

What if your mother

Judith Arcana.
Goshen, CT: Chicory Blue Press, 2005.

Reviewed by Jill Scott

Judith Arcana's *What if your mother* is more than a book of mother poetry; it is a trip through the history of women's fertility rights. One might call Arcana a poetry journalist or a poetry activist. Her words speak the clear, bloody truth of women's fight for reproductive freedom in accessible language heavy with the solid rhythm of story. Arcana's voice is inviting and strong, taking readers with her on a journey through the dark underbelly of the unspoken and the unspeakable, of the real and the inevitable. The truth is often funny, like the tale of sperm cells—"But there they were, jerky, blind, hesitant little swimmers with tails of thread." Arcana can be blunt and frank, as in the titular poem "What if your mother," which lays out the old argument that we cannot sanction abortion because what if your own mother had aborted you—"I think you just have to tell these people, / Get real. That's not what it's about." Some poems are poignant and poetically brilliant, as in "Loverchild," which evokes breastfeeding in all its liquid abundance:

she broadens, she goes liquid
she runs with saliva, with sweat, dripping milk
...
bitten by the teeth of the loverchild
mother, I'm so hungry, feed me
I need to eat you mother
I love to eat you mother
I eat to love you mother

Arcana tells the real story about mothering, not the Hallmark version, one where "If that baby doesn't stop crying / I don't know what I'll do," and one that is so vexing in its complex, incomprehensible beauty that it defies syntax—"blaze red angel baby / bleed purple magic mother." Arcana uses biblical imagery—"King Solomon could not imagine this woman, / sobbing, crazy, lost in shock"—and mythical figures—she writes Oedipus from the perspective of Jocasta, the mother forced to forsake her baby. We also hear, in all its sordid nakedness, the story of a teenage couple who hide their pregnancy under a girdle, then collectively dispose of the unsightly bump's contents—"When it came out, I turned it over and we pressed the head into a pile of towels for a while." The politics of abortion unravels into etymological humour when "roe" becomes a "small species of deer inhabiting parts of Europe and Asia"

and “wade” becomes “chiefly, to go through a tedious task, a long or uninteresting book.”

Mostly, though, *Arcana* evokes the gut-wrenching paradox that women love their bodies and their babies with every fibre of their being; that this unwavering love for the growing fetus forces them to make hard decisions because when the circumstances are not right for mothering, mothers turn to murder. No woman wants to be a Medea.

True Confessions

Renee Norman

Toronto: Inanna Publications, 2005.

Reviewed by Dorsía Smith Silva

Renee Norman's poems in *True Confessions* cover a range of experience, from her complex relationship with her mother to the daily struggles of womanhood. Her poems are bound together by the various experiences of women as daughters, mothers, grandmothers, and poets. The end result is a fresh, appealing collection that balances love, nostalgia, humour, fear, and anger.

Norman opens the first section, “This is How It Begins,” with “Chop.” The poem describes a parenting role-reversal, in which the speaker affectionately helps her mother undress like she does her “youngest child / when her head is stuck.” The tone quickly changes in “Repairing Damage” when the daughter starts to “break / and fight back” with her mother for lecturing her “children / who should have known better.” Mother-daughter tension also resonates in “Mother's Madness,” as the daughter once again disapproves of her mother's commands to her children: “is this what you want them to remember? / stop running up and down the stairs / stop teasing your sister.” Norman returns to the intimate bond between mothers and daughters in “For Sara at Twelve.” The mother here tenderly recognizes her connection to her daughter: “the same knots tangle / your hair and mine / we both squint through / glasses spotted with breath.” These moving poems best illustrate the profound emotions shared by mothers and daughters.

In the second and third sections, “If I Call Myself” and “When Geese Fly,” Norman reflects upon the strength of women and the domestic responsibilities of mothers. With “On the Tongue,” she describes how women come together to share pain: “when Nicaraguan poet Daisy Zamora recites / a poem about her mother / when mature students read personal narratives aloud / one mother's lost child is each particular sadness.” In the poem “In the Bathroom Thou Shalt Eat Stones,” Zamora reappears as a symbol of brave women who fearlessly “eat