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## Mourning Glory

The vibrant, anguished poetry of Hamutal Bar-Yosef

BY MARGOT LURIE

It has been said that one can learn a great deal about a country by reading the work of its poets. This assertion may or may not be true—depending on the country or, indeed, the poets—but there is certainly a tremendous amount to be gleaned from the words of Hamutal Bar-Yosef, one of Israel's most respected and honored lyricists. For starters:

There's nothing here to explain.  
Either you know the painful place  
or you don't.

*Night, Morning: Poems*, a newly-published selection of poems from Bar-Yosef's four-decade career, is a probing of this painful place. Her poems, appearing as a collection in English for the first time, tackle love, solitude, suffering, and life in Israel under the promise and then the fact of statehood. For Bar-Yosef, the "painful place" is also the poetically generative one, and her best poems seem to be written on raw, exposed nerves.

Much of Bar-Yosef's subject matter is autobiographical. Her childhood on a kibbutz provides some of the most arresting material, including the description of a silent transaction with an Arab girl through a fence: "bubble gum from her wet mouth to my dry mouth in exchange / for a slice of bread with salted butter from the American care-package." The exchange is thwarted, but not before Bar-Yosef is able to create in the poem real suspense and the indefinable intimacy between strangers: "I look at her and she at me, chewing, not smiling. / Flies that fed on the pus near her eyes settle on my eyes." Bar-Yosef's ready heart puts her at risk for sentimentality, so we are relieved when she doesn't give in to platitudes about human commonality or shared suffering. Flies that land on both sets of eyes are as far as the thought is taken.

But most of the material in *Night, Morning* centers around two bereavements: the death of the poet's brother in Israel's 1948 War of Independence, and that of her teenage son, a suicide. The work about her brother recreates a child's sense of displacement (Bar-Yosef was eight at the time of his death)—"Not on the Sabbath they dressed me in white / and we drove to Jerusalem not to see the sights"—while those about her son often contain unsteady swerves into dreams:

There in the white porcelain sink lay  
the dead boy, his body  
transparent, still frozen.  
I closed my eyes tight and with a long knife  
cut my fingers loose from his fingers  
those fingers that made heavenly music  
on the ivory keys.

Although Bar-Yosef often employs the language of dreams and symbols, her sensibility is that of a literalist. She wants to tell you how it is, exactly, without eliciting sympathy, and she often achieves the metaphysical subtlety she strives for. Her nightmare, expressed in the poem "Solomon's Trial," is that you will think she is acting or exaggerating:

Gripped by real terror, I wailed with all my might:  
Give her the live baby, just do not slay it!  
I tore out the hair of my braids, I scratched my cheeks  
I pounded my forehead against the classroom's tiled floor  
at the feet of King Solomon who was frightened by the screaming,  
by my tears, my fists, my madness.



I was wrapped in the fringed and vast  
red woolen shawl of my bereaved mother.  
She sat still beside the other parents  
as they praised my acting.

What is so frightening about this scenario? Bar-Yosef knows hyperbole or hysteria would rob her of her power—which is to say, if the reader thinks she is acting, her words can be discounted. This emphasis on exactitude and concreteness is rewarding, and in Bar-Yosef's later poems she has not only fulfilled her early promise but enlarged its dimensions: her images are sparer but more eloquent, her free verse more fluent, and she shows more willingness to experiment with her own gifts.

The translations by Rachel Tzvia Back, printed opposite the original Hebrew, are faithful. Back captures Bar-Yosef's unfazed, sometimes wry tone, and she preserves the poet's economy of vocabulary without substituting synonyms. Bar-Yosef is herself a translator, notably of *Isaac Babel*<sup>2</sup> into Hebrew, and the translation of *Night, Morning* was clearly a collaborative one. In an exchange with David Shapiro (author of the book's introduction) printed at the end of the volume, Bar-Yosef speaks of "the beautiful old-new Jewish language, the language of the Bible," that is spoken in Israel. Bar-Yosef has advocated for the teaching of Tanakh in Israeli schools, and her poetry demonstrates the benefits of this intimacy with all the phases of Hebrew, from her Second Temple rationalist questions ("What is impure / in touching the dead?") to her Biblical idiom and vocabulary in depictions of heightened emotion.

Bar-Yosef also makes use of the range of double meanings available in Hebrew grammar. "Vise" is a prose poem with the breathlessness of Frank O'Hara's "The Day Lady Died"<sup>3</sup>:

Immediately I grabbed the man, gripped him, pressed him  
to me with all my stomach muscles, the way a carpenter,  
after applying the metal vise to the cupboard that sudden-  
ly collapsed, twists and tightens the tool's handle, groaning  
a bit from clenching his guts, that's how I clenched the  
man to me, standing there, with every angle of iron in  
me, when the doctor came out and said our child was  
not.

A previous translator of Bar-Yosef's work, Shirley Kaufman, had rendered the last phrase as: "when the doctor came out and said our child would not." In Hebrew, the line can be read both ways. The last word of the poem, that Back translates "was not" and Kaufman "would not," is the particle "lō," that negates both the child's being and all the possible verbs and adjectives that could be introduced after it. One's mind wanders to Jeremiah 31:15: "Rachel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not." The negation is total, final, and all-encompassing, one swift cut that ends all the possibilities of a human life. Our ears ring with it.

But the richest reward comes at the end of this collection, when Bar-Yosef delivers what the book's title promises: a glimmer of morning after the pained, heavy night.

The sweetness of a split fig and a crushed strawberry,  
the sticky sweetness of wrinkled, brown dates,  
even the sweetness of carob slivers  
crooked and cut—  
they were all there, at the edges  
of the torn unraveled summer.  
So, get up. In the dark, in the pain.  
Say sweetness, like a soft tune.  
Repair summer's ruins.

In a [recent article](#)<sup>4</sup>, Bar-Yosef wrote that "the experience of struggling to recover from trauma seems to me a no less compelling adventure, and no less deserving of literary stylization and media coverage, than the condition of being trapped forever in a post-traumatic state." *Night, Morning* will do much to convince readers of this. It is a striking document of the human ability—and duty—to heal.<sup>5</sup>

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