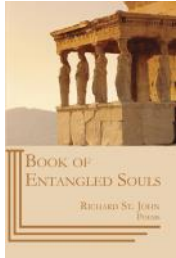


Review: Poetry in 'Entangled Souls' illuminates humanity



FRED SHAW

FEB 26, 2023

6:00 AM **PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE**

In the introduction to the City of Asylum-produced anthology “Pittsburgh Live-Ability,” a collection of writing which “amplifies the experiences of disabled folks living in Pittsburgh,” editor and poet Ellen McGrath Smith shares this perspective: “We make things happen for each other, for ourselves, when we listen, when we speak our truths.” One collaborator on that project, poet Richard St. John, has also authored the recent collection “Book of Entangled Souls,” which from the beginning showcases writing that seeks to capture the humanity of those trying to rise above their challenges. Using a clear, imagistic voice that affirms and details the depths of human existence, Mr. St. John allows these poems to shine.

In the opener, “The Chorus,” Mr. St. John employs a snaking list of noticings, letting glimpses into the everyday often taken for granted come alive in images the author mostly culls from daily life. Some examples include the person who “Works at the deli counter, evening shift //...Kneels at a routine traffic stop //...Hoards used foil from Meals on Wheels. // dances. swaying hand-in-hand, / two Down Syndrome girls, new friends, / linger as a wedding party ends. // Tends the household altars. / Goes online to shop. / Files forms in triplicate.”

The lines build toward incantation, reminding readers that the job of the chorus in Greek drama was to provide commentary on actions that were taking place before the audience. By doing this the chorus created a deeper, more meaningful connection between characters and the audience.

Mr. St. John continues in this sharply observant mode with “Down Syndrome Boy at the Movies,” which begins with a declaration: “I saw the face of God today. He was wearing / an olive-colored skullcap. Or maybe I saw / the

connection between them: his mother's arm / draped loosely on his shoulder as they walked."

That Mr. St. John will continue in a more figurative vein only ups the ante as he describes "the lamps of his doughy eyes burned only dimly— / one chromosome triples, 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." While the scene morphs into a filmic moment of the Israel-Palestine conflict, it's the personification of the theater — "it's body-pummeled, / stained red seats: the ghostly shaft of light / that suddenly divides the darkness" — that's worth the price of admission alone.

There's self-awareness and -deprecation to be found on various dance floors which he rhetorically addresses in the poem, "What Is Dancing?" The first stanza tells readers it can be found in the "Black weight / of the shoes, the cleats — the swish, the steady clack" of a ten-year old's tap shoes. But it's also to be found in the speaker's memories of "the cavernous gym, / hiding by bowls of chips & Chex Mix, watching / the girls who moved so easily, the bolder boys / who moved along with them." The awkwardness here is relatable. By the second stanza, he's gone looking for answers from others when he's told "it's practice: Arthur Murray's footprints / pasted in a square. Told it's simply giving in: / throb of the rave-club, silvery tinge of ecstasy / dazzling your skin." That it's all of these things and more seems to be the point, but above all, "It's turning, / being taken, gently into another's arms."

The longer poem "Sandra Shrine" stuns with memories of a beloved sister's last days as she copes with Down Syndrome and dementia. Broken into sections, the speaker is left to dispose of her Special Olympics accomplishments, "an easy seven pounds / of medals... / dropped forlornly in the blue recycling bin."

The speaker is reduced to consider suffering of this gentle soul, who "couldn't comprehend / the tubes / the reasons, / probes and catheters, / the mouth syringe / of sour medicines." In the end there's the existential question — "A world reduced to bone?" — and more importantly, memory is reduced to "a scrap of tape, / invisible and frayed. I am held // by this: the clutter and confusion / of my desk, the gabled space, the taped-up photograph." The poem arrives at its destination with the speaker holding out his "dented begging-bowl of heart."

"Book of Entangled Souls" will leave readers with a hopeful glimpse into the scope of the human condition.

Fred Shaw is the author of the collection, "Scraping Away" (CavanKerry Press). First Published February 26, 2023, 6:00am