

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

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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

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 poetry collection titled *Code* will be published by Black Lawrence Press. She is the director of the Stokes Center for Creative Writing at University of South Alabama.