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The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating

Elisabeth Tova Bailey
Algonquin Books (Aug 13, 2010)
Hardcover $19.95 (208pp)
978-1-56512-606-0

This is an account of forced stillness and its unexpected gifts. Suddenly stricken with a rare and mystifying neurological illness, bedridden and drained of energy, Elisabeth Tova Bailey is brought to a studio apartment, far away from her own home and friends, to rest and wait.

She suffers, not only from weakness—she cannot sit up, and even rolling over from one side to another causes her "heart to beat wildly and erratically"—and from not knowing if she will ever recover, but also from isolation and the loss of all sense of meaning or purpose. She writes, "it is shocking how swiftly illness steals away those certainties. It was all I could do to get through each moment, and each moment felt like an endless hour, yet days slipped silently past. Time unused and only endured still vanishes, as if time itself is starving, and each day is swallowed whole, leaving no crumbs, no memory, no trace at all."

Then a friend, in an inspired act, brings a woodland snail in a terra cotta pot of field violets to Bailey's bedside. That evening, when the snail emerges from its shell to glide slowly down the side of the flowerpot, its tentacles gently waving, Bailey is immediately mesmerized, and so begins a strange and lovely companionship. She finds comfort in its company—especially at night, when sleep eludes her—and admires its graceful and complete adaptations to life on a small scale. Its serene pace, its solitude, and its membership to an ancient family help her to enter a "timeless world without change," and to find reason for continuing on. "If life mattered to the snail and the snail mattered to me, it meant something in my life mattered, so I kept on," she writes.

Bailey's lovely book is composed of her close observations of the snail, interspersed with scientific information about gastropods, and literary quotations, including haiku from the old masters. In reading, she joins the company of others—poets and naturalists—who "thought nothing of spending countless hours in the field observing their tiny subjects," and through her we rediscover the lyrical writing of early scientists.

The scientific information adds heft, but perhaps this book is best read as an invitation to imagine a slower life, and thus the lives of other creatures. Although she completes the arc of her story, leading us back through a gradual and partial recovery, we know she is forever changed. Her challenge is to remember what she learned: "A last look at the stars and then to sleep. Lots to do at whatever pace I can go. I must remember the snail. Always remember the snail."

TERESA SCOLLON (July / August 2010)

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