



Just an Ordinary Woman Breathing

Julie Marie Wade

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“Dangerous the epiphany that you are old enough to have a history”: like a bullet through a pane of glass, so begins Julie Marie Wade’s hellacious essay collection, *Just an Ordinary Woman Breathing*.

In her nonlinear cavalcade of shattering and shaping moments, Wade peruses topics surrounding body image, religion, and sexuality from at once a personal and universal perspective. Her mother, herself considered the “Plain Jane” among her siblings, instilled in Wade a simmering fear of her own body—a tool to be enhanced and utilized before its inevitable betrayal. Marilyn Monroe and Princess Grace are the epitome of beauty; dark-haired Wade is positioned as the iconoclast, even her height unable to spare her her mother’s hopeful comparisons to Nicole Kidman and Gwyneth Paltrow.

Within her snapshots from childhood into adulthood, Wade also reveals tensions and confusions surrounding her sexuality. Recollections of tongue-tied conversations with camp counselors temper devastating scenes, such as a visit to a physician who pronounces her bisexual against her protestations after asking if she has ever had intercourse with a man. “Well,” Wade replies, “it wasn’t a gold star I was seeking.”

Enhancing her personal history, Wade utilizes examples and language from poetry, art history, math, and philosophy. The works of famous Baroque painter Peter Paul Rubens become a commentary on ever-shifting, ever-unattainable standards of beauty, while people become equations in such expressions as “Let G=Gestalt.” These original devices add layers to both the essays and Wade herself as she blends and juxtaposes diverse mediums into an amalgamation all her own.

Just an Ordinary Woman Breathing is a white-hot meteor streaking straight to the heart of individual identity, cracking it open and inviting grief and exultation over all the disparate pieces of its seamless whole.

DANIELLE BALLANTYNE (March / April 2020)

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