

Folio



Ruth Skilbeck, Nightdress, 2008

Editor's Notes

It's a great pleasure to feature Jane McKie, 2011 winner of Scotland's prestigious Edwin Morgan International Poetry Competition, in this issue of *Folio*.

Jane McKie's first collection, *Morocco Rococo* (Cinnamon Press), was awarded the 2008 Sundial/Scottish Arts Council prize for best first book of 2007. Her other publications include *When the Sun Turns Green* (Polygon, 2009), and *Garden of Bedsteads* (Mariscat, 2011) which was a Poetry Book Society pamphlet choice. Originally from the south coast of England, McKie lives in West Lothian, Scotland, with her husband, mother, and two young children and currently teaches on the MSc in Creative Writing at the University of Edinburgh.

McKie's is a strikingly imaginative and unforgettable response to female experience and motherhood. In the lyric space of her verse, the beauties and perils of the quotidian are vividly etched and her domestic scenes reverberate with the archetypal world of myth and fable. This sequence opens with a retrospective glance to childhood's freer days, an elusive and magical era of unabashed confidence and enchanted play. "I was a boy then," the speaker muses, "made of stem and briar." With the speaker's sudden fall, the spells break. As her male playmate's grandma picks "grit/from my split knee with a pair of pliers," the speaker bleeds "for the first time," seeing a portent of what the future holds: "becoming long hair, soft flesh." The children both flinch for "pain, for lost alliance." Because "terror inched up" her "new body, making us both shy," the speaker muses that girlhood is "a form of dying."

Having grown up reading "Tove Jansson, Alan Garner, the late great Ray Bradbury among other authors of the fantastic (in a broad sense)," McKie admits that she does "still feel these early influences acutely." This impulse appears, for example, in "Burying My Mother's Library," where a hoard of

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interred paperbacks “mattresses larvae, /helps a pathologist pinpoint the time of death.” Here the speaker confronts the cyclic nature of life, rendering it in surreal imagery: the “books hatch words” which “elongate into sentences, squirm with the need/to be pieced together and read as a single story/until a far away clock chimes.”

In “Archipelago” McKie paints an entrancing portrait of family members housed in the dark space of separate rooms at night. While “snow sifts from the curtains,” the speaker’s “husband begins to levitate,” sleeping restfully enough that she fears her “stranger’s reach will stop his heart.” Against the quiet backdrop of her domestic space, an aged mother bangs about, searching empty bureau drawers and she hears her daughter’s “tinny iPod dreaming,” with its “insectoid, /subtly overbearing” sound. Though the speaker’s son is “lost/to the pillow without complications,” she knows that the “story he reads behind his lids might shock me” and that she’ll choose “not to enquire—of myself, or of my friends/with famished boys.” Instead, the speaker revels in her son’s presence. Though “his lovely feet/slop over the bed,” he is “an open lotus flower.” Elsewhere, a child recounts a nightmare of a hyacinth macaw that plucks out her eye. In the clearer light of day, the mother teaches her child to “laugh it off,” hoping that “dreams can be ironed/like dresses, filed/like civil buttons” as she, too, tries to believe that “fear of flight” and “fear of death” are “only a nightmare.”

McKie’s poems are deceptive in their directness. Spare, lyrical, and precisely observed, their surface elegance belies more sophisticated themes. In “The Monster of Ravenna’s Mother,” for instance, McKie reflects on creative power and culturally determined notions of beauty. For the woman whose heart is the space “where a life of failure curls, withered from scrutiny,” the infamous creature is neither a monstrous birth nor an emblem of divine displeasure. Instead, McKie posits a speaker who finds her progeny “perfect”—an emblem of creative power. In the final poem of this selection, McKie revisits the Baba Yaga legends in what she wittily describes as a “prog-rockish poem.”

With her lucid rhythms, archetypal subject matter, and surreal imagery drawn from the specifically female sources of fairy tale and myth, McKie’s poems reveal a kinship with foremothers Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and Stevie Smith as well as contemporary British poets Vicki Feaver and Selima Hill. Reflecting on her work, McKie observes that “having children is so emotionally complex, something superficially depleting yet profoundly enriching, wondrous even, I feel I have only begun to scratch the surface of stories brewing as a result. I find I am increasingly drawn to surreal notions and imagery, and relish the relatively free connections the unconscious makes.”

Look forward, reader, to McKie’s poems in years to come.

—Jane Satterfield