

## Opening Invisible Doors: Considering Heavenly Mother

Rachel Hunt Steenblik. *Mother's Milk: Poems in Search of Heavenly Mother*. Illustrated by Ashley Mae Hoiland. Salt Lake City: By Common Consent Press, 2017. Paper: \$9.95. ISBN: 978-0-9986052-2-7.

*Reviewed by Kristen Eliason*

*Mother's Milk: Poems in Search of Heavenly Mother* is a collection of poems written by Rachel Hunt Steenblik and illustrated by Ashley Mae Hoiland. Divided into four sections and armed with nearly thirty pages of notes, the work of this book appears to be two-fold: first, to enter into a discoveratory conversation about the nature of Heavenly Mother, and second, an outcropping of the research Steenblik conducted for the scholarly article “‘A Mother There’: A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the epigraph from Kierkegaard sets the stage for what the reader expects to be a deep poetic dive into the nature of a Heavenly Mother and the relationship between the deity and the writer. However, the following 200+ short poems (often three to a page) accomplish little more than cursory observations of a feminine divine. The poem, “Sometimes” muses:

Sometimes  
I just  
need my  
Mama.

(Sometimes  
it is hard for Her

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1. David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, “‘A Mother There’: A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven,” *BYU Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011): 70–97. Steenblik is credited as a research assistant for Dr. Paulsen.

to be so  
needed.) (18)

The two short stanzas host a representative sample of the consistent capitalization of the feminine throughout the book. The primary thrust of the book is to highlight the feminine, and the capitalization seems logically necessary; however, the thorough underscoring of the importance of the deity's gender and role through Capital Letters comes across as somewhat self-aware and overwrought in poems already so spare.

The structure of the stanzas and line breaks attempts thoughtful symmetry—unfolding Sometimes/Sometimes and Mama/needed as matching bookends to the dual statements. But the careful scaffolding of the structure fails to elevate the poem beyond its existence as two statements. The observation, “Sometimes I just need my Mama,” lacks the precision, concrete imagery, metaphor and, ultimately, epiphany required for the poem to land with the force that I suspect was intended. The poem appears to rely too heavily on the reader to supply what it looks like to need a mother-God-figure in the transcendent space between the lines.

Steenblik goes to great lengths to establish herself as not only the writer but a highly knowledgeable speaker of the poems. References to her children throughout the book effectively blur the line between speaker and writer. With this foundation, she then strives to establish herself as a very well-read researcher of Heavenly Mother. Titles such as “What Søren Aabye Taught Me,” “What Chieko Taught Me,” and “What Jeffrey Taught Me,” suggest that Steenblik wants the reader to know she's done her homework. But the poems themselves rest too heavily on the accomplishments of the titular philosophers, prophets, and poets invoked. “What Chieko Taught Me” reads again as two linked statements:

The Mother's face  
is hidden from us,  
because Her arms  
are around us.  
(Our heads rest gently  
on Her shoulder.) (62)

The sentiment here is really nice—a loving Mother in Heaven who holds us, her children, with our sleepy heads resting where we cannot see her face. The approach however, calls to mind the well-known “Footprints in the Sand.” “Footprints”’s (limited) success rests entirely on the surprise/perspective shift—the realization that Christ was there all along. Similarly, Steenblik’s poem relies on a shift in perspective of Mother in Heaven and requests that the reader take this perspective seriously not through the wrought language but by telling you that a well-known LDS leader also holds this perspective.

There are overtures to a more profound look at Heavenly Mother in poems such as “Marco Polo II” and “Motherless Milk,” which offers a somewhat more developed metaphor with the lines:

I searched for my mother, the way a baby roots  
for her Mother’s breast, head nuzzling from side to side,  
mouth open, ready to suckle. But still I was thirsty.

This section reflects the metaphor I expected from the outset of the book—the speaker/writer searching as a child does for her mother. I appreciated the positioning of the blind searching of the babe that cannot see her mother’s face but knows intuitively that a breast is near. The poem, which I count as the most successful of the book, continues with the lines:

Then my belly grew, and my breasts grew, and  
a ravenous little thing came out. I offer her my milk  
without money and without price. My husband  
offered it to her once, while I sat beside them on a train.  
She pursed her lips against the false nipple,  
and stared at me with sad eyes. I wondered then,  
if Heavenly Mother walked into another room  
so we would take the bottle. I wondered then,  
if we are weaned. (8)

There are a few brilliant pieces of language here—the ravenous thing, the false nipple, and the sad eyes carrying an emotional impact that belies the somewhat prosaic tone of each line.

Steenblik's conversational style is consistent throughout the book, with most of the stanzas holding one or two fairly innocuous observations, statements, or feminized versions of scriptures; however there are a couple of poems that gave me serious pause. The juxtaposition of two specific poems was particularly troubling: The first "Maybe" posits that perhaps one must "[be] a mother / to know the Mother." This exclusionary and somewhat elitist idea is immediately tempered by the final line that suggests one could be the mother of "a child, a poem, an idea," and thereby qualify to know the Mother. My initial reaction, as a new mother myself, was to feel generally alienated by the sentiment, but I didn't want to get too bent out of shape over a poem that was clearly backpedaling out of the unfriendly territory it had unintentionally wandered into.

Maybe

Maybe it takes being a mother  
to know the Mother,  
to carry something inside  
for months, before birthing  
it into the world—  
a child, a poem, an idea

I decided to give the poem's potential blunder a pass until I read the poem immediately following it.

The Mother Understands

The divine  
Mother  
of us all,  
understands  
not every  
woman  
is a mother. (87–88)

At first blush, this poem seems to be trying to be more inclusive—not every woman has given birth to a physical child, and the "divine / Mother / of us all / understands." But the cumulative effect of these two poems

is to be told first that only a mother can know the Mother, then that you can be a mother even if you haven't born children, and then that not everyone is a mother. If it is true that not every woman is a mother, and if it is also true that it takes being a mother to know the Mother, then only some women are entitled (via their ability to reproduce) to a relationship with deity. The thought is grating. I feel certain that the intent here was to somehow say that it's okay to not be a mother by way of giving birth, but if so, these two poems shouldn't be read in succession. The positioning of these poems is disappointing, if not offensive.

Poetry aside for a moment, the book is sustained throughout by Hoiland's warm and inviting illustrations. The thoughtful artwork celebrates women and children by recognizing quotidian moments and allowing us to see them as art. Line drawings of a woman's pregnant belly, or a mother holding a child, recognize and honor the feminine experience and elevate the work as a whole. The facelessness of the people depicted allows the reader to insert herself into the art and to resonate with it in a meaningful way.

Where this book ultimately succeeds is in provoking more profound thought on the nature of Heavenly Mother and starting conversations about this relatively undiscussed deity. The form of the poems asks the reader to get very comfortable with the feminine pronoun, and with Heavenly Mother as an active participant in the situations described. The work insists on her presence and posits interesting questions about the characteristics of a relationship with her. Lines like, "She knows our / need by kissing" and "The Mother still remembers to sing" are thought-provoking and stand alone in a quiet field where not many other texts have been crafted. I am left, perhaps like the speaker of these poems, wanting to know more about why the Mother remembers to sing, what it is that she sings, where she sings from, and what she sounds like. If this were a draft manuscript, I would earnestly want to read second, third, and fourth revisions to see how these ideas develop, and how greater precision could make them sing. That said, the existence of this book does open previously invisible doors to new thought, and that is an accomplishment that should not be overlooked. While it's not a great

book of poetry, this book is benchmarking new territory, and that is worth a great deal of consideration.



## Resisting Interpretation

Lisa Bickmore. *Ephemerist*. Sante Fe, N.Mex: Red Mountain Press, 2017. 74 pp. Paper: \$18.95. ISBN: 978-0997310269.

*Reviewed by Bert Fuller*

Ephemerist, n.: (1) after the Greek word for day, a journal keeper; (2) a collector of ephemera (see *archivist*); (3) an inventor of ephemera (see *capitalist*); (4) a devotee of ephemera (see *nudist*); (5) one who privileges ephemera (see *nepotist*); (6) a scientist whose subject is ephemera (see *mycologist*).

What follows is a lecture on three samples from a known ephemerist.

### “Let’s Get Lost”

Bickmore resists interpretation. She draws you in, leaves you tingling or still, and sets your mind wandering. No conclusions, no closures to the verse, except her Emersonian epigraph that “Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion.”

“Let’s Get Lost” opens with the crack of billiards on a November night in rural Vermont. Bickmore is by herself, “so I could have the loneliness I craved.” Late in the poem she reveals that she had been there twenty years before with her children and “the man who was my husband.” Presumably the husband is no more, yet the spot remains where they had shared dinner over a fire. “*I am lost*,” she writes, “at the mouth of the canyon / closed with a gate.” The closed gate says: “*Enough . . . with emphasis.*”