

Mother, May We?

Dove Song: Heavenly Mother in Mormon Poetry. Edited by Tyler Chadwick, Dayna Patterson, and Martin Pulido. El Cerrito, Calif.: Peculiar Pages, 2018. 400 pp. Paper: \$21.99. ISBN: 9781732030206.

Reviewed by Gail Turley Houston

She is willful. She is in the other room. She is “the feminine / present subjunctive.” She is “tessellating.” She is “throneless, / wanders.” She is “queen of heaven.” She is a “Heavenly Hausfrau.” She is “Medusa in the kingdom.” She is the “Pillar of Womanhood.” She is “executrix.” She is a “mahogany” woman. She is “the Holy Soul.” She is.

These are among the things we learn about Mother in Heaven in *Dove Song*. It is glorious.

Edited by Tyler Chadwick, Dayna Patterson, and Martin Pulido, *Dove Song* is an anthology of almost two centuries of Mormon poetry about Mother in Heaven. A hefty tome at four hundred pages, it is not to be read in one sitting. Treasure it. We need this book, says Susan Elizabeth Howe in her introduction, for it is a “work of history” and a “sacred record” of not only Heavenly Mother’s existence but the “personal quest of the poets to learn about their Mother in Heaven” (21). Indeed, *Dove Song* gets it so right by foregrounding the historical significance of the “expansive state of contemporary Mormon poetry” that contemplates Heavenly Mother, in other words, to do for her what art works have done for over two thousand years in establishing, legitimizing, and authorizing the Christian God the Father and Jesus Christ, who were shunned and ridiculed before Constantine’s Edict of Milan in 313 CE (8).

The task is enormous. To overturn centuries of patriarchy’s occlusion, elision, and assault on the Great Mother, the Goddess, Mother Mary, Inanna, Isis, who came before. After that erasure “eons of / amnesia”

about and “partial / prints” are left of her, her “chapters purged” from the “book of history,” as so poignantly inscribed in Ann Gardner Stone’s “Mother,” Tara Timpson’s, “Missing Her,” and Paul Swenson’s “Motherless Child” (109, 268, and 135). As the editors of this volume tersely record, the “canon of scripture includes no direct, individual revelation of our Heavenly Mother” (24). Put Mother in Heaven’s tepid entry in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* against Jesus and God the Father and, yes, she is a cipher. With no edict from Salt Lake City regarding her authority, we are left to “infer” it from “hints” and a hymn by Eliza R. Snow.¹

In their variety of genres, tones, and imagery, the poetry in this volume illustrates the understanding that a god has no crown nor scepter without art. The building, singing, painting, lyricizing, sculpting, and dancing are the infrastructure for the edifice of worship. The arts no god can essay; it is left to the realm of mortals to create—mortals who make mythologies for their gods. Many of the writers in this volume project that obligation to make a mythology for her theology: In “I Can’t Imagine Her,” Marilyn Bushman-Carlton writes, “I need to know an office you can claim / here on earth where we and myth exist” (271). Tiffany Moss Singer assumes the mantle of authority when she proclaims, “Mine is the mythos of Mother, in all her iterations” (“Flesh and Bones,” 259). Alex Caldiero, too, lyricizes the “mythic / moment” of becoming conscious of the Goddess (“Once Upon a Time,” 144). Maxine Hanks is particularly drawn to the mythos of the goddess, as in “Truth Eternal,” which limns Heavenly Mother as an “endless divine archetype” (96).

But there is more than myth-making here. Joyful exploration of so many genres praise and appraise her. Here, splendid visions and revisions of the Bible dance upon the page: psalms that “cry for wisdom” (Nola Wallace’s “A Psalm,” 117); a witty rewriting of that old misogynist St. Paul (S. E. Page, “To the Unknown Goddess”); an edgy, tongue-in-cheek Song of Solomon of sorts from Steven L. Peck (“My Turn on Earth”).

1. Elaine Anderson Cannon, “Mother in Heaven,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, https://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Mother_in_Heaven.

One is bent with grace to hear Mother say, “how often / would I have gathered you as an eagle / feeds her fledglings” in Howe’s stunning parable “Mother God” (277). Catechism skitters in Timpson’s charming “Small Gifts,” where it is asked, “Is your name hidden in the color of vermilion sandstone in this / canyon” (269).

Secular forms abound in sonnets (a perfect fourteen lines manifesting the “azure” of her body in Tyler Chadwick’s “Goddess Sonnets”). A Shakespearean “O” by Emma Jay, whose sound symbolism shimmers. Charles Edmund Richardson’s “Excerpts from Footprints of Gospel Feet for the Modest-in-Heart,” written in 1891, is essentially Miltonic in explaining God and the Goddess’s ways to (wo)man. Marden Clark engages T. S. Eliot’s late poetry of hope in the lyric adeptness of his “Mother of Us All,” while Cheryl Bruno takes us into the territory of the astonishing religious poet Gerard Manley Hopkins in the lithesome line “a great loneliness has now descended” in “Message to Cecily.” Linda Sillitoe’s nursery rhyme “Song of Creation” gentles the spirit. And then there is the sheer gusto of William H. Apperley’s “To My Fellow Workers,” which was published in 1910 and reads like a Marxist manifesto, beginning and ending as it does with a call to the “Comrades,” or the sheer chutzpah of Ashley Mae Hoiland’s “Some Women Whose Stories I Have Known or Am Getting to Know,” which is wholly and, holy, a roll call of great feminist names.

Is it quibbling to note that in this volume Mother in Heaven is usually inferred as white and inordinately interested in Utah, that busy Beehive that has forgotten its Queen Mother long since (or as Patterson writes in “If Mother Braids a Waterfall,” she’s a “queen bee with no drones” [242]). The Mormoncentric-ness of, well, Mormonism, invading the exquisite territory of the divine—what can you do? But of equal concern is that, too often, where Father in Heaven is presented as tangible and ready to hand, Mother is amorphous, gauzy, seen through a soft-focus lens. She is in the sky, in the water. She is to be (not) seen and heard in nature or the aching metaphor of earthly parenting.

Perhaps I gesture here, for she is not only described in metaphor—she is metaphor, that classic bait and switch whereby the vehicle (the image) sometimes overtakes the tenor (the concept described). Rather like what patriarchy did to the goddess. She is the thorn in theology’s side: there can be no Trinity with or without her. Joseph Smith probably saw that coming. He knew you could not square the paradigm of a Father, Son, and Holy Ghost with that of a mother and father godhead (which Jonathan Penny in “The Toscano Heresy” extends further with the line, “What if that Holy, Heav’nly Three / Is Godly Him and Him and She?” (184). In another riff in this theologically problematic direction is Timothy Liu’s wonderful query, “Exactly how many / wives does my / Heavenly Father / have” (“Strait is the Gate,” 284). Yes, this volume goes with bravado into that brave and incomprehensible world. (My sneaking suspicion is that Joseph got the whole idea of the goddess from that woman of all strengths, Eliza R. Snow, who had been raped by a Missouri mob, the appendix informs us. All Mother’s mercy upon her.)

So, then, it is the brash seekers my heart follows after in this volume: Marilène Phipps in “My Father’s Sister” announcing that “men occupy the earth like an army” (197). Melody Newey Johnson reminding us that “the chapel I inhabit / invites no female to the rostrum” (“How Long the Call,” 193). Melissa Dalton-Bradford demanding “no intermediary, please” between her and Mother in Heaven (“Phoning Home,” 212). Elisa Eastwood Pulido recognizing that even the goddess gets paid 70-odd cents to every man’s dollar—“Oh Queen of the menial wage!” (“Sightings: The Heavenly Mother in North Central Texas,” 244). Timothy Liu’s craggy reminder that we “shit” and make love and that is why “it’s okay / to contemplate / the other half / of something else / no one has seen” (“Heavenly Mother Ode,” 281). Jenny Webb’s elixir for those put off by endless Mormon niceness, that, “My breast is not my / Femininity,” if that’s why men can’t just deal (“A Theology of Flesh,” 294). Harlow Clark’s hilarious “Adam-Ondi-Ahman” that features Eve asking Mother,

“Did you really tell him [Job] to curse God and die?” And she answers, “Yes I did” (131).

These illustrious quibblers bring to the fore the question of why so many of us have been so cautious and submissive with the brethren for so long. What makes us so afraid to ask one simple question: How can we know ourselves if we do not know her? This volume rings with that query, indirect or full-bodied.

As so many of these poems acknowledge, God is a remembering of who we are; and if God is home, then Mother must be there. As Robert A. Rees imagines it, Mother is our “deepest memory” (“Mother,” 175), or, as Nola Wallace pens this is our deepest woe, “Let me know you that I may know myself” (“A Psalm,” 117). Carol Lynn Pearson doesn’t let it go, in so many of her poems, wondering, ironically, why we must leave Mother hidden in that room of Her own.

We worshippers of Mother remain a cult within a cult if she is not known more widely. Indeed, we need this volume of poetry to prepare us for the revelations at hand.



Morning Has Broken

Robert A. Rees. *Waiting for Morning*. Provo: Zarahemla Books, 2018. 145 pp. Paper: \$12.79. ISBN: 9780999347201.

Reviewed by Karen Marguerite Moloney

The day the head gasket blew in the California desert, it was late summer, 1987—and therefore, stiflingly hot. The painter’s van was hooked to a travel trailer, living quarters for my foster brother Karl, his wife, and