Seattle Spring, A Monstrous Thing

           Monster: the initial traits that come to mind include ‘large,’ ‘frightening,’ and ‘overwhelming.’ Yet as modern media have shown, monsters can also be misunderstood. It is this plethora of aptitudes that Karen Finneyfrock addresses in her poem “Monster.” The poem takes place over the course of a bus ride, in which a speaker (presumably Finneyfrock) describes the encounter she and her fellow passengers have with the monster that is Spring. Over the course of the poem, Finneyfrock uses an array of poetic devices to create contrast, including word choice and imagery, dynamic narrative structure, and metaphor. These devices indicate the different ‘monstrous’ stages of Seattle spring, from animalistic to frightening to sympathetic. In these characterizations, Finneyfrock draws on her own background as a Seattle poet to conjure the specific experience of spring in Seattle.

Finneyfrock’s overarching structural choices make this poem easy for readers to understand and visualize. “Monster” is free verse, with no clear pattern of rhyme or rhythm. Instead, Finneyfrock relies on specific, contemporary language and narrative to create the poem’s movement and arc. By using a first-person speaker as a guide through the poem, Finneyfrock drops the reader inside the poem itself, allowing them to experience events alongside her. Finneyfrock also fosters a sense of community between herself and the other bus passengers, perpetuated by use of collective pronouns throughout the poem. This technique incorporates readers into the poem’s events as they read. Finneyfrock uses colloquial yet specific and descriptive language to make her poem easy for the modern reader to understand, while painting them a vivid picture of the scene she sets. An excellent example of this is in the first stanza: “Even the wet floor of the city bus, that slimy / torso, muddy with mountain spit, challenging each / rider’s ankle to a duel, is romantic on an April afternoon.” The language here is physical and tangible. None of the terms are archaic – readers can easily comprehend these images, yet their specificity still gives them power. The phrase “muddy with mountain spit” is particularly visceral, giving a clear picture of what that bus floor must look like in a way that is engaging. This description also evokes Seattle specifically: the messy-yet-delightful feeling that accompanies the coming of spring. Specific word choice and description continues to characterize this poem moving forward. Finneyfrock’s poetic structure draws readers into her poem, forcing them to grapple with the ensuing ‘monster’ firsthand.

           Finneyfrock’s characterization of Spring as a monster evolves over the course of the poem, fostering a narrative structure of tension, movement, and shifting perspectives. Her initial portrayal, beginning with Spring’s appearance in the poem’s third stanza, subverts expectations of how both springtime and monsters are classically portrayed. “Rearing up on her hind legs in front of the bus, / two feet planted in the Puget Sound, yellow claws / tapping the tops of skyscapers, stands Spring.” The reference to Puget Sound places this as a firmly Seattle monster. Here, Finneyfrock describes Spring as classically animalistic: ‘rearing’ on its hind legs, possessing claws. Yet, other than the bus driver’s initial fright, Finneyfrock does not yet portray Spring as terrifying. Readers are unsure of whether this monster is a welcome intruder, as springtime traditionally is in literature, or otherwise. Finneyfrock creates contrasts in her portrayal of Spring in the following lines: “Godzilla with a head full of flowers, Gorgon with ivy / for snakes.” The contrast here between allusions to classical monsters and their floral appearances match the larger contrast Finneyfrock crafts in equating ‘monster’ and ‘spring.’ In the next description, Spring appears almost pet-like as she “sniffs the bus, sneezes, licks every tree twice….” Even her fury is pink, accompanied by rhododendron rain; the use of this color and description change the connotation of ‘fury’ into something livelier, gentler. Finneyfrock toys with readers’ expectations of monsters and spring alike in this characterization, impressing how the start of spring in Seattle comes as a pleasant shock.

           However, like spring itself, Finneyfrock’s poem is not stagnant. Her characterization of Spring grows and changes over the course of the poem, preventing readers from settling on any one description. Finneyfrock weaves in frightening imagery to portray the precarious nature of spring. Spring disrupts the Seattle status quo as it inevitably sweeps its way through the city. Finneyfrock first establishes this in her portrayal of the city itself, as seen in the second stanza: “I… cross the bridge beneath / the eye of a volcano, pray an earthquake / doesn't come while we’re on the viaduct, sled the exit ramp into downtown….” The references to natural disasters represent the perilous nature of life in the Pacific Northwest as a whole, the danger that is always lurking. The way the bus ‘sleds’ down the hill offers a similar impression of lack of control. It only makes sense, then, that Seattle spring would have the potential to be similarly catastrophic. This capacity is shown in the following description: “(The bus driver) knows Spring wants / to eat us like fat chickens, sucking the grease from our bones. / She wants to snap our spines before tossing us skulls first into / Summer.” As with Seattle itself prior, there is a comparison drawn between Spring’s beauty and danger, its capacity to blow through and overwhelm in its abrupt arrival. This description is the most classically ‘monstrous’ of any given of Spring. Readers thus reconsider their original conceptions of what constitutes a monster, further complicating the multifaceted metaphor Finneyfrock evokes. In aligning her monster with chaotic descriptions of the city, Finneyfrock characterizes her Spring as uniquely Seattle.

           Finneyfrock next hones Spring’s supposed menace into a capacity more manageable: the exaggerated anger of a teenage girl. In drawing this comparison, Finneyfrock warps readers’ unease into something more like sympathy as Spring “coats the city / in cherry blossoms so it will look like her messy bedroom....” The transitional phase of adolescence is something all readers will have encountered, if not personally endured. This kind of monster is painfully human, more than any other personification so far. This portrayal is aided by Finneyfrock’s use of language, which throughout the poem has been detailed and specific. Cherry blossoms appear as an image closely associated with Seattle. Specificity of language additionally comes into play in the dialogue she gives Spring: “‘I know that slut summer is coming / with her long legs and easy love.’” Finneyfrock takes on traits of the genre of poetic monologue here to distinguish Spring’s voice. The word ‘slut’ in particular stands out as crass in this otherwise rather eloquent poem, and thus works to distinguish the voice of Spring as a character. This voice continues throughout this stanza, concluding with the remark: “‘If you loved me like you should love me, / I would stay here all year.’” With this line, readers suddenly grow remorseful for their prior impressions of Spring as ‘monstrous.’ She seems instead sorrowful, relatable, and misunderstood. Especially after this last personification, the poem’s conclusion is particularly melancholy. Spring’s departure is quiet, lonely even: “When she leaves us, she goes / back to the ocean, through the Puget Sound. Only the magnolia trees go with her.” Finneyfrock closes the poem with sympathy for her monster – the word ‘only’ in particular is heavy with loneliness. Despite the havoc Spring has wreaked, the upheaval of lives she has caused, Seattleites and readers alike are sad to see her go. With the image of Spring as an adolescent still in their minds, they are left with the wistful impression that accompanies growing up and moving on.

           In “Monster,” Karen Finneyfrock prompts readers to think further about traditional portrayals of both monsters and spring. The tension in this poem originates from the contrasts she devises in characterizing spring as monstrous, and in her varying portrayals of what a monster looks like. Finneyfrock also delivers language and characterizations of spring that are specific to Seattle; within this poem, she delivers her own unique perspective on the often-written-about experience of the season’s turn.