

Folio

Editor's Notes

Over the last decade, thanks to the support of Andrea O'Reilly and *JMI*, I've had the pleasure of compiling Folio features that showcase the work of an individual poet who explores mothering, mother figures, and related themes. In retrospect, it's clear that I am drawn to writers who put motherhood at the very center of their poetic and who offer powerful testimonies about the complex historical forces that shape both parenting and writing. Among the voices featured since I took up my post are, in order of appearance: Rishma Dunlop, Nicole Cooley, Katherine Smith, Katherine Rhett, January O'Neil, Terri Witek, Laurie Kruk, Judith Baumel, Pimone Triplett, Beth Ann Fennelly, Lesley Wheeler, Kirun Kapur, Marilyn Taylor, Jennifer Givhan, Joelle Biele, Patricia Jabbeh Wesley, and Adrienne Kalfopoulou. Whether their poems are narrative or lyrical, formal, free, or somewhere in between, these writers share a kinship: a transformative vision that crosses communities to reveal links between our domestic and civic lives. It's been an honor to introduce the poems of some of today's most compelling writers to their readers of *JMI*.

For this final *Folio*, I'm delighted to feature Charlotte Pence.

Charlotte Pence's first book of poems, *Many Small Fires* (Black Lawrence Press, 2015), received an INDIEFAB Book of the Year Award from *Foreword Reviews*. The book explores her father's chronic homelessness while simultaneously detailing the physiological changes that enabled humans to form cities, communities, and households. She is also the author of two award-winning poetry chapbooks and the editor of *The Poetics of American Song Lyrics*. Her poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction have recently been published in *Harvard Review*, *Sewanee Review*, *Southern Review*, and *Brevity*. In May of 2020, her next book of poetry, *Code*, will be published by Black Lawrence Press. She is the director of the Stokes Center for Creative Writing at University of South Alabama.

Pence's verse is admired for its seamless fusion of lyric storytelling and scientific knowledge. Poet Traci Brimhall has described her work as "fierce and tender...mysterious and wise." Reflecting on this powerful tension that lies at the heart of *Many Small Fires* for Sundress Publications, Tawnysha Greene praised Pence's "stunning achievement describing the complexities of relationships and its long-term effects," noting her attention to "the beauty of endurance and survival." In this selection, readers will encounter a body of verse that displays the poet's profound gifts of observation.

Pence's poems are deeply grounded in domestic settings that, keenly observed, open onto broader vistas. In "The Weight of the Sun," the poet reflects on her newborn child's early morning feeding sessions. In the pre-dawn light, the poet's awareness of her maternal role expands from the room where she sits, "tilting/the rocking chair back and forth/with my toes," to encompass the mysteries of the natural and human-made worlds. The neighborhood is temporarily at rest, "everyone on this block wishing for sleep,/ for peace, for the coming day to be better," yet the poet's meditations bring contact with larger mysteries, from "the grass/growing a thousandth of an inch every/fifteen minutes" to this reminder:

...we all began in dark and stars,
 that the carbon, nitrogen and oxygen
 in our bodies was created 4.5 billion
 years ago in another generation of stars,

In her meditation, the poet discovers the fortitude threaded throughout our daily lives, everyone waking to some resolution that propels a new day. The "morning feed" genre is a familiar one, and Pence's poem shares an affinity with powerful predecessors such as Plath's "Nick and the Candlestick" or Eavan Boland's "Night Feed." Her exploration of the scientific foundations of the cosmos, however, further underscores the majesty of creation and offers adds a powerful new dimension to this esteemed tradition. "Love Between Parents" offers a witty commentary on the postpartum body and the challenges it places on erotic life. The emotional and physical toll of parenting leaves the speaker feeling that the couples' bodies have transformed awkwardly, to become "a rented text weary with underlines" even as desire remains in "[M]emories of cravings—sleet-shined and treacherous."

Pence is equally persuasive in her exploration of the linkage between the maternal body and the body politic. In "Sometimes, When a Child Smiles," the sight of a child's mouth, "open wide and greedy," leads Pence to reflect on a visit to an orphanage in Ecuador, describing herself as a passing tourist "distancing myself/with one-armed hugs and toy store gifts." As she recalls an encounter with six-year-old girls who hid an abandoned baby in a garden, she

questions the ethics of storytelling. In disclosing the recollected scene, Pence documents actions that transformed her awareness, making a child's smile the permanent reminder that she "could not do what//those girls did: accept a secret without fearing it;/spit into a child's mouth and know this to be love."

In the new poem, "Mourning Chicago," Pence confronts the horrors of police brutality and the legacy of racial segregation in the United States through the lens of a mother's struggle to explain the morning's news to her five year-old child. Pausing over her breakfast, the child wonders, "*Cops shot two kids?/Will they shoot me?*" As the speaker struggles to formulate an answer, she is "relieved and sickened" at the relief she feels: as a white mother, she knows her white child is likely to be safe. Throughout the ages, parents have always struggled to balance honesty with the need to provide child-appropriate replies. Pence's achievement here is to question the need for balance. She pays particular attention to the complicities of privilege and the need to shape the next generation's social conscience. Her attention to the dialogue—and the tension—that unfolds between husband, wife, and child are powerfully evoked. In her hands, familiar domestic tableaux become a provocative space for cultural critique.

In an online interview for *North American Review*, Pence describes her strategy of "not balancing everything and accepting that as one way to negotiate the addition of being a parent" while finding solutions to "honor writing." More recent comments offer a lively glimpse into her artistic process; for their power and urgency, I include them below.

—Jane Satterfield, July 2019

Independence at the Root

"Motherhood. As joyous as it can be, I have found it difficult terrain for myself as a working mother and feminist. Responding to the physical needs of my body and my baby meant so much of my independence had to be reevaluated. Suddenly, I needed people in a way I didn't need them before. It was a place of vulnerability, and that scared me. This idea is at the center of the lyrical essay/poem "How to Measure Distance" in which the speaker is uncomfortable with how much she is suddenly depending on her husband.

Yet independence is at the root of mothering, too; we are raising our children to ultimately be independent of us and useful to the world. I remember after thirty-six hours of labor, the sudden weight of something light and hot placed on my chest. As I looked into my daughter's face for the first time, I expected to feel simply love. But instead, I felt surprise. My first thought was: *You are your own person. And one day you will leave.* In the moment, I found it a confusing realization. But now I understand. Since my daughter had literally come from my body, I had the mistaken impression that she would be a

miniature me. Yet her face was not my face, her body not my body. And her path will not be my path. As mothers, as educators, as writers such is always the goal: to see each person independently of our preconceptions. To learn who that person is, who she might become, and at the same time, who I am and might become, is intertwining the honor and responsibility of motherhood.

—Charlotte Pence

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