

Book Review

The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating

Elisabeth Tova Bailey

(Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2010, 190 pages)

Reviewed by Jack Coulehan

Life inches forward very slowly for a person incapacitated by chronic, devastating illness. As Emily Dickinson wrote, “The velocity of the ill... is like that of a snail.” In *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*, Elisabeth Tova Bailey describes being confined to bed for months in a single room of a borrowed apartment, her mind intact, but her body so weak, her autonomic nervous system so dysfunctional, that she couldn’t even sit up in bed. Time slowed almost to a stop. Time accumulated in her solitary room, but she was unable to spend it. When friends visited, they moved quickly, always short on time. “My friends had so little time,” she recalls, “I often wished I could give them what time I could not use.”

Bailey describes how one day a visitor brought her a pot of

violets, and among the violets was a small snail she had picked up in the woods. Later that night Bailey noticed a sound like “someone very small munching celery continuously.” In the quiet room, she could actually hear the sound of a snail eating! Initially, it chewed tiny holes in her writing paper. But shortly after receiving the little mollusk, Bailey acquired a glass terrarium, which her caregiver filled with ferns, moss, and other native plants to provide the snail with a rich natural environment. During nighttime hours when her sleep was “diaphanous or nonexistent,” she began carefully to observe the nocturnal creature as it went about its activities. “Its companionship was a comfort to me,” she writes, “and buffered my feelings of uselessness.”

The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating is a meditation on the relationship between a woman and a woodland snail. Bailey’s illness, a mysterious condition called chronic fatigue syndrome, held her captive, severing most connections to her former world. “The mountain of things I felt I needed to do reached to the moon,” writes Bailey, “yet there was little I could do about anything...” But the absence of

doing allowed her to learn from the slow and immediate world of her snail companion. In fact, she speaks of the snail as her “true mentor” because “it always lived in the moment and was an example of how life, on even the smallest of scales, could be rewarding.”

Bailey interweaves her sick-time meditations with numerous facts about gastropods, gleaned from extensive reading long after her condition had improved and her illness stabilized. We learn, for example, that in the world of snails, slime is king. “Slime is the sticky essence of a gastropod’s soul, the medium for everything in its life: locomotion, defense, healing, courting, mating, and egg protection.” The creatures have many different recipes for slime, each one produced when needed for a specific purpose. Pedal mucus covers the snail’s stomach-foot, attaching it tightly to any surface, while minute ripples of muscle allow the snail to move forward. One scientist demonstrated the strength of this mucus attachment by showing that a snail can safely move upside-down across a ceiling burdened with nine times its own weight in reels of cotton.

Other remarkable facts: snails may have thousands of tiny teeth, they love to eat mushrooms, and they are “by no means lacking in intelligence.” Snail sex is a very sensuous affair, complicated—though only in human eyes—by the fact that these animals are hermaphrodites, able to assume either the male or female role in any given sexual encounter. The courtship begins when two snails cozy up to one another and wave and touch their tentacles as if smooching. As the affair develops, each shoots a tiny calcium carbonate love dart (literally) into the other. Their bodies press tightly together. Eventually, one of them lays fertilized eggs, although an interval of months may pass before doing so.

This must have happened to Bailey’s snail, who one day produced a cluster of eggs. When they hatched, she was able to observe dozens of the snail’s miniature offspring develop and thrive. Meanwhile, Bailey’s condition gradually improved. She moved back to her own home. Friends released most of the snails into the woods. Finally, when she was able to walk in the woods herself, Bailey set free the last remaining juvenile. Having

just crossed her own threshold of release, Bailey reflects, “For the first time, the young snail was in a world without boundaries. I wondered what it would think of this unexpected freedom... How would it choose a territory in this endless wilderness?”

This splendid book gives a glimpse of the deep interrelatedness of living beings, an experience open to any reader who slows down, looks around, and pays close enough attention. ☪

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