

Take This Spoon: A Review

By Guest Contributor

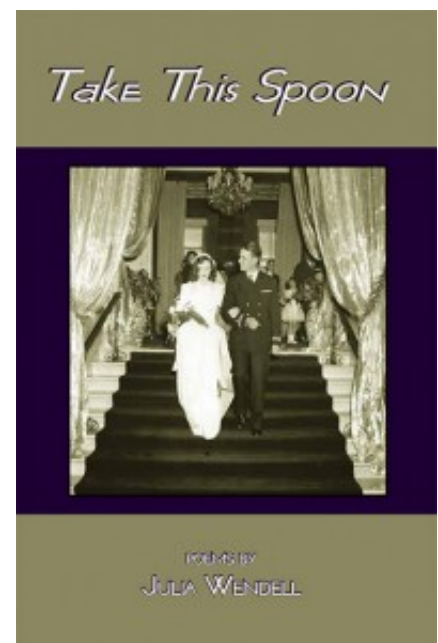
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Take This Spoon by Julia Wendell
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I didn't bring a scale with me to the beach. I've weighed myself multiple times a day for years, watching the numbers go from 108 to 180 and vacillate widely in between. The only constant over the years has been an often raging eating disorder. The beach house on Barnegat Light was meant to be a vacation, from work, from my mother, and, I decided, from my scale.

What I packed instead were swimsuits (one-pieces), four bottles of sunblock (one for each day—I'm Irish), and, among other things, the collection *Take This Spoon* by poet Julia Wendell. I'd heard about this project far before it was perfect bound, though all I'd heard was that it was a collection of poems with recipes interspersed. Our first day on the beach, after diving into rough Jersey Shore waves, I settled on the blanket with her collection and began to read, the beach behind me.



People talk about getting lost in books, as though they're corn mazes, and that day I knew what they meant. Wendell's words called to me more than the whole Atlantic. Her poems recount a family connected by food, alcohol, and guilt. More than once in the collection is tension resolved by a sweet of some sort. In "Appearances," Wendell writes of a fight between the speaker's lover and father: "I think Viet Nam / provoked their angers, / which flare and then subside / when my mother calls them back / from their scuffle in the hallway / for Kahlúa mousse." In *Take This Spoon*, food connects but also divides, as in the poem "Letting the Cat Out," a didactic for the speaker on how to interact with her mother. Wendell writes:

Offer always to do the dishes,
eating as much as you can

from the abandoned plates of those privileged enough
to leave some food behind—then, close the bathroom door.

When she asks where all the leftovers went,
stare blankly, or lie. Some things she oughtn't know.

Wendell's speaker describes herself as "yours truly, the anorexic / addicted to not eating." So what to make of the recipes in the collection, obviously written by someone who loves food, its ingredients, its preparation, the joy it brings to others? Their inclusion speaks to the themes of pushing and pulling that resonate throughout. How do you cut yourself off from that which gives you life, whether it be food or family? Even death is not a fissure in *Take This Spoon*, as the ghosts of mother and father are omnipresent, in memories, in recipe cards, in direct quotes: "*Aren't these exquisite popcorn shrimp?*"

While Wendell's speaker spends much of her time in the past, reconnecting with her parents, there are poems in *Take This Spoon* rooted in the present and the speaker's own role as a mother. "The Bad Mother" is one such poem, though the title is more a half tongue-in-cheek reflection of the speaker's self-worth than a statement of her parenting. Even within this poem, the speaker says of her children, "They are always glad to see me," despite her alleged parenting failures of "not wanting / to go on vacation, / to pick them up from school," failures that she makes up for with her cooking. In poems such as "Summoned," which closes with the speaker tending to her daughter Caitlin who's ill, the love Wendell's speaker has for her children is made palpable through the lush imagery. Wendell writes:

...because my daughter needs me

to share her aimless sense of sick time,
when it's all right not to do a thing

but listen to the catbird in the tree,
rub her thigh and count to one hundred,

move from bed to stairs to door to barn
and back again, with the progress of a love

that only goes away
so it can come right back.

The speaker's addictions to disordered eating and alcohol are both shielded and not from her children; in "Under the Influence," she describes needing privacy to drink "without young eyes to measure me," while even within the same poem, the daughter has to ask the speaker in the bathtub after her fifth drink if she's awake.

Just as Wendell's speaker consumes and is consumed, by addiction and self-control and memory, so are the animals that populate the collection's world. The animals and their simple relationship with food creates the moments that were most poignant to me, both for the beautiful writing, as well as for the contrast they posed. In "Keep Your Palm Flat," a poem about, in part, McIntosh apples fallen at a farm, Wendell writes: "The daily stroll with my mending horse, / who spends his time longing / for this small red planet, balanced on my palm." In "Addictions," a long poem and one of the strongest in the collection, a bat is crushed in a pony stall. "All night, / through our open window, / we hear the mastication of tiny bones."

As someone who has struggled with disordered eating, lines such as “the anorexic’s / silent weapon: // no one can force / anyone to swallow,” felt as real to me as the sand that collected in the book’s pages. The collection gives a voice to a terrible illness, one normally kept secret. There is no tidy resolution to this disease, making this collection an honest and heart-wrenching one. What I gained that long weekend at the beach, aside from four pounds and a wicked sunburn, was a great insight into a woman whose problems were both like and unlike my own. The best poetry collections will let you inhabit another person’s skin. Wendell’s speaker may be uncomfortable in hers, but for me, the humanity and vulnerability of the collection’s voice made for a highly recommendable read.



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