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Elisabeth Tova Bailey. ***The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating.***
Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin, 2010. 208pp. Clothbound, $18.95.

Years ago, I had a housemate who was a psychologist. Sometimes, catalogs arrived in the mail for special purposes: play therapy toys, professional development courses. I'd bring them upstairs, then flip through them at the kitchen table. Once, a catalog of children's therapy supplies offered something I instantly wanted—a hand-puppet of a snail. "Snails teach children about vulnerability and safety," the catalog claimed, but I had already gone past the text and was gazing instead at the little snail head, its two horns happily protuberant, its mouth open, holding a couple of fragments of leaf. Its brown body was retractable into its slightly darker brown shell. I remembered the snail from the world of childhood, perhaps the last time I had the opportunity to stop what I was doing long enough to appreciate the tiny life-form.

The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating, by Elisabeth Tova Bailey, is a brief study of snails, among other important subjects. Mixing genres effortlessly, the author relates detailed facts about the lives of snails, literary appreciations of gastropods, her own medical history, and the moving story of her long, bedridden year with one very particular snail for a pet. The snail arrives in a pot of wild violets dug up from the woods beside a friend's studio apartment, and it becomes a companion to Bailey during her illness. We learn the origins of Bailey's medical condition in the first pages of the book: "At age thirty-four, on a brief trip to Europe, I was felled by a mysterious viral or bacterial pathogen, resulting in severe neurological symptoms" (4). After an initial period of sickness and recovery, Bailey becomes bedridden again, and she explains that "more sophisticated testing showed that the mitochondria in my cells no longer functioned correctly and there was damage to my autonomic nervous system; all functions not consciously directed . . . had gone haywire" (5). As many people with profound illnesses do, Bailey experiences disorientation, listlessness, an attenuated sense of time. Her text, however, does not linger on discussion of her illness or her particular symptoms. The book's main concern is the subject of her increasing obsession—her relationship with, and intellectual curiosity about, her pet snail. The snail is treated as both a creature apart from the author and as an objective correlative for the author herself—but this story is not only about vulnerability and safety. Survival, resilience, and intellectual curiosity also emerge as themes, and the illness narrative transforms, in Bailey's clear prose, into an exploration of the vital possibilities of even the smallest life-forms.

It is worth noting that Bailey begins each section with a brief quotation, and laces the text with her scholarship—though she never

treats the scholarly study of snails with the reserve or distance of an academic. Creative writers, including Rainer Maria Rilke, Helen Keller, Kobayashi Issa, Yosa Buson, Elizabeth Bishop, Emily Dickinson, and John Donne; naturalists Charles Darwin, Oliver Goldsmith, Edward O. Wilson, T H. Huxley; malacologists G.A. Frank Knight, C. David Rollo, William G. Wellington, George Johnson, Ronald Chase, Ernest Ingersoll—almost *anyone* who's ever concerned him- or herself with snails shows up as a guide to our understanding. The striking thing about these guides is that many of them suffered through protracted periods of physical or emotional pain—or both. Bishop was a sickly, isolated child, and her asthma and allergies famously left her bedridden for several weeks when, as an adult, she experienced a violent allergic reaction to a cashew fruit upon arriving in Brazil. Her poem “Giant Snail" is quoted three times. In it, she uses the voice of the snail to reflect on her own mortality, and the path her work leaves behind: “My wide wake shines, now it is growing dark. I leave a lovely opalescent ribbon: I know this" (69). Issa suffered the death of his two small children and his first wife. In light of this knowledge, his haiku seems more poignant: "the snail gets up / and goes to bed / with very little fuss" (9). Dickinson watched a great number of relatives and friends sicken and die during her lifetime, and she herself weakened considerably from Bright’s disease before passing away. Dickinson is not known for shying away from the more painful details of life; this is, after all, the lady who gave us “I heard a fly buzz—when I died." Bailey quotes a letter she wrote in April of 1886, when she observed that “The velocity of the ill . . . is like that of the snail" (37). Dickinson died in May of that year. Darwin, too, was no stranger to bed-rest; he spent a great deal of his adult life ailing, often with mysterious symptoms that were never clearly explained. Ever the scientist, however, his curiosity seems to cause him more pain than his own body: "I have for [the] last 15 months been tormented & haunted by land mollusca," he wrote in a letter to a friend (92). All of these writers seem to participate in a common aesthetic world; their own suffering and pain are often addressed in an oblique fashion, through metaphor, rather than directly. The indirect method of exploring pain affords them, and their readers, compassionate reflection on the suffering of others—even if those others are tiny gastropods.

These guiding spirits have a worthy descendant in Bailey. She, too, would rather discuss her illness in relation to her knowledge about the snail. "I learned that snails are extremely sensitive . . . to changes in environmental conditions," she writes. "I could relate to this, as my dysfunctional autonomic nervous system made me sensitive to these things as well . . . My body's temperature regulation no longer worked. One moment I was chilled, and the next too hot; this made life as a cold-blooded poikilotherm seem appealing" (59). At times, these reflections are funny, as when she fantasizes about opening her mouth at the dentist’s office to display a radula, the snail’s rasp-like set of ”2,64O teeth" (49—50). Other times, she displays an openness and curiosity that are extremely attuned to the snail’s pace; when listening

to Gregorian chants, she wonders if the snail could sense the vibrations through the air, and what the Benedictine monks would think of singing to a gastropod" (60). More poignant meditations are also spurred by the presence of her snail. In a chapter titled "Colonies of Hermits," she reflects on the isolation of snails, "each off on their individual forays by night, each sequestered, asleep, by day" (83). She admits that friends have not been visiting as often as they once did, during the long duration of her illness, but notes, I knew that there were other people home-bound from illness or injury, scattered here and there throughout rural towns and cities around the world. And as I lay there, I felt a connection to all of them. We, too, were a colony of hermits" (84). Her illness and isolation seem usually to connect her to a world of others like her, rather than just differentiating her from the "well." In this way, her discussion of her illness never dips into bathos or self-pity, modes of expression that are completely understandable in a patient, but verboten for literary writers.

Make no mistake, though—Bailey is capable of evoking terrible sympathy for her condition merely by explaining the facts of her isolation.

> There were times when I wished that my viral invader had claimed me completely. How much better to live an exuberant life and then leave as one exits a party, simply opening a door and stepping out. Instead, the virus took me to the edge of life and then left me trapped in its pernicious shadow, with symptoms that, barely tolerable one day, became too severe the next, and with the unjustness of unexpected relapses that, overnight, erased years of gradual improvement. (131)

The poignancy of the party simile is striking—that graceful exit, denied to those whose illness lingers, seems so clean and uncomplicated. Contrasted with the facts of her own pain, it is, for me, heartbreaking. This moment is the climax of Bailey's discussion of her own illness, and it is preceded by a passage that is so difficult she doesn't even write it in first person. "One cannot bear to live through another loss of function, and sometimes friends and family cannot bear to watch. An unspoken, unbridgeable divide may widen . . . . Sometimes the people you know well withdraw, and then even the person you know as yourself begins to change," she explains (131). This deeply moving passage does what much literature aims to do: it places the reader right in the middle of that situation, and with absolute clarity, it evokes the experience of the writer without centering on the first-person subject. Although we know that this subject describes her own experience, somehow it becomes our own experience, as we enter imaginatively into this life. It isn't a life that we would voluntarily enter, of course—although some readers may have had this experience themselves. However, for a moment, we begin to understand the depth of suffering that Bailey lives with on a consistent basis. It

is no mistake that this passage accompanies the disappearance of the snail, which brings Bailey's isolation into sharp focus. "[T]he snail . . . the snail kept my spirit from evaporating," she explains. "Between the two of us, we were a society all our own, and that kept isolation at bay. The snail was missing, and as the day waned, I was bereft" (132). (Fear not, dear reader! The snail returns.)

The truly extraordinary thing about this book, however, is its deep joy in the quirky details of snail biology. Though Bailey uses the snail as an alter ego at times, she glories in the intellectual project of discovery, and ultimately, she shows us that her snail-companion is able to do things Bailey cannot. The details she reports about snails are awe-inspiring. Like other mollusks, including squid, octopi, and slugs, snails do things that humans wouldn't even dream possible. Apparently, all snails are hermaphrodites, and when mating, they either swap sperm with each other, or they must agree about which snail will play the role of "male" and which the role of "female" before they even get started. Some kinds of snails even construct tiny, flexible darts and shoot each other with them as a form of foreplay, like picadors of love. In their bodies, they form "tiny, beautifully made arrows of calcium carbonate, and they look as if they've been crafted by the very finest of artisans" (124).

Even more impressively, the snail can rebuild its own shell. "New shell material is secreted by the mantle, and where there was once a crack, a scar appears, looking much like a skin scar," reports Bailey (65). She quotes Oliver Goldsmith here: "Sometimes these animals are crushed seemingly to pieces, and, to all appearance, utterly destroyed; yet still they set themselves to work, and, in a few days, mend all their numerous breaches" (65). For a convalescent patient who cannot sit up without effort, this unique ability must seem extraordinarily desirable. The strange and beautiful potential of this animal to do such things reminds us of our relative simplicity as organisms, as much as it also reminds us that our own bodies are capable of strange and beautiful acts. The snail's ability to survive, in fact, shows us that our assumptions about his vulnerability are projections of our own feelings—which also gives the reader hope in her own potential to overcome adversity, to achieve something beyond the assumptions we all make about the disabled and the suffering.

Bailey's desire to learn about the snail serves two purposes: it allows her to distract herself from her illness as she slowly gets better, and it exercises an intellectual curiosity that must have helped her to feel able, alive, aligned with the rest of the world. Even during recovery, she carried on relationships and friendships with others—local librarians, editors, authorities in the fields of malacology and biology—as if she were not sick at all. In the act of writing, she also communicates her own intellectual and emotional engagement with the natural world, and her "biophilia" becomes an act of love—love of snails, love of others, sick and well, and love of the natural world. In a traditionally disempowered state, she finds power in a broadening of the mind and spirit, even as the uncontrollable body restricts her motion.

Bailey, at the end of the book, has transcended the world she inhabited during her illness. In an excerpt from a letter to one of her doctors, she explains, “Watching another creature go about its life . . . somehow gave me, the watcher, purpose too. If life mattered to the snail and the snail mattered to me, it meant something in my life mattered, so I kept on" (154). Rather than being limiting, her relationship with the snail opens up a broader philosophy. She concludes on an important note that she has considered throughout the book: “While illness keeps me always aware of my mortality, I realize that what matters most is not that I survive, nor even that any species survives, but that life itself continues to evolve" (169). The remarkable equanimity with which she reaches this conclusion seems to me to be the result of a deep engagement with another—in this case, a small gastropod whose life she observes and whose well-being she takes as her project during what must have been a very difficult year. This kind of writing has a spiritual precedent; St. Francis of Assisi wrote his ”Laudes Creaturarum,” more commonly known as "Canticle of the Creatures," in the 13th century. He composed that long poem in praise of the natural world during a time of deep physical pain and weakness, sequestered in the tiny church of San Damiano. Though Bailey's book is not explicitly religious, it also reminds us to observe and to be grateful for the life that exists around us—not just our own. It is, in fact, spiritual work she has been doing, as much as scientific observation, for rather than treating her snail as a specimen to be analyzed, she learns to care for it with abiding love and attention. *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* shows us that no matter what our perceived limitations may be, our capacity for human kindness, curiosity, and fellow-feeling allow us to transcend even the most difficult states of being, providing ourselves with a kind of comfort and enriching the experience of others as well. By attending to one of the smallest forms of life, Bailey discovers the greatest—not the individual body, but the survival of the entire, evolving biological world.

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