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KELSEY PRATTO

Kelsey Pratto is currently pursuing an MFA in Poetry at Chapman University. Drafts of his poetry can be read at jackgiaourpoetry.tumblr.com.
Book review

LITTLE SPELLS BY JENNIFER K. SWEENEY
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The world created by Jennifer K. Sweeney in her third book of poetry, Little Spells, is a gorgeous hybrid of real and imagined, fantastic and mundane, natural and man-made. These are not necessarily juxtaposed against one another but are, rather, blended together to create a language that is at once terrifyingly dark and delicately magical. To call this book a book of “spells” feels more than appropriate.

These poems are as much dialogic as they are absolute. We, the readers, feel we are being spoken to personally, as if these poems were written just for us. Yet, they also seem to speak to everyone and everything in the world, addressing a more universal way of being.

Wake up, the currents of bees have fled
this hour of seed
dark imaginings in their wake—
unsweet feverless drone.

This stanza comes from the first poem in the collection, “Abandoning the Hives.” In this stanza, we see a natural event (bees abandoning their hives) turned into something dark and ominous with phrases like “this hour of seed” and “dark imaginings.” The poem ends with the line “A row of empty jars fills with sunlight.” This language is much more concrete, more straightforward, than anything preceding it, but the image of the empty jars filled with sunlight—filled with nothing of substance—has the same haunted tone as the rest of the poem. Its bluntness only increases the horror of the statement; this is an end, but what kind of end? Is the sunlight an image of home or an image of emptiness?

The next poem, “Call and Response,” gives us no answers to these questions, but, as the title suggests, raises even more of questions.

There are mnemonics for remembering bird calls,
a goldfinch’s airy Po-ta-to chip!
or the Inca dove’s bleak no-hope. That spring,
a pair of meadowlarks pleaded But-I-DO-love you
from the maple boughs…

The listing of the bird-calls seems to have meanings, seems to give multiple personalities, ways of looking at life. But these are mnemonics, ways of remembering the sounds of the calls. How far can we actually read into them? This tension is at work throughout the poem, wandering between positive and negative, romantic and realist, wondering how best to approach a world that contains such a kaleidoscope of joys and sorrows. The voice of the narrator becomes yet another “bird call,” another voice among and around the various sounds of the birds, and the mnemonics that mimic their song. There is one bird in the piece that has no call—the crow—a silence just as poignant as the bird calls all around it.
The poem “Field Accomplice” shares its name with the title of the first section. The second couplet in this poem reads:
She flies around for hours begging me
to catch her in my throat.
This couplet captures the tone, not just of the poem, but of this entire section. It is such a concrete image and, yet, is completely metaphorical. It’s a haunting, almost sullen line, but composed with a delicate musicality of sound that lifts it from merely somber to something almost gothic.

Echoing the book’s title—Little Spells—the “she” in this poem is an earthy, witchy personage associated with both life and death, putting “dead leaves back on the trees.” The meter and the assemblage of sounds gives this poem the musicality, and therefore the mystique, of a chant, a place where poetry and music intersect. But who is doing the chanting? Not “she,” but the narrator, who, with the power to “catch” this mystical “she” in its throat—in the place where words are made—becomes even more strange and terrible than “she.” The speaker/narrator/poet is a person with real power, the person with the power of language.

The title poem of the collection explains:
We are not witches as fable stoops us
hunchback over caldrons, not women
hobbled sinister by absence though we know
there are tides in our blood that lean us
toward some ancient clock.
“We are not witches,” says the speaker—but only not “as fable stoops us.” In short, “we” are witches but not in the way we have come to think of witches.

These little “spells” turn the world we thought we knew into a world of vivid fantasy. We see “the trick of the moon” in a row of apartment windows and see the roughened bark of a tree as “etched with secrecy.” These poems are dramatic, even over-dramatic, but that’s exactly what’s appealing about them. Sweeney manages to take tropes we think we know inside-and-out and make them feel utterly new. These poems are long, thin, meanderings—they look slender and delicate on the page. Each line carries contemplative weight even as it is impossible for the eye to zip across the shortest line.

This is a book that will stay in the mind long after it is finished. These are lines that will float through the reader’s mind at random moments in the world, that will continue to have meaning no matter how many times they are read and re-read. A beautiful collection, Little Spells is a book well worth the read (and re-read).