

Are You Listening?

Gill McEvoy

Hedgehog Press

There is something about the elegy that makes us sit up a little straighter, makes us concentrate a little more, makes the silence of the poems aftermath seem that little bit heavier. Maybe it is because we have just confronted, in a small but profound way, the ultimate end to which we all must go. And poetry, perhaps, is the best vehicle we have as a species for negotiating this terrifying universal truth.

Gill McEvoy's 'Are you Listening' is reminiscent of some of the great elegiac poets, and reading through the collection I was reminded in many places of both Douglas Dunn and Thomas Hardy's heart-breaking collections of poems that deal with the loss of a life partner. In 'Now I see You, Now I Don't' for example McEvoy states:

'Since you died
you pop up in the oddest spots -
there by a lamp in an unknown street
when I am looking for a space to park'

Compare this to Hardy's lines from 'The Going' and you will see the universality of the experience that McEvoy is evoking:

'Why do you make me leave the house
And think for a breath it is you I see
At the end of the alley of bending boughs
Where so often at dusk you used to be;'

There is a shared kind of grief in these poems and it is expressed in the simplest of terms, with the simplest use of language. It is this element of the elegiac tradition that McEvoy has mastered in 'Are you Listening?' The poems are understated, the language stripped back to its bare bones. There is no superfluous penmanship, just a statement of the facts and an exploration of the rawest emotions that one can feel. And the poems are all the stronger for it.

Throughout the collection we are allowed into a secret world of memory and experience. It is hindsight that gives the elegy its power, and McEvoy displays a dexterous skill in weaving

together seemingly innocuous moments and trivial happenings to bear witness to the grief felt by the speaker. It is a technique used so well in Douglas Dunn's 'Elegies' and McEvoy has employed it with similar assurance and courage. In 'The Wayward Button' for example:

'That coat was each Day Centre afternoon
When you refused to get in the car and I,
With murder in my heart...
Would force you in'

'Are you Listening' is full of such moments, such snapshots that we can all relate to. It is a patchwork of memories, of love and loss and grief. It is, as all great elegiac sequences are, all that is left of a life. A raging against the forced absence. And therein in lies the sadness, the power.

Colin Bancroft