*As If A Song Could Save You*

Betsy Sholl

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Vitality Ghosted by Pain: A New Poetry Collection from Betsy Sholl

I have known Betsy Sholl for more than thirty years. Along with everyone else in the tight-knit Maine poetry community, I was heartbroken to learn of her beloved husband’s death from Covid in 2020. It’s no surprise that her tenth poetry collection, *As If A Song Could Save You,* is laced with elegy. The title delivers a thesis of sorts. Its subjunctive “as if” expresses both a wish and the impossibility of that wish. The book pulses with the tension between irrepressible life force and inevitable loss. Despite ancestors who were “silent //when it came to delight,” Sholl’s speaker chooses to sing—and does so with the collective pronoun, pulling the reader into her dance. *We* rise from our roots by “dancing in the street, / drumbeat, dog romp, dock sway” as songs “spill from our lips.”

Musical references thread the collection. Thelonious Monk, in particular, stays close, a musician who embraces life’s contrasts, both ugliness and beauty, “echo and off beat, stutter and dodge.” The poet advises the reader to “Read Dante,” or “if you don’t like to read, give a listen / to Thelonious Monk.” When Sholl is literally lost while driving home, Monk seems to guide her, the piano and saxophones like “rain or beaded curtains opening up / a quiet space inside the space I thought I was in.” Music is not separate from our work or difficulties, but part of it, as when the poet’s sister practices “over and over that one tiny patch / of Bach pulled out from the rest like rubble / at the shore” until the notes lift off the page, suddenly the “magnificent cargo” that was “inside the piano and inside her.” Literary spirit guides also abound in these richly layered, narrative poems. The reader encounters Dickinson’s “noisy bog.” Whitman whispers: “You furnish your parts toward eternity.” Dante enacts his journey to the underworld.

Sholl welcomes the reader into meditations on ordinary moments. She wonders about the weight of the sky and addresses it directly: “How to look at you without seeing ourselves?” She contemplates meeting a bear along a country road, “seeing nothing of her beauty.” She remembers bats pouring “out from under the Congress Avenue bridge” after her sister’s funeral, realizing, “as Dante would say” that the bats are the “memories of our sister / swirling around us.”

Though this book is Sholl’s extended meditation on the loss of her husband, she hears music even in the trauma of her bereavement:

—first my love’s lonely Covid bed,

then me without him. How that song smacks

like a skylight collapse, cloud thrash

mixed with shatter. Dirt-finch, mud-light,

world-stop.

The harshest song, grief—a crashing skylight. The poet nods to the “ancient journeys the living take / into the afterlife to embrace a shade” while offering detailed descriptions of her daily walks to the pond near her house and over the bridge where she used to walk with her husband. She enacts the push-pull of longing and acceptance, comparing widowhood to a kind of dormancy, like that of a caterpillar,

 wound up in itself, wound

and wounded, shut blind in its own dark

as if hunched over on the therapy couch

held rigid or falling apart in sobs,

not knowing anything can ever budge,

that there is an outside to step into.

She considers what Thomas Merton sees in the music of Jimmy Smith: the advice to “lose, loosen, let go, enter the music, / its eruption of vitality ghosted by pain.”

*As If A Song Could Save You* leads the reader into the profound experience of “vitality ghosted by pain.” The poet, viewing a painting that’s hung on her wall for years, spots a “ghostly blur” she’s never seen before. This “thin ripple of presence,” is like the dramatic art on the cover of the book, a piece called “The Bloom After Dark” made by Sholl’s daughter, combining hand-tooled leather, paint, and grey denim from her father’s gardening jeans. Just so, these poems hold the beloved. The bereaved speaks directly to him: “I can’t stop talking to you,” and describes him chuckling “on the verge of sleep / as if entering a sunlit realm after rain.”

The final poem ends with a memory of the beloved joyously heading off on skis after a blizzard. Here, the poet wonders if the spirit might be “held / in language”—which, in a way, is what these poems have done. How fitting that the last lines suggest acceptance:

This kind of breaking and entering

I can take. Him stepping into snowshine,

even if it so welcomes, so blazes around him

there’s no way back.

Jeri Theriault