

## Agency and its Aftermath in Three Recent Poetry Collections

Sharlee Mullins Glenn. *Brighter and Brighter Until the Perfect Day*. Salt Lake City: By Common Consent Press, 2025. 94 pp. Paperback: \$9.99. ISBN: 978-1961471207.

Marilyn Bushman-Carlton. *We Wore Dresses*. Salt Lake City: By Common Consent Press, 2025. 128 pp. Paperback: \$9.99. ISBN: 978-196147124.

Stephen Peck. *Experiments in the Fading Light*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2025. 144 pp. Paperback: \$19.99. ISBN: 978-1560855200.

*Reviewed by Alixa Brobbey*

“What will you do with your one wild and precious life?”<sup>1</sup> What will you do with your agency, your desires, your very body? These questions repeatedly came to mind as I read three recent poetry collections by Latter-day Saint authors—*Brighter and Brighter Until the Perfect Day* by Sharlee Mullins Glenn, *We Wore Dresses* by Marilyn Bushman-Carlton, and *Experiments in the Fading Light* by Stephen Peck. Each collection, with its own themes and poetic styles, grapples with and answers these questions in its own way.

### Brighter and Brighter Until the Perfect Day

Glenn’s book *Brighter and Brighter Until the Perfect Day* is a poetic epic written in blank verse. In the Miltonian style, it tells the story of the plan of salvation with fierce imagination, thoughtful language, and meticulous craft. The blending of an old form with new ideas makes

---

1. Mary Oliver, “The Summer Day.”

the book particularly memorable. Her use of two specific theological speculations in particular further a thoughtful exploration of agency, the idea that “You will make mistakes— / for one must practice to become a God” (4) within the context of God’s eternal plan for their children.

One theological speculation is an envisioning of the Holy Ghost as Heavenly Mother, an idea that has been circulating in LDS feminist circles for years. In Glenn’s rendition, however, the impetus from this idea comes from Ora (meaning light, brightness, or prayer), one of Elohim’s daughters who first envisions a need for a sacred guide during mortal life and then “brought her plan before the throne” (19). In awe of her brother Jesus’s sacrifice, she questions, “what is my part in this hallowed plan?” (21). Ora takes an active part in the plan of salvation, going so far as to participate in its co-creation, and opening up avenues for LDS women to see themselves in additional roles throughout the plan. So, too, does the use of the plural Elohim to refer to both Heavenly Mother and Father. The poem frequently emphasizes the sacrifice Heavenly Mother has made and also addresses her absence from much of scriptural canon and established theology. Although her role is different from that of Heavenly Father, there is hope for finding her, as

My children, you will see me in the clouds,  
in fire, and sunrise, and the breeding dove.  
You’ll hear me in the cry of newborn babes,  
the sweet and pushful whisper of the breeze.  
You’ll find me in the tops of ancient peaks,  
in whirlwinds and hot pillars of pure light,  
in wombs, and tombs, and slender blades of grass. (25)

The second theological shift I was struck by was Glenn’s transformation of the forbidden fruit into “the flesh of beasts” (36). In the poem, Adam and Eve are warned that

Partaking of their meat would introduce  
brutality and bloodshed in this space  
and would beget corruption, sin, and death. (38)

In this telling of the plan of salvation, the serpent kills a lamb, to the surprise of Eve who sits

eyes wide and welling, comprehending not  
the spot of crimson seeping like a stain  
across the milky fleece of quiet lamb. (45)

Not only does the lamb function as an image of Christ, but it is striking to reenvision the fall not as a calm event, such as the biting of a fruit, but something involving violence, blood, and hunger, precipitating an entry into a violent, bloody world.

The image continues to impact throughout the retelling. As Adam and Eve are thrown out of the garden, “Evicted from the nurtur’ing womb of God” (50), as Glenn masterfully puts it, the lamb turns to a symbol of protection and hope. Mother God promises to

make a coat of skins for you to wear  
as you embark upon your mortal quest.  
This coat, made from the fleece of that slain lamb,  
will cover and protect you on your way  
as you enrobe yourselves in mem’ry of  
the Lamb of God, who’ll give his life for you. (50)

For LDS readers, the idea of being cloaked in a protective skin may take on additional meaning.

The text of the poem is short—only sixty pages long, including several illustrations. The poem can easily be read in one sitting, allowing the epic to unfold in one quick breath. By the end, one may wish that it was slightly longer, taking some additional time to delve into Christ’s life on earth. However, it leaves much for readers to ponder, enriching the canon of LDS writing.

### We Wore Dresses

While Glenn’s collection focuses on centering women’s choices in an explicitly eternal context, Bushman-Carlton’s collection *We Wore Dresses* catalogues a woman’s life on earth—from girlhood through

adulthood—and all of the messiness, desires, choices, and hardships that it entails. Among the free verse poems, she also includes pantoum, sestina, haiku, and ghazal to great effect.

The opening poem and several thereafter are full of a girlhood that is constricted by social norms and conventions. The titular, opening poem, which functions as a bit of a prologue, chronicles ways in which dresses shape childhood experiences. The speaker notes, “In dresses we were careful, won free scars or bruises, / collected even fewer tales of swift licks, shattered bones.” Despite the physical constraints of dresses and the wider societal constraints they symbolized, the girls in these poems are brimming with dreams and with desires. In “Desire” (8),

The Mia Maid teachers pretend girls don't have it,  
even though we reek of it,  
even though it oils the fasteners of our necklaces,  
stains the buttons of our blouses,  
skids on our shoes to dances in church parking lots.

These hungry girls grow up to be wives and mothers, to deal with pregnancy, breastfeeding, adoptions, the loss of identity that can come with giving up one's maiden name. In “Cleave” (24) the speaker describes her son's early days, and the ways in which it shapes their bond. She describes how she “Finger-trace[s] his features,” looking at “His innocent face not fully knit together.” Rich with double meaning, the poem describes bringing the baby home from surgery:

At first,  
we are cleft. I cannot press him breast to breast—  
now the closure must hold its seal—  
and have to improvise,  
cleaving his body back to my front, his body's heat, his beating heart  
against my own.

In “Quickening” (27), Bushman-Carlton describes the first moment of becoming aware of a pregnancy through a series of stunning images:

the faintest ripple      a spilling whisper  
a soap bubble      dispersing

a flutter      a ruffling      a flicker  
a scratch from inside an egg; from inside me  
a bashful tap: your announcement      your hello.

Here, the theme of agency also is apparent in the last line of the poem, “the first time you chose me.”

Several of my favorite poems deal with embracing aging bodies and the passage of time. In “My Body in Motion” (36), Bushman-Carlton describes leaning into her own body “like I’d lean into a lover, / my face flushed and lusty.” In “The Solace of Letting Go” (100), the speaker describes how she is “eschewing tall shoes, unstable tools, / skinny jeans, being told what to eat.” Rather than a life of abundance, she is reveling in less: “Give me what’s empty—ladles, palms facing up, / the well of a magician’s black hat.” In “Breadbox Ghazal,” (74) the speaker ruminates on that household object, and how it is unfamiliar to her children (and likewise this reviewer): “My children don’t use rabbit ears, clotheslines, root cellars, / ice cube trays, iodine, diaries with keys, a breadbox.” While breadboxes housed the “staff of life” during the speaker’s youth, the symbol means nothing to her children.

Along with aging, the collection ponders the importance of touch. In “Learning to Touch” (66), the speaker describes how her daughter “arrive[s] at the dying” of a relative and “with lotion and unambiguous care / hydrated the dying flesh.” She catalogues her daughter’s medical school experience with learning to touch:

Gradually,  
they touched the stomach, the chest,  
easing their way to the consecrated place  
where they would deliver babies. They practiced  
until they could touch without revulsion or shame,  
until it was as natural to spread the petal folds  
as it was to deliver the new life  
to the mother to put to her breast.

Later poems hark back to these images. In “At the Nail Salon” (104), the speaker describes being tenderly touched by a nail salon employee, after

“her nails are finished.” The employee “embraces / each used hand, and kneads.” She is described as

sweet,  
 alive intimate. She is not frightened by the ruins  
 of my long journey,  
 nor of the tithes a body must make.

Several poems near the end of the collection deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, discussing, for example, the sudden solitude it brought, the ways we reached out for human connection. In a particularly memorable poem including several synonyms for “boomer” (codgers, biddies, old coots, Vietnam veterans, etc.), she calls back to the effort to vaccinate children for polio (“Polio,” 92). All of the poems in this collection are brimming with the senses, reminding readers of both the joys and sorrows that come with traversing earth in mortal bodies.

### Experiments in the Fading Light

Peck’s *Experiments in the Fading Light* is divided into various sections, each constituting “an experiment.” This allows him to delve into wide-ranging and various themes and styles without it feeling disjointed. Among the various poetic forms there is prose poem, free verse, ode, haibun, sonnet, and ghazal.

From the first poem, “Additions to St. Hildegard’s *Physica*” (1), this collection also raises questions of agency and choice. Like the classic work, this prose poem contains sections delving into various animals and plants—here, mule deer, opossums, coyotes, aspens, harvester ants, ravens, vesper bats. The ants, Peck notes “are gifted with unsullied freedom” and “epitomize the embodiment of agency.” He muses on the idea of them one day “just head[ing] off in a random (to us) direction, peeling off into whatever adventure strikes their fancy,” noting that “there are universes in which that very thing happened today, but not this one.” Throughout the rest of the collection, this same wild imagination, grounded in scientific fact, is on display. The final poem begins with

“What Comes Out of the Hardship and Difficulty That We Are Willing to Say ‘Yes’ To?” (128) and contains early on the image of “A blessing of grandmothers gather[ing] in a complex fractal.” Peck traces his lineage back to his animal ancestors, noting that “My fishy grandmother was fierce.” From this lineage he draws strength (“I contain multitudes. It’s more than the survivors. It’s the cosmos. It is all of us.”) and questions (“Stand with me toe to toe and answer. Did I agree? / To this place? To the pattern of what I am? To the structures that define and constrain me?” “What is at my center? / If anything beyond this flesh?”)

Like Glenn’s volume, Peck’s collection also explicitly deals with the theme of agency in the context of the story of the fall. In the poem “Eden’s Cur,” (62) he reenvisions this classic story. Rather than the fruit being meat, here he has Adam kill the snake,

bashing its head against  
that fruit-laden tree  
which tempted you so.

The story is unmoored from time, allowing for rich and new language, such as the phrases

After the Fall you played piano in a hotel bar  
smoky, filled with lusty travelers, empty-souled sots,  
drunk, stuffing dollars into your jar hoping  
to lure you back to their shabby earth.

Like Bushman-Carlton’s collection, some poems deal with the consequences of the fall—with aging, mortal bodies, and with the aging, struggling earth. In “Ode to My Ringing Ears” (29), Peck skillfully uses free verse structure to allow the reader to experience the speaker’s experience with tinnitus, through the use of repeated colons in lines such as

::Silence::honor::to::you::  
my::quivering::ears::  
my::buzzing::absence::  
my::noisy::quiet ::/

There is a brief reprieve in the poem, marked by clean lines of prose, “Once it went away . . . It was like breathing clean mountain air after this summer’s fires . . . I thought I was cured.” The tinnitus eventually returns, and with it, perhaps a fresh perspective, with the speaker noting, “I’m::alive:: / vibrating::”

Several of the poems deal with the changing climate and its effects on the earth, including forest fires. “Ghazal on the Ash Left by the Troublesome Fire” (119) uses the repeated language to emphasize the consequences of the fires which lead to the earth “retaining ash,” “ordaining ash,” “waning ash,” and so forth. In another poem, “California Fires Feed Our Utah Sunsets” (120), Peck opens with references to various extinct birds. As the speaker watches a hazy sunset, “each particle of the haze maps to / an individual burned to dust” leading them to conclude that “*the number of species we have inhaled becomes too much.*” Through these poems, natural disasters become tangible and urgent—reading Peck’s poems one can smell and taste it in your throat.

Like the fall poem, other poems in the collection also discuss religious themes, blending them with scientific language and ideas. In “Natural Theology” (19), Peck writes, “Neither microscopes nor telescopes can contain, compress, nor bring God near nor drive God away.” He describes God “a predator” and “parasite,” who is “unrelenting in pursuit.” This God “cares for her own” and “can be scarred and has been.” This God can “be studied, but you can’t control all the variables.”

In contrast, in the poem “What If When You Got to Heaven” (108), Peck imagines a merciful God. The lines open,

God did not care if you had student loans  
or what projects you finished,  
or left undone.

After proceeding through a list of various images, the poem ends “And what if when you asked, What about my sins? / God said:”

The breathtaking last line of this poem invites readers to rethink the nature of God, of sin, of shame. Altogether Peck uses poetic conventions,

both old and new, to take readers on a journey where creatures, man, and God alike are carefully dissected and described, revealing them to be far more complex than we may have originally thought.

### Conclusion

These collections are striking in both their differences and similarities. All employ formalistic elements—meter, rhyme, metaphor—to great effect. All deal with themes of choice and with the passage of time. All include references to the LDS theology of Heavenly Mother. All are a great choice for someone looking to spend an afternoon of their wild and precious life reading thoughtfully crafted poetry that opens up new avenues for discussion.

ALIXA BROBBEY {alixawrites@gmail.com} is a writer currently based in New York City. She is a member of *Segullah's* poetry editorial board and was selected as one of the inaugural participants in the Center for Latter-day Saint Arts' annual Residency program. Her poetry has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and published by *Rattle*, *Brittle Paper*, *Weber—The Contemporary West*, *The Caribbean Quarterly*, *Wayfare*, and others.



## A Crossing of Boundaries

Laura Stott. *The Bear's Mouth*. Spokane, WA: Lynx House Press, 2024. 85 pp. Paperback: \$18.95. ISBN: 978-0899241999.

*Reviewed by Heidi Naylor*

The first poem will break your heart. It's the shakedown start of a pilgrimage into loss and beauty that speaks in tough, physical language of the collecting—the “plucking”—of “an abandoned nest / from a red