

## Her Familiars

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REVIEWED BY MAYA BHAVE

Jane Satterfield's *Her Familiars* is a remarkably unique book of poetry, in that Satterfield delivers more than beautiful, haunting prose, more than eloquent words tied to ironic images, and more than just lingering memories. Rather, the reader comes away from this collection of poems with something they weren't expecting—a rich, intimate sociological analysis.

Satterfield bridges micro and macro analysis, the personal and political or what C.W Mills called one's "biography and history" in a convincing manner. She moves beyond the confines of the written word to weave together a moving analysis of all our lives and our sociological imaginations that have been constructed in a multiplicity of ways. Satterfield titles her collection, "Her Familiars," a reference to those often unnamed enlightening spirits that drive and shape women's daily lives.

Her poems span historical narratives from Colonial America to more modern narratives focused on Princess Diana's death and the 9/11 attacks. Each poem is imbued with a unique story about the socially constructed self, a merging intersection of historical facts tied to the construction of identity. We leave each poem asking, how did I get here? Who am I? How do others see me, and why? Her poetry reveals us, not as bounded, static creatures, but rather ones shaped by race, class and gender with truths that are fluid and dynamic.

Take for example her vivid descriptions of the detrimental health impact on workers in the British potting industry. She writes, "*On a good day you could see beyond your outstretched hand/the smoke was a sign of prosperity/ Smoke meant business and wages/For mothers, mouths fed/ the slim crescent of a rimmed dinner plate where a line of meadow flowers/its brilliance a life-line etched in the palm*" (71). Satterfield astutely conveys the complexity of motherhood, focusing on an epoch when women and children were shifting their own labor from home to factory, taking advantage of new economic opportunities all whilst enduring virulent and injurious conditions. This paradox illuminates the contemporary, global struggle of numerous women today attempting to create a better life for their families and children often at great cost. In a similar vein she writes, "*you cannot drink tea out of tea cup without the aid of the five towns.... Bernard Shaw wanted to get into fresh air*

*but found gray streets, gray skies, even the meadows choked*" (73). These particular poems speak to the irony of the expanding global market for fine china, advanced by young workers hampered by diseases induced in the manufacturing factories. The worker demands the labor, all while simultaneously creating his or her own demise.

Other poems in the collection reflect themes of love, loss, and grief. In a poem entitled "One kind of purgatory" (16), she reflects on the night Princess Diana died in Paris. Diana's global allure was unparalleled, yet Satterfield captures many people's obsession with her in one line, "*It spins again, the revolving door/what is the camera looking for.*" She repeats the line over and over, mirroring the television frames that incessantly replayed Diana's last moments on earth. A similar device is employed in "Bombing: Pet Bazaar, Baghdad" in which she writes, "*There's grief in the mute loop of CNN flashing the flat screen TV*" (19). In sharp contrast, Satterfield speaks to more intimate feelings of loss in "Meditation on a line from Hafiz" (44/45). She notes, "*one regret, Dear world, I am determined not to have when I'm lying on my deathbed is that I did not kiss you enough.*"

In each poem, there are tightly woven connections of history, identity, and social status, distinct social markers shaping readers' experiences within the world. Each time and context is critical, yet Satterfield challenges readers to move beyond the obvious, the seemingly bounded word and find something new which we did not expect. Thus, her poems leave us wanting more, asking more and searching for ourselves in each line. That is the beauty of this compilation, and of her immense skill as a poet.

There is one poem, however, that is truly different from the rest, "Family of Strangers." This poem spoke most poignantly to me, as it was written about, and dedicated to, her dear friend and colleague, Deborah Tall, who died of cancer in 2006. Satterfield writes about Deborah's diagnosis, chemo treatments, and stoic, remarkable effort to continue in her academic social role. Yet, it is two lines that I am haunted by, "*Deborah something struck a nerve/ You'd never know the lives of those you'd touched*" (51). Yes, Deborah that is so true, and Jane Satterfield, that is true of you too—a skilled social storyteller who brings insightful social analysis through carefully chosen words, scene, and memory. I am richer for reading these beautifully worded constructs of time, space, and place.