

Editor's Notes

Of Silence and Idolatry: The Poems of Ann Fisher-Wirth

Let's not speak of the sorrow
this child and her sister and brother
will inherit; instead, listen to the story
their mother tells them, how all the babies
line up in the sky by the baby ladder,
and slide down when they hear their future
parents say, This one...This one...This one...
How they are the chosen babies of the world.

Ann Fisher-Wirth, "Devotions"

I first met Ann Fisher-Wirth in July 2004 at the Poetry and Sexuality Conference at The University of Stirling, Scotland. The poetry reading she gave at the conference included poems from her first book *Blue Window*; it was a beautifully eloquent performance. In her poems, Fisher-Wirth tangled the everyday of family, motherhood, and the natural world with sexuality and erotic love in a unique lyric voice. I remember thinking as I heard her read, that this was a poet with a courageous, sensual voice, whose work was rooted in the body.

In this issue of *Folio*, I am pleased to feature a selection of Ann Fisher-Wirth's poems that convey a visceral, deeply embodied perception of motherhood, a physical, psychic landscape in which the wounds of infant death, the dissolution of a marriage, the agonies of loss and guilt for the mother whose children are moved to another state by their father, are narrative threads juxtaposed against the protective fierceness of a mother's love.

In the opening poem “In Crescent,” we are introduced to the mother’s body:

The bloodwall thickens
and everyone I have loved
begins to ripen within my body.

...

And so inch forward toward that
teeming bed
where we all lie down together.

In “Moth,” the young woman, “the girl I once was,” grieves for her dead newborn daughter, breast milk letting down over her new white dress:

Oh I was death’s girl,
sure to poison anything I loved,
any sweet cock or baby that came near me.

In “Devotions,” the narrator describes the devastations of a life of poverty: “It’s 1973. They’re so poor/it’s a crisis when she breaks a jar of honey ... Let’s just say/ poverty and terror can break a marriage.”

Throughout these poems, there is a sense of rawness, the narrator confessing the intense physicality of her mothering, as in “Kisses:” “Kisses like birth fluid, floating them, surrounding them, until the day they die. No, confess. She wants her kiss-shaped seal still to be glowing at the end of eternity.”

The Trinket Poems, were composed after Fisher-Wirth acted as Trinket Dugan in a production of “The Mutilated,” a Tennessee Williams play. Fisher-Wirth takes us deep inside the character of Trinket, offering us provocative perceptions of the nature of maternal desire. The poem “*Blesser*” plays on the meaning of the French word, problematizing the word which means “to wound” in French. Fisher-Wirth contemplates *blesser* alongside the English “to bless.” For Fisher-Wirth’s narrator, for the reader, there are no easy answers:

Oh I know
it’s false etymology but think about it: doesn’t what
brings you to your knees gut-punched, or makes you
sit on the toilet as your lover lies sleeping
and scratch bright welts along your thighs
with the paring knife, the fingernail scissors,
or drops you fetal to the forest floor because you’ve
run so far away from home, sobbing *mother, father,*
help me—doesn’t the day you stand in the empty house

of the family you destroyed, sent your children
like dandelion seedpods spinning into the golden
canyons of grief far beyond their small as yet imaginings—
doesn't even this somehow bless them, bless you?

In the powerful closing prose narrative, “Of Silence and Idolatry,” Fisher-Wirth uses a double-voiced technique that exposes the power struggles between ex-spouses and the mother’s decision not to place her children in a court battle. The contrast between the aims of shared custody, the powerlessness of the mother who loses the daily presence of her children in her home, and the incapacity of legal systems to serve familial needs are keenly conveyed. The “idolatry” of this poetic prose is contained in the mother’s intense love for her children: “This is my idolatry. I know every inch of their bodies. Which ones vomit easily, which one fights it. . . . I know my children the way you know your breath, your voice, the water in your eyes.”

As we read Fisher-Wirth’s work in this issue on mothering and feminism, the lawyer’s words remembered by the narrator are a haunting reminder of the legal struggles of mothers and a long history of untenable choices: “Remember the day the lawyer said, ‘Once a woman falls off the pedestal in Virginia, she’s in the mud?’ Remember how happy she sounded, even though you’d heard she was a feminist and were planning to hire her?”

What is most impressive about Ann Fisher-Wirth’s work in these poems is the voice that manages to convey vividly the irreconcilable subject position of the mother who leaves her children, “not meaning to leave them.” The question “Why did you do it?” is answered by the narrator’s conception of the lover who becomes the “one love strong as birth.”

As I write this introduction to Ann Fisher-Wirth’s poems, I have just returned from meeting her once again in July 2006, in Stirling, Scotland at the Poetry and Politics Conference. As I listened to Ann read poems from her new book, *Five Terraces*, I knew this was a poet highly attuned to the world, full of authenticity, surprise, intellect, passion, grace and courage. Her work extends our understandings of the immense complexities of the roles of wife, mother, lover, poet, while acknowledging a terrible beauty in the luminous particulars of human living.

—Rishma Dunlop