

Editor's Notes

It's a great pleasure to feature Patricia Jabbeh Wesley in this issue of *Folio*. A Liberian civil war survivor who immigrated to the United States with her family during the fourteen year Liberian civil war, Wesley is the author of five books of poetry: *When the Wanderers Come Home*, (University of Nebraska Press, 2016), *Where the Road Turns* (Autumn House Press, 2010), *The River is Rising* (Autumn House Press, 2007), *Becoming Ebony*, (Southern Illinois University Press, 2003) and *Before the Palm Could Bloom: Poems of Africa* (New Issues Press, 1998). She is also the author of a children's book, *In Monrovia, the River Visits the Sea* (One Moore Books, 2012). Her poem, "One Day: Love Song for Divorced Women" was selected by U.S. Poet Laureate, Ted Kooser, as an American Life in Poetry June 13, 2011 featured poem. Wesley's poetry and prose have been anthologized and published in literary magazines in the US, in South America, Africa and Europe; her work has been translated in Italian, Spanish, and Finnish.

As Nigerian poet and scholar Chielozona Eze notes, Wesley is "one of the most prolific African poets of the twenty-first century ... and the most renowned of African women poets ("The Open Wounds of Being: The Poetics of Testimony in the Works of Patricia Jabbeh Wesley"). Among Wesley's many honors are a WISE Women Award from Blair County, Pennsylvania, the President's Award from the Blair County NAACP (2011), a Penn State University AESEDA Collaborative Grant for her research on Liberian Women's Trauma stories from the Civil War, a World Bank Fellowship. In 2010, she received the Liberian Award for her poetry and her mentorship of young Liberians in the Diaspora. Wesley is an Associate Professor of English and Creative Writing at Penn State University.

Poet and editor Frank M. Chipasula (*Bending the Bow: An Anthology*

of *African Poetry* and *Whispers in the Wings: New and Selected Poems*) has described Wesley's work as "brave and fearless" but also "necessary for the witness they bear to human folly while insisting on our capacity to love." In this selection, readers will encounter rhythmically rich and unforgettably detailed poems that meditate on the many meanings of home that mothers inherit and create. Whether she is reflecting on a child's desire for a pet, considering the ways childless women and mothers define maternal love, or offering consolation to bereft parents at a campus memorial, Wesley's poems pay tribute to the ties that connect generations and the distances that threaten to divide them.

In "Coming Home," the poet greets her college-aged daughter at the airport, recounting the many moves the family has made since their immigration to the United States. While the daughter takes in the unfamiliar terrain—"all these valleys and green, green hills" in the neighborhood where the family will be "the first black on this property"—her mother meditates on time's passage and memory's dizzying accumulations—the gains made, the distances traveled. As the speaker suggests, this homecoming summons a deeper, more resonant archetypal experience:

Every girl becomes woman
when she can come home, knowing how like her mother

she is becoming—a woman like all the other women
before her.

The mother's joy in having "all my children are under one roof in our new state" gives way to poignant recollections of family in Monrovia who "gather/ and discuss the many years we have been away from/home." No matter the new American holiday rituals the family practices, the homeland still remains inscribed in memory—"the true ghost story of lost peoples/ in the Diaspora." Here, as elsewhere in Wesley's poems, the complexities of belonging and displacement are sharply rendered.

In "You Wouldn't Let Me Adopt My Dog," the poet responds to a daughter who dreamt that her mother refused to adopt a pet with a wry humor that shines light on deeper concerns:

Tell your dog that I do not have the résumé
to tend an American dog. Tell him I am still
African, in the way that my mother woke up
each day, wondering where the food
for us children would come from.

Wesley's poetry pays tribute to the challenges of exile and assimilation, offering readers a stunning vision of courage and beauty in a world of "havocs"; her own words about writing and its relation to mothering are equally powerful and are included below.

—Jane Satterfield

How Motherhood Influences and Informs My Craft

"There is something remarkably beautiful and rewarding about being a mother to an innocent child, to nurture that child, help them grow into adulthood, and take their place in the larger world. For me, that role of mothering against the challenges of successfully developing my writing career involved a negotiation of the two challenges. I knew that to succeed as a mother and writer, I needed to bring these two parts of me together. I was a writer before our children came; therefore, I wrote my way around the children, often, about them, sometimes, holding a child on my lap as I wrote a poem or sitting our four kids up in the family room as my first audience after a new poem was written. They gave me the inspiration I needed, the subject matter, the cause to laugh and poke fun at myself, and they were constantly there with me. I captured them as they grew up, sometimes to their dismay or pleasure. Mothering has always influenced my writing just as much as my writing has informed my place as mother. Without mothering, my work would be dull.

A poet writes about the world around them, explores the uneven parts of a world they must occupy, the havocs of their world, taking the unevenness of their world in an attempt to make meaning of it. Some of that unevenness may not always be the wars or difficulties and the realities of the inequality of their world, but often of the simplicity of child rearing, the morning wet diapers, the shrill cries in the deep night of a colicky infant, all of which are themselves the conflicts and tensions which poetry must negotiate. So, mothering gives me fuel for the fire of my poetry, gives me laughter to keep me going just as my writing establishes for me a balancing stand from which to view my very challenging world of mothering."

—Patricia Jabbeh Wesley