She Took Off Her Wings And Shoes

Bishop, Suzette

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She Took Off Her Wings and Shoes is an extraordinary book. I mean no hype; whoever reads it will, I believe, be blown away by it, as I was. Blown away, or at any rate buffeted, as by a sudden hard wind, of the sort that hits you sideways while you are driving across a bridge, making you somewhat anxious about reaching your destination. Actually, Suzette Bishop’s language is itself the bridge, the car, the wind, the dangerous rocking, the ultimate safety.

Technically, Bishop is all over the map. She can do a simple, casual, conversational lyric poem about childhood friendship, or morning light in a seaside bedroom, or reading epitaphs in a graveyard, that looks and sounds like many other poems you’ve read, only a little fresher, just a little levitated off the page. But her signature work is formally radical, in ways May Swenson would enjoy. Many of her poems are acts of brutal (or tender) linguistic splicing. “Elegant Shrimp in Champagne Sauce” is a three-way braid involving the text of a chic magazine’s advice for a dinner party, memories of shifting rented rooms with a beloved and indigent mother, and a present-tense dream meeting with that mother. “Exit Interview” splices the smarmy scripted voice of a corporation flack with the writer’s unspoken responses. “Wedding Triptych” wickedly juxtaposes advice from one of those horrible wedding manuals designed to help you spend scads of money (“A good professional videographer, unlike a relative or other amateur, will be prepared for the unexpected and have the skills to add artistic touches”) with the reality (“A no spitting sign hangs above the front door of City Hall”). Now there’s an artistic touch! Does one laugh or cry? Yes, and the variant typefaces are part of the fun, part of the pain.

Like many poets today and always, Bishop makes art out of her life: the family story, the love story, the personal journey. She also dives into other lives. There is a brilliant sequence of poems re-creating the journeys and sensibilities of women artists like Eva Hesse, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and Christina Rossetti. Here the splicings are from the artist’s own writings,
and the poems are alternately heartbreaking and triumphant. And then there is the long title poem that ends the book, a meandering meditation on the goddess Fortune, that possesses a troubling grace, with its seemingly aleatic construction that so well embodies chance as an aesthetic as well as biographical rule. Where are we in this poem? What time is it? Here, there, skipping years, looping, longing, losing, surviving, closing with a heron that “flies beside me effortlessly” like an image of achieved poetry.

Wild, bold, furious, generous, unsubdued, hilariously and painfully dishing up our world in chunks of cognitive dissonance that mysteriously evolve into something lovely, She Took Off Her Wings and Shoes is deeply personal, extravagantly public art. I was thrilled to read it.

Alicia Ostriker