*Voice Message*, by Katherine Barret Swett rev. by Christine Martins

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Katherine Barrett Swett is the author of two poetry collections, *Voice Message* and *Twenty-one*. She is a high-school teacher in New York City and has received a PhD in American Literature from Columbia University. Her work has appeared in various journals, including *The Lyric*, *The Raintown Review*, and *The Orchards Poetry Journal*. Her sonnets were finalists for the Nemerov Contest in 2016 and 2017. Her latest work, *Voice Message*, is an outstanding chapbook collection that combines some of her previous work with new, thought-provoking poetry.

In *Voice Message,* Swett’s poetic style combines grief, womanhood, and motherhood. In the first section of the book, “Songs and Sonnets,” the author is mainly focused on developing the theme of grief and mortality. For example, in “City of Refuge,” the speaker openly talks about the loss of a child:

“[...] We have a dead child

or two and he does too and he’ll know that

you talk about the dead as if alive.

[...] We have to make a choice

between our neighbor’s staring at his plate

and somehow seeming to have lost his voice,

or our just saying that we have no daughter,

the way a drunk might say his gin was water.” (19)

We can also have a glimpse of the extensive soundwork present throughout the chapbook. In the above poem, we can notice a large amount of refrain, consonance, assonance, and rhymes. There are two main aspects to this technique. Firstly, the rhymes and the quick rhythm help the reader move through the delicate themes that Swett develops throughout the collection. In other words, it allows the reader to stay connected with the poem, moving from one line to the next without confusion or doubts. Secondly, it contributes to the experience the audience has while reading it. The quick rhythm will add to the tense and anxious tone, which impacts the way the reader interprets what is being said in the poem. The soundwork also affects the audience’s physical experience of the poetry. When reading it out loud, the reader has a mouth-full experience to which the body has a physical response to. Thus, the soundwork not only guides the reader through the poem, but it also creates a literal experience of the tone for the audience.

With poems and sonnets previously published, this collection also includes a series of fifteen sonnets that describe and interpret several of Johanne Vermeer’s paintings. Titled “Vermeer’s Daughters,” this forms the second section of the chapbook and is filled with synesthesia and strong imagery. The diction in each sonnet is tangible and strong, taking the reader through a powerful experience. This section is also interesting due to two unique characteristics. First, the line that ends each sonnet is the first line of the following poem. This adds a lot to the tonal juxtaposition between each line. It also leads the audience to the final sonnet, “Vermeer’s Daughters,” which is made up of the previous fourteen end lines. The main difference between this section and Crown of Sonnets is that it contains fifteen linked sonnets instead of seven. Second, the sonnets are a mix of actual description of the painting and the speaker’s interpretation of it, which adds a very particular imagination to each poem. For example, the second sonnet ends with:

“I’d read a book with half a mind on what

I read, another half on what I planned

or hoped to do once I had my daughter,

a window opened on the sound of water.” (24)

Then, the third sonnet follows with:

“A window opened at the sound of water,

her face is glowing with happiness.

[...] A velvet elbow in swashbuckling stance

creates a shining triangle of gold.” (25)

One can see here how the tone changed while the diction is still strong and focused on imagery. The sound work continues to guide the reader through each line, setting the rhythm of the piece. Due to its unique structure and theme, this section contains a lot of the power in the book and creates a unique experience to the reader.

Finally, the third section is titled “Marginalia.” This part is the most experimental of all. Here, the speaker plays with words by writing about famous writers, questions her own mortality and suicidal thoughts, explores her womanhood through sensuality, and hides from her grief. For example, in “Wine,” the speaker says:

“Some memories are drowned,

[...] we drink with those we see

to those we loved, to those who aren’t around

[...] as if with wine we drink up memory.” (55)

In this passage, one can observe the refrain of “we drink” and the slant rhyme of “drowned” and “around.” We can also observe how the speaker hides from her grief by drinking wine. This is particularly impactful because one learns that, despite trying to hide from her grief, the speaker is still struggling with life. Her suicidal poems tie with this notion of drinking to forget. Unlike the other sections, the connection between each poem here has a clear storyline that tells the reader how grief and mortality are being constantly questioned by the speaker. This, combined with the quick rhythm and extensive sound work, works well on taking the audience through a powerful experience while still giving them enough time to process the depth of the tones and the themes presented throughout.

In conclusion, *Voice Message* is a brilliant collection that combines well developed poetic devices with powerful themes. These topics include grief, mortality, motherhood, and womanhood. One of the highlights of the book is the “Vermeer’s Daughters” section, which explores different paintings and its significance to the speaker. The combination of various themes with the use of different poetic devices makes this book unique and meaningful to a large audience. And the incredible imagery and strong soundwork makes it tangible and interesting for even more people.