

Kristina Andersson Bicher's debut full-length poetry book, *She-Giant in the Land of Here-We-Go-Again* (Madhat Press 2020) employs history and myth to explore a varied psychological landscape that does not shy away from pain and loss, but also allows for consolation and redemption. The collection is replete with references to Norse gods, biblical figures, and historical incidents. Bicher brings to bear her considerable skills—vivid language, revelatory images—to tie these elements together into compelling poetry.

The book begins with poems about the 1783-84 Laki volcanic eruptions in Iceland. (*Prophecy*) These eruptions lasted eight months, spewing gas onto the ground and into the atmosphere. "What once was hill, now deep bowl,/ where love, split earth. Clouds/lie thick on our tongues . . ." The resulting famine took a catastrophic toll on animal and human life (approximately 10,000 dead), and the explosion's affects were felt throughout the world in colder temperatures and abbreviated summers. Bicher focuses on the Rev. Jon Steingrímsson, a local priest credited with aiding the local villagers, and his wife, who lost her life in the resulting famine. Bicher makes the horror of famine real, describing villagers eating lichen off of trees, killing animals in the local zoo, and surviving by trying "to live in our bodies' smallest rooms." (*Fasting*) Famine, in its many forms, is a theme Bicher returns to throughout the collection.

But this is not a poetic history book. It is set resolutely in the modern era, with urgent themes of loss, separation, estrangement, and loneliness. Bicher skillfully yokes the historical with the present in her poem *Kirkjubaejarklaustur*. The title is an Icelandic village within the Laki volcano zone, but the setting is very much modern:

This is how you break the children—
This is how you sever the husband—

with ice and flame

take them to the land

of unspeakable names
and beauty
unstoppable

and drop them

. . . .

The book has several poems—both poignant and ferocious—about the breakup of a marriage. *Reading the Ruins* is replete with sadness, along with gorgeous music and images:

Marriage is a lamentation to the clouds.
. . . .
I am an abode of mortification.
Estrangement is the abomination of the shepherd.

....

Comfort is a god with one hand.
Divorce is the pickaxe of the doomed.

In *How to Get Out of a 20-Year Hole*, the imagery is spun out even more inventively (and violently). It begins:

a prison spoon, sharp teeth, a rosary
and chicken feet, a compass rose, magnetic blood
TNT, equanimity, and a diamond file for a finger;
....

In fact, the title of the collection is a reference to a troubled relationship. In *The Weight of Myth*, she relates:

...

The earth opened around my husband's sandal.
There was a wound in the earth and he stepped right into it.

Welcome to the land of here-we-go-again.
At the end of the first saga, a she-giant falls through grass

to the bottom of everything.

...

Themes of divorce and family dislocation thread through the collection. The biblical Eve laments Cain, with his rage and fevers, a son who is "no longer hers." (*And Eve Knew Even Before*) Another mother, with a son "disfigured/by woes and so wept over," "sleeps the sleep of seas./Wakes on her knees." (*Gudrun, Morning*)

Poems of mental illness haunt the book. Troubled characters in various stages of life—from young boy being fitted for his first suit to adult prison inmates and patients in mental institutions—appear throughout the collection. The poems are heartbreaking. The short poem, *On Visiting My Brother in Jail*, laments that his body is "built for breaking/not flight." Bicher has a keen eye for the revealing (and devastating) detail. *Bringing Him Home* begins:

He comes out through glass front doors

and into the light like a dazzled prize
fighter, instinctively, he ducks—
my fists thicken. His feet have forgotten

how to wear people shoes. . . .

In *In the Garden of Mental Illness*, Bicher brilliantly invokes the natural world to reflect the violence and uncertainty of someone returning to civilian life from a stay in a mental institution:

Cacti pierce the sky.
California is cloudless and fat oranges wobble
on soft stems.
Pills smell like jasmine.
Nothing is forgotten.

In *Sugar for Krister*, the speaker brings a Baked Alaska to her brother in a mental hospital, calling it “my oblation/to the inscrutable god/of genetic misfortune.” These mental illness poems, woven throughout, are the soul of this collection. Bicher’s poetic concision and imagination bring the agony of seeing a loved one fall apart vividly to life.

Although this is a book about pain, it is also a book about desire. It opens with a poem in the voice of the Reverend’s wife, “praise the nape of you where/dark bee of my mouth goes troubling/the plum swale.” (*The Widow Sings A Love Song*) In *Ode to Restraint in a West Village Bar*, the speaker laments how prudence and self-restraint inhibit her from making a play for a taken prospective lover, but warns, “I would rip the sky/to fill my mouth—.”

But with desire comes its inevitable sidekick—heartbreak. In *The Widow Plants Daffodils*, the speaker says: “Try to dislodge/from your mind the difficult man who left in late August/and your grown children gone.” In *Woman, Cooking*:

He is five days
gone and far.
An anvil has formed
dark in her hollows, sunk
into rib and wet lung,
...

My favorite of these “breakup” poems, *Then*, adds a different element—the speaker’s self-awareness of her power to frame events through the very art she is creating:

when you are gone, for good
from me, irrevocably gone,
irretrievable

...

when I am sitting in my little yellow room
and leaves slipping
inside me
and you, vanished

what will become of you then?

...

. . . will I burnish our story into myth
harden you to marble
will I put you on a horse?

Here, what starts as a poem about the pain of the lover's departure transforms into a meditation about how the speaker will portray the lover. It is the speaker who has the power of the pen and she will not hesitate to use it, reserving the right to put her lover on a horse, or on anything else she damn well pleases. She is the author of her own story. We all create myths about our past and I love what Bicher does with that here.

This collection is rife with myths—Norse and Greek gods, biblical figures. The *She-Giant* of the title returns later in the collection. Harkening back to the opening theme of the Laki volcano, here is the poem *She-Giant* in its entirety, in all its explosive intensity:

I am the Next-Big-One-
to-Blow. My body
over these seething
fields; no joke, I bear
char marks, black
feather scars.

All of these pressures bearing down on the speaker take a toll.

I admire the way Bicher skillfully weaves together the various themes of the book. She achieves a similar alchemy, again returning to the volcano and its resulting devastation, in *The Famine That Follows*. But here the speaker could be writing about divorce or some other breakup:

We die not
from fire
but its quenching—

the flames set down,
then a barrenness

...

we will fall
upon each other
with forks
and fingers

we will eat our very names

But not all burning is destruction. Through all of this trauma, there's still the promise of rebirth, growth. In the gorgeous *After the Fire*, the speaker asserts:

. . .

yes, of course, there was pain—
the constellation

we're born under: isn't our

remaking always
violent,

but look: now the burnt tufts

of hair are virgin forest
a mountain range has bloomed

from my temple to my jaw

ropey and smooth

. . .

She-Giant in the Land of Here-We-Go-Again takes an unflinchingly look at divorce, disintegration of loved ones, desire and heartbreak. Bicher's language is always concise and surprising, the images arresting and sometimes surreal. Her language is unfailingly lyrical, but packs an emotional punch. There is not a wasted word in this entire book.

This is a well-wrought, urgent collection.