

The Woman Who Married Herself
Donna Spector
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Reviewer: Heather Taylor Johnson

I find it interesting that Donna Spector opens her first book of poems—*The Woman Who Married Herself*—with a short series of pieces about her father. Though they beautifully combine the intricacies of a character with simplicity of style, and ultimately portray mystery, awe, and a soft and weeping love (she is, after all, a playwright), the poems set the tone of the collection as something other than what it is. *The Woman Who Married Herself* sings proudly of women, of failed lovers, and of the laughter women can glean from those experiences, the wisdom wrought from those experiences, or the failed wisdom, as the case may be. It is a celebration of finding the woman within the self and accepting her, growing with her, loving her. What a glorious title she has given her collection! So...appropriate to open with poems about her father? I'm not so sure, unless we're speaking of a woman's foundation, the reasoning behind her failed loves, and the reckoning of her own strength. Whatever the case may be, they happen to be some of the best poems in the book.

This first section, "The Same Shadows," is generally filled with childhood memories, some only stories recalled, brought to mind by photographs such as those which decorate the book's cover. In fact, the whole of the section feels like a collage of family photographs. Names, trinkets, clothing, and colors combine with a quickened narrative style, making for a sometimes overwhelming reading experience. I longed for variation, if only to slow things down, give myself the space to wipe the mishmash of Spector's memory from my eyes. That is not to say that the poems in "Shadows" are not good—they are quite touching and occasionally brilliant (as in the father poems)—but they are often jammed together for the sake of maintaining a thematic approach that ultimately highlights Spector's limitations when it comes to expressing familial memories. So I was relieved to discover that the following two sections were sparer in their approach. Even the section entitled "Lovers and Other Dreams" held a specific theme, but in these poems Spector gave herself greater freedom to explore memory through a disparity of rhythm and tone. The final part, "Lessons in the Mirror," worked best for me. It is here that Spector interprets the self through various defining incidents, allowing us to string it all together, thematically, for ourselves and, in turn, allowing us to behold a more complex set of female portrayals.

"Do Not Forget These Words" is a stunning portrait of a friend's death. I see the widower/doctor, and I see the "red-lit jealous gods," the "alluring smoky light of hell-beings," even the "yellow hungry ghosts." I got the sorrow and the fear. Equally impressive is her confessional poem about John Berryman, a pioneer of the confessional movement. It's both tense and lyrical, imparting a sense of doom, and also offering a portrayal of an awakening. "Pesos" is one of the more skilled poems in the collection, combining an almost child-like manner of speech with a constructed formalist's eye. The result is a glimmer of human compassion in all of its multifaceted, heart-of-the-matter blatancy. These poems are uniquely deserving of multiple readings, but it is with the pieces in which Spector heavily focuses on women where the overall theme of the book comes together. She writes, "And I am all these women, the helpless and the one/ who will not help" ("Au Bon Pain"), and "We are the woman who drives by/ lighted windows" ("When the Women Say Yes").

Also prevalent in this collection is the theme of displacement. Whether it can be attributed to her Christian upbringing juxtaposing a Jewish heritage, her guilt (or perhaps the guilt placed upon her, guilt being a tricky emotion) over leaving her family, her status as a twice-divorced woman, or her varied travels over land and sea, Spector consistently reveals a deep sense of dislocation. In "What the Woman Does," she writes,

In this story there is no husband, no father, just
men who fall from her life like combs too
delicate to hold her heavy curls. She plays tambourine,
flutes, thumb pianos, a zither that goes up in
flames. She dances with rain sticks.

She is in love with the ocean, the redwoods, but she
and her son travel east with a man in his old blue
Ford. They settle for a valley with lakes and loneliness
like ocean ghosts in winter. When she rounds a corner
and meets the dazzle of sun frozen on snow

she knows she can live anywhere in a moment.

This is a fine example of the trust Spector places in her own hands (as well as a fine example of questionable line breaks). Just as the wind excites as it moves through our hair, so does the security of knowing that we may follow it to its resting point, and that we may rest there, too. I trust Spector in all of her impulses, even when she suggests that I should be wary, as in “Fortune Cookie Wisdom”:

Asked to draw myself, at eighteen, I traced
a nearly perfect circle. Nothing inside. Now I'm a rag
bag of scraps, litter, wisdom bits, a few faux
gems. Something must be
made of all this.

Throughout *The Woman Who Married Herself*, Spector is trying to locate herself, which is why it is so appropriate to end with the book's namesake poem. The final lines of the collection—“Opened boxes of china/ so fine she could hold/ a plate to the light and see her own/ life beyond”—suggest that Spector has indeed found a place for herself. This placement is one that has occurred internally. Spector holds no regrets. She is forever probing deeper into the woman she is, seemingly unconcerned with the woman she might become and especially the woman she *should* become. She is able to live in the here and now, inspired by the clarity of a deep acceptance. Quite a feat for a first collection. I'm looking forward to charting her growth in further collections to come.