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Poetry Review: Letdown by Sonia Greenfield

Alexandra Umlas · Wednesday, April 22nd, 2020

"They used to believe the *mis*- of miscarriage was payment for a mis-deed. / But there are two shadow halves here. Two threads to the story. One, failure. / The other, diagnosis" (13). This is the *"Foreword"* to Sonia Greenfield's newest collection of poetry, *Letdown*, from White Pine Press. Here, sixty-four stunning prose poems work individually and as a narrative to put to words Greenfield's experience with miscarriage, fertility loss, and raising a son with an autism diagnosis.

The two "shadow halves" that we are introduced to in this *"Foreword"* travel with us as we make our way through the experience of reading *Letdown*, reminding us of the contradictory nature of motherhood, reminding us that in naming things, in putting words to them, we shape what those things are and how they might be seen; and yet, undeniably, some things also simply *are*.

Take, for example, Greenfield's title, *Letdown*, a term explored in poem "36" as Greenfield describes a language mini lesson she gives to her son: "I try to explain / how some words have two or more meanings. For example, *letdown*" (58). Letdown is both the term for the milk-release that happens during breastfeeding, but it is, of course, also a term that names disappointment. This act of defining, of including multiple ways of seeing, is a sort of proof of the contradictory nature of life and of language. The state of being disappointed is called the same as the state of being able to feed a child. One letdown is a feeling or emotional one, while the other is a function of biology.

Greenfield's decision to use the prose poem form is an inspired one. According to Charles Simic, the prose poem is "the result of two contradictory impulses, prose and poetry, and therefore cannot exist, but it does." Greenfield's prose poems are spaces that allow for all of the tools of poetry—lyricism, condensed language, etc., but in a surprising way (not many poets have written entire books of prose poems). This affords them an additional, subversive power; their lack of typical line breaks gives them a forceful fluidity, while making them resilient containers for their "contradictory impulses."

The examination of the term "letdown" is aptly followed with poem, "37," an exploration of all the things people say: "Someone says to me, *Don't be so in love with your own suffering*. / I just wanted a little more. Why is that so wrong?" (59). Greenfield makes us feel the insufficiency of language, the way that language often takes on a life of its own, the way language can cut into us or reduce us; and yet, these poems are abundant in their ability to fully articulate these experiences, and so in them language is also a healing balm that also has the power to explain and to soothe.

Another contradictory aspect of motherhood that flourishes in these prose poems is a sense of

motherhood's ability to be simultaneously wonderful and terrifying. These poems give readers that are not mothers windows into the experience, and give those of us who are mothers tangible utterances that unequivocally describe the experience.

"6" is a sort of modern update of Sylvia Plath's "Morning Song," where "All night your moth-breath / Flickers among the flat pink roses." Greenfield writes, "I sat at the edge of the bed and my ears pivoted. I could see in the / dark. I checked your small chest again for its rise and fall. I checked with a pocket mirror for your moist breath" (22). There is an intense worry in these poems, but also a demonstration that the worry stems for an unimaginable sense of wonder and love. Worry and wonder sit next to each other in each of the poems; they are inextricable from each other.

In "44" Greenfield brings her son to an aquarium and then to a beach, where he finds joy in being knocked over by waves. The precise descriptions of the son in these places is paired with the mother's thoughts at the end: "What makes some children wander into water? When I think *spectrum*, I think / of light. When I think of light, I think of ripples. When I think of ripples, / I think of the girl lured into a pond, the boy found in a reservoir" (66).

Each moment of thought is transformed into a new moment, and the poem creates in the reader the same frenetic thinking that accompanies being responsible for the safety of someone else, the next thought and the next, the worry that blurs the edges of all joy, the worry that sits in the margins, waiting for whatever will come next, where everything is tied to everything else, and nothing is all the way safe.

What I found most extraordinary about this collection is how Greenfield's work is consistently honest. We get prose poems that are crafted for clarity and content, but that have no hint of fabrication or inauthenticity. This way of writing takes an enormous amount of bravery, especially when you consider the subjects with which Greenfield is dealing. There is a lack of discussion on the issues of of autism, issues of pregnancy loss, and issues of fertility, and Greenfield does the important work that poetry is so wonderful at, building, with language, bridges of understanding that ask the reader to evaluate his or her own ways of using language and labels.

In "49" we are taken to the California Science Center in Los Angeles, where there is an exhibit of eleven preserved embryos and fetuses: "And here is what I know: eleven times someone had / to decide to put their loss on display in the name of science scrubbed clean / of woe, their stories submerged in preserving solution" (74). This is also what poetry has the power to do, to preserve and contain what existed, or what almost existed; however, in poetry all of the woe is present. What is preserved is not the scientific fact, but the human experience. Greenfield's poems are not to be looked at as an exhibit, but rather to be interacted with, to be read and then reread, and to be shared.

As readers, we are buoyed along by the presence of Greenfield's son, who "wants silver linings for breakfast," who wields "a stick of lightning to trace constellations on the ceiling," who asks us, through his existence in "62" to "strip expectations away, to peel off the layers until we're / holding our child's happiness in the palm of our hand, as pure as the / simplest silicate mineral, and to then say it is enough" (90).

And still, even in the most beautiful renderings of his energy in these poems, we still all are who we are and we still all have what we have. Each of these prose poems is a demonstration of the

idea of the “two shadow halves” from the book’s *Foreword*. Each prose poem a marker for everything that never was, or everything that almost was, and also, each prose poem a blossoming of everything that is. In “64” we hear the voice of the preschool teacher “who finished *we get what we get* with *we don’t get upset*” (92) except we do get upset, and as long as we have a voice as resonant as Greenfield’s, that is okay.

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