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[sjohnson1@nhsdragons.org](mailto:sjohnson1@nhsdragons.org)

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## Mother/God

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**Mother/God**

Poems by

Sarah Denise Johnson, BFA

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
Stephen F. Austin State University  
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements

For the Degree of  
Master of Arts in English

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY  
May 2021

**Mother/God**

Poems by

Sarah Denise Johnson, BFA

APPROVED:

---

Dr. Sara Henning, Thesis Director

---

Dr. Mark Sanders, Committee Member

---

Dr. Elizabeth Tasker-Davis, Committee Member

---

Dr. Owen Smith, Committee Member

---

Pauline M. Sampson, Ph.D.  
Dean of Research and Graduate Studies

## ABSTRACT

My collection, *Mother/God*, attempts to look at my own growing up and how it has affected my beliefs and self in the present, while also looking at the choices my mother made in raising me. The central thread throughout the collection is my relationship with my mother and the love that's endured those hardships. It explores my mother's past up until the hardest parts of motherhood in section one, *The Mother*. Then, section two titled *The Daughter* focuses on my own rebellion of how I was raised and an exploration of existentialism that was, in a lot of ways, fueled by my religious upbringing. The *Creator* section ends the collection with a sort of acceptance in my relationship with my mother and a settling-into of my own identity, while also closing on my own beliefs as seen in the final existential poem, "Revelations, *The Book*." The imagery of the collection is grounded both in memories of growing up and different scenarios from the Bible.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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*Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.*  
-1 Peter 4:8

## **I. The Mother**

## **After My Father Delivered Me**

Sometime in August, my mother  
decided she loved my father,

so together, they whispered me  
into being. First an egg, encouraged

down from her ovaries, to an embryonic  
creature closer to a dragon than a baby,

yet still, through the outside, his hands  
cupped the taunt skin of my mother's belly.

Before I ever tasted fresh air, I tasted  
the way my father said my name

into my mother's mouth, *after*  
*her grandmother*, he said,

and inside the delivery room  
was a surplus of aunts, grandparents,

first cousins, and her best friend  
from nursing school. There's a camera

set to record in the corner,  
and a long, rosy dress she wore

to the hospital hung just behind it, out  
of reach. He stood between her spread legs,

doctor just to the right, coaxing from her  
a wriggling worm of a baby, me,

and the first skin I felt other  
than the inside of my nine-month home

was my father, strong and centered,  
crying over his first born, keeping

me steady as they snipped umbilical  
cord, the last thread attaching me

to my mother. He'd never loved  
something as much as he loved me

in those first few moments, fresh  
and untainted, brand new.

### **Early-Morning Intercession**

My mother, on the king-sized bedsheets,  
opens her day with a prayer,

before she turns the alarm off  
and rolls over, her bronzed

and wrinkled fingers brushing the round  
curve of my cheek, underneath

my chin to wake me up.  
She never says *amen*—

I have never known if it was purposeful  
or forgetful, too distracted

by my presence in her bed,  
where I have slept since my father

left for another. Later, she tells me  
she never wants this worship to end.

If she never finishes, every breath she utters  
throughout the day, every thought that enters

her head will continue the plea.  
I imagine she thinks of me,

at school, visiting my father,  
and every thought a gentle prayer

she whispers to God is *for Sarah*,  
her lips soft as they brush my forehead,

her hands cupping around my biceps,  
a reminder I will be late if I don't get up.

## **On First Patients**

When car hits brick wall  
hits pavement hits passenger's  
face, skin peels back  
from bone. And bone  
is dry, crackled and spotted  
with spider-web fractures  
deep as Nes Canyon,  
but these jawbones  
are empty. If only her fingers,  
clearing glass and dirt  
from carmine-red skin  
exposed, could whisper  
their own moisture  
from her blood into  
their basins. If only  
they could drown  
the screams, calm  
the rising bile in her chest,  
burning through her gullet,  
stop her exit  
from the room to the third  
floor stairwell, knees  
on hard tile, hands clasping  
a rail turned altar  
and moans turned prayer—  
The doctor enters  
from the fourth-floor  
door with wings of florescent  
light and takes her hand  
and says, *it's time*  
*to try again.*

### **On Best Patients**

Once, two college boys  
so high they didn't

feel pain  
from their matching battered

heads were assigned  
to my mother's

care. They'd said  
they were playing a game,

got too caught up  
in not calling chicken,

slammed their little  
sisters' scooters handle-first

into the next, cracked  
their foreheads against

each other, hit the curb.  
They'd driven themselves in

with blood-covered eyes  
and a couple missing teeth.

The nurse swiped gauze  
to clear their vision, just before

the doctor would return  
to administer stitches.

Cheerful with renewed sight,  
he grabbed my mother's

wrist, waist, stood on shaky

ground to ask her to dance  
with him. She wanted  
to say no, but his friend,  
on his own hospital bed,  
clapped his hands to an off-  
beat drum, and the one holding  
her gave a holey grin,  
so she laid her hand upon  
his shoulder and said  
*just one little go.*  
In navy-blue scrubs,  
for the tenth-hour  
of a double shift,  
with blood barely dried  
against the pink strip  
of flesh from eyebrow  
to hairline on her current patient,  
she twirled.



**I Ask, *What's the Hardest Case You've Ever Had?***

*A baby fell into a sewage tank and drowned.*

No, *a three year old*. That makes no difference.

My mother says, *a little boy fell into a sewage tank and drowned.*

She cannot make eye contact, not with me. *Why would you ask me?*

I don't know how to tell her we all want to hear terrible things,  
monstrous anecdotes about baby carcasses being pulled from the ground,

mouths full of shit. *I'm sorry*, I say—

it's only the truth; I can't give you a candy-cane image  
of a three-year old, a little wet, but alive.

She says, *he was dead on arrival. Even though we knew it was an accident,*

*I had to call CPS*, and they interrupted mother and father holding  
shit-stained baby to ask a few questions. I used to be angry

when she missed a play or choir recital; I imagine her hands  
gripping my ankles as she pulls me from a sewage tank, wiping toilet  
paper from my eyes, and begging no one to make a phone call.

## On Worst Patients

*Bodies let go before we can*, she thinks  
as she stands bedside  
with defibrillator cupped  
in each palm,  
everyone frantically  
wrapping and cutting  
and stitching back  
together a man  
whose body's skin seams have split  
from overuse.  
She has been told to stay put; she follows  
orders, conflicted, asks *Clear!*  
so she can bring him  
back from the dead.  
She thinks God should be the only one  
allowed to bring back the inevitable.  
She watches breath  
flutter against  
cheekbone,  
a promising blush, then—  
that pathetic sound  
of a heart steadily slower on the monitor  
above the doctors' head before  
she is ushered forward.  
She wonders what  
constant-dying thoughts are made of:  
*let me go*  
*with some dignity*  
*i am suffering*  
*theres the face of god*  
*is this the end—*

## **Diptych**

### **I. Age 7: After My Father Calls**

my mother cries. I can hear from the kitchen,  
just on the other side of her bedroom,

and I sneak inside despite being warned  
to not enter because she was busy

with Christmas presents. I poke my head  
around the corner of her door and open

my mouth to ask *what's wrong*.  
Surrounded by uneven cuts of wrapping paper,

a pair of roller skates with flames across their ankles  
left exposed between her outstretched legs,

she's still wearing the pajamas she slept in that night,  
hair a knotted mess thrown up at the base

of her skull, cordless home phone half poised  
like she was answering a call,

and she throws the phone to the too-big  
king-sized bed with its duvet unmade

and flings the double-sided tape against  
the door. I am scared. She screams

*get out of here!* so I slam the door  
and run to the other side of the house

to find my brother. We are hysterical,  
my mother and I. Her aggressive gesture,

him telling her he would return for Christmas  
Day but after that, never again.

## II. Age 39: After Her Husband Calls

Some Christmas presents can go unwrapped,  
her skinny-long fingers layered in paper cuts,

a receiver letting loose the long tone  
to tell her he's hung up. She could press

redial and hear his voice one last time,  
a gentle rasp to promise all problems

are fixable, but she knows with one  
divorce already on her record

and the second approaching  
maybe the problems don't lie with men

or differences or inflexibility  
or even God—and *God*,

*I am sorry. I am so sorry—*  
and a pair of roller skates

with flames across their ankles  
act as alter to a forgiving prayer

made of shaking hands  
and crumpled balls of wrapping paper.

*God*, she needs a shower.  
Her children are somewhere in the house.

She has to get up.  
*Get up.*

## Envy

When my sister is born with a missing arm,  
our mother's heart stayed steady,  
despite her husband's frantic  
questioning: *what does it mean?*  
*How could this happen?*

Our mother caresses the stub  
just below her elbow and thinks  
if we are all flowers, Toni  
is a cherry blossom tree  
with a single bud unready

to bloom. Just give it a little time,  
she'll reject prosthetics  
yet still manage feats nine years  
later I will fail horrendously at.

Our mother says Toni is no less  
whole than the rest of us.  
I look at myself in the mirror  
and wonder if I could be special

to my mother without a limb.  
If, when I was born, she held  
me in her hands and thanked God  
for finishing me when I was ready,

not when the rest of the world  
said I am complete. I cover my left forearm,  
wrist, palm, fingers behind my back. I wonder  
if somewhere, my mother tells whoever

is listening that she has never  
been prouder of me.

## **The Mother**

I see my future in the emerald eyes of my mother,  
the same shade as my own. She has two

sides: the first brought my head to suckle  
her breast, the second placed a backhand

on the high side of my cheek just after, 13,  
I told her to shut up. I feel in the splits

of the DNA, that she only ever had my best interest  
at heart, the same as hers. I never knew her before

she had me, but I imagine her  
round, child-birthing hips

and her promise of more  
to come. She loved other men

before my father. I can see  
the stretchmarks where her supple

skin pulled against womb.  
As a child, I ask if the ballerina

of my fingers can assemblé  
from one end to the next. She guides

where my fingertips will land. Someday,  
she says, you'll have children of your own.

I can see my rounded hips, taunt skin,  
outsticking belly button and hidden feet,

the same as my mother on the old VHS tape  
at my father's: her sunflower dress,

the beachball hidden under its hem,

her long flowing curls dancing in the car's AC,

her thighs spread once she reaches the hospital.  
Bed. A moan. *Push*. Crowning

where she'll give birth to the world,  
a carrot-topped head and a tinny cry.

*Thank you*, she says to her god.  
*Thank you*, to my father.

*Thank you*, to my amniotic skin.  
Then she says she is ready for rest,

and lets a doctor's hands reach inside  
her ovaries to tie up loose ends.

## **I'm Sorry, I**

At Thanksgiving, 22, against the leather seat sticking to my thighs,  
I look at mother, sister, Steve and say *I'm gay* and then I choke  
on the words *I'm sorry*. They stare.

I want my mother to reach out and take my hand, kiss the cuticles  
chewed bloody. Instead: *You don't have to tell anyone.*  
*It's no one's business.* I have no words  
to explain why I'm deserving of more. I want to ask  
her what she thinks will happen next:

I walk down the aisle to a woman in a cupcake ball gown.  
*I'm sorry.* Legs spread, I push out the amniotic-head  
of my first born, and holding my knee up is a woman  
with a silver ring. *I'm sorry.* Somewhere in east Texas,  
my boss finds out and fires me. *I'm sorry.*  
On a deathbed, holding a wrinkled delicate hand  
of another woman, my last words could be *I'm sorry.*

When my mother pushed me out, she did not say  
the word sorry, but asked to hold me to her bare chest,  
feel my baby-slick skin against her moist, kiss her  
own muck and blood from my small forehead.  
In my soft blue eyes, she imagined a life. I was the same  
as I am now, vulnerable across a sticky surface,

across the living room. I wonder if my mother thinks  
of my greeting for death. Above me, God will only stare  
and speak no words, just like her. My first  
to this maker may be *I'm sorry*

or maybe, *I am ready to rest*  
or maybe, *I love you*  
or maybe, *I forgive you.*



## Vanilla Bean

I go to the house across  
from Blackmon Trail,  
a porch, four feet  
of concrete I often fly  
from to grip a tree's  
branch and swing out.

This time  
splinters pull nail from bed  
as I just miss  
the edge, fall backwards  
and down, scrape  
my leg on the porch's  
exposed side.

I limp back  
to our street  
shattering and sniveling  
noises slipping from pursed lips.  
Somewhere inside,  
my mother's sixth sense  
tells her to come  
and lift me in her arms,  
soft words *you'll be alright,*  
*I've got you. We're okay.*

This is all I remember. I ask how old I was.  
She doesn't know.  
*You came home with so many bumps and bruises.*

What she does remember:

*the smell of the soft  
downy hair that only  
grew when you were over  
a year. The way you  
slid off the first  
pile of snow*

*on our back porch.  
Your hands not quite  
closed around the moist  
circle of a Starbucks cup.  
She laughs. Vanilla bean.*

I don't remember, I tell her.  
Her hands, with spider-webbed veins and knotted knuckles with age,  
brush the rounded tip of my nose, the same shape as her own. *I know.*

To love someone their entire life is a different kind of memory.

## I'm Sorry, II

She used to imagine planning  
weddings with me watching me walk down the aisle  
to a groom, probably crying like us.

She can't  
doesn't  
get to  
do that anymore.  
She can't I've changed it  
I've  
taken it away.

*You don't have to tell anyone.  
It's no one's  
business.*

She knows fairly quickly this was not the thing to say  
but  
she can't take it back and doesn't know how to reach out so I pull a  
blanket  
over my face

to cry  
there are others to comfort me but she gazes down  
her nose

and wonders  
how it is to grieve  
for a woman still alive  
the only thing to die  
being the future you  
saw for her the possibilities

the endless she thinks  
*you'll live a hard life, one i never imagined for you. i'm sorry.*

## **II. The Daughter**

## The Maiden

The first time I let a man fuck me,  
I call up my sister, Traci, to ask how long

I'll bleed. She asks if I regret it, then tells me  
never to let my mother know. I want to tell her

I lost this virginity first to my best friend Sadie,  
but instead we swear our lips are sealed. I live

in another state to this side of my family, five  
hours away through a sea of pine trees and Dallas

bumper-to-bumper traffic. Most days, independence  
fits over me like the slinky green number

slipping over Kiera Knightly's shoulder.  
I never tell my mother *Atonement*

made me cum. Or that just last week,  
my girlfriend dipped me in the florescent

light of my desk lamp. What I do say:  
*when I was twelve you swore you'd*

*never let me turn into a dyke.* She tells me  
I'm a liar, making up things just to find

something to write about; I tell her she's full  
of shit and storm from the house. Sometimes,

I wonder what would change if I never  
drove back, revved this red Corolla

and floored the pedal.

## Marked

My mother says it'll be hard to get into heaven  
with so many tattoos; if only she knew

every night I slept with another woman,  
parted the red seas with only my tongue—

I imagine God likes sinners a little more than saints.  
I get a dandelion over my knee in the hopes

that my fertilized blood will make it bloom.  
I imagine if I think long enough I can give birth

without ever spreading my legs. I'm not  
what they call a gold-star gay.

Late last summer, I ate a tiny tablet  
and thought I could see Moses among

the backdrop of artificial light on a popcorn  
ceiling. She'd call me reckless; I call me unfettered.

She asks for a little better control and I feign  
helplessness. I just want her to say *your art*.

I say: *God came to me on a Tuesday*  
*afternoon as #a9c237* and he didn't give a single

fuck what color I painted myself. I imagine  
another God with two sleeves,

uncaring what employer won't hire  
him with a little extra ink.

## Smoking Blunt

Against the headlights slipping past the edges  
of the sun shades tossed onto the dashboard,  
I see Charlie's face, lips puckered around  
the filtered-tip of a smoking blunt,  
the slow blink of his eyes as he focuses on me,  
and then we are plunged into foggy  
darkness. An orange ring is brought closer  
to my own lips, coaxing me to open  
my teeth, take in the moist end  
of a cigarillo, draw my breath  
in quick, deep, exhale.

I wonder if this is what my life  
will always be: sneaking into cars,  
putting up visors despite the fact it's midnight,  
calming a thundering heartbeat until all  
I can think is how good it is to be able to live  
here, now, no other timelines meant  
to distract me. If I could, I would get high  
every day, let my skin fuse into the soft fabric  
of the passenger's seat, be toted around  
like nothing more than a machine.

I close my eyes as Charlie coughs.  
There is a pulsing heat somewhere behind  
them, the only affirmation I am alive  
here, in this car, so high I can imagine nonliving,  
how wonderful it could be to be nonbeing,  
exactly how existence is before birth,  
before you remember any of it.



## Empty Nest

She sometimes still takes my unused clothes  
left in her closet—*mothers rarely throw them out*—

lays them over her bed, a ritual for the dead  
yet still living. She finds an old blonde curl,

plucks it from cotton, and laughs. It falls  
from her fingers, to the carpeted floor below.

Sometimes, when I'm away from the home I built myself,  
I miss my cat. I ask my mother not to laugh at all the love

inside me, breaking through my breathing heart. She rolls  
her eyes, sad smile on her lips, but says she understands:

the first night after I moved in with my father,  
she slept in my bed, far beneath the bedsheets

of my old dwelling, and draped herself in the scent of my  
familiarity, the closest feeling to home.

## It Begins

I.

a laugh            after acid  
*are you happy* C asks  
the red mood-lighting in the corner  
of the living room makes the rivers  
in the popcorn-ceiling miles above my head  
look like Moses' Nile

there here        touch the humming-bird  
flutter beneath my breast  
*i have never been so happy* then, i  
am crying        C is amused with me  
a baritone on the couch above me  
because i fell off in my delight

*why are you crying* C's hand obscures  
my view        Moses' staff raised  
                  and ready to strike    middle knuckles  
knotted spotted with freckles the pink troughs  
of her fingerprints brushing the soft moisture  
from the tips of my lashes i grasp  
at the cobalt veins of her wrist and bring

her fingers to my mouth to speak a warbled  
song against their drowning trenches  
*why were we ever scared to do this*  
C pulls away and leaves a dimple in my chin  
in her wake she cannot answer above the sound  
of the rhythm and blues blaring from her speaker

We should head outside we think.  
There has always been more to find when we  
are not confined to four walls  
and a ceiling

II.

*we've never seen the color green this way before*  
i think C's pumpkin hair and angel-kissed  
freckles stark against the pine needles behind her  
her arms spread out feet shoulder-width apart

and against the lifeline and wrinkles of her palms  
there are holes where I can see the jade hue behind them  
big enough to fit my own fingers through  
like someone took a spoon and carved

out skin muscle ligaments  
and even the thin bones on the other side  
i wonder who did that—and did they do it carefully,  
the way i might if given the chance

i reach up so I can touch her palms  
but i skip over the hole to her wrist cobalt  
veins like someone's fingers stretching for her own  
we can see where blood separates from water

and i am grasping onto the denim  
of her jeans hiding my view within  
her thigh i do not want her to see me  
C nearly topples over tells me to be careful.

i have never seen something so beautiful  
C spread against a backdrop of southern forests  
looking for all the world like she belongs here  
among the dirt and bugs and grass tickling our feet

like someone cut down the trees surrounding  
us carved them into crosses and strung C by the palms  
i crouch beneath the altar of her bare soles and think  
they have holes too

III.

just past midnight already home  
C is an angel spread out on my bed  
white shirt stark against red sheets  
hair a halo across the headboard

her eyes are black holes sucking in  
everything surrounding them  
stretching my body out thin—  
feet so far i cannot reach them

and i fall inside of her  
fumble at the cliff's edge  
of her eyelid grab onto an eyelash  
which breaks off in my earnest palms

and goes down with me until she swallows  
us whole I have never been so devoted  
to someone before *i want to marry*  
*you* i say—her fingers chewed-down

nails and all pinch the skin  
on the back of my neck pull me  
back out against my bedsheets head pillowed

beside hers mouth so close  
i want to disappear inside another part  
of her again *please C take me*

*there* she leaves me my hands grasping  
at the wings of her shoulder blades

IV.

the cat shit stacked in the litter box  
looks peculiarly like the tower of babel  
and sitting on the toilet i lift up  
my hands to search for god  
past the rod of the curtain  
into the open sky above the tub  
hoping to find heaven somewhere  
amongst the steam from my ninth  
shower since i got home  
C sleeping with the kitten inside  
my bedroom wondering when  
i will venture back to bed to try & sleep again

god has cursed me to speak every  
language except the one i need                    *sleep—*  
i haven't slept in thirty hours  
nor has the angel       left me                    my shampoo  
bottle is on fire       speaking to me in a tongue  
i haven't learned to decipher and the water  
droplets scaling down       the wall of the shower  
speak moisture       into my lips wondering  
if a deity took my words or i did

V.

after being awake for over  
forty-eight hours  
C took us to the hospital  
and the walls are moving  
but not because of the drugs  
slipping through my cobalt  
veins or the iv drip  
calming an overactive heartbeat  
but because god  
has abandoned me  
and in his place  
on a throne in the corner  
of the hospital room  
C takes on a horned  
appearance for only a moment  
then brings my hand  
to the trough-covered bone  
curled from her forehead  
behind her ear whispers  
*it's not all tripping*  
i wonder who was right  
god for fighting not to give  
up any power or C  
for refusing to kneel to it

## Round-Ring

I used to race the shade that stretched from cul-de-sac  
to end-of-street on my bicycle. When a cloud rolled over  
the sun's light, the dark would sweep over my road

like from a low-budget horror film, and in excitement  
I'd press feet into pedal, lift off the seat in an earnest attempt  
to stay in the sunlight disappearing—the cloud fast approaching

the tread of my back tire. Most of the time, I'd win, make it  
to the opening onto Blackmon Trail just before the shade  
caught up to me, but my mother's rules were to stay on our street,

so I'd skid my bike sideways, catch the weight on my left leg's foot,  
and the cloud would reach me, the warmth from above turned cold  
as I closed my eyes and imagined when the sun left, so did I,

like water evaporating into the phenomena above me, where I might  
sail above Bells and see my school friends, or my brother down  
by the creek, or maybe I'd even make it to McKinney where I'd

get to see my dad before his weekend. But I was never water,  
only ever a little girl, and I'd push my bike back to the round-ring  
at the end of the street to wait for the next cloud. I don't know why

I remember this now, no bike or mother to tell me where it's safe  
to ride, my arms outstretched with towering clouds overhead,  
begging for the sun, reaching for it—

## The Kid's Alright

Just after Christmas, my father announced he was leaving  
my mother and my brother and sisters and me

and when I'm in my teens, I'm old enough to know  
she manipulated him into giving up the truck, and when gone

turned it in for a new hatchback. At my plays, readings,  
graduation my mother lifted her nose to the air and refused

to acknowledge my father in her presence, and certainly  
not his wife. Once, I said *you hate him* and she spat back

*I feel nothing for him* and later I told my dad he must wish  
they'd never been married. I think he ruined her credit,

or Traci says he cheated on her, but that's karma  
because she cheated on her first husband with my dad

and here's the truth: *I don't fucking care*. There's comfort  
in plausible deniability. Because I remember when I'm sixteen,

I have pre-stroke systems, blood pressure sky-rocketing, and when  
I'm settled into the hospital my mother reaches across the expanse

of bedsheets to take my father's hand—he's crying—*it's not  
your fault, Ken*, and he grips around her bony fingers like a lifeline.

This was the first time I saw my parents in a room together  
and they can make eye contact let alone touch. The only hope

that when I someday marry, they can sit near each other  
and be happy: they created me, together, in a marriage full of love

and hope and possibilities. When it ended, I imagine all  
of those things went straight onto me.



## God Particle

Man is made in God's image, she insists,  
thus God is a man, but I question  
    where woman came from—  
did God get curious with his sculptor tools,  
    create breast and bush, kiss  
    his creation until stone turned  
    to flesh?

And what of the angels?  
    The stain-glass of our church  
    printed with their majestic faces—  
    they were men.

But scripture  
says there are multiple types  
of bodies in Heaven, so  
which came first?

And who says God even has a gender?  
The pantheists see him in the rings  
    of the oak tree, the pollen of the orchid,  
    the feather in the grass from a passing bird,  
    a blood vessel making its way  
    through the veins of all living things.

What of Higgs boson, the God particle,  
    the explanation, the proof  
    of the theory of mass—  
    though Peter hated the name.

And if God is a Higgs field,  
    holding particles tightly together  
    and gifting the universe mass,  
    which gifts the universe existence  
    despite its composition of multiple dead things and

we are

    comprised of multiple dead things,  
so I wonder what makes up God.  
    Is it the fact humans are all *alive*,  
    these dead cells come together

to create consciousness?  
Consciousness, so undefinable and yet maybe  
*God* is that spark let off between  
neurons in our brains that  
ignite

being.

Or what about the force  
that freed the tiny point of energy  
in the beginning  
and created the galaxies?

And if *I'm* God?

A being who gives meaning  
to lifeless little accidents—  
meteors and planets. Without me  
there would be no observation,  
and so I see the sun and say selfishly  
*God made it just for me.*

### **III. The Creator**

### **A Prayer Under the Crape Myrtle**

My fiancé once told me her mother asked:  
*who is your god?* and then built her a temple.

I have a hard time imagining this;  
my mother read me her own stories, and I never

said I didn't believe in them. But my fiancé's  
mother took her at face value, *who is your god?*

She said the crape myrtle.  
I've seen this tree: deep-rooted, peeling bark,

and spiraling branches that dangle overhead like lights.  
I decided, then, gods should be who we want them to be;

that the crape myrtle caught her attention because it was  
beautiful. My mother used to say we pray for god to build us,

to help us. In gratitude, I touch a single, fallen flower  
and brush it against my lips to anoint them.

## **The Birth of All of Us**

God is probably a woman,  
each galaxy a joint, a freckle  
blemished on the smooth  
black canvas of her body.

*Push*, she says, thinking  
of speaking thunder,  
the lightning strike that sparks  
life. Her voice, reduced,

a trail of sweat dripping  
off the cleft of her chin,  
giving salted water to the ocean  
forming between her legs,

hands grasping at the rings  
of Saturn, helping pull free:  
the birth of all of us.  
God's probably my mother,

or at least similar, with crows  
feet and roaring voice,  
hands that comb through my hair  
like trying to align meteors.

I wonder if she imagines  
I'm the universe she gave birth to:  
still so young and new, yet  
so much growth on the horizon.

## Connected

A gynecologist's diagram tells me  
that once, I was a small  
cluster of eggs forming  
inside the fetus of my mother,

inside the uterus of my grandmother,  
traversing the streets  
of Cincinnati. I hope  
she didn't smoke cigarettes

yet, but neither of us could blame  
her considering how she lived.  
I question if she knew the eggs  
inside her ovaries would someday become

my mother, back when she felt  
alone, cold-bitten curbside  
wondering if the next foster  
family would fit. My mother says

not to comment when she shovels  
three spoonfuls of macaroni into  
a to-go container. She says, *she used  
to go days without food.* Inside

my grandmother's cavernous body,  
in the 1950s, my mother was already  
there; soon, I would be too.  
We'd walk the same streets  
together almost fifty years later,

and my grandmother would take  
my hand, point to a street corner,  
say, *That's where I met your grandfather.*  
I ask, where do beginnings begin?

## God Visited Me in a Walmart Parking Lot

He said, “Hey. Got a light?” He sat in the middle backseat, stared at me in the rearview mirror. His skin was the color of moss and he had eyes like mildew. The sunken hollows of his cheeks reminded me of my grandmother sitting front row on the porch, Lucky Strike dangling from the tips of her two fingers, as she puffed a long drag from an oxygen tank and offered to buy me my first pack. God smiled, his teeth rotting yellow, said, “If you look at me through a keyhole, you’d be surprised at what you’d find. Everyone’s lives are lived in different houses, but a roof over your head is shelter regardless of what it looks like on the outside. Brick, wood work, or stone. There is always a ceiling, there is always a floor.” He reached over the middle console, guided my fingers to my lips so I could whisper against them, “All our sweat tastes like salt.”

When he left, he gave me a twenty for a tank-full of gas, said he’d catch me later. He’d greet my grandfather. He’d let JC know I missed him—I said, the picture of him hanging above my mom’s mantle creeps me out. He rasped, *me too*. After he left, I wondered if someday I’d have my own book in the Bible, and if it’d say God visited not as a burning bush or angel from above, but as a drug-addict in a pit-stained t-shirt and shredded jeans, sandals. If it’d say he kind of looked like my uncle. That he seemed like family.

## **Mother as God**

I.

Bring my lips  
to the pearl-tipped  
nipple of my mother's  
breast. I know only  
this suction, her soft skin,  
handfuls of flesh,  
gripped palms, the color  
of her areola.  
Her smell.  
Her roaring voice  
like the warm water  
I can just remember.  
Her strong arms supporting  
my weight, fingers  
brushing hair over  
my fontanelle.



II.

Leg outstretched  
over the coffee table,  
my mother pulls stitches  
from my leg  
with tweezers,  
her hand holding  
down my knee to keep  
me still, the back  
of her curly-ratty hair  
with greying roots  
staring at me,  
and she says *Maybe*  
*I pulled them out*  
*too early*, but she doesn't  
stop, and the puckered  
scar makes me run  
my fingers over and over  
its canyon before  
my mother smacks  
my hands away.  
*Your fingers are dirty.*  
So instead, she brings  
my tips to the long  
line from the top of her  
kneecap to the bottom,  
proof she once had tweezers  
pull thread from her skin  
too. She says *It'll feel*  
*like this someday*. And still,  
my fingers run over  
and over the scar.

III.

*My mother is like the crescent moon,*  
I say to anyone who will listen.

What I mean is this: some days  
her touch is gentle, like a New Testament

God, with forgiveness painted over  
her nails, her thumb print clearing

the lines etched above my forehead  
until I am smooth.

What I mean is this: Sometimes, she  
is an Old Testament God full of rage

when she backhands me in the kitchen  
for daring to speak up after she silenced

me, her voice rough as she affirms  
I am living her life, not my own,

so long as I am underneath her roof  
living off her money. I learn to stay quiet

and she learns to listen to this.

What I want to say is this: Love

is a double-edged sword.

IV.

When I announce I'm moving  
out, in with my father,  
she lets the sudden surge  
of rage roll from her tongue:

*I won't support you.*  
*In any way.*

So I spend each day after  
hiding in my room,  
counting down,  
avoiding her gaze  
and disappointment

that I've made a poor choice  
and she's about to decimate  
Gomorrah, her piercing gaze  
the beginning of flames  
licking up from the streets of my ankle—

But I am only on my knees reaching  
for the hem of my mother's garment  
praying a brush will heal  
what's broken inside me.

V.

When I first move into the dorms  
at college, my mother drives  
me and all my things up  
to help. She fills a vase with orange  
flowers, helps string the canvas  
above my bed, and settles a wooden  
picture frame on my desk,  
inside a years old photo of us  
riding the TRAM, her hand  
settled onto my shoulder, our  
hair matching curls, my grin  
so big it outmatches the rider  
that snuck into the shot behind us.

In her departing moments,  
I grip the back of her shirt in tight  
fists, nails finding skin for fear  
I will be left alone  
in a place with no one I know  
and she says, gentle, into my ear  
that she can call into work the next  
day, extend her hotel stay, stick around  
for just a little longer if I need her.

But I tell her to go and she listens.  
Inside my dorm room,  
I curl into the foot of the bed,  
hands forming a chantry  
over scarred knees asking  
who is even listening?

VI.

I miss a call  
from her  
because I'm out  
on the intermural  
field. The annual  
bonfire takes place  
over a mound  
of burning wood  
and rot and above  
the thick-top smoke  
I throw  
my hands up  
in a battle prayer,  
followed by those  
surrounding me,  
and then I am  
pulled along  
by a maybe-friend  
who insists  
on being closer  
when I slip over  
a misplaced rock,  
twist my knee.  
As he steadies me,  
my hand brushes  
over ligament  
and bone  
and puckered little  
scar before  
we push along,  
and I think—

VII.

On nights when the moon  
casts a shadow over my bed,

too full to close my eyes,  
I imagine the first place

I thought of as home:

the amniotic atmosphere,  
the rumbling of her voice,

the pressure of hands coaxing  
me into a different position,

into sleep. Now, how I want  
to crawl back through her

cervix, house myself  
in the only place I've ever

felt safe, reattach broken cord  
to placenta, beg her not to eat

this lifeline in a show of good  
fortune, keep me

inside my maker.

## The Crone

I watch the grey of my mother's hairline stretch  
into blonde, the wrinkles at the corner of her mouth

even with her thin upper-lip, the bags beneath  
her emerald eyes so heavy I wonder how many weeks

she's packed for, or when she last slept. She called  
me a month before my brother met his wife

to say she had a dream he walked down the aisle.  
When I was only eleven, my grandmother swore

she dreamed of her husband settling into a carriage  
where they rolled through wheel's tread marks until

he exited with a brush of his large hand against  
her rounded cheeks and emerald eyes and six months

later he died. I don't know if it means anything, or if  
I'm reading too far into it—I want to ask her if she's

ever dreamed of my wedding. My child named after  
her grandmother. When I sleep, I pinch my eyes shut

tightly in the hopes that the fireworks behind my eyelids  
will turn into prophecies. I don't think I inherited the same ability.

I want to ask my mother what she's dreamed of for me,  
but instead I ask if she really thinks her dreams mean anything.

*It's a gift.* I don't ask why it skipped a generation, I just  
let her gather my hands between hers to pray.

## Patchwork

i.

i am born on a mid-summer's day at exactly noon, in a fairy ring. my blonde hair casts a halo over the separation of my skull, my cries sound more like a grackle than a person. when my fist beats against my mother's breast, it feels like the chilled mist in the morning.

ii.

in the forest, the leaves are blankets i cover myself in to protect from the wind. i balance on a railroad track and see a doe with freckles on her nose and twitching ears; she sniffs at my hand and disappears. i come back again and again, but i never see her; i tell my mother who laughs, and then we never speak of it again.

iii.

when i confront my father i have the temper of the terrible twos: spit venom from the length of my mouth. it reminds him of indignation, of a child never learning to lie but rather one born understanding some men never come back, like a lover bringing up disputes months after the fact.

iv.

i dream: inside a dingy hospital, pain electrocutes me. i'm sucking on cool ice cubes and grunting. my girl is blonde, blue eyed, looks putrid, but i laugh into her forehead and when she, too, screams, it sounds just like me.

v.

i touch the name of one i love on a gravestone, trail the dates and the message of gone but not forgotten, of clichés, like how the elephant visits the bones of old allies and touches them, touches something that was once hidden away inside a body, that loved and housed the intricacies of the fallopian tube, of the homunculus, of the aorta.

vi.

someday, i will die like a bowhead: in the arctic, with thick skin and no dorsal fin, endangered and ready. they'll throw me into the ocean, scatter my remains among shorelines and sterns; over reefs and at the bottom of soft sand; i will be loved well in the lulling waves and the crushing pressure of weight; 95% unexplored; blue.



## On Inspiration

Her eyes are the same as mine: I see her first marriage, at only seventeen, and five years

later she steps foot inside the emergency room for the first time, her patient a man flung

from his high-speed car, how she crouched inside a stairwell until she was discovered

and told to care for him again. Four births and two marriages later, she slips into a darkly lit

room where I lay beneath Dora bedsheets. Her hand combs through ratty knots and over

a tiny, rounded shoulder down to a hand no larger than her fingers and she is crying

because she'd watched a fifteen year-old have a stillbirth. I've never pretended to know

how hard she has it, only invited her to the movies as a distraction. Compartmentalization is a necessity,

her best friend that holds her hand as she begs the doctor to *call time of death, I can't bring him back again,*

and the faces of my brother and sisters and I as we run through the sprinkling system. How she really

must be like god—so used to the destruction yet still finding ways to keep loving her children.

## **We Never Tell Each Other Anything**

She never says *I'm sorry*,

but I've stopped expecting it,  
and instead listen for the words formed  
by her hands, pressing into seventy-three  
percent polyester, her infamous judgmental

stare as she asks if I'm *sure the cats  
can handle this*. My girlfriend, over  
by the loveseat, insists they'd be fine  
and maybe my mother wants to argue,

but she doesn't. My mother takes us  
couch shopping, just us three; she wants  
to make sure we spend our money  
wisely. I remember all the things

I swore I'd never say: how  
that was only ever a self-fulfilling  
prophecy, when two shorts months  
after the reveal she sprints into a rage,

tells me I've betrayed her  
by keeping my sexuality secret  
a little longer than necessary.

My girlfriend, over by the loveseat,  
insists the cats will be perfectly fine  
and maybe my mother wants to argue,  
but she doesn't.

Instead, we eventually go  
back to the home I've built, where my  
mother will sleep in the guest room,  
and offer to fix our coffee in the morning.

We never tell each other anything, it seems,

like we're bees dancing around each other  
in an attempt to point out the flower.  
She never says I'm sorry, but I never

ask for the apology. She motions  
to the creamer sitting by the kettle.  
I hand her a spoon—together, we stir  
until the dark mixture is white.

## The Truth Is

I don't expect anyone to understand this,  
except maybe Jesus,  
who knows better than me

what unwanted body mutilation  
can do to a person—he told me  
when the spear slipped between the meat

of his bones, he felt water split  
from blood even though he'd ceased  
breathing—

to cease breath yet *still* feel their sharp  
shot, cheap shot, slithering between your ribs—

The truth is, I used to lay in bed and imagine  
holding my breast at the tip, taking a knife,  
slicing through fat until I was as flat-

ched as God himself. I used to wish I was a man,  
saw only his features in the stain-glass wall  
of my hometown church, so striking

yet dangerous were the Angels, and even Adam—  
able to love Eve as freely as he pleased,  
I'd only ever wished that were me. But now,

as Jesus guides my hand to the open wound, my fingers  
brushing past muscles' tendrils and broken bone, I find  
myself slipping inside of him, wearing his skin around

like my body. He says, *this is what it is to be a man.*  
I say, *it's not that great.* Jesus laughs. He says, *well, then this*  
*is what it is to be a god* and I reply, *nothing new.*

## **Revelations, The Book**

To an insect, I might be a god, so vast  
in size they cannot comprehend  
what is coming before the heel  
of my boot, or the toilet paper, or the palms that slap  
together. We do not think of it as murder,  
to take a small existence from something  
we perceive as having no thought  
or emotion, its lifecycle lasting no more  
than two days; but sentience does not  
make a life. This does not stop me  
from irrational fear, from screaming  
at the sight of a wasps' nest,  
but when I hear that the bee population  
is dying, I wish that I had stopped a moment  
to capture instead of kill,  
remember that I occupy this earth  
the same as every other creature,  
whether the size of a fairy fly  
or giant weta. Now, if I were to destroy  
what I was given, a god I might not be able  
to notice, too vast to see coming until it is too late,  
will blow out my own existence.

## **The Birth of Me**

I find the old VHS tape  
in my closet at my dad's

one weekend I'm visiting.  
I watch it in my room,

by myself, door closed  
for fear I'd found something

I wasn't supposed to.  
I see my mom first,

a long rosy dress draped  
over the beach-ball of her

belly. Dad must hold  
the camera, his hand focusing

as he guides her elbow  
while she climbs into the truck,

no grey at the base of those curls,  
her wrinkleless lips stretched out—

the video cuts off here before  
bathing the dark bedroom

in a shower of bright light.  
In a hospital room, I watch

the birth of me, bedside full  
of those more like strangers than family,

my father between my mother's  
spread knees, his announced cries

of *she's here!* and then I am crying

as he curls me into the crook

of his arm, and on the bed  
my mom's hands stretch out—

The screen goes blue  
when my finger taps the power.

I don't piece together  
why my hand did such a thing

or why there felt like two  
sides overcoming me:

to live never having experienced  
the undaunting love between father

and daughter and mother  
or to watch the video again.

## VITA

After completing her work at Whitesboro High School, Whitesboro, Texas in 2013, Sarah Denise Johnson went on to receive an associate degree from community college before entering Stephen F. Austin State university in the fall of 2016. She received the degree of Bachelor of Fine Arts from Stephen F. Austin State university in December 2017. Upon graduation, she was accepted into the Master of English program with an emphasis in creative writing. She received the degree of Master of English in May of 2021.

Permanent Address: 2907 Patton Drive

Melissa, TX 75454

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