the "lost object" into a stable, post-Oedipal self. Instead, the door of the house (and of the stanza's room) is left open. Like the Freudian dream, in which a vulnerable house represents the body, the "just ajar door" of consciousness keeps the speaker fixated on an "endless refrain" and the "unbearable/Afterimage" in the undraped mirror.

Similarly, in "Tragedy," the speaker explains why the classical tragedians have little to offer a bereaved mother: all the rhetorical decorum and the queenly drag of the Athenian stage cannot revive the beloved's body.

The ash box and I bide our time.
This is typical. This is classical.
This is what tragedy was

Always trying to teach us.
Those toga-wrapped torsos,
That chattering
Chorus, those women
With Psyche-knots in the center

Of a circular stage,
Under an Athenian sun,
Foreign enough now to confound
The eye that knows nothing
Of them but what comes crawling

Larva-like out of a book. (40)

The maggot-like tales of classical literature, written in "dead" languages, are of no help to this parent, despite her capacious imagination. Indeed in the next stanza, the speaker switches from Sophocles and his ilk to the tales of "Peter Pan," as she dreams that "We and others all / Wrapped ourselves in sheets / And went flying" (40). Turning the "toga-wrapped torsos" of antiq-

uity into flying, magical bed-sheets, the speaker tries on both the fiction of Greek drama and the tricks of Walt Disney. But even the mythos of American childhood fails to bring consolation or remembrance of innocent days. Instead, it reminds the speaker of the rebellious adult-child "Who would never grow up / And who now never will become" (41). As in classical or Shakespearean tragedy, it is the fact of the corpse which abruptly concludes the dramatic attempt, the animating desire of the poem. The last two lines, separated by a stanza break, read:

> Because his eyes have been
>
> Ceased shut and will not open ever. (41)

Since eyesight is analogized throughout the book to the experiencing "I," it is the cessation of the son's vision—his consciousness—that precludes catharsis in the Athenian amphitheater and the flights of fancy in his mother's dreams. Classical narratives, the candied images of cartoons, and the psychoanalytic paradigm are all shown to lack conciliatory power in Bang's elegies because they cannot accomplish the impossible. None have the Orphic power to recall the dead from Hades.

If Bang finds little solace or staying power in the modern narratives that have been used to handle and process grief, she carves out meaning with her own metaphors, which perform the truth of metaphor's etymology: "bearing-change-across." For example, in the poem "She Said," maternal sorrow is an exploding galaxy, a cosmic event of time-altering proportions.

> In the afterglow of a starburst
> With the remnants
> Of a collapsed star creating
> A fast-spinning solar corpse
> That left as an aftermath
> Of the blast, a smouldering
> Oblong ring that would glow
> For light years, the debris
> Launching itself into the surrounding
> Air and swallowing everything
> In its wake. (61)

Pathetic fallacy has rightly assumed galactic scale. But Bang modulates the grandness of this vision with a return to earth and its calendar time later in the poem, reminding readers that this seismic event has not altered time's dreary march, or the everyday look of things. Still, the speaker must con-

front the dour winter months, the uncelebrated birthday of her dead son, the Hallmark tawdriness of mid-February, and the spring with its meretricious promise of new beginnings. Since it is the vernal turn of earth which brings Persephone, married to Hades, back from the underworld to her mother, Demeter, inducing the trees to green and the flowers to bloom, Bang includes the mythological character in her sketch. A token of modern technology—and the spontaneous intimacy promised by the makers of cellular phones—gives Persephone new poignancy.

> To be something like a beginning
> That repeats every year some Persephone
> Story of a cell-phone phone-home
> To say the future will be
> Okay and mother please pray for me
> Now as I travel across another green sea. (61-62)

There are no new chances for the recovering addict, for the establishing artist, for the irreplaceable lost son. Bang—forced into the extremity of intimate loss, into the impossibility of desired communication—has sent a lyric letter from grief's country that stands to change the ways in which we understand the elegy and its new postmodernity. While we would not wish the doomed fruit of the pomegranate on any poet or Persephone, Bang's journey has brought back something quite living from a dead land.

NOTES

1. Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1994), 221.

2. "Infans" or "not-speaking" is the etymological parent of "infant." And here the narrator of *Elegy* revisits the parent's first task of interpreting and communicating on behalf of the child unable to speak.

3. Melanie Klein, "Mourning and Its Relation to Manic-Depressive States (1940)," *Love, Guilt and Reparation & Other Works 1921-1945* (New York: Dell Publishing Co. 1975), 344-345.

4. Ibid, 353.

5. Ramazani argues that post-war elegies, particularly those written for parental figures, tended to incorporate far more ambivalence, anger, and violent feeling than their modern or pre-modern counterparts and to renounce accepted religious, political, and psychiatric narratives of consolation (216-333).