

Songs for Solo Voice

James R. Whitley

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The lush poems of Songs for Solo Voice narrate a recovery from a relationship that ended in a painful manner.

James R. Whitley's poetry collection *Songs for Solo Voice* concerns a broken relationship, which is addressed from the point of view of the lover who was left behind.

The opening poem, "How to Talk Your Way Through Abandonment," sets the tone for the volume, which is ferocious in addressing a single situation. The poems thereafter spiral, navigating grief, loss, and longing. They are rife with literary and musical references, and are charged with emotion.

"There is no key for longing" here; poems address how some absences become veritable presences of their own, or center haunting photographs. In "Piazza San Marco, 1996" the past comes into focus; the poem concerns the couple's hungers, which are a driving force. "Overture" reframes the relationship, treating it like a song whose melody collapsed from within.

Many such poems are nostalgic, written as if time has stilled to remember the romantic love that lit the relationship, or the opposing ways that the lovers recalled a shared experience, as when one calls time together "a wonderful vacation" and the other recalls, with dark humor, "Nature's blistering invective / against human frailty." The couple's mutual inability to see an experience in the same way threads through the book, resulting in startling images: the moon is no longer a vision of romance, but is "hung like a luminous wrecking ball, / a thirsty razor-sharp pendulum." Such lush figurative language is paired with dark humor that comes between bouts of longing and loss.

Art, songs, and poetry take on new resonance with the hindsight of hurt. "Excursion into Philosophy" is a questioning poem that sympathizes with the lonely man depicted in Edward Hopper's painting, while elsewhere works from Mazzy Star, Emily Dickinson, and Gwendolyn Brooks are reconstructed in the face of memory and longing. Wallace Stevens's "13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is reborn as "13 Ways to Deny an Ending"; poetic forms, including calendelles, aubades, and ghazals, are also referenced.

As the poems work to establish a new voice outside of the ended relationship, notes are repeated; this especially occurs near the end of the book, which wallows in single moments without new results. Still, most of the poems speak ably to break up cycles. Various funny and figurative, the poems of *Songs for Solo Voice* narrate a recovery from a relationship that ended in a painful manner.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (August 18, 2021)

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