

Sarah Mook Contest 2016, Grades 9-12, Third Place Winner, “My God”

This polished poem reflects the competence and maturity of the writer. With precision and originality, the poem explores the aftermath of giving up God. The economy of language, use of sophisticated metaphor, and understanding of self makes this poem arresting and memorable.

The poem does not meander on its way to the topic; its immediacy is striking. The first stanza’s language is visceral:

When I was sixteen,
overly rational and
insufficiently hopeful,
I cut God from my chest
with a surgeon’s knife.

The speaker looks back at this choice to “cut God from my chest” with honest and fearless self-knowledge. He or she forthrightly admits to being “overly rational” and “insufficiently hopeful.” This confidence and surety accurately portray sixteen-year-old naiveté. The decision to “cut God from my chest” is so difficult that only a “surgeon’s knife” can be used to achieve the bloody separation. The removal of God in this way metaphorically suggests that God is his or her heart that has been removed.

Section two uses metaphor to delineate the calamitous results of this act. The speaker immediately shows regret by stating that “I did not realize then / the empty gaping that / would sprout in my body.” The word choices of “then,” and “empty gaping” not only emphasize a longing for God but also state that what is left is as “gaping,” as a wound—suggesting a void deep and wide open so that it might never close. That the “empty gaping” “sprouts from my body” implies that it does not diminish, but grows. The speaker goes on to say that this emptiness is now a “black hole where / there had once been a dream of Eden.”

How to fill this “empty gaping” is the topic of the rest of the poem. The speaker tries to do so “with many things”; for each item the speaker mentions, the choice that the faithful would make is also presented. The speaker would buy “concert tickets,” while the faithful would have “church seats,” the speaker would “recite poems” instead of the faithful’s “prayers,” and the speaker would find only “fragments of heaven” in his or her “father’s embrace” and not the whole of heaven. The fact that the speaker openly states that he or she has “*tried* [italics mine] to fill it / with many things” alludes to the unsuccessful nature of the attempt.

The last stanza moves to the speaker’s more personal choice; someone else has been chosen to replace God.

Instead of eucharist,
I hold your name
atop my tongue like a ruby.
Instead of God’s name,
I say yours.

We do not know if this replacement for God will satisfy; the diction would suggest that it just might do so. “Instead of the eucharist” [sic], the speaker “hold[s] your name / atop my tongue like a ruby,” something very precious indeed. Unlike the previous sections, there is no regret expressed in this choice, but a declarative statement: “instead of God’s name, / I say yours.” The speaker has found a replacement for God in this person. We (and the writer) will only know if this choice is sufficient when the poet writes of this dilemma and solution again.

I admire this concentrated, economical poem that uses its words wisely. The writer's diction is forceful; words such as "surgeon's knife," "gaping," "sprout" "black hole," and "dream of Eden" strengthen the poem. The sounds of the poem make it a pleasure to read; in the third stanza, the writer's uses alliteration in "concert tickets" and "church seats," "poems" and "prayers," and "fragments" and "fathers." The memorable simile, "I hold your name / atop my tongue like a ruby," marks this writer as one who values originality. Through the entire poem, this writer's knowledge of self is impressive.

With adept skill, the author of "My God" explores the consequences of losing God, and the satisfaction of finding a solution.

Thank you for the privilege of reading your work!

*Marie Kane, Final Judge
Sarah Mook Poetry Contest, 2016
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