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THE SMALL, EXPANSIVE SELF AND THE SELF OBSESSED

“ . . . I seem to live/ a smaller person that I was . . . ” Hilda Raz writes in her third collection of poetry. This constellation, composed around the reverberating experience of breast cancer, constitutes a set of emotional documents on human feeling in one individual, female self. At times this self seems small indeed, shrunk by fear, as in the chilling “Mu,” where Raz images a children’s slide in the park at midnight as “the mouth of the metal tunnel” into the darkness she must traverse when she goes under the knife. But to be prey to fear is human. Smallness in these poems is actually a metaphor for a self transformed.

The beauty and strength of this collection is that it goes beyond the meticulous, selective documentation of that illusion, the separate and isolated self. In the moving “Earlier,” Raz delineates what she has gone beyond—that ego self that is prey to craving and grasping, with needs “I had myself, or didn’t or dimly knew/ but learned to satisfy, then damp, . . . ” We might, in longing for an expanded self, imagine a smaller self to be something cramped, shrunken. But in this poet’s symbolism, the small self IS the new, expanded self, small only because it is part of the rest of the universe. For by book’s close, Raz sees herself as intimately webbed into nature’s largeness and largesse. She has transcended the grandiosity and ignorance of the single particle ego and reconnected with the world.

Small, I wander the paths
of the world, dust, a miracle
nose to scoop air, breathing.

★

Who do I think I am,
a solitude,
Enough that my eyes focus

Divine Honors, Hilda Raz. Wesleyan University Press, 1997. 107 pages.

on that emerald tree, that spruce,
blue in its huge dying.
(“Who Does She Think She Is”)

Raz seems equally at home in the lyrical (“my skin, a bracelet/ of psalms . . .”); the rhetorical (“Herein find one woman, used, in fair shape . . .”); the elegiac (“words had gone/ in their ash fans . . .”). And nature, especially as it includes the human, is this poet’s touchstone. Nearly every poem takes nature’s sensuousness as its perceived context and reference point, displays its “two-toned hosta/ green from sopped earth,” its “braid of onions,/ purple,” its “dun cardinal,” its “loam fields.” The surgery scar itself is “Riverroad, meandering root . . .” Even the pin which the poet’s jeweler daughter fashions to mark the missing breast is “a tiny silver moon/ with dark brass nipple . . .” And in the moving “Let’s consider the consequences,” the biblical lilies which neither toil nor spin are universal, dimensionless, sacred backdrop against which the small, recovering self tries to measure its expansive space.

Consider the lilies of the field, how they sway in wind
without reference to your pages, how little they care
for laughter or the dour vice, the smile tucked under the chin,
the complaint, the whine, how—if nothing else—you have
your dear cornea, lungs that puff and inflate their wings . . .

Raz is a mature poet who feels her constituent being as a wideness that includes everyone she comes in contact with, every thing she perceives, and all of nature—that encompassing bower in which we experience love and suffering. Not surprising then that in the closing poem, “Ecstasies,” Raz records feeling her surroundings almost at a subatomic level.

Where I am now,
every ecstasy dissolves
back into the pool,
the lap of waves,
the filled basin.

To say of Ellen Dudley's first book, as does the jacket, that the poems are "passionately involved with the human body" seems a bit reductive. Though they take as their subject matter sex and the violence that sometimes colors it, the poems are psychic cries, testimonies, accountings. The body serves as emblem, for it constitutes the material configuration in which spirit lives, but let us not forget that we live simultaneously on material and metaphysical planes. This poet focuses on the body as a locus of and as a way of speaking about psychic violence.

The poems in part I feature *dramatis personae* on the psychic stage: a babysitter, a hunter and his girl, a doctor abusing his wife, a raped girl turning her experience into self hatred. The psyche is helpless and vulnerable, and trust is shattered. Nowhere in this section is sex—or the body—erotic. Instead sex is an occasion for psychic wounding. The poems in this section seem not so much raw as driven. The poet cannot move on. Over and over she examines the wound of innocence betrayed. Thus I'm especially drawn to poems which attempt to encompass reverberations beyond the single atom of the obsessed self, poems like "Crazy" and "After Image."

She has no idea: of me, of cells
marshalling for the campaign on the left breast.
No idea that to the east Dr. Goebbels
takes time to play jackstraws with his daughters,
and far West, Oppenheimer strings equations
like tinsel. . . .

In part II the poet begins to get a leg up on experience, and here and there a poem hints at perspective. Still though, in quite a few of these, the poet casts back over the past, as though memory does not inform the present but actually possesses more reality than "now." Thus "Recidivist" comes as a relief. This is an accomplished and life affirming poem, and its movement is unerring. Dudley has arrived at a place where she can utter passionate, embodied praise of desire, which she characterizes as "on my side now," and says, "I trust her."

Slow Burn, Ellen Dudley. Provincetown Arts Press, 1997. 65 pages.

In part III Dudley backs further away, widens the lens, gets more persepctive. The first poem, "Trajectory," begins with a close in shot of a girl stepping out of a lagoon, then zooms back so that Dudley can say, brilliantly, "Gravity,/ carnal and delicious force,/ keeps us—and kills." Here the poet has distance on her subject matter, and the sense of obsession lessens. There is room for the humor in "Mitered Corners" where two lovers are "joined at an angle/ empirically imperfect,/ exactly desired." There is also room for the generosity displayed in "Mendel's Lesson" and "Blowing Up the Giacometti" and the kind impulse toward both her father and herself in the moving poem "Prop Wash."

Dudley's adeptness with image is often better than the best, as in "Independence Day" where the watermelon stain on the girl's clothes "from breasts to thighs" suggests the painful legacy her dead father has left her. This is a poet whose diction gleams. Dudley is utterly exact and avoids overkill and cliché. Of the hunter and the deer, she writes,

and as she turned her head toward us, inquisitive,
he squeezed softly and she stumbled,
her front legs splayed
like split sticks, and coughed up
bright blood on the lichen. He smiled,
and whispered a hard *Yes!*—
the yes he used with me. . . .

The strength of concentrated focus is that it works like a spotlight to foreground subject matter. The downside is that the reader can feel too close to apprehend the relative significance of the grassblade within the larger field. There is also danger for the poet, for a narrow lens necessarily narrows vision. But the fact that in part III the focus begins to open out suggests that Dudley may soon begin to use her considerable skill on a larger emotional canvas. If she will, we have much to look forward to. This is indeed a promising debut.