

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.



[[[Title]]]

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

*Reviewed by 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 *paleontologist*).

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.”

The poem centers on the fact (call it “fiction” if you like) that for Bickmore to “get lost” means going to a place you’ve already been, not somewhere entirely strange. This space between familiar and unknown is where losing oneself is possible, and, if I may make a suggestion without elaborating at length, it is the space that the whole of literature traverses. It is the twilight of consciousness between waking and sleep, and in pieces like “Let’s Get Lost” Bickmore excels at its articulation.

### “Heavy Metal”

This double-scene interweaves Catholic mass and a car crash, indenting stanzas to indicate narrative shifts. At church there are three characters—the narrator, the priest, and a boy with headphones a few pews back blaring thrash metal. Present at the crash is the narrator again, plus the truck she hit and some bystanders. The simultaneous chaos and calm with which these events are conveyed demonstrate Bickmore’s high capacity for taking in, then ironing out catastrophe. She is able with her inner

ear to pick up on some elusive wavelengths, including stillness amidst pandemonium and “a quiet scream” in the deep of silent oppression. She rides the lightning between dissonance and counterpoint almost to perfection, managing to salvage import from scrap metal—audio ephemera awaiting temporal redemption.

### “Eidolon”

For a book whose title signals the fading away of day after day, Bickmore could not have selected a more appropriate sticking place than the eidolon as her finale. An eidolon is either an *ideal* of enduring substance or an *idol* of fading shadow.<sup>2</sup> “Eidolon” floats gingerly about this tension, never landing on firm ground. What is real versus illusory, what is passing versus permanent? Those are questions for the philosopher, less for the poet, and even less for the critic. I won’t attempt them, because (a) I am not trained to do so and (b) what matters more are the lines, the fiction, the images, and so forth. “Eidolon” is a poem after all, not a treatise.

The first line extinguishes perceptions of stability readers might have brought along with them: “The pop of the disconnect I feel as a point in space.” *Pop, disconnect, point, space*. Then the occasion generative of speech comes into view. Bickmore’s son is dead—or gone, rather. Absent, distant, away on a mission in Asia. Not dead, really, but disembodied. A voice from beyond the veil that prods, *Are you willing?* “I could not bring myself to answer,” comes the confession, but later: “*Willing for what?* I should have asked.” These probations draw forth Jonathan Edwards, like leviathan on a hook, who observes with elegance that will is the faculty that makes choice possible but is not itself susceptible to wishes, wants, or whims. Edwards dispatches the image of a bird, which Bickmore toys with through a macaronic pun on flight (*volare*) and volition (*volere*), and to which she adds the indelible movement of swallows tracing “glyphs

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2. “Ever the permanent life of life” (Whitman) v. “the smoking souvenir” (Hart Crane).

over the glyphs of midge-flight.” There is more to be said about Bickmore sporting with Edwards of all people—because I sense Calvinist stocks rising slightly but steadily among Mormon intellectuals (NB: the late fawning over Marilynne Robinson)—but I will hold off till conditions become clearer as to whether the market is a bull or a bear.

If my remarks seem scattered, it’s because they are. The poem refuses to stand still and subject itself to brisk anatomization. Perhaps it requires the scrutiny of a more skillful critic, though I would like to offer one final point before closing out this review. If we suspend disbelief, exercising what Coleridge calls poetic faith, and grant for a moment that the image of a thing is more real than the thing itself—a notion Bickmore entertains—then this poem, or some future transmutation of it, has the potential to become a profound expression of Mormon sensibility. The commonly held sensibility is this: gods are human, humans are gods, humans and gods are conspecific. A potentially controversial next step is this: humans are made in the image of gods, gods are made up of these images, the image is what lasts, the stuff that endures among the gods are the human bits. A possible conclusion: the gods fade, but people don’t. This concept is potent yet morally neutral, capable of justifying blasphemous tyranny or radical charity—*idolatry* or *idyllatry*. If pushed, it could lead to another phase in the unfolding, collective revelation called Mormonism.

To be ugly, but honest, I didn’t like most of the poems in *Ephemerist* at first. It took some time sitting with the book’s sashay-and-sway before I could internalize the rhythm at a level that felt natural. Thankfully, what I like and what I don’t like is rather irrelevant. Instead, what matters is engagement of a fair and balanced sort. I still prefer Bickmore’s last book over this one, but I consider both it and *Ephemerist* important enough to justify buying and reading everything she writes. I look forward to decades more of being haunted by her amiable ghost.

