

## Editor's Notes

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It's a great pleasure to feature Beth Ann Fennelly in this issue of Folio. An accomplished poet, essayist, and novelist, Fennelly is widely admired for her lyricism, formal dexterity, and emotional range. Whatever her subject or form, Fennelly's work is an impassioned inquiry into the lives of contemporary women. With a voice that is meditative and witty, Fennelly illuminates the shifting landscapes of our lives, paying close attention to the varied roles we inhabit as daughters, mothers, lovers, wives, friends, and committed professionals whose quest for individual fulfillment is balanced against the demands of gender-specific responsibilities.

In this brief selection from the poet's impressive back catalogue, readers encounter the familiar terrain of marriage, pregnancy, birth, and motherhood in the company of a refreshingly honest and witty confidante. Fennelly's crisp style is a compelling blend of direct speech and vividly observed detail; her syntactically tight lines zero in on the moments that mothers find compelling and confounding. As poet and critic Isaac Cates observes, Fennelly's verse draws its power from the poet's abiding preoccupation with "the here and now, with the compromises of the flesh as well as its pleasures, and it gives us a way to enjoy both the asking of these questions and the acceptance of their qualified, provisional, uncertain answers."

In "Bite Me," we meet a mother alarmed by her year-old daughter's newly acquired habit—one that leaves "six-teeth-brooches that take a week to fade." As the bemused speaker looks on, she considers the "fierceness in that tiny/snapping jaw" and "after-grin." She marvels at the way her daughter will open her "warm red mouth/and let float" the word balloon. The poet shares this revelry in the power of the word—her daughter's "fourth/in this world,"—even

as she considers the way her own language evolves to fit the maternal role. The “stern No” the poet-mother reminds us she must “practice” is a gesture that “feels like telling the wind No/when it blows.” Transporting us back to the moment when labor went awry, the poet describes the way she watched, through a held-up mirror, the “mandala/of your black hair turning and turning/like a pinwheel, like laundry in the eye/of the washer, like the eye of the storm/that was just beginning/and would finish me off, forever . . .”

With cinematic clarity, Fennelly’s well-paced narratives take surprising turns that evoke the astonishing shifts of emotion that accompany domestic life and parenthood. In an essay puncturing the “mystification in which the whole process of childbirth is so richly shrouded,” Angela Carter commented on the rather strategic use of black and white photograph in childbirth manuals. After all, she quipped, “colour film would have made souvenir snaps of the finale of my own accouchement look like stills from a Hammer horror film.” “Bite Me,” like other Fennelly poems, shares this aesthetic commitment to frankness. A poet who never turns to ornament as a means of sidestepping life’s grittier realities, Fennelly’s work commemorates the fierce physical and emotional attachments that presage and follow birth.

“Latching On, Falling Off” is a vivid dispatch from the “strange country” of new motherhood where child and mother are “tied to the tides of whimper and milk.” Here, Fennelly’s focus on the physical demands of breast-feeding and caretaking are rendered with precision and delight. “Once, I bared my chest and/found an animal,” she writes, “Once, I was delicious.” But this dispatch becomes disarmingly honest as the poet considers the impact of parenthood on her erotic life. The mother’s first nighttime separation from her daughter, a romantic getaway with “a hotel room, and on the horizon/a meteor shower promised,” is soon cut short by exhaustion. As the seasons pass and turn to spring, bonds loosen; the child becomes a “scholar of sandwiches and water.” Inevitably, “the milk stops/simmering.” After weaning, the poet packs away “bras ugly as Ace bandages,/thick-strapped, trap-doored, too/busy for beauty.” With her husband “worshipfully” watching, she begins to “unwrap bras/tissue-thin and decorative//from the tissues of my old life.” Fennelly’s witty observations shift to wry acknowledgement of darker truths: when a woman’s breasts “resume their lives as glamor girls,” the child

...forgets the mother’s taste, so  
the motherland recedes on the horizon, a kindness—  
we return to it only at death.”

Reviewing Fennelly’s third collection for the music magazine *Paste*, poet David Kirby noted that her “poems are so full of movement and color because,

in many of them, the poet is trying to hammer out a truce between passion and domesticity, between a whirlwind libido and the need to put dinner on the table.” This energy is seen at work in “The Mommy at the Zoo.” Fennelly’s consideration of the trade-offs that are part of parents’ lives—the sleep deprivation, distractedness, and more—are set against vibrant memories of the past. The domestic woman, weighed down with sippy cups and diaper bags, looks to be a far cry from the “girl forged of carbon” who enjoyed a quickie “in the French Quarter/where the hot rain rained down/in the alley beside the bar.” Where the protagonist of Randall Jarrell’s “The Woman at the Washington Zoo” mourns her “serviceable body” shrouded in “dull null/navy” worn to and from work, longing for transformation, Fennelly’s speaker praises the transformations in her identity.

Though Fennelly’s poems have provided a spacious canvas, her most recent collaboration with her husband, novelist Tom Franklin, seems a natural extension of her literary ambition to capture the full complexities of motherhood, as this excerpt from their co-authored novel, *The Tilted World*, reveals. Of this project, Fennelly notes, “The protagonist, Dixie Clay, has lost her own child to fever a few years back and hasn’t been able to conceive again—and into this desperate life comes an orphan for her to love....”

Reflecting on the ways that motherhood shapes her writing life, Fennelly observes:

I want to put childbirth right up there alongside the big events, such as war, when it comes to physical terror. Just because more people experience childbirth than front-line combat doesn’t make childbirth any less significant. And I put parenthood up against, say, a plane crash in the Andes that forces survivors to become cannibals, as an event that strips us naked and teaches us who we are.

Beth Ann Fennelly directs the MFA Program at Ole Miss where she was named the 2011 Outstanding Liberal Arts Teacher of the Year. She has won grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Mississippi Arts Commission, and United States Artists. Her work has three times been included in *The Best American Poetry* series. Fennelly has published three full-length poetry books. Her first, *Open House*, won The 2001 Kenyon Review Prize, the Great Lakes College Association New Writers Award, and was a Book Sense Top Ten Poetry Pick. It was reissued by W. W. Norton in 2009. Her second book, *Tender Hooks*, and her third, *Unmentionables*, were published by W. W. Norton in 2004 and 2008. She has also published a book of nonfiction, *Great with Child*, in 2006, with Norton. Fennelly writes essays on travel, culture, and design for *Country Living*, *Southern Living*, *Oxford American*,

and others. *The Tilted World*, the novel she co-authored with her husband, Tom Franklin, was published by Harper Collins in October 2013. They live in Oxford with their three children.

—Jane Satterfield, April, 2014