

**Folio**

## Editor's Notes

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It is a great pleasure to feature Lesley Wheeler in this issue of *Folio*. Lesley Wheeler is a poet, essayist, and scholar whose collections include *The Receptionist and Other Tales*, a Tiptree Award Honor Book; *Heterotopia*, winner of the Barrow Street Press Poetry Prize; and *Heathen*. Her fourth full-length poetry collection, *Radioland*, is forthcoming in 2015. Her most recent scholarly book is *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present*, and she is writing a study about twenty-first-century verse with the working title *Taking Poetry Personally*.

Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Claudia Emerson has praised the “richly drawn intermixtures of narrative and place” that characterize Wheeler’s work, while poet Rafael Campo observes rightly that Wheeler’s “genius is in her utter engagement with language, its familiar forms and its unknowable entropies, her astonishment in its capaciousness.” In this selection from Wheeler’s four collections, readers will encounter a poetics of impassioned questing that transports readers through domestic and public spaces. In their fierce intelligence and vivid immediacy, these poems recalibrate our notions of a daily life complicated and enriched by children. Wheeler captures the vicissitudes of memory and the passage of time with a clear-eyed vision that eschews sentimentality: an adolescent’s moody reverie inspires reflections on the “filaments of mother-worry” that bind and separate; children riding surf “dive back into the churning grit, resolute” as their mother stands by, watching “the future bear down,” cheered temporarily by the seaside landscape which reveals its mysteries to her “[o]ne beautiful threat at a time.”

A poet of formal range and lyric inventiveness, Wheeler seems closely attuned to the weirdness often overlooked in the lived experience and literature of moth-

ering: offspring are simultaneously the familiar stuff of genetic inheritance and completely other. In “Heathen,” a son places his ear against his mother’s with an uncanny wish that “*the god your in your head can talk/to the god in mine.*” The haunted heath of the mother’s mind stands in a powerful counterpoint to the son’s magical world: unlike the speaker, he “treads/safely in his own wildness.” This knowledge emerges, too, in the wry sonnet, “Adolescence is a Disorder of the Mouth,” where a daughter chides her mother for revealing necklines and other forms of bad taste (“lipstick, the key/of my lullabies, the trash I watch”). The daughter’s burgeoning sexuality—and assertive independence—leave her mother as disoriented as “a tourist straining through veils/of haze.” In such crisply cinematic glimpse of domestic life, Wheeler reveals unnerving truths about relationships and the passage of time.

Sprezzatura isn’t a word often associated with the poetics of motherhood, and it’s no wonder: despite the association of practiced composure that engenders grace, the term also connotes a calculated pose, an ironic, jaded cool. Transformative and empowering, motherhood is also disruptive and messy; its wisdom arrives in accidental or piecemeal fashion. I’d bet this is why so many poems about mothering share a kinship with other crisis narratives: disruptions are represented in the form of fragmented and elliptical scenes; in terse, unadorned language that seeks to interrogate and revise assumptions, presumptions, and inherited scripts. While the dramatic crisis of motherhood unfolds memorably in Wheeler’s work, her poems nonetheless register a confident ease and joy of expression that make the poet a vibrant, deeply humane companion. She is candid: no ornamental mask shields poet or reader from difficult truths.

Lesley Wheeler’s reflections about writing as a mother are as lively and instructive as her poems; for that reason, I include them here:

The first two poems in this selection are from my first full-length poetry collection, *Heathen* (C & R Press, 2009), and were composed when my children were small. I was so struck by their essential strangeness: even when you grow a person in your body, out of your own genetic stuff, as soon as you meet him or her you realize you’ve been harboring a little alien, a creature with its own strong will and way of thinking. My second and third collections center on other issues and relationships, but my forthcoming book, *Radioland* (Barrow Street Press, September 2015), circles around to the weirdness of mothering teenagers. Witnessing my daughter’s adolescence in particular brought my own teenage hopes and miseries back vividly. Watching her grow from fear to boldness, too, helped me see the trajectory of my own life differently. I’m afraid for her, as any sensible parent would be, and yet her essential gameness suggests that fear might have ruled my choices too often.

My poems about my children may rely on received forms in higher proportions than my poems overall do, although I warp those forms substantially. My son is particularly delighted by rhyme and soundplay—so those early delights in pattern may factor in—but I may also be also seeking containment for strong feeling, anxiety especially. For “Spring-Sick” I was thinking about falling rhythms and sapphics; “Inside the Bright” is modelled formally on Marianne Moore’s “The Fish”; “Adolescence is a Disorder of the Mouth” uses an unusual sonnet scheme Jill Allyn Rosser suggested at the West Chester Poetry Conference; and “Laggard” is counted verse. My poems about maternity also tend to be short, composed in stolen hours. I’ve never been able to keep to a Sylvia Plathian regime of writing in the early hours. I like late afternoon and evenings, so I’ve scribbled a number of drafts while squatting among Lego piles or at the sidelines of soccer games.

Wheeler’s new poems and essays can be found in *Gettysburg Review*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, and *Poetry*; more of her thoughts about poetry appear on her blog, “The Cave, The Hive” (<http://lesleywheeler.org>).

—Jane Satterfield