

Folio

Editor's Notes

It's a great pleasure to feature Jennifer Givhan in this issue of *Folio*. Jennifer Givhan is a Mexican-American poet from the Southwestern desert. She is the author of *Landscape with Headless Mama* (2015 Pleiades Editors' Prize) and *Protection Spell* (2016 Miller Williams Series, University of Arkansas Press). Her honours include a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, a PEN/Rosenthal Emerging Voices Fellowship, the Frost Place Latin@ Scholarship, the 2015 *Lascaux Review* Editors' Choice Poetry Prize, *The Pinch* Poetry Prize, the DASH Poetry Prize, 2nd Place in *Blue Mesa Review's* 2014 Poetry Prize, and her work has been nominated four times for a Pushcart. Her writing has appeared in *Best of the Net 2015*, *Best New Poets 2013*, *AGNI*, *TriQuarterly*, *Crazyhorse*, *Blackbird*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Rattle*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Indiana Review* (runner-up for the 2015 Poetry Prize), and *Southern Humanities Review* (finalist for the 2015 Auburn Witness Prize). She is Poetry Editor at *Tinderbox Poetry Journal* and teaches at Western New Mexico University and The Poetry Barn.

Writing about *Landscape with Headless Mama*, poet Patricia Smith praised Givhan's poems for their "restless, storm-hued stanzas, revelations of our dark cravings and hapless, woefully imperfect attempts at perfect love." In this selection, readers will encounter a profoundly lyrical poet whose syntactically rich lines render the darker truths of domestic life with an engaging frankness. Whether her gaze is trained on the maternal body or the body politic, mourning the natural end of lactation or the preternatural destruction of ecosystems due to climate change, Givhan's verse seeks to reveal the forces that divide and heal us, uncovering the strength and wisdom that help us survive.

Questions of inheritance and kinship lie at the heart of Givhan's poetic. In "Madhouse of Spirits," the speaker reflects on the ghosts of the past whose presence resonates in daily life. Memories of a mother's harsh disciplinary tactics

resurface as the daughter considers her attempts to resist becoming “the kind of parent I feel bound/to (all this screaming, this relentless/motherloving fear).” By night, her dreams become surreal storyscapes where images of trauma are reconfigured as metaphors of entrapment and escape:

When I dream, to stop the train,
I must split myself in two: one of me is metal-hinged &
crushed, the other, with chest pain but living. I wake

with heartburn. How does one extract the violent bone
without mining that poor child’s spine?

Elsewhere, the poet explores tensions implicit within the adoption triad with keenly observed detail. “In Jeremiah Growing,” the poet expresses familiar ambivalence as her child progresses past infancy to a growing awareness of his origins. The birth mother’s relinquishment of her child seals a fate that bonds two women for life. Meanwhile, the son they share struggles for autonomy, pulled toward each of these maternal figures at different times, noticing, even in childhood, the divisions of the heart.

Deeply intimate, Givhan’s domestic tableaux reverberate beyond their triggering moments, achieving broad social resonance. “The Polar Bear” is one of several poems that reveal the poet’s determination to confront our collective history of harms. Shielding her young black son from televised coverage of “the riot funerals riot arrests/riot nothing changes riots” in Baltimore during the spring of 2015, the speaker watches another painful narrative unfold on the Discovery Channel. A starving polar bear, victim of shrinking ice fields, must live out a dire fate: confronting a herd of walrus, he is gored as he hunts. The show provides neither aesthetic distance nor entertaining escape. Here, as in other poems, Givhan reveals the intimate connectedness of domestic and public life. Though she pays tribute to the confluence of place and history as it shapes maternal identify, Givhan’s is ultimately a redemptive vision—necessary art for our times.

Reflecting on her process, Givhan notes: “I’m drawn to exploring mother/child relationships in my work and that kind of sticky love that keeps us hanging on when we’ve no other reason but love because they pave the way for everything else—all future memories and dreams hinged on what happens or doesn’t when we’re forming our personalities, our versions of the selves we can become. There’s tremendous guilt and sadness surrounding this for me, but also a sense of freedom, of revising and reimagining the possibilities . . . Even in the poems that I’m not explicitly writing about motherhood tend to “mother” because they come from that place of trying to reclaim and heal—the

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way I recite my mother's chant to my children when they're hurt: *sana sana colita de rana, si no sanas hoy, sanas mañana*. Translated literally it's asking a frog's tail to heal. Of course, a frog's tail, if cut off, grows anew. My poems come from that place of love asking the impossible—because poems offer a place for impossible healing to begin.”

Beyond poetry, Givhan publishes critical explorations of literary mothers and curates the Mother Writers' Interview Series, an on-going series of conversations with some of today's most successful writer-mothers. Visit her online at: <http://jennifergivhan.com>.

—Jane Satterfield