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A Review of Lesléa Newman's I Wish My Father

Alexandra Umlas · Wednesday, April 21st, 2021

In *Herakles,* translated by Anne Carson, Euripides writes, "Come back! Even as a shadow, even as a dream." Anyone that has lost anyone will feel that longing for something of the person that is gone; and yet, there are ways people stay with us, especially through the medium of poetry, which has the miraculous ability to keep so much of a person alive, even if that person is not physically here.

In Lesléa Newman's most recent collection of poetry, *I Wish My Father*, Newman shares the last years of her father's life through poem after poem of narrative verse. My mother-in-law discovered this book sitting on a table at my home, picked it up, read a poem, and proceeded to make her way through the entire book. After reading Newman's work, I understand now why my mother-in-law felt compelled to keep reading. After all, there is an amazing person living in these pages, and Newman captures her experience with her father so tenderly, so honestly, that it is impossible not to want know more.

Each poem both tells its own story and works with the others to share with the reader an abundance of insight, humor, and yes, grief. In "Yes We Have No," Newman is shopping with her father when they start a discussion on bananas. The two reminisce about bananas and Newman's mother:

At this my father brightens.

"Ah, your mother," he says.
"She could have done it.
She could do anything."

"Almost anything," I correct him.
"There was one thing
she could never do."

I reach for a bag of whole
wheat bagels. "What's that?"
my father asks, genuinely curious.

"She could never get you
to eat a banana."
"That's true." My father's chortle

dies in his throat.
“I would eat every banana
in the world

just to see her one more time,”
he says, and we both fall
silent, make fists

around the handle
of our grocery cart
and together we push on. (6)

We push on. Through our griefs, that are both separate from Newman’s grief, and so much the same, we push on. Newman expertly reminds us, through vibrant and resounding details of her father, what love is and what grief is, and how they are inextricably tied to each other. Her poems are clear and detailed, and consistently comprised of concise, three-line stanzas. For me, the effect was soothing, as I came to expect this format, the three lines serving a sort of tripod effect, capable of holding the reader in the words – the father, the mother, the daughter, all there, interacting, building bridges between lives and generations, populating these poems with personality—the pure joy of them in a balancing act with the heart-wrenching pain of loss.

As I read, the flower that is my own grief bloomed in my heart. It is not necessarily pleasant to resuscitate one’s own grief, but I think there is a pleasure in knowing someone has put words to loss and has made something incredibly edifying and gorgeous from it. There is a startling recognition in these poems. Newman experiences her relationship with her father in a specific way; but we, as readers, will find delight in knowing this man through these poems, and I found myself thinking intensely about many aspects of my own life, my own loves, and my own losses, as I read them.

One of the techniques Newman expertly carries out in her poems is the way she unexpectedly brings back prior phrases or happenings. For example, in “The First Time We Visit,” Newman brings her father to a neurologist, who asks him to do some simple math problems, sparking a childhood memory:

“Dad, what’s
a million trillion plus
a million trillion?”

“A ba-a-a-zill-ll-ion,”
he’d say, shaking his head so fast
his cheeks turned to rubber

and I’d crack up. If only
we were laughing now
but the neurologist is not

amused. He leans forward
to study his puzzle of a patient.
“Where were you born?” he asks.

“Brooklyn, naturally,”
my father says as if the doctor
should know that anyone who is

anyone was born in Brooklyn. (22)

The poem ends

Clearly we have more important things
to do than deal with this nonsense
and this doctor who I know
my father thinks is a real nut job
and will never again agree to see

not next week,
not next month,
not in a bazillion years. (24)

Newman expertly brings back themes, words, and phrases, solidifying the recognition and connection of the reader to her experiences. This is a poet who knows what she’s doing and has the capability and the skill to build poems that tell their stories with maximum impact.

The endings of the poems are particularly strong; consequently, I would often have to take a deep breath, my eyes unexpectedly welling-up with tears. I found myself astonished by the emotion I felt as I read. The exact detail of day-to-day life, interspersed with sharp memories from the past, felt both elaborate and stripped down. These are the kinds of poems that express the inexpressible, the best kind of poetry, in my opinion, because it works a sort of magic. It says and it says what cannot be said.

In the title poem, “I Wish My Father,” it is the father’s 90th birthday:

I Wish My Father

a very happy birthday
and yell in his ear, “Dad,
can you believe you’re 90?”

He backs out of my hug,
tilts his head to one side
and peers at me intently

trying to figure out
if what I’m saying is true.
Then he collapses

onto a kitchen chair
as if they weight
of every day

of those 90 years

is pressing down
on him hard.

I am heartbroken. I feel all of the losses I have already experienced. I feel small parts of the losses that I will experience. But Newman does something extraordinary, she makes it feel utterly painful and utterly okay. This is a book about being human and about making the most of our relationships not only while we have them, but even after we have them.

Newman's poetry makes grief a thing we can all hold together. She does the very thing Shakespeare impels us to do through Malcom in Act IV, Scene iii of *Macbeth*: "Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak knits up the o-er wrought heart and bids it break." This grief speaks, and in doing so, creates a net by which to hold all of our multitude of griefs. Our hearts expand and become stronger because of Newman's words.

Also, perhaps I am so drawn to this book because as Adrienne Rich says, "When a woman tells the truth she is creating the possibility for more truth around her." This book makes me hopeful because it tells the truth. We come to appreciate and to mourn this father "in his freshly pressed grey wool suit / starched white shirt (easy on the collar) / and cranberry juice-colored tie" (45). This book is both an extraordinary tribute and a consoling mirror, reflecting our own loves and our own losses. Newman's *I Wish My Father* is a big-hearted masterpiece that has my whole-hearted recommendation.

Click here to purchase I Wish My Father by Lesléa Newman

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