*Sooner or Later Everything Falls Into the Sea*, by Sarah Pinsker reviewed by Krista Nave

Small Beer Press

Sooner or Later Everything Falls Into the Sea is a story collection written by Sarah Pinsker, published by Small Beer Press. Pinsker is a Nebula award winner science fiction and fantasy short story author that has been published in a variety of science fiction magazines and year’s best story collections. In addition to fiction, she is also a songwriter and part of the rock band The Stalking Horses. In her brand new collection, Pinsker evokes a persistent sense of loss and dreamlike atmosphere through strong characters and uncanny premises.

 Pinsker opens her collection with her two strangest stories of the bunch, “A Stretch of Highway Two Lanes Wide” and “And We Were Left Darkling”. In the first story, a man loses his arm and gains not only a robotic prosthetic but also the unassailable belief that he is a road. As Andy doubts his reality and feels torn between his real life and his delusion, Pinsker keeps the story grounded in human emotion and melancholic prose such as “a chip that was an arm that was Andy who was a stretch of asphalt two lanes wide, ninety-seven kilometers long, in eastern Colorado. A stretch that could see all the way to the mountains, but was content not to reach them. Forever and

Ever” (13-14).

 Where “A Stretch of Highway” gives us an explanation and conclusion, “Darkling” is mysterious and fantastical with an ambiguous ending. The protagonist dreams of a daughter she never had yet deceptively real in her mind. She is not alone in her visions, as many people experience their own dream-children as well, and they desperately gather at the shore when the children inexplicably appear off the coast. The story feels divisive: you are either the narrator, basking in the dreamy tone and embracing the uncertainty of the situation, or her girlfriend Taya, trying and failing to connect to a vague idea with little to no explanation and ultimately leaving dissatisfied.

 “Remembery Day” manages to balance character relationships and genuine emotion with a partially explained, seemingly very different from our own world. Pinsker’s description of the veteran’s march is detailed and vivid, while the obscurity of this world’s history does not undercut the emotion of a daughter who does not really know her late father or living mother. Unfortunately, the collection’s namesake, “Sooner or Later”, falls flat. Set in a quasi-apocalyptic world, a cruise-ship musician named Gabby attempts to escape from her life and washes up on the shore to be rescued by Bay, a callous scavenger who is waiting to reunite with her love. The story opens in Bay’s point of view, but quickly switches to Gabby’s interview segments after the events, then back to Gabby’s perspective of the present. While the majority of the time is spent in Gabby’s head, the abrupt and too-short changes to Bay’s perspective distract the reader and fail to offer any meaningful insight into her character that isn’t provided in her conversations with Gabby. Ultimately, you are left unclear what Gabby wants and why we should even care.

 In “The Low Hum of Her”, a granddaughter struggles to accept her Bubbe’s robotic replacement as her family flees from a vague threat. Through quiets moments like “the new Bubbe reached for my hand in the darkness of the car; for the first time, I let it. I fell asleep on its lap listening to the low hum of it and pretending it was a lullaby” (60), a fondness develops between them, leading to a touching conclusion. “Our Lady of the Open Road” is Pinsker’s love letter to touring and full of anxiety for the future of music, but unfortunately spends too much time meandering through scenes with low-stakes tension. In contrast, “The Sewell Home for the Temporally Displaced” is too short for such an interesting concept, and the lack of time for worldbuilding makes it too confusing and unable to leave a real emotional impact. Compared to other high-concept stories, “In Joy, Knowing the Abyss Behind” is too mundane to keep your attention. The tension of the husband’s prison is introduced too late in the story and not given enough explanation to know the stakes or care about it.

 Pinsker closes the collection with her Hugo and Nebula nominated novella “And Then There Were (N-One)”, a science fiction twist on the classic Agatha Christie murder mystery that acknowledges and plays with the associated tropes. An insurance investigator, named Sarah Pinsker, same as the author, is invited to an unusual convention attended only by of versions of herself from different timelines and is called on to investigate when one of the Sarahs is murdered. Where this novella diverges from a straightforward whodunnit is how Pinsker leans into the theory of multiple worlds and denies a clear end to the story, leaving us with the ambiguous ending of, “Somewhere out there, iterations were sparking. Variations on the host, deciding and not deciding to go through with her plan. Killing the DJ, changing her mind and walking away. More iterations yet: the second quantologist, making and unmaking her split-second decision to leave her life and slip into one that was identical in all ways but a crucial one. Somewhere, another me turned in the second but not the first, the first but not the second. Both. Neither. Some other place, the DJ had never died. She put another record on her turntable, slowed the beat to match the song already playing, shifted seamlessly from one into the other. Some other place, a hotel nightclub full of Sarahs danced awkwardly to their favorite music, shaped by their worlds, shaping new ones” (286).

 What ties these stories together is the unifying feeling of loss. The characters all long for something they no longer have, or maybe never did, such as a father, a lover, an arm, a lifestyle, or an Earth they have never walked upon. “Sooner or Later Everything Falls Into the Sea” is a good choice for any literary reader who enjoys the blurring of reality and uncanny in unique settings and premises.