

JACKIE CLARK

We Briefly Saw: Childhood and Unknowing in Farrah Field's *Wolf and Pilot*

Wolf and Pilot, by Farrah Field. New York, New York: Four Way Books, 2012.

In "The Smartest Person in the Room Never Speaks," Farrah Field writes, "The four sisters were like deer taking a rose / without any sign they had been there or would return." In this, the first poem in Field's newest collection *Wolf and Pilot*, the major tensions that run through the collection are established, but leave readers with the assumption that what follows is some sort of narrative with characters and conflict. And while this presumption isn't necessarily wrong there are much greater complexities at work that speak to the uncertain and, oftentimes, invisible lines that separate what it "means" to be an adult and what it "means" to be a child. Put more plainly, the poems in *Wolf and Pilot*, investigate the discrepancies between the way children and adults perceive the world around them (both of which are continuously hindered by the unknown, by not-knowing) in addition to conjuring up the inexplicable, almost magical, feeling the world holds in the eyes of a child.

The narrative of "The Smartest Person in the Room Never Speaks" serves as a compass for the rest of the book. In the second stanza the reader learns that "there were Revolutionary / soldiers in the family. The girls wanted to register their names," and right away the reader can infer that preservation is important to the characters in these poems and to this text as a whole. Registering deceased soldiers' names is a way to not only pay tribute but a way for those doing the registering to make a statement about themselves and what they choose to remember and revere. Though the girls have run away, there is something still that moves them emotionally and connects them to their roots.

Having firmly established this connection, what follows is a mix-

ture of alternating generalizations and assumed perceptions held by children and adults. In "The Girls Bury Themselves for Two Weeks," Field writes, "We think the worst thing a parent can do is love one child less than the others," and again in "The Girls Gather Around While He Sleeps": "Something has to happen." In the first example the reader is reminded just how small a child's world can be, how simple their desires are in essence—to be loved and be loved equally. In the second example this idea that something "has" to happen is just as much foolish as it is hopeful, and is perfectly situated coming from the mouth and mind of a child. In "The Girls Talk of Troilus" the last line boldly exclaims, "We have everything to look forward to when we grow up." Only a child could so earnestly believe that to be true.

Meanwhile the character of "the detective" (an adult) is trying to follow the thread of the case of the missing girls but is always coming up short: "Who's running this case here? The detective never can tell." And while the case is quite literally the case of the missing girls there is always a looming sense that the case goes much deeper than that and is simultaneously investigating the forgotten intricacies of childhood, the mysteries of being a child and what the world looks like and how it operates. Such intricacy is understood in "Wanting to Train Pigmy Goats":

Old service roads have old houses.
No fences means no dogs.
We know where sheep slept.
We use leaves to push away the poop.

Details like these recall the symbols, meanings, and protocol used by children to make sense of the world around them. It's a logic derived from adult reasoning but done on a much smaller and abbreviated scale, or as is asserted in "Our Food Will Not Come from a Cigarette Company": "It's all local because there isn't anywhere else." A child's entire world is that which immediately surrounds them. That said, this logic also allows the runaway girls to arrive at a profound conclusion. In the poem "Bedtime Stories" the girls hit upon the true tension of the book by reasoning:

We are stronger than blackbirds
we don't know what anything means we put our
hands on the cool glass called a window.
Once upon a time all adults used to be children

The wisdom of such an observation allows the reader to empathize with certain adult characterizations that follow. In "Mother Talks to Herself before Hunting Her Children" (a particularly ghoulish title) the reader gets to hear things from the mother's point of view, namely, "Everyone who thinks babies solve loneliness is wrong," and "Your daughters never needed you even when you forced them." This double-edged reality of parenthood neutralizes the "us vs. them" dynamic that exists between children and adults and between the characters in *Wolf and Pilot*.

In the poem "Human Hair Paintbrush" the reader sees just how uncertain this adult and parent business can actually be when supplied with the detective's thoughts:

He wonders if he should tell the girls
not to put their elbows on the table.
You think I'd know what to do because I agreed to take care of
them

This assumption that just by simply agreeing to care for a child would make one "know" what to do is such an honest misunderstanding that it can't help but comfort. It also brings to light a latency that is often overlooked: there is unknowing in childhood and unknowing in adulthood simply separated by varying degrees.

The strongest unifying theme in Field's collection is the experience of childhood, particularly girlhood, in contrast (and sometimes in similarity) with that of adulthood. Over time, with age and experience, adults come to know "meaning" but as a child all one can do is guess using what makes sense out of the available information and mimic the adults around them, modeling their behavior, as in "Emaline Develops an Attachment":

If it rains, the cigarette behind your ear
will turn into splinters and mush.
We know you don't do you know I wrapped
grass around my fingers and married you.

The act of running away is a great vehicle with which to represent the chasm that exists between the child world and the adult world. Running away represents non-conformity and rebellion and also embodies the arrogant and impulsive nature of children. Despite having run away, the girls are still modeling the adult world they left behind, and in the case of the four sisters, their modeling is based on the adult

feminine, which is problematic as described in "The Teacher Explains Urgency to the Detective":

Girls are prey to everything
They're only daughters for a little while.
They think kindness could spare their lives.
Their tiny lives, tiny as wrists.

These "tiny lives," as "tiny as wrists," speak to the supposed delicacy of girlhood. They also speak to the fact that the girls who have run away don't yet understand this delicacy. The girls don't realize that they are prey, that they have something to protect against aside from their witch mother. That said, there are moments of perception, such as, "Someone's always watching. // but never where you think" in the poem "The Witch Stands Beyond the Vapor." But overall their "unknowing" is similar in a parallel fashion to that of the "unknowing" adults' experience. For example in "The Detective Wonders if He Said Something Wrong":

Maybe love wonders what the world is—
 shouldn't this, tortured that—

and how to buy a house and have babies.

Lines like these foreshadow more mature concerns affiliated with girlhood. How is one supposed to grow from a girl to a woman to a mother? How is one supposed to grow up to be anything at all? The adults in *Wolf and Pilot* are just as concerned with this question as the children are.