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Peter Boyle, *Enfolded in the wings of a great darkness*
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In an early verse from *Enfolded in the wings of a great darkness*, Peter Boyle describes a simple artistic tableau: “Round and clear / three pears sit on a small tray on the table,” not unlike, he says, “the conical spirits / of some Chinese landscape / or Dutch still-life from the time of Vermeer.” The invocation of these two genres points to the broader impulses of Boyle’s elegiac, book-length poem. Like both still life and landscape painting, Boyle’s work is about the disappearance of the human body, and how the ordinary world of things survives that loss. Boyle, though, is not especially interested in the subtleties of ekphrasis. In fact, the description of the pears is designed to underline their separateness from the world of language. They possess a “stillness” that captures Boyle’s attention: “their fragrance of / water made solid // a presence to steady the mind.”

Published in late 2019, and awarded the Kenneth Slessor Prize for Poetry in 2020, *Enfolded in the wings of a great darkness* was written by Boyle during the protracted final illness of his partner, Deborah Bird Rose. He refers to this, reservedly, in the book’s afterword as “an especially difficult period in my life.” The long, meditative poem that resulted from that period is full of unusual contradictions, as Boyle seeks to make sense of the universal questions of life and death. In a lesser poet, subjects of this nature would quickly become tiresome or clichéd, but Boyle handles them with great delicacy. For instance, when he writes about the solidity of pears on a tray, he gestures to the unsteadiness of grief, and the way that things tend to dissolve into absence. What consolations exist, we see, are to be found in the “presence” of the material world; not only in objects, but in nature too: in “the sun’s light / its bright dependable / presence among us.” For this reason, grief comes to feel double sided in this book: at once a longing for people (a person), yet also a turning away from them. To escape the transience of the human world, the poet turns to a realm that is solid, and present, and dependable. At times, this impulse is expressed as a longing to escape even from oneself. The desire for objects, in other words, is tied together for Boyle with a desire for objectivity: “to know the clarity of skies where / the full roundness of earth / would be visible.”

In one sense, this is a familiar expression in elegiac writing. Boyle’s Archimedean fantasy recalls Virginia Woolf’s articulation of grief as a longing “to see things without attachment, from the outside” (*The Waves* 176). Boyle’s poem, though, is not an elegy in the conventional sense. It is not, for instance, a work of commemoration. In the afterword, he explains that the book was written “late at night or in quiet moments at home or in hospital waiting rooms” during the period of Rose’s illness. These sites of composition are central to the tone of the work, which negotiates the slant relation between grief and its various “waiting rooms.” The epistemology and temporality of loss is experienced so strangely here:

both known, and not known; here, and not-yet arrived. “And perhaps there is no time now for / the building of monuments, even monuments of words,” Boyle conjectures in one poem. This feeling of being out of time—both displaced by it, and of time expiring—is yet another reason that Boyle turns to the presence of concrete things. The desire for stillness becomes the need for reprieve and delay—to make time for what Boyle refers to as “the brief sad gentle / glance back / at the world I’m leaving.”

Part of the tension in this work, however, is that language and words remain important to Boyle. In one sense, of course, language belongs to the world of temporary things: people, and feelings, and relationships. Yet it is precisely because of those associations that it cannot be disavowed entirely. This, it becomes clear, is one of the paradoxes of mourning: while the consolation of objects lies in their supposed separateness from the world of subjects, the consolation of language lies in its proximity. The question, then, is what kind of language could represent a loss that feels otherwise so un-narratable? This is not, for instance, a book about “witnessing” illness, or “working through” trauma. Against the impulse to resolve his grief into a suitably literary “monument,” Boyle instead produces something broken and fractured, simply

what the breath
can carry between stifled
waves of grief

a line
a phrase some
sounds, a click at
the back of the throat

This is at once an illustration and explanation of Boyle’s style throughout the book. The poems in this collection are lyrical, but they are often also simple, minimalist gestures. They are writerly and ambitious, but there is also a smallness and modesty to them. This is a matter of both idiom and of scale. Boyle, for instance, is attuned to the way that grief can be embedded in “the most common / think-nothing-of- / it phrase”—language that goes “unnoticed” until “it turns itself / inside out” to expose something else. The ordinary and the revelatory occupy proximate ground in this work. The size and shape of the poems are marked by a similar tension. The most successful poems here are those that, like the verse above, have an economy of form. They are more like fragments, communicating only “what the breath can carry.” Yet even if the scale of composition remains small, that “click at / the back of the throat” is sometimes extremely loud. If the poems are visually spare, their sound is more like

a pleading soprano voice
distantly soaring
unable to come to rest on
a single word or faint
half-human syllable
lost in something
more elemental than grief
or the sharpest
moments of love-making

Here, again, Boyle draws attention to the contradictory proportions of loss. On the one hand, it feels enormous and operatic in scale. Yet to give expression to it in language requires the most minimal, the least narrative, form possible: something less than “a single word or faint / half-human syllable.” Only in this inarticulate, guttural form does language come close to capturing a pain that feels “more elemental than grief.”

This is not to suggest that the book lacks a sustained poetic vision. While there is very little scene-making here, the poem is given shape by recurring sounds, images, and motifs: birdsong, rushes of wind, morning sunlight, forest trees, the distant noise of traffic. Yet the images that recur most frequently and evocatively are cosmic, planetary ones. Much of the book is built around the feeling of being at the threshold of something—at the very furthest edges of life, but also of love, and knowledge, and pain. The various conjugations of that feeling are expressed in the metaphor of deep space. The grieving poet stands at the precipice of the universe, “occupying a space / at the end of space,” “out there / towards the exploding edges,” bathed “in the light of whatever survives us / here at the world’s end.” To reach that point, Boyle suggests, is lonely and terrifying—truly the limit of what is endurable. Yet at the same time, it is filled with a kind of wonder: “out there where it ends / multitudinous colours / swirl,” “cosmos-fragments / glitter,” “the slowly spinning wheels of the sky / dissolve.” The sight of the world breaking apart appears sublime in the most traditional, Romantic sense of that term: at once terrible, dangerous, and beautiful.

This leads back to the title of the book. On the one hand, the phrase “enfolded in the wings of a great darkness” clearly signals that this is a work about death and absence. One possible intertext for the phrase can be found in Oscar Wilde’s *Salome*, where the arrival of death is prefigured by “the beating of the wings of the angel of death” (77). Here, for example, is Herod at a crucial moment in that play:

There is an icy wind, and I hear ... wherefore do I hear in the air this beating of wings? Ah! one might fancy a bird, a huge black bird that hovers over the terrace. Why can I not see it, this bird? The beat of its wings is terrible. The breath of the wind of its wings is terrible. (90)

But even this quotation seems to draw attention to the unusualness of Boyle’s metaphor. For him, it seems, the wings of darkness are a kind of comfort. They do not engulf, or envelop, but *enfold*. This particular verb recurs across the book in suggestive ways. The poet feels “this sudden / stillness / enfolding me.” In his “stricken, broken” state, he learns “to enfold another / in a tenderness / that would hold us both.” In this way, Boyle slowly glosses the meaning of his title: to be enfolded in the wings of a great darkness may be terrible, but it is also an experience of love. It is to be held in stillness, and in tenderness. In one verse, for instance, Boyle describes night-time as having “thousand-folded pleats.” What if, he seems to ask, the “darkness” of grief is a gathering together, instead of a falling apart? On the one hand, this is a book that refuses easy explanation, moving as it does in so many thematic directions. But if it is possible to say something final about the work, it may be this. To be “enfolded” by grief is to be held inside one of love’s pleats; love turning back on itself, insisting that even in great darkness, there is still care, still touch, and still life.

WORKS CITED

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