

Folio



*ARM 2008/09 photography contest. Second prize winner:
"Sourire D'Amour." Photo: Gerard Jouffray.*

Editor's Notes

It's a great pleasure to feature new poems by Nicole Cooley in this issue of *Folio*. In this selection from *Milk Dress*, the lived experience of mothering is viewed against Harry F. Harlow's controversial maternal separation/ surrogate mother experiments designed and conducted in the late '50s to explore the development of the child/mother bond. Poetry, of course, makes no pretense of being objective study, yet Cooley approaches her art with a dedicated researcher's passion and care, following her own line of questioning to its disjuncting conclusions. "Which mother," she asks, "will lie awake all night, wishing for solitude, yet wishing for her daughters' small bodies/wound into hers, while the radiator hisses, the dull gray color of a knife?"

Throughout this formally inventive sequence, Harlow's borrowed language, clinical and assertive, forms a dramatic contrast to the poet's own voice and sparks compelling lyrical deliberations on the nature of maternal love. Harlow's description of infant attachment as "a sacred or mystical force, an instinct incapable of analysis" is weighed against the poet's knowledge of these complex bonds. When her child is sick, the mother can "feel the heat rise/in my own skin," the child's "fever leaking into me." The demands of giving comfort and the need for separation compel Cooley's notice. When her daughter is in hospital, the mother must put on a "lead dress" if she wants to stay with her child. Medical intervention, however necessary, thwarts a natural impulse: "I was not allowed to hold her," Cooley observes, "I tried to soothe her but/the lead collar choked my voice out of my throat." Elsewhere, she captures the sheer emotional exhaustion of mothering. After "five days of fevers, cold baths, wrung-out washcloths on foreheads, pink bulbed Tylenol to squirt inside cheeks," she observes, "I only want to smoke. To smash the cigarette on the asphalt."

In these cannily precise poems, grounded in urban and suburban settings unsettled by "America's new war," we encounter a writer who, in speaking as a mother, is less interested in tracking the ways a woman feels pulled between mother work and other work than she is in transcribing the ways that mothering shifts our temporal and linguistic constructions. A nursing mother and child are "one body," the mother "an instrument, this body/my daughter knows." The mother's body, as the poet shows, is ultimately a landscape all its own: "like fabric turned inside out."

Putting on and taking off motherhood, shucking the “dress” of convention, poetic or otherwise—this is Cooley’s great theme, carefully documented as it plays out in the classroom, hospital, neighborhood block party, or the Harvard Club where the poet nurses her baby under the gaze of Eliot and his first wife, Vivian, who would, of course, have used the “Woman’s Entrance.” While brunch continues and the child feeds, the poet/mother muses on her vocation: “I’d like to write about kept silence. I’d like/to flip on searchlights to sweep the elegant drawing room,/and set every corner burning.”

The author of two books of poems on LSU Press, *Resurrection* (1996), *The Afflicted Girls* (2004) and the forthcoming *Breach*, a collection of poems about Hurricane Katrina and the Gulf Coast, Cooley has published writing on mothering in the anthologies *Toddler* (Seal Press, 2003), *The Best of Literary Mama* (Seal Press, 2005), *Not For Mothers Only* (Fence, 2007), and *Mama PhD: Women Write about Motherhood and Academic Life* (Rutgers University Press, 2008). With Pamela Stone, she co-edited the “Mother” issue of *Women’s Studies Quarterly*.

Art, like the mother, may give comfort, but this poet insists it provide no easy escape. Waking with her husband and baby in the aftermath of the September 2001 terrorist attacks, where “each day is a gasp” and a “jaundiced yellow smell” filled the bedroom with “fear/of the future,” this poet will “pray for the world outside our bed to disappear,” and in the next breath acknowledge, “It won’t. But then it shouldn’t.”

—Jane Satterfield