

***CRY BACK MY SEA: 48 POEMS IN 6 WAVES***

Sarah Arvio

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*Ilka Scobie*

The hottest love has the coldest end.

—Socrates

Spare, elegant, and deliberately soul-baring, *Cry Back My Sea* eloquently explores the universal experience of mature heartbreak. Sarah Arvio, an award-winning poet and translator, uses superb linguistic play to delve into the landscape of lost love, obsession, and survival. Reading this book reminded me that romantic rejection is processed in the same region of the brain as physical and emotional pain.

Her sustained passion recalls that of Petrarch, another love-obsessed poet. The early Renaissance poet and humanist famously wrote “I find no peace, and yet / I make no war / and fear and hope; / and burn, and I am ice.”

Divided into six “waves,” *Cry Back My Sea* thrusts the reader immediately into the experience of being “the one less loved” and, ultimately, abandoned. The introductory poems share titles united by nature; “Gosling,” “Rat Idyll,” “Wood,” and “Whorl.” The tenor of the collection is set by “Shrew”: “I hate my heart What is this wild and bad / renunciation I hate my heart Why / does it hurt me even now after so.” “There are no words great or small to describe / the private torture of the hounded heart,” ends the introductory poem, “Small War.”

Hauntingly artful homophones enliven the unpunctuated poems, like the powerful intimacy of “Crow,” which begins with

My only hate my only love  
you like  
to chant  
chant cant chant cant

And continues with

Rook me of my heart  
oh crooked heart  
Oh crackpot heart  
oh my clochard my wanton clock

Arvio’s carefully curated language captures powerful universal emotions, filtered through her wide-ranging references and lilting linguistic foreplay. Who can resist engaging lines like these:

You hang me on the hanger  
of your anger  
like da Vinci’s triangle  
and *vinci* is vanquish  
and vanquish is  
like anguish  
.....  
I’m hung up on you  
you’re hanging me up  
(“Tu Mi Vinci (or Hang)”)

The plaintive poem transforms grief to an ironic plea:

but please let me down  
off your hanger  
Oh love let me be free  
of your anger

Effortlessly evoking primal experiences (who has not experienced some form of heartbreak?), brief and beautiful deliberations unite the collection. Dramatically riffing on a devastating separation, Arvio skips perilously close to self-indulgence. But her panoramic poetic poise, tempered with subtle humor, saves the collection from maudlin misery. Laser-focused linguistic leaps and freewheeling metaphors are far more intriguing to me than the some-what hackneyed subject of lost love.

And hiss rhymes with kiss  
short for Kissinger

who was instrumental  
in the making of a war

.....

while you were kissing me  
the day was such a glory

("Kissing Her (*or* Morning Glory)")

Charmed by the poet's iambic magic and subtle humor, readers will ultimately sympathize with the painful reality of:

You tried to break me so you broke me  
if you break me again I'll break again  
Is there a point you're trying to make

("Puck")

Her abbreviated musings jump from folktales about the fabled mariner, to the realities of sudden singlehood. In "Sinbad," she writes:

I'm agog in the synagogue of love  
and the sin is I don't know my Sinbad

.....

He was erotic and he was erratic  
he was scintillating and then savage

And goes on to declare, "It's a symbiotic thing my bio and his / I'll need an antibiotic to fight him."

And then, in "Shoe," Arvio immortalizes uncoupled status: "There's no such thing as a stand-alone shoe / There are always two to cover feet."

“Fey” begins with a seductive alliteration—“I’m fey / no one says this anymore / or this feckless / falling into a faint”—and continues with the ponderous lines, “I feel the lure of failure / the feeling / that all has failed or will fail / not the allure.” The power of these short, unpunctuated lines immediately enchants with an almost haiku-like grace. Poignant, sometimes wounded, Arvio’s emotional pain is counterpointed by a wry and charmingly wide-ranging tenor.

Even her self-deprecation casts a sweetly seductive modesty:

I am only my small humble self  
heaving inward and needed to be nursed  
a slip of a thing needing a nurse mother

(“Gosling”)

And a gentle reprimand is heard in the line “for hearts’ sake and souls’ sake stop sniveling.”

This refreshingly demure resonance is again heard in “Animal”:

I am very nervous in myself I  
was always nervous as an animal  
angling for its home and then homing in

.....  
but speaking of myself I  
tried to live in beauty and found it hard  
even harrowing

But why does such a compassionate and clever woman bemoan “When life is a wreck / with reams of remorse” (“Wreck”), or begin with the confession, “It’s like I fell off the horse of my life / I was horsing around and he bucked me” (“Rodeo of the Rose”). Surely, middle-aged survival, feminism, and life experience offer alternative paths to emotional healing. One does not expect a vivacious and keenly intelligent voice to echo with such raw pain.

Arvio’s superb sophisticated language play lightens the landscape of later life’s lost love, a far different experience from the rash drama of early first romance. Divided into six sections, *Cry Back My Sea* thrusts the reader immediately into the experience of being “the one less loved” and ultimately, abandoned.

I applauded the celebratory musings of “Peas”:

Each green  
    explosion  
a kind of green dream  
.....  
Had I known  
    I might have said  
Give me some fresh green peas  
  
give me a handful of peace

And what reader can resist the wit of lines like these:

Some color in the pit of it  
something sham in the pith of it  
  
something like shame in the myth of it  
or a puzzle deep in the paint of it

(“Shah”)

The concluding lines epitomize Arvio’s beautiful brevity: “Oh passion have patience—do a *pas de chat*— / tell me your story shah show me your heart.”

Continually surprising, elegantly offbeat, Sarah Arvio epitomizes the “less is more” axiom. The arabesques of her wide-ranging imagination, from a sensitivity to the natural world to erudite musings informed by her translation work, make *Cry Back My Sea* far more profound than a nostalgic study of romantic grief. The alchemy of Arvio’s hopscotching brilliance and restrained wit makes these poems jewels that invite admiration and contemplation.

**ILKA SCOBIE** is a native New Yorker who teaches poetry in the public school system. Her book *Any Island* (2021) was published by Spuyten Duyvil. She writes about contemporary art for *London Artlyst* and is an editor of *Live Mag!*