

Editor's Notes

I am pleased to feature poems by Judith Arcana in this special issue on young mothers. In many of the poems published here, and in her book length collection, *What if your mother*, Arcana writes about her experiences, from 1970-1972, as a “Jane,” a member of the Abortion Counseling Service of the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union. The Abortion Counseling Service, now called “Jane,” in the histories of the women’s health movement in the U.S., worked with more than 11,000 women and girls (the youngest under 12, the oldest over 50), all of whom came to the underground group for abortions before the Supreme Court decision on *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. Some of the poems in the collection were inspired by this pre-Roe abortion work, others are drawn from the lives of girls and women Arcana knew and imagined, from newspapers, elections, legislation, from accounts of terrorism and assassination perpetrated by the anti-abortion movement in the U.S.; as well as from Arcana’s work with clinics, colleges, and community organizations.

Arcana writes skillfully about complex subjects, managing to present powerful political poems that are at once grounded in women’s lives and bodies. The poems are clear-voiced, compassionate and passionate. The poet manages to express struggle, suffering, and loss in work that is accessible, fierce, funny, and full of lyric intensity. The voices of young mothers are heard in compelling ways through poetic forms that employ everyday speech, conversations, and narratives of depositions and interviews.

Complex arguments are raised in poems such as “Jocasta interviewed in Hell” and the wry and darkly humorous “For all the Mary Catholics.” The poem “In the Service we said,” demonstrates Arcana’s ability to use simple vernacular for the statement of “truth”:

Lying there, some would ask, so we said No, / we're not doctors; we're women just like you. / We needed to know how, so we learned it – /you know, just like you learn anything.

One of the most powerful poems is “Felony Booking, Women’s Lockup, 11th and State: A Short Literary Epic” in which Arcana describes the experience of being arrested:

Compounded by conspiracy: *collaborators* / like in black&white movies about Nazis / where they shave the heads of women who fuck / the enemy. But, citizens, here’s the thing you need / to know: when it’s illegal, abortion’s homicide.

Towards the end of this poem Arcana’s description of her own breast-feeding body evokes an ironic eroticism juxtaposed against the stark reality of prison and the justice system:

Locked up, I freed my breasts from their container: / a nursing bra built like the Golden Gate Bridge. / I squeezed them soft like a lover, milked them hard/ like a farmer; sprayed my baby’s own sweet nectar/ down that dirty little sink. Then lawyer boys took me / out to night court in the basement, away from the women, / saying *strategy*: I was a wooden horse, a night mare.

Arcana’s arguments are never simplistic, as we see in her poem “She Said” in which we encounter the voices of many different girls and women, the many things “she” said, ending with the final voice:

She gulped some water in the kitchen and said.... My mother always said that everything comes down to give and take. So I think the baby, today, that was the taking – and me, me in my own life, I think that was the giving.

Judith Arcana’s poems are fascinating historical contributions to the bodies of literature on abortion, reproductive freedom, the women’s movement, and motherhood. Arcana speaks for many women, across boundaries of race, class and sexual orientation.

—*Rishma Dunlop*



Photo: Joe Paczuski



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