

The Hollins Critic

Vol. LX, No. 1 Hollins University, Virginia February 2023

Books in Brief

Book of Entangled Souls. By Richard St. John. Frankfort, Ky.: Broadstone Books, 2022, \$24.00

Richard St. John's *Book of Entangled Souls*, his third full-length collection, contemplates a rich world of people and places, each worthy of our attention and deserving of our care. Its premise is taken, loosely, from a phenomenon observed in quantum physics: when particles become connected regardless of the distance between them and thus share a common condition or state. Using this analogy to suggest the complexity of human life, the collection's title marries the scientific ("entangled") and the humanistic ("souls"). It sees one thing in the other, inviting readers to think about the mysterious grammar that governs our existence. And yet, to say matter-of-factly that St. John uses quantum entanglement as a poetic conceit is to limit how far-reaching his project really is. In a word, this book is about empathy, how we, as human beings, are distinct and separate—living individual lives within particular realms of experience—while simultaneously sharing deep commonalities.

Throughout this work we journey the world, encountering disparate people—the poems intermingling with each other, creating a qualitative field of humanity. The complexities of inner life are always a central focus for the poet, and these are rendered with nuance and grace. I am moved most by the expressiveness of St. John's witness bearing, as when, early in the collection, he describes a child with Down Syndrome:

The lamps of his doughy eyes burned only dimly—
one chromosome tripled, as if Yahweh, insistent
in his wish to take this frail, unlikely temple for his breath,
should write the letter of his name three times.

In this we get compassionate external description blended with private imagination: the poet's idea of God. St. John writes with a fragile sense both of the child's degree of limited intellectual ability and the intrinsic human desire to confront scientific rationality, to find reason and meaning when we are at a loss for explanation. Later in the collection, in one of the most tenderly-wrought poems I have ever encountered, St. John elegizes his sister, Sandra, who also had Down Syndrome:

The night attendants must have washed your hair—
still damp when I arrived—

then soothed a soft cloth
across your crusted lashes, corners of your eyes,

and wrapped you in this thin, clean robe.
Already you were moving toward

a threshold, the way
we'd often seen you step into a room

and hesitate—holding out your hands
as if you're carrying a delicate glass globe.

Through precise language and careful attention to sound, the poet unflinchingly chronicles the end of a life, the dignity every person deserves in death, the pain of losing a loved one. But the poet also sees beyond the fact of physical mortality, perceiving the potential for a life's invisible movement "toward / a threshold" into a metaphysical or, even, spiritual realm. Though, later, upon telephoning the crematorium to make arrangements for the body, he wavers on this earlier perception when he poignantly asks: "A world reduced to bone?" Here, again, we see the poet thinking deeply and sympathetically about how we make meaning from experiences, how a person's hold on the world is fleeting, how at any moment that world might contract or be rendered unrecognizable.

Book of Entangled Souls is a captivating and diverse landscape. Along with the poet, we tour museums in foreign countries, attend weddings, rake leaves in the backyard, shop at the supermarket deli, and drive to Disneyland. But like a well-seasoned traveler, St. John does not obsess over the destination. He remains alert and observant, deciding judiciously where a momentary pause for reflection is warranted. While the book paints intimate portraits of people (an eccentric neighbor, a "love-starved" refugee, a Muslim asylum-seeker, a homeless woman, innocent victims of cartel violence, the poet's mother and father), the book also persistently explores childhood memory, as in "What Were You Doing the Night of the First Moon Landing?" Here, the adolescent speaker, who simply "wants / to be wanted," tries on his older sister's bra, holding "the cold half-moon to [his] breast." In this instance, longing for connection is amplified by the very real mathematical distance from the moon. Through vulnerable moments like this, St. John creates a safe space that allows the reader to relate to the experiences he is charting, forming bonds of identification that transcend the page.

St. John never shies away from feelings—the fears, grief, doubts, and regrets—that threaten to break our psyches apart. For example, in "Insurgent," a poem about the poisoning of a household pest, a "small, gray mouse," St. John rehearses image after image that readers will not soon forget: the animal "jerking in circles on our concrete step," its "dark / bright droplet of each eye" and "the minute, finely-fingered stars, / those delicate, white feet / that stalk our sleep." At times the poet is a witness, at times a participant. In either case, he is mindful of how he represents living things, human and nonhuman—whose destinies are enmeshed and dependent upon the actions of others.

To say that St. John is an intellectual poet does not capture how masterful *Book of Entangled Souls* really is. The poet is well-traveled. He is well-read. He is well-versed in the rules of prosody. Every aspect of this collection contributes to its

overarching metaphoric principle—that regardless of our apparent differences, we share a common essence, and that shared humanity is what promotes dialogue and understanding. I am struck by the sheer range of inspiration on these pages. St. John draws on literary giants from across generations, such as Homer, Chekhov, Yeats, and Heaney. But poems are also inspired by NPR reporting, online articles, newspaper obituaries, and photographs that supplement blog posts. While many of the poems tend toward free verse, there are sonnets, a sestina (“White”), echoes of Yeatsian rhyme, poems that make deft use of anaphora, even a poem written in alliterative verse (“Required Reading”). Quite fittingly, the collection’s “notes” section contains several dedications. In other words, St. John was thinking about real people when he wrote this book. The range of subject and form reveals a truly democratic poet, a person with a deep respect for humanity and an attendant desire to share in the noble task of making meaning, together, as friends.

I am not sure if I believe in the notion of a soul, but I know one thing: if I do have one, Richard St. John’s poems have surely expanded it.

— Robert Fillman