

Blood Mother

Su Croll.

Ottawa: Signature Editions, 2008.

The King: Poems

Rebecca Wolff.

New York: Norton, 2009.

Reviewed by Leah Souffrant

Within the expanding corpus of poetry that addresses the subject of motherhood, Su Croll's 2008 volume *Blood Mother* is an example of normative mothering in dialogue with itself. Croll's book includes poems that touch upon conception, ovulation, lactation, and many other physical realities of procreation, but they lack originality. Many poems are unsurprising, even formulaic.

Each lyric forms a tidy unity and is sometimes richly imagistic. In "first night," the new mother confronts mortality after guiding the reader through the steep learning curve of "a knowable vocabulary of need." Although the poem articulates valuable experience, portraying a maternal reality with some vividness, the imagery is bogged down by familiar tropes. The speaker observes "now she was netted/by the smell/of the milk knitting us together," but the intensity of the situation is not sustained. The poem concludes with the unremarkable assertion, "I would be her mother/after my death."

In sharp contrast, the 2007 anthology *Not for Mothers Only: Contemporary Poems on Child-Getting and Child-Rearing*, edited by Catherine Wagner and Rebecca Wolff, altered the poetics of motherhood by collecting several decades of work by mothers, including a wide range of new and experimental writers, and demonstrating the abundance of material, topics, positions, and formal innovations inspired by the field. Rebecca Wolff's third volume of poetry, *The King*, published in 2009, continues to explore the poetics of motherhood. The collection yields a study of the self as mother—a thoughtful, fierce, fragile, dynamic individual. Wolff's motherhood is complicated by life, the mind, the body, personal entanglements, intimacies, and estrangements.

The poems in *The King* come together as a journey of self-transformation through the physical, temporal, and psychic impact of new motherhood. In "Nonfiction," the speaker declares:

That's the way they greet me—

that's the way they have always
greeted me:
a fire in the eyes

and dedication
to the experience
in the moment.

The speaker resists being defined by the maternal, even as she carefully carves out a self refracting off the daily wonders of mothering.

The collection deploys curious juxtapositions of the religious and the maternal. It presents religion through a secular lens and repeatedly blurs and refocuses the lens of language. The poems, which often are fractured, nonetheless assert the congruity between motherhood's jerks, interruptions, disappointments, and instabilities. As Wolff asserts, the pieces of motherhood may be imperfect but they fit together neatly.

The King confronts the reader with a complex portrait of the maternal figure. It includes frequent references to breast milk and “letdown,” without reducing breastfeeding to a tired metaphor. And the narrative arc of the poems is occasionally pierced by the marvel of plain insight: “He loves me best when/I teach him things.” In her earlier anthology, *Not for Mothers Only*, Wolff set a high bar for maternal poetics. Her latest volume of poetry seeks to challenge paradigms and move readers; it adds a valuable voice—wry, tentative, blunt—to the growing and diverse body of poetry that attends to the maternal subject.