

## CONTENTS

*Introduction: Rags into Riches* / 11

### PRIMIPARA

Domain / 17

Change Herself / 18

Bitch & Destroyer / 19

Umbilicus / 20

Poverty / 23

White Solids, Pink Shadows / 26

The Teaching / 28

Enchantment & Freedom / 29

### MULTIPARA I

Proud Belly / 35

Great Mother / 38

Reprise / 40

Birth/Wide/Spread / 41

Old MacDonald / 43

Song About / 44

Am / 46

Birdsong / 49

Unmaking the House / 51

Little Flowers / 53

A Tip of the Table / 54

Justice / 56

Our Mother / 57

Migration / 58

Rock / 61

MULTIPARA II

Spiders & Dogs / 65

Healing Circle / 68

Remember / 70

Grandmother Sweatlodge / 72

Ma / 73

INTERREGNUM

Birth Sketch I / 77

Birth Sketch II / 78

A Present Made / 79

The Kitchen Thief / 80

Birth / 82

Protection / 86

Gone Not Gone / 87

Separation / 88

Mother's Day / 90

Night Flight / 91

Thirteen / 93

O Very Young / 94

As a Good Jaguar Should / 95

Decade One / 96

Springtime Blossoms / 101

Grandmother / 102

Mother Time / 105

MULTIPARA III

Conception / 109

In Autumn Garden / 110

A Moment / 111

Who is This? / 112

Birth Place / 114

Reproduction of the Goddess in the New World / 116

GRANDE MULTIP

Two Children / 119

Invitation / 120

Tableau / 121

Wave / 122

Easter Feast Day / 123

Multiparanormal / 124

Into Manhood / 128

Boy of Earth, 1986 / 130

*Notes* / 133

*Gratitude* / 135

*About the Author* / 139

INTRODUCTION:  
RAGS INTO RICHES

*There is no such thing as a bad experience, and there's no such thing as anger being bad, because every emotion we're given is a teacher. There's a reason why we're given those emotions.*

— MARIA CAMPBELL

This is a collection of new and used, or rather, new and selected poetry. I have not attempted to choose “the best” poems found in my previously published books, no more than a parent would choose his or her “best child.” Nor have I organized this book in relation to a poet’s landmarks. Beginning in 1996, I began to pull the threads of work written from a mother’s perspective from the weave of childish and girlish and citizen-of-the-world-ish perspectives, and to build a new compilation of work using these scraps. A dozen pregnancy, birth and mother-related poems from my first three books are here joined with new and/or unpublished work, and organized around the landmarks of a mother’s life: *primipara* (first birthing), *multipara* (subsequent birthings), and *grande multipara* (more than five birthing

experiences). Into this mix I have added a section, *interregnum* (the time between the death of one king and the election of another), to represent my years as a single mother.

A poet's sense of what is important and what is beautiful sometimes diverges dramatically from the more open, overarching and practical concerns of a mother. The external elements of this mother's journey are only lightly sketched; the inner struggles, however, proved a fascination for me, and are amply documented. These poems were written over a twenty year period, 1985 to 2005. Through these two decades, I spent a solid five years pregnant, twelve years breastfeeding, and twenty years parenting the young. I have given birth six times, at home with my family, attended by midwives. Two years were spent in struggle over custody of my first four sons, with one month of complete separation from all four children. Through mediation and negotiation, a joint custody arrangement was developed which has stood us in good stead, and allowed the friendship and family feelings between ex-partners to resurface. In my fifth year as a single parent, I was caught up in courtship once more, and quickly married.

All of my children live at home with me, half-time or full-time, to this day: one is currently pre-school, two are in elementary school, two are in high school, and one is working full-time in the labour force. I have one daughter and five sons.

The Latin term *primipara* is literally defined as "she that has brought forth, foaled, whelped, littered, etc., for the first time" (Lewis & Short). Although such definitions bring me pleasure, and I frequently turn to my tattered Oxford dictionary, I do not in this collection try to capture either "mother" or "time" within any particular confines or limitations. "Mother" and "time" — the two endlessly interact, an ongoing medley of life and becoming.

By separating the mother poems from those of girlhood, many of the tales of abuse received are left behind. The harm taken by that heady combination of Roman Catholic teachings

and my real world experiences as a mixed blood girl-woman led to the efforts toward healing found in many of these poems. I was both soothed and influenced by concepts of the divine female, found in several cultures, and Chinese medical concepts and religion. Katherine Anne Rabuzzi's *Motherself: A Mythic Analysis of Motherhood* had a positive impact, despite her lack of ease with the poor, presenting the mother's journey as an heroic one. Beth Brant, whose "sweetgrass hair, moss eyes" show up in these pages, gave me permission to live in my skin, and to write from that place. Maria Campbell's work, including the interview with Doris Hillis published in *Prairie Fire* in the late '80s, has both led me and fed me: "When you look at our history, as women," she said, "regardless of our culture, it's terrible what's been taken away from us."

My desire as a poet has been twofold: to observe carefully my passage through what seemed to me to be a largely undocumented landscape, and to use poetic expression to recapture and re-synthesize my self, in all of her shards and slivers. After years of contemplating the destruction of female pride and power within the generations of my family, I wrote the poem "Mother Time" as a new job description, a revisioning of a mother's work, away from the rebellious "not this, not that" approach of my first decade of parenting. Although it might read as an historical piece, it has stood me in good stead. Over the years, as my understanding of my historical place has filled out, so too has my compassion for those who raised me.

Although neither a quilt nor a rag-woven rug, this collection bears a resemblance to both of those forms of mother arts. By weaving these poems together, I have intended to make something that will be useful. You do not need to have given birth to enjoy this poetry. You do not need to be a mother. For those who are mothers, here is an opportunity to compare notes. Have your pregnancies been heavily occupied by medical personnel who over-rate their concerns and need for control, or was your life saved by these same personnel in heroic clothes? Did you

feel supported, informed, even cherished by your caregivers? In later years, were your teen-aged sons handcuffed and tasered by sadistic “peace officers”? Or were their lives transformed by a human, dressed as a police man, being touched by a human, dressed in criminal clothes? Our stories, spoken truly, are essential: food and drink, fresh air, room to grow.

Through listening and telling, we weave our individual rags into riches shared.

Joanne Arnott  
January 2007