Book Review on Kimberly Johnson's *A Metaphorical God: Poems*

Brent Rowland

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A METAPHORICAL GOD
by Kimberly Johnson
review by Brent Rowland

Anyone can enjoy the stars. Stargazing requires no special training or formal degree. You don’t have to know anything about them to admire how they burn, or to spend hours beneath their light, tracing your own patterns. But certain people do study the history of stars. They know specific names, temperatures, myths, and connections that form the numerous constellations in constant motion above us. For these people, the night sky looks very different.

The great beauty of Kimberly Johnson’s latest volume of poetry, A Metaphorical God, is that you don’t need an advanced degree in Renaissance studies to enjoy the striking sound of her poetry; but, after you’ve read through a couple of times on your own, grab the equivalent of a star map (your dictionary), and work your way through the breathtaking constellations of language that illuminate
the poems in this book. Simply put, the stellar language will reveal an adroit poet at work behind every word.

Johnson crafts every poem in *A Metaphorical God* with her self-proclaimed “lavish particularity.” You’ll “brank” troubadours, hear crickets “geiger-up,” see “orange blossoms wave in pneumatic arcades,” and before you end up all “skewampous,” you’ll come across adiaphora, phalanges, sackbuts, astrolabes, shotgun angels, petrichor, and plenty of “spunky verbs.”

*A Metaphorical God* is comprised of thirty-nine poems that open with Ash Wednesday, traverse the period of Lent, and conclude with Easter. Johnson may “verb impenitent” near the end of the book as her verse thunders across the page, but she admits early on that her spiritual forays do not begin in fatness or excess: “I whose blowtorch urge approaches the ascetic, whose resolve to bury luxuriance grows raw-handed from shoveling.” Johnson writes spiritual verse, but you’ll rarely find the soul of her poetry separated from the flesh and blood that surrounds it. She sings the promptings of a highly visceral, metaphysical muse.

There are quiet, hushed moments, soaring pleas, acute observations, and instances of wide-eyed fascination with both the spiritual
and the profane. Rather than attempt to resolve the disparity between heaven and earth, spirit and flesh, many of these poems prefer to explore the fact of the disparity itself.

Johnson’s poetry tirelessly explores the gulf that separates us from the Divine—at times fasting patiently, at others demanding suffering. At times she observes nature’s beauty and at others she exhausts herself in attempts to stave off its inexorable force. She bemoans the frivolity of her appendix yet concludes that nothing is extraneous. In *A Metaphorical God*, Johnson points us to the myriad metaphors of life and death, love and sadness, fall and redemption that occur around us every day. She writes in energetic, unfettered tones and *nothing* is extraneous. John Donne (Johnson’s professed boyfriend) wrote that the Lord’s metaphors made “all profane authors seem of the seed of the serpent, that creeps” and the Lord “the Dove, that flies.” Happily, *A Metaphorical God* spends as much time romping in the dirt as it does forcing itself upward through the air—reminding us where our feet are planted and where our eyes may roam.