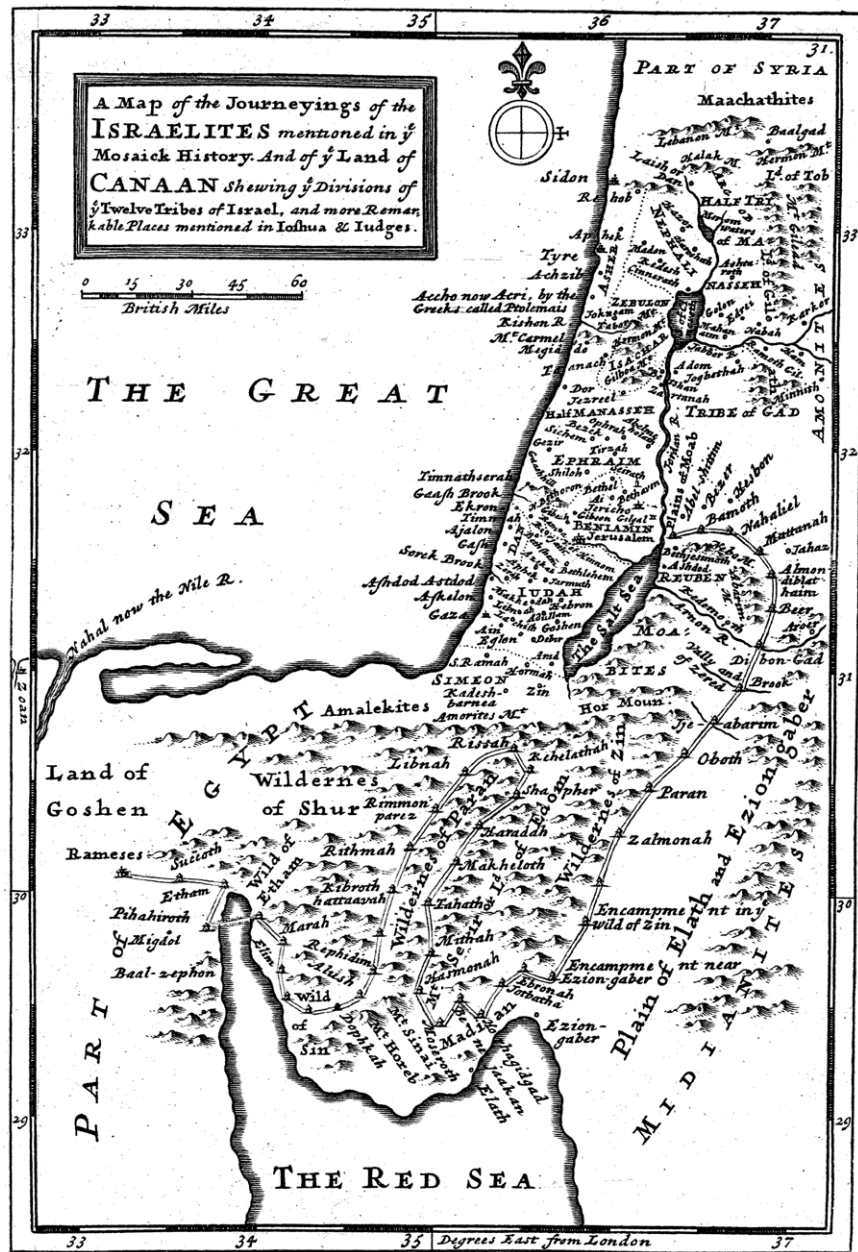


Poetry



IRREANTUM

A Review of Mormon Literature and Film

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IRREANTUM

Volume 8, Number 1 (2006)



ear-ee-an'-tum: 1 Nephi 17:5. And we beheld the sea, which we called Irreantum, which, being interpreted, is many waters.

IRREANTUM: A REVIEW OF MORMON LITERATURE AND FILM is a refereed journal, published three times annually (Fall, Winter, Spring/Summer) by the Association for Mormon Letters.

We seek to define the parameters of Mormon literature broadly, acknowledging a growing body of diverse work that reflects the increasing diversity of Mormon experience. We wish to publish the highest quality of writing, both creative and critical. We welcome unsolicited submissions of poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, and plays that address the Mormon experience either directly or by implication. We also welcome submissions of critical essays that address such works, in addition to popular and nonprint media (such as film, folklore, theater, juvenile fiction, science fiction, letters, diaries, sermons). Critical essays may also address Mormon literature in more general terms, especially in its regional, ethnic, religious, thematic, and genre-related configurations.

We welcome letters or comments. We also seek submissions of photos that can be printed in black and white. Please send letters and submissions to submissions@irreantum.org. If you do not have access to email, send your text on a floppy disk or CD to IRREANTUM, c/o AML, PO Box 1315, Salt Lake City, UT 84110-1315. Submissions on paper are discouraged.

Map facing the title page is from Herman Moll, geographer, *Moll's Maps: Thirty Two New and Accurate Maps of the Geography of the Ancients, as contained in The Greek and Latin Classics* (London: Tho. Bowles, 1732).

From the Assistant Editor



This issue is a tribute to Laraine Wilkins. Laraine was a poet and a scholar, an artist and an intellect, an incisive editor with a sensitive soul who sought to champion the very best in Mormon letters. The content in this magazine represents her vision, her passion, and her determination that poetry be celebrated as one of humankind's most important means of expression.

A few weeks before Laraine's death this September after a tragic car accident, she and I met at the Salt Lake City public library to discuss *IRREANTUM* and her plans for its future. Although Laraine was intending to step down as General Editor in the spring of 2007, she had big ideas for the final two issues to be published under her direction. She was particularly excited about this issue because it focused on poetry, one of her great loves. Not only had she received some excellent submissions—especially in the area of epic poetry, she felt—but she was looking forward to turning the spotlight on an often overlooked genre. Although poetry's audience is smaller than that of novels or films, Laraine believed (and I agree with her) that some of the finest LDS artists working today are poets, and that they deserve a substantial issue of *IRREANTUM* dedicated to them.

Laraine had a multitude of ideas for this issue, and many of these ideas were already taking shape at the time of her death. Amidst the shock and grief of her passing, I felt it was my job as assistant editor to uncover and give voice to these ideas. As I combed through Laraine's *IRREANTUM* emails and computer files, it became stunningly clear how much she cared about language, literature, and her LDS community. And I also discovered how very, very hard she worked to bring the art she loved to the audience she cared about so deeply.

This issue was cobbled together by the staff of *IRREANTUM* magazine with the hope that it would not only represent the best in LDS poetry, but honor Laraine's life and legacy. I look forward with great anticipation to *IRREANTUM*'s continued growth under the leadership of our new co-editors,

Scott Hatch and Valerie Holladay, who will be taking over the helm in 2007. But I also believe that Laraine's influence won't end with this issue. Every poem, every essay, every story that is published in IRREANTUM, now and in the years to come, has been given a voice in this magazine's pages in part because Laraine refused to let IRREANTUM fade away, despite many difficult obstacles.

I believe that language, like spirit, is immortal. Laraine understood this as well. I hope this issue makes her proud.

Angela Hallstrom
Assistant Editor

The Internal Garden of Laraine Wilkins: 1965–2006

In Memoriam

David G. Pace



*and what of
passions untapped
unreached senses
unsent worlds
all tight right here*

The poet is talking about a garden plot here, “soil of stones, sharp and large / like knives that bite/the flesh exchanged / for voice . . .” Is she referring to her voice? The voice of her daughter Lena? The voice of the people she called her own?

In May 2003, when Laraine Wilkins wrote the poem quoted above, she was weeks away from taking on the job of IRREANTUM's editor and busy recruiting volunteers. Laraine was first my friend, but as an editor she became my way back into the community of my origin. She never cared that I attended another denomination with my wife Cheryl—that I had made my departure from the LDS Church. She saw that I was somehow still a Mormon and that I was grappling with the same intellectual questions and feelings that she was, feelings that brought her to the formidable task of shaping IRREANTUM into an offering that she could hand not only to Latter-day Saints and people like me, but to the broader American community of letters.

Laraine knew there was an image problem with Mormon literature. It bothered her that people, even Mormons—especially Mormons—sniffed at the idea that we had a culture that deserved a literature. She had big ambitions. And she had the resolve to match. Most of the time.

Less than a year before Laraine, her boyfriend Guy Lebeda, and seventeen-year-old Lena were in an auto accident that would claim Laraine's life, Laraine sent out a distress signal. Eighteen months into her editorship, the publication was behind schedule. Funds were low. Readership seemed sparse. There were rumblings of dissatisfaction from the wings. "With a change in editorial focus and staff, changes in process don't allow a lot of room for unforeseeable events," she wrote. Still, the letter she sent to the readers of IRREANTUM and its publisher, the Association for Mormon Letters, signaled not only a determination that we could pull what she called "the new Mormon Literature" out of the mire, but that we had to.

"And what is 'the new Mormon literature'?" I asked when she was drafting the letter. "Thoughtful, nuanced, and articulate," she responded, then added, "We need a hook." "Then add 'provocative,'" I said. She was hesitant. She had more respect and tender feeling for fellow Mormons than I did, and she knew that to many—including me, to be honest—"provocative" meant controversial, even abusive. She was on to me, but what was amazing about Laraine Wilkins is that she not only respected the LDS community, she respected those of us who had experienced injury in it and were yelling "Ouch!" however inarticulately.

She added the word: *provocative*.

Laraine knew that we needed more than a hook—that we needed voice in the soulful sense of that word, a verbal imprint as genuine and distinctive as the pad of an inked thumb. So she led the way, seeking widely to find her own voice. Most heard this voice in her poetry and music—she was a ward organist and pianist—but I seemed to hear it best in her incisive essays regularly featured in IRREANTUM, and in appeals to the journal's readership.

She also nurtured the voice of Lena, an emerging athlete and intellect in her own right, who, with her mother, made a home in the LDS 10th Ward in Salt Lake City. There, Laraine seemed to let her daughter claim her own religious experience by not doing Lena's thinking and feeling for her.

And, of course, Laraine worked hard to provide a space in which a collective Mormon voice could emerge, a voice funded by the "passions untapped / unreached senses / unmet worlds." She wrote in November 2005, "We have more work to do to convince the world that we are part of a larger discourse around religion, art, film, history, anthropology, the West, American culture, folklore, spiritual autobiography, poetry and many other relevant aspects of the human experience." Laraine encouraged me to work with her for a people I once called my own, and she encouraged me to call them my own again, to be

anxiously engaged in a good cause. Her good cause was to give to the Mormon community and to the world at large a Mormon literature. She was not less than a visionary.

I wonder how we will honor her vision. Surely it will involve work of the true put-your-shoulder-to-the-handcart-wheel variety, but also work in our own internal garden, "soil of stones, sharp and large / like knives that bite / the flesh exchanged / for voice . . ."

At the last, ours will also be a work, I think, that must be underscored by the notion that to love well is its own reward; to love well is our best hope for the emergence of one's own voice, literary or otherwise. I will remember Laraine as a beautiful woman with sensuous brown hair and a circumspect smile, a mother, an intellect, an artist and a seeker. But mostly I will remember her because she demonstrated to me through her time as editor of IRREANTUM what it was to love well, to embrace our community, to respect its voice and to believe in its literary place.

Laraine Wilkins lived her life as if it were more important to love one's own than to make sure one's own loved you. A worthy demonstration as we strive to listen to others and to grow our voices with them.

Lance Larsen

And a Garden Drifts Past My Window

For Laraine Wilkins (1965–2006)

She took our hands and touched their emptiness.
*Say thank you to work gloves and grocery lists,
to the jump rope slumped on the step, to paintbrushes,
to spring water cupped in the palm. Sitting
still with a pencil makes for the bravest of flights.*

She opened her purse and handed each of us
a bird. *Say thank you in requiems and birthday
songs, in table talk at midnight and dialogues for one,
in manifestoes hummed into the lifting wind.
Each mother is also a daughter and sings for three.*

We dig a hole and ask questions of the earth.
We ask a question and dig holes
in the sky. Let the doe, her ears pricked
for summer, give us counsel. Let her
tracks through the orchard serve as pilgrimage.

And sometimes a hummingbird mistakes
a necktie or ribbon for sweetness
and tries to drink us. Let grief hover close.
Say thank you for shade, for songs unsung.
And sky says, *Come join me, the morning is young.*

*Laraine Wilkins***Soul Retrieval**

Here you are, sitting in the dark
womb of the lodge, warm, almost
unbearable at times, sweating
in the company of those
familiar with the edges of their souls,
hard and soft. They weep and mourn,
laugh and dance with the shadows
that anchor them between earth and sun.
Here you are, sharing space with a shaman
who takes the lost on journeys to find the missing
ghosts, shapes that prove the substance
of the body. Here you are with healers
who knead out the ailments lodged
in muscle and bone for the sake of the matter
in the gray mists that collect and fog about the head.
Here you are with the comforter who talks
with troubled teens and drug addicts,
digging out the grime embedded
in the contours of that
which has been forsaken.
Here you are looking around
because you found you had given
your matter away somewhere
along the line—to a school, a little blue book,
an expectation, a man,
or a church you kept going back to, hoping
you'd find it floating
somewhere up by the steeple or organ pipes,
perhaps, in hopes you could channel
it back to yourself so it could move lightly
with your limbs and wishes.

Might you be like Nicodemus
who wanted it all spelled out
in black and white, in tangibles
he could handle and read and put away
on a library shelf?
The learned priest thus missed the gray doves of autumn—
September fury, October fire, November gentle—
because he could not see in the dark.
Crouching on the earth, are you now ready
to exit the womb, call yourself a new name,
and wait for the moment
when you will hold a dove in your hands,
stroke its wings close to your breast,
and thrill in the soft rhythm of heartbeat?

♦ 2006 (?)

How Long

How long
 since I last saw my younger brother grown
 two heads taller but maybe that's only because
 he's grown five layers thinner. Come up
 from San Diego to Salt Lake City to be redeemed
 dried out pockets cleaned the cobwebs off his palms
 catching in my hair as he bear-hugs me whispers
 "Just a month." Car retrieved by the repo man
 who's glad my brother's honest now even though
 it means he wants to borrow the BMW in the driveway
 with the JSS license plates (dial 9 for Jesus)
 so he can find a job again since the first one lined up
 didn't work when they let him go and he came home
 to sleep it off for a few days with milk and ashes
 and the missing bread turned burnt now and then.

His eyes in my kitchen framed by a profile
 of gaunt cheeks hollowed eyes and slackened pants
 I ask him if he's had an AIDS test yet. Not yet they
 charge for it here how long can they expect us
 to come in when you have to make an appointment
 two weeks ahead of time and even have to pay.
 Besides I know I'm going to live forever
 I just know. And Michael is lying
 when he says he's got HIV he does it just
 to shock me he says wrists limping stiff
 against his ribs. His coat reminds me
 of the images of Jews in old war films
 wearing stars on their wool thickness
 placed gently as lambs below fur collars.
 Nobody in Utah wears coats like that.
 Did they resurrect him from Auschwitz
 and bring him here as my dead brother for me
 to wonder how long his luck will run and how long
 his nails are.

At night in bed I listen to his deafening pleas
 on the phone chidings to Michael left behind
 who's moving up here soon he just doesn't know it yet.
 The phone bill's arrival thuds me to my feet
 when I read there's a price to pay that rivals
 human grief and pull to go again and not give in.
 Perhaps he's used to those jobs for the cable
 companies that hire phone solicitors by the dozens
 because business is booming. His gift should be offered
 to the Blarney stone so that twice the number
 of tourists will come to finger the stitch in his side
 and smell the soapy menthol in his hair. Or
 perhaps twice the young-girl neighbors
 ready to celebrate his birthday two months later
 with admiration for his enthusiasm that inspires them
 all the more as they remember their children whose fathers or grandparents
 have custody and they learn to make it on their own
 clean and dry. And by now Michael's here and shares
 with my brother the pull-out futon in my living room
 that smells like a used-up gym every time I come home
 from work wishing I could do something
 with my yard but knowing it's better if I help
 my daughter with her homework or spin a tale
 with her before it's time to sleep. Because we never know
 how long.

♦ *Originally appeared in Weber Studies*

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Double space, copy manuscript on both sides of paper, and spiral bind into 8½ x 11” book. **Do not place ID on manuscript itself.** Include a business envelope with title written on the front and seal inside the envelope the novel’s title, your name, address and phone. Send SASE **only** if you want manuscript returned. Do not send unattached postage.

Send manuscripts to:

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Some Thoughts on Mormon Epic

Michael R. Collings



Every People longs for their epic, for the story of their central defining struggle, their heroes and villains, their hopes and failings . . . an embodiment of all that is crucial to who and what they are.

Traditionally, the epic impulse manifested itself in one specific form: Epic Poetry. Even the earliest extant examples reveal a continuity of concerns, of forms, of treatments; so much so that for several thousand years of literary history such poems immediately announced themselves—their intentions, their purposes, their forms—to listeners and readers. With little effort one may identify scores of repeated conventions, many apparently indigenous for the form, others consciously copied from the great poems of the past, *Gilgamesh*, Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and Virgil’s *Aeneid* (for centuries considered by many to be the single greatest achievement in poetic art). For the Western world at least, the form reached its apex in Milton’s magnificent *Paradise Lost*, simultaneously a culmination and a rejection of such poetry.

For a number of reasons, many having to do with changes in culture—the spread of literacy and of books, the increasing importance of writing as a profession and a business—epic poetry rapidly declined as a viable form after the death of Milton. Indeed, by the middle of the twentieth century, poetry itself had declined from the primary form of literary expression to be replaced by prose, particularly by the prose novel. Today, when most people use the word *epic*, they do not envision a specific form of poetry but rather something more general, more diffuse; anything, in fact, that is long or weighty. A particularly thick novel, especially one dealing with multiple generations, is automatically advertised as “epic”; so too is a two-plus-hour movie—even more so the original blockbuster movie and its several sequels—dealing with warfare and heroics, or a multinight television miniseries. The word appears so frequently in such diverse contexts that it seems nearly to have lost its power.

But the underlying impulse remains. We rarely see “successful” (that is, widely read and equally widely influential) poems claiming to be epic—T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* or Ezra Pound’s *The Cantos* certainly influenced the direction of modern literature and appear frequently in Epic reading lists, but probably far more people know *about* them than have actually read them . . . and even at that, Eliot’s poem is perhaps more accurately defined as an anti-epic, an expression of the past century’s disillusionment with the very concept of heroes. On the other hand, the popularity of those *New York Times* best-selling long novels often argues for their close connection with epic, even though they are not poems. Indeed, science fiction and fantasy, among the more popular genres today, may come closer than any poetic attempts to capturing the essence of epic.

At a session of the annual *Life, the Universe, and Everything* symposium on science fiction and fantasy, Orson Scott Card once referred to Mormonism as a “science fiction” religion—after all, we believe in other worlds, in faster-than-light travel, in aliens visiting the earth (although we do tend to call them *angels*). In much the same way, Mormonism is an epic religion. We believe in an epic fable, a struggle played out by heroes and gods on a vast, cosmic scale, in central events with repercussions that resonate throughout history. And as far as our individual perception of human life, of the great and long-lasting struggle between good and evil, *our* story begins *in medias res*, literally in the middle of things, a convention of epic tales since ancient times. As we understand more about who we are in the mortal present, through revelation the past and future unfold—eternal past and eternal future. We have larger-than-life heroes, pivotal events, defining moments that we celebrate as individuals and as a people.

Mormon poets have been intrigued with the possibility of an LDS epic poem for well over a century, even though the form as such appeals to an extremely limited readership (and therefore to an even smaller core of potential publishers). That three subjects recur frequently in such poems—the mission of Christ, the Book of Mormon, and Joseph Smith—is eminently logical in terms of the history of epic; those subjects contribute to the LDS epic fable, the story that encapsulated a unique society/culture and allows for an expansive treatment that places that society in its perceived place in the universe. For Virgil, such a fable was the founding of Rome, for him the most crucial point in human history (and an opportunity to flatter Augustus at the same time). For Milton, it was the Fall, for him the most significant error in human history—which

explains why so much of what he does in *Paradise Lost* is more anti-epic than epic.

For Mormons, Christ stands at the center of all things. Their unique understanding of Him in earthly and cosmic terms both allies them with and separates them from historical Christianity. Joseph Smith is the focal human character, that individual without whom Mormons would not exist as a distinctive culture, and his life contains enough “epic moments” to support a long work. The Book of Mormon explains who and what we are, and also contains multiple possibilities for heroic/epic narrative.

From the intersection of these themes arise unlimited possibilities for a uniquely LDS epic.

♦ ♦ ♦

At first glance, Janean Justham’s “Emerging at Easter” seems to have little, if anything, epical about it. It is short. Its lines are fragmented rather than elegantly constructed. Its tone is colloquial rather than oracular. It deals with the disintegration of a single life rather than some culturally significant, epoch-defining event. Yet it does connect nicely with the epic tradition. The term *epyllion* identifies a specific sort of poem, suggestively epical yet lacking many if not most formal epic characteristics. Such a poem is shorter than its more elevated cousin; it deals with love (often overtly erotic love) rather than history-altering warfare; it is more private, more individual than traditional epic. “Emerging at Easter” is such a poem. It is quiet, apparently simple (though never simplistic), individual, and private; yet in theme and characters it embraces one of the great social problems of our day, even among Mormons. Its narrowed scope reveals rather than obscures crucial elements of modern life. It concludes not in triumphant grandeur, but in personal growth and awareness.

Bryan Monte’s “The Exiled King” moves one step nearer traditional epic. Its focus is narrow. It is short, an interior monologue that allow us to hear a character’s public words and invite entry into his inner being. It recounts the fall of a public icon, one of the most popular writers of his day and one whose works—especially “The Selfish Giant”—still communicate spiritual truths. Yet he fell. Epic is traditionally associated with tragedy (during much of the Renaissance, scholars debated which form represented the height of human artistic achievement). “The Exiled King” gradually reveals the flaws—including overweening pride—that ultimately destroyed Oscar Wilde.

With Alan Rex Mitchell’s *The Road to Carthage*, we move even closer to something that is characteristically epic and overtly Mormon. As the subtitle

indicates, this is simultaneously readers theater *and* poem. It explores multiple verse forms, matching language, diction, and style to individual speakers. It concentrates attention on one of the central events in Mormon history—the Martyrdom—suggesting Joseph’s heroic character while at the same time giving full play to his essential humanity. At moments of high emotional intensity, diction and style consciously shift to elicit a sense of true epic.

Dennis Marden Clark’s *rough stone* bridges one gap between contemporary readers and traditional epic. A consistent difficulty poets confront relates to the proper language and line for epic. Among the most intriguing results of working intensely with classical and Renaissance epic is that one might see directly the evolution of form reflected in the evolution of language; Milton knew that without the refining of blank verse a generation or so earlier, for example, he would not have been able to construct the poem he did. Modern secular, non-LDS epics—including works as disparate in form and purpose as Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*; David Jones’s *In Parenthesis* and *The Anathémata*; T. S. Eliot’s anti-epical *The Waste Land*; William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*; Charles Williams’s *Taliessin Through Logres*; J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*; Frank Herbert’s *Dune*; Stephen King’s *The Stand*; and uncounted other works of prose and poetry—illustrate that, since Milton’s capstone achievement, even blank verse no longer guarantees that an epic is truly epical.

Clark makes the best of two forms. His poem uses a nonrhyming four-stress line that, while echoing some of the rhythms of blank verse, allows for a shorter line, one more amenable to the colloquial tone he has selected. Although a work in progress, the completed seven sections of the poem illustrate the breadth of vision it embraces, yet throughout it remains accessible to readers.

With its title and opening phrase, Thomas Kohler’s *O Sing Now, Muse* announces its intentions as clearly as did Homer’s poems or Virgil’s or Milton’s. The allusion asserts a close connection to the fundamental conventions that governed epics for millennia; and the line and language continue that assertion. Even the fable connects the poem with its progenitors; creation epics, such as *The Babylonian Creation*, constitute some of the earliest literature we have. As did the great poets before him, Kohler selects a moment of universal significance (literally, for readers of Section 76 in the Doctrine and Covenants and Joseph Smith’s poetic paraphrase of it, “The Vision”) and presents it with his own arguments and embellishments, elevating action and language to approach the crucial importance of the fable.

Of the poems included here, *The Nephiad* probably represents the most self-conscious determination to re-create traditional epic. The first version was composed during a Milton seminar at the University of California–Riverside, nearly thirty years ago; the final version was composed after additional years of teaching and studying the tradition. It attempts to incorporate virtually all of the conventions from the past millennia and apply them to a distinctly LDS topic—Nephi and the slaying of Laban from the Book of Mormon—expanded to over 6,500 lines of convoluted blank verse. To that extent, it may be the most elevated and elaborate—and least easily read—of these poems.

From: *Emerging at Easter*

Janean Justham

I

I am washing dishes,
A simple chore
I never had to indulge in
At home.

JUMP—
My heart recovers
From a car driving past
Between the green lawns
Between the slats of the blind.
Could he find me here?

I think about how long ago
The newness was
As I wash the darkened muffin tin.
I give up trying to scrub the black off,
Rinse, and set aside.

II

I bathe,
Because there is no shower here,
And because of the new-found luxury.
My soul drinks in the warmth.

Light from the hall
Silhouettes a bust of me
Onto the wall of the tub.
I admire it.

I caress the body parts
He didn't cherish—
Feet, forearms, calves, face:
Just cleanse the rest.

Lying back to wet my hair,
I tell myself
Someone
Will love all of me.

III

My chest takes the blow.
Stunned, I wait for scarlet
To seep through in a D.

I thought yielding, conceiving,
Carrying, bearing, nursing
Fulfilled the measure of my creation.
I now see those are just physical.

Christ had to transcend all things.
Apparently, so must I.
I shrink, and would not drink.

IV

It is Easter.
My new dress
Is the color of the tulips
That have broken free
Of the dark, cloistering earth
And stand, shaky and alive

In the sunshine.
I put on my red bracelet
And go out.

V

I used to run out into the night,
Newly wed and also newly pregnant.
The danger didn't matter.
I'd search the indifferent dark for a clue.
Where to run?

I could hear Mama—
Go home where you belong.
I could see Daddy's dark look.
In my mind, five pairs of siblings
Like figurines on wedding cakes
Lined up on a staircase.
I always went back.

VI

Guilt and sorrow
Wash over me and recede
In rhythm.
Cold moonlight splashes in on me,
Makes the waves.
I wait for a flicker of warmth.

Beneath the confusing roar—
A whisper,
Faint but forceful—
All my female ancestors,
All my female descendants
Urge,
Go on.

I imagine many stars.

VII

Looking over my shoulder,
 I come home to cleanse carpets.
 The one in the bedroom
 Is dingy green and matted.
 The powerful appliance inhales
 Years of dirt.
 Memories hang in the air like cobwebs,
 Thick and black.
 I am remembering
 Not romance, but rows:
 My Bible flying toward him,
 The blue blanket, folded, hitting my face,
 His foot snapping as it met the bed.
 Here are the cracked door, the smashed switch.
 Echoes of shouts, screams, sobs
 Enter my mind and expand.
 I watch the charcoal water
 Shooting up the wand
 And tell myself
 It is gulping every speck.

VIII

I dreamed my marriage
 (In the form of my baby)
 Fell down the clothes chute.
 I was too afraid to go down to see
 If he was alive or dead.
 Finally, Kathy went down for me
 And brought him up in her arms.
 Then I had to look.
 His eyes were barely open,
 His body shrunken, stunted,
 The wound on his leg
 Like an old, sodden

Amputation,
 Wrapped in white paper.
 Sometimes it takes a sister
 To go down and retrieve.

IX

In the narrow hall of the apartment,
 I run off accumulated flab.
 It's dark; smoke trickles in
 From the main hall.
 Back and forth,
 Back and forth,
 Like a rat in a maze.
 I try not to breathe in the smoke.
 Approaching one end of the hall,
 I check the blinded windows for shadows;
 At the other end,
 I eye the stacked white boxes.
 Tomorrow I am moving home.
 That fact propels me back.
 No shadows so far,
 But fear drives me forth
 To the boxes.

Home—
 I will have to stretch my arms
 To complete the circle around the table.
 I will love
 Filling the extra space with myself.
 Still, I cringe.
 This place has been an escape:
 Dark and dirty, but
 An invisible space in the wall
 Where no one can pounce.

X

Seeing my (once his) car in the parking lot
 Reminds me how, newly wed,
 I would open the door at work
 And catch my breath,
 Thinking he was there,
 Then laugh and get in the driver's seat.
 I get in now,
 Glancing at the child seats in the back,
 And drive off.

April sunshine
 Pours warmth on my arms and chest.
 I am wearing a new outfit
 He doesn't even know about.
 I smile and roll down the window.

XI

I am back at the house,
 Which looks like it
 Got half its teeth knocked out—
 Furniture, like family, divided.
 I rehang the cross-stitched sign
 Someone gave me at a shower:
 "Janean's Kitchen."
 The irony hits me in the face.
 Why just the kitchen?
 I stroll through the back yard
 To see the flowers—
 Lilacs and pinks
 (*Purples*, Grant says),
 And red tulips.
 I gather the best of each.
 This once,
 Red and purple go together.
 I place them on the mantel.

The aroma fills the empty house
 Like it was what was missing all along.

XII

I am lying
 In the narrow bed
 Crying.
 My children
 Are climbing
 The baseboard,
 Lifting the blind,
 To see sunshine.
 The little one
 Can't quite make it.
 He comes to me.
 We rock and cry.

XIII

Dear Father,
 I see, hear, feel, taste, smell
 His pain.
 It is my pain.

We hope all things.
 We believe all things.
 We have endured many things.
 We hope to be able to endure all things.
 But for how long?

I imagine a star falling,
 Becoming cold.
 Even God said, "Enough!"
 Some ancient part of me knows
 It can't be heaven
 Until the contentious
 Are cast out.

XIV

After nightmares,
When fear had risen
To the screaming point,
I couldn't scream
Or move.

My spirit arms and legs
Beat the bed,
Trying to find the passageway
Into my body,
My throat aching
With the imprisoned scream,
My mouth forming
Al-Al-Al-Al-Al,
My heart sick
That I wasn't making a sound.

I had to break through
In layers.
Finally,
My spirit would connect,
The scream would erupt,
The real nightmare—
The inability to act—
Would be over.

XV

I remember how I would keep getting up
To place my hand on Ben's back,
Feel him breathe,
Check the lock,
Glance through the peep hole,
Then return to bed.
I thought it a stupid compulsion.

Now I understand my persistent fear.
The bundle of death,
The housebreaker,
The robber, the rapist,
The butcher,
The evil spirit
Were in my bed.

XVI

I pull on the cord;
The drapes part;
Sunlight drenches me.

I was calling the wrong name.

From: *The Exiled King*

Bryan Monte

Oscar Wilde (1854–1900)

*The innocent always suffer
Besides we are all innocent
Until we are found out.*

Wilde to Esterhazy 1898

I am Sebastian Melmoth. I am the Happy Prince.
I am the tall, shabby man with an upturned collar
Who stands outside the pastry shop biting his fingers
Then feeds the birds the bread he has begged
They call to me and their mates as they circle
The bronze general along the boulevard
On whose great green shoulders and hat
They leave their merry tribute.

It was not long ago people paid dearly to see me
In another country and century, in such a public place
I carried a lily through the square at Piccadilly
Soon all London was ablaze with my bright phrases
*Either those drapes go or I go
Every day I find it harder to live up to my blue china
I can resist everything except temptation.*
The bitter truth sugared with a great deal of wit
Guaranteed my entrée into polite society and the literati
I became the new Congreve with plays on two stages
An Ideal Husband and *The Importance of Being Earnest*
Balfour and the Prince of Wales bragged of my acquaintance
While others crowded around in nervous amusement
Trying to catch my infectious conversation.

The milkman even bought my picture, and the cabman
 Asked mother if she were any relation.

It was the same when I made my New York debut
 While I waited the night in ship's quarantine
 Reporters came out of the sea to meet me
 Their pens still dripping with brine
 I met them in a great green coat trimmed with otter
 A white shirt with a wide Byronic lapel
 A sky-blue mariners' tie, purple knee breeches
 And black patent leather shoes
 I was exotic, I was fantastic
 I was everything they had hoped I would be.
 I quickly discovered my greatest collegiate defense
 That dress is the weapon to disarm one's audience.

At Customs they asked if I had anything to declare
 And I replied: Only my genius and then I was off
 On my year-long, transcontinental tour
 New York, Boston, Halifax, Buffalo, Chicago
 Omaha, Topeka, Cheyenne, Salt Lake, San Francisco and back
 To lecture on Dress, The House Beautiful, and The English Renaissance.
 I saw the condemned man in Leavenworth reading Dante
 Silver miners in Leadville opened a vein in my honor
 And at Harvard, sixty boys dressed as Whistler
 White flowing hair and Bunthorne's great hat
 Limping languidly in procession, carrying sunflowers
These are the kinds of compliments mediocrity pays greatness
 You should have heard their sighs of distress
 As I rose to the stage in plain evening dress.

.....

Yes, I was the Happy Prince
 Who stood as the general in the town square
 And bid the young swallow strip me bare
 My rubied sword, my sapphire eyes, my gold leaf coat

To feed the feverish boy oranges
 To clothe the tattered match girl
 To warm the two boys under the bridge
 Shivering in each other's arms, who dared not speak
 For this I stripped myself dull and gray.

*For half an hour I stood
 In the gray November rain
 On the center platform
 At Clapham Junction
 Handcuffed and in convict dress
 Surrounded by a jeering mob
 Whose numbers swelled
 With each arriving train.*

And when winter came
 Blind, exposed and defenseless
 My heart cracked from the cold
 Indifference of those I'd clothed and fed
 John Donoghue, I found you on a lecture stop
 In a bare room at the top of an enormous building
 Starving upon a radish and a crust of bread
 Who praised your statue of young Sophocles to the press?
 Who obtained the commissions for your studio in Paris?

.....

Where are my children, Cyril and Vivian?
 From whom I created the Happy Prince?
 Shall I ever see them again? They have a new name
 What is it? Holland, I think, given by my dead wife
 To conceal them from the modern angels of death—the press
 Though she could not hide herself as well.
 In the foothills of Genoa there is a simple stone
Constance Mary, daughter of Harold Lloyd, Q.C.
 There's not even the slightest mention of me.

And where is the young swallow
I bid strip me of all my riches?
Will he not kiss me once before I die?
My dear Bosie, my beautiful boy from Magdalen
Whose boxing, bullying father broke me
Will you not pay my legal fees as promised
Now that you have your twenty thousand pound inheritance?
Did you not enjoy our villa in Naples
Do you not love me more than your horses?
Now we can afford that white house on Corfu
Where we swam in the bay with the bronzed fisherboys
But you're never coming back, are you?

They have all deserted me except two
My dear Robbie Ross who waited for hours
In a long, dark corridor as I passed
From prison to Bankruptcy Court
So that he could silently tip his hat
Men have gone to heaven for smaller things than that.
And Frank Harris who nightly sits by my bed
My guide through the tremors and coughs of the sulfurous underworld
There are two types of nurses in this world
This one must give me over to the boatman.

And when winter came, the town's councillors took me down
And melted my gray form in a furnace
To make a memorial to themselves from my metal
My leaden heart they could not render.
On his iron stand in the twilight
The general slowly wades into the night
Shadows erasing his heavy boots, his large hands
His fierce eyes and scornful mouth
Until nothing of his visage is left
But darkness, darkness under the hat.

From: *The Road to Carthage*

A Readers Theater Presentation
Written in rhyming and blank verse

Alan Rex Mitchell

From: *Scene D. Woods in the Iowa Territory*

JOSEPH: So here I am at thirty-eight years torn
between the Mississippi's shifting shores.
No longer young, I've not the youthful dread
of unknown pathways that dead-end to black.
The rudder of my life's not steered by fate;
God's Will shall set my bearing and my port.
Life-long it's been my lot to swim upstream
against the current mulishness of men,
where I must daily dodge the crafty snares
of those self-righteous in their motèd eyes.
I would to God my struggles here were o'er.
To live unbothered by the hordes of hell,
to play a solitary farmer's role,
would be, of myriad lives, most consummate.
To work the mellow fields by morning sun
and tinker with machines in afternoon,
read Homer, Virgil by the waning moon—
Perhaps there is a hidden home out West,
where none may stir my peace.

I'm thirty-eight.
I've stood the seven trials of Abraham:
the loss of home, the call to holy war,
the sacrifice of all, the turn-coat friends,

the loss of love—the Hagers in my bed—
 the loss of children, then finally from the Lord,
 my sons to soothe our quest for progeny.
 May God in Heaven bless my stalwart sons
 to gaze beyond the twilight dream and see
 how Zion is redeemed from foul men's minds.
 I've set the groundwork with an uncut stone
 that teeters on the mountaintop, then rolls
 blood terrible onto the valley floor.
 But thirty-eight is less than half the course
 to five and eighty years of troubled life
 when, by God's promise, I may see his face
 and supplicate his home. Lord, give me rest!
 And if not rest, then give me Samson's strength
 against the pillars of the Philistines.
 Or give me wisdom of King Solomon,
 until we crown the spire of His House,
 but withhold from me his fanciful desires.
 Just give me raven's meal and Eli's coat
 before I mount the chariot of fire;
 whose spark may detonate the fused curse—
 the tinder of this modern Babylon.
 Or not.
 For none of these appointments is my fate.
 Mine is no fiery pyre like Joan of Arc
 where weak-kneed multitudes regret their sins
 before red embers of their deeds grow gray.
 Methinks that I, like countless lion meal,
 shall face the faceless mob of Italy
 for I'm as guilty as a Spartacus.
 I led the insurrection of the slaves
 as one who fought to set the captives free
 against the keepers of the ancient myth:
 the doctors, lawyers, and the Pharisees.

From: Scene K. Carthage Chorus

CHORUS: As sunlight kissed the morning prairie with her dew
 and showered an orange gown upon her canopy
 of oak and walled sunflowers between the knee-high corn.
 Calves butted, milk cows grazed the wild-strewn grass,
 the birds of heaven called, then flew the nest to find
 the burrowing creatures hidden 'neath the covered sod.
 Mule brayed, horse whinnied, the cock began, and lastly man.
 The buzz of beasts did sing with extrasensory speech
 to sound the angel's trumpet of a sacred seal.
 Then as this scene grew great I heard the Spirit call
 "This prairie town is now the world's capital.
 This hamlet housing western scoundrels, thieves,
 becomes the coliseum of the common man
 —the center point where all the universe is fixed."
 Let Kings hold reign upon the souls of serfs
 'til forty-eight, when all shall shout "Revolt!"
 Let London rule the tides of seven seas
 while Rome stands tall in robes of its decay.
 Let Paris paint the fortunes of the flow'rs
 while Vienna waltzes its way to foreign wars.
 Let Copenhagen dream of penny delights
 while Moscow sows the sorrow of the steppe.
 None holds a candle to pretentious Carthage—stage
 of Satan's triumph in the modern age.
 The spirits of the unseen world, both pure and gray,
 do cast their light and shade upon each flow'r, each tree,
 as they gather to watch the modern passion play
 in its entirety. They mark the scenes by hours,
 each certain that the final victory will belong
 to their own camp—and none of them are wrong.

From: Scene P. The Starlight Speech

Carthage Jail is a room with a door and a window opposite. A single bed and carpet. The JAILOR leads HYRUM, JOSEPH, TAYLOR, RICHARDS, MARKHAM, and JONES.

HYRUM: At last we meet the walls of Carthage Jail.

JAILOR: Please do not think that this was my idea.

JOSEPH: We have no doubt that you are but a pawn.
And thank you for your cordiality.

JAILOR: Forgive me, General, for the meager room—
I was not told there would be company.

TAYLOR: Do you know why we are here?

JAILOR: You destroyed a press.

JOSEPH: No Sir, we met that charge and posted bail.
For treason—treason to defend oneself
against the maddened rabble who proclaim
their liberty depends upon *our* loss,
the full extermination of our lives.

JAILOR: You certainly have loyal enemies.

JOSEPH: And, thank God, as many loyal friends.
These men fear not to cast their lot with me.
And heaven knows our sociality.

JAILOR: And do you lead them into danger's way?

JOSEPH: I've always followed where the Spirit led,
which path is not what skeptics comprehend.
No man among you knows my history,

I would not trust the tale myself had it
not been thrust upon me ere my birth.

TAYLOR: How can that be? Was it your destiny?

JOSEPH: Not destiny, but callings organized
in councils when the plan for earth was drawn.
I've seen the angel bring me golden books,
instructions, powers, keys. It often seemed
that they were weary of the time of earth
and sought to hurry backward—heaven bound
to rest among the lilies of God's home.
If they were called to minister to me
and to the people of their tribe and time,
then am I not within the heritage
of prophets called to testify on earth?

TAYLOR: Not only you, we also feel the weight
of heaven calling us to join this age.

JAILOR: Tomorrow morn, I'll hear you out; for now
I hope you find the cell most comfortable.

JOSEPH: It's fine and large enough to hold a wake.

RICHARDS: Why talk of wakes and fate and unjust death?

TAYLOR: I know no better recreation than
to place before the Prophet inquiries
ranging from the science of this earth
to workings of our Lord in ancient times.

RICHARDS: Tell us the sermon you desired to preach
by starlight to th' elect of Nauvoo Saints.

JOSEPH: I will oblige.

HYRUM: My loyal brethren, sit.

JOSEPH: I saw the apostle Paul, the Tarsus Jew,
 a zealous and cantankerous sort of man
 well suited for the struggling Gentile church;
 Paul wrote from jail exhorting them in faith
 but he was not endowed to keep the church
 from falling into vain apostasy.
 But I, I've held the Church of Latter-days
 in unity of doctrine and of faith.
 If it can grow unchanged from child to man,
 then there will be no need for anyone
 to lecture, "Know the Lord!" for all will know.
 But now the church in infancy doth err—
 I've erred today and told the army men
 the secrets of their hearts—this ought not be.
 I should have stilled that blood-lust prophecy.

HYRUM: It should for once be told what prophets see.

JOSEPH: As Willard Richards asked—what did he ask?

RICHARDS: To know the topic of the starlight speech.

JOSEPH: Simply this, the Son could nothing do
 but what he watched his Father first perform.

MARKHAM: What's that?

JOSEPH: There was a council in Kolob before there was
 blue earth and all of God's created worlds.
 There was a trial by existence named—
 A school before this too too solid flesh.
 Our personality hath elsewhere lived,
 trailing clouds of glory for the voyage.
 Eye hath not seen, nor ear of mortal heard
 The gifts He hath His children foreordained.

For while on earth we view through darkened mirrors.
 But we shall see ourselves when He appears!

TAYLOR: You say we are of royal parentage?

JOSEPH: Can you not see? Ye are God's family!
 His wife, our Mother. His Son, our Brother.
 And Father had a father's father too,
 and so on back to countless family trees.

TAYLOR: This most corrupted flesh with Adam's curse
 shall be the frame to stand before our God?

JOSEPH: Not cursed; but a school for souls to strive—
 Most fruitful when we've reached the future place
 where th' mortal voyage unfolds before our eyes.
 When we view God as Father of our race:
 Our parents become most honored and renown;
 Our wives become the Goddesses of Lives;
 Our children are our Kingdom and our crown.
 Our passions are the Mark of Deity;
 the plan repeats in all biology.

JONES: When did it all begin?

JOSEPH: 'Twas always so.
 We mortals measure time by ticks and tocks;
 before The Cause, there chimed a common clock.
 To comprehend the beginning of eternity,
 believe the permanence of paternity.

HYRUM: There is no start to matter, time, or space?

JOSEPH: Nor propagation of our human race.

From: *rough stone*

Dennis Marden Clark

I. Aloof

early Spring, 1820

Now, of Spear-Danes in spent days
you've heard the tales—terror and tears,
tracking demons, trapping dragons—
a world out of words as magic as werewolves—
as alien to upstate New York as unearthed
treasure, the fabled Spanish troves
that those who poked and probed and prodded
their fields and woods could find at will—
after they salted shaft and barrow;
while gold that shrank from the shovel, and burrowed
deeper in dirt that had drunk the blood
of earlier peoples, Indians' ancestors,
had far more weight than its worth in traffic.

No name, no knowledge, no rest, no nerve:
crossing a field on a quest to find
all of the answers—he can't even ask
himself the subtle, simple question,
*What if no one knows no more
than me?* His muscles move his body
toward the wood lot, walking lightly
to a chapel more cheerful than church or tent,
trusting trees to shelter truth
like songs of birds, bold and simple:
this is my tree, my limb, my twig —

go find your own, you're on your own,
hoping to hear a different hymn.

Slipping away after early work,
willing to wait no longer for words
of clarity, wisdom, cleaving his brain,
he sets out seeking the words himself,
Joseph, hammer and anvil of heaven.
Wrestler, grappler, he can't wrap
his arms around the real absence.
He goes to wrest—to win—from God
the answer to *Which way from hell?*
away from strife, toward still life,
toward the end of aching for truth.
Doesn't know the question next
is not which sanctuary to seek, but
which door to do what no one had done,
open a universe, close a heaven?
Follows his feet over furrow and seed,
to grapple deep in the grove with doubt . . .
to prove the Lord, to pray aloud
for news of another world, not noise.

A quilt of morning mist for cover,
he crosses the fields foot before foot,
sin on his soul like mud on his shoes.
Careful to step on stone or clod
he fares between fences, face to the trees,
fearing to trust the teeth of his faith
or fail to test the truth of his fears.
Crosses the field full with seed—
ploughed and planted, pregnant with toil—
labor all spring, sweat all summer—
bridge to the grove, dusted green,
dark and damp in the day just opened.
To answer the question each tent-flap asks
and answers in its own wind, he

walks to the wood lot wanting wisdom,
burning grove bright with pitch,
harvested for hearth or home
but unconsumed by either one,
sacred despite his shoes unshed.

Not strife of words but stillness of word.
No contest about opinions, but quiet—
the comfort every digger craves.
Scent of the soil enters his senses
but not his head. He only hears
the prayer he wants to pour from his mouth
where none can listen but God alone
and no one answer in his own interest
but only God, and grant a truth.
Nearing the fence his feet have grown
heavy with mud, but not his heart.

He barely feels the burden of feet,
walking each stride to wisdom, to what
awaits, who weighs in, gives the word,
to settle the war of words, to still
the tumult of opinion, torrent
pouring about his head, oppressing,
washing him away from his folks—
who'll put it squarely, speaking plainly:
*Open this door, drive your team
inside, shelter, shift your load.*
It entered his head *No door will open;*
he never entertained the notion,
so many doors were made to open
in all the rush of revival rant
and then swing shut to shelter sheep.
Scorched with dread: afraid at the last
to pray or not, to pour it out
or suck it in; speak, fall silent.
Hears a tread somewhere behind him.

Hopes he's clean in hands and heart.
 Falls to his knees after looking, and finding
 himself alone. Hears his breath
 change to speech splitting the wood.

Hears the alteration in his
 voice, otherness offering up
 heart's desire. Hears death
 choke him up—oozing like mist
 from leaf meal mashed by knees.
 Sucked like smoke it settles in lungs—
 molds like web to mouth and cheek,
 follows breath through face and gullet:
 rot—mold—mildew—slime—
 gag and tickle, choke the telling.
 Tongue limber as leather belt
 cannot shape escaping breath.
 Tongue limp as a linen knife
 carves no words from cache of wind.
 Wrestling whom no hand can hold,
 flesh no fingers can find and grip.
 By main strength moves muscle
 against a mass dense as murder.
 Chin trembles, tongue cleaves
 to roof, curls against its root,
 rolls out, rolls in as Joseph rocks
 in cradle, coffin, crossed up, thrown.
 Drunk on despair, sunk in destruction,
 fighting a power that pricks his flesh
 like winter wind, that wounds like love
 withheld, that flays his flesh with laughter.
 Twisted, thrown, thrashed, taxed.
 Sunk in a pit, already a slave
 sold by a family settling for less.
 Every wisp of will wiped
 but one: the tongue—try again.

Call out, cry out cold as dawn,
 little, last, breath, leaving.
 Let lungs' collapse expel
 the final cry: *Christ, or finished!*
 Cold clutches chest, legs,
 arms, throat, ears, eyes,
 fingers hair, freezes heart.
 Eyes find, before they can fail,
 a pillar of light pushing aside
 leaf and bud, limb and twig,
 descending slowly athwart the dawn.
 Entering gently the ocean of air,
 finding the floor, it falls on him,
 floods his flesh, fills his lungs
 with light like air, with air like light,
 thawing both his blood and heart.
 Dawn in his life, dawn in the leaves.
 Shrouded in light he sees two shapes
 whose depth and glory defy death
 standing above, still in the air,
 source of the light, living wicks.
Joseph says one, points to the other,
Here is my son. See what he says!

Silence sighs, sun fades.
 Hushed the bird bearing song,
 stilled the breeze swaying limb,
 blue the sky holding its breath.
 World waits to hear the words
 Joseph's teeth will shape and join:
 "Of all the churches, which for me?"
All are wrong, each of the creeds
abomination, not balm of nations.
Each professor—all corrupt.
Their lips draw close to kiss my cheek,
they keep their hearts to count their coin.
They make their creed of men's commands

*in God's own form, but given no force.
No church or chapel to hold you, child.
Join not to cross, Joseph, nor sect.
Stand off, away from wise and awesome.
Simple but strong, your mouth will sing
songs of the dead to serve the living.*

He heard much more, saw more, the scenes
of a world to its end and all her children
before and beyond, below and above,
a whole history shaped for him
and senses he never knew he had,
the smell of earth, the taste of orbit,
the grooming of air on outspread wings,
a hymn of seeing, a web of saying,
a meal of moving across the moon,
swimming the sun smart as a shark,
starting a star with a stutter kick.

*You will walk in strong wind
against the gusts of gathering storms;
walk unwavering the way I walked.*

His strength failed. He stayed still.
He came to himself flat on his back,
flirting with ken and cognition, flailing,
hearing a universe hum, staring.
Jays were back, jawing in boughs.
Sound of squirrels scurrying up
trees siphoning food from soil;
leaves growing to grab light;
worms working through woodland meal;
shrinking stumps sighing for trunks
lost to hearth; litter of axe
the tears of the tree; turkey scuffling
backwards through duff, digging grubs;
flash of cardinal calmly flitting;

ants crawling across his ankle,
outflung hands floating him
on leaves where he lay limp and lank
unable to lift his like from the land,
floating flat, no longer flying.

Strength gradually steepes his sinews.
Gaining heart he goes home
flat and leans up to the fire.
His mother asks "What's the matter?"
"Never mind," he mutters, "now
all is well, I am well
enough off." And now he catches
his breath and the smoke of smoldering embers,
"Never mind, I've learned for myself
Your presbyters are priests of turf.
They tell no truth not touched by death."
"But Joseph," she says, "Just come and sit
awhile with us, and sing our songs."
"I may not lift my muzzle and howl;
I must not join their joyous jail."
She knows how deep his knees have sunk.
She holds her tongue and holds his heart.

Some few days gone, he fails that test,
telling a Methodist minister all
he saw and said and heard. It sounds
sinister, sordid, soiled, sick,
the preacher says, like something dead
dug from a grave, dragged to a grove
by one whose wish is waste and void,
whose will is stale, who stole the word
now sealed in tombs of apostles deceased,
who waits to steal the solitary,
to bait the treasure-hunting boy,
with corpse-light, grave-gas, flaming tongues;
no word not written could be God's will.

O Sing Now, Muse

Thomas Kohler

O sing now, Muse, and through me make
Truth shine with all the ancient gleam of holy light
That is the herald of thy God-sent task
To comfort fallen man and guide his path.
Make sacred now my song as when of old
You did give strength to speech of men that they
Could cast the very demons out to heal;
Or make my voice a roaring trump to sound
Great calls so all the pagan walls collapse,
Because of all of Adam's seed am I
The least, and worst equipped to sing of how
The grace of God gave shape to starry skies,
And Sun, and Moon, in their concentric spheres,
To light a world to house what He in His
Own image and of lowly dust did forge.
Make quick my tongue to move, by verse, the
World, lest truth become so lost in myth that we
Forget our place and how we came to it
By nothing less than the pure love of God.

The Earth was without form, as all must be
That know not hand of God to give them shape
And mold them to a grander scheme than they
Alone could dream or hope to be in all
The lengthy nighttime of their lightless sleep.
Almighty God whose smallest whim is law
Sent forth his spirit out upon the dark
Chaotic Void to gently waken it
From torment's sleep. Then, in such might and in

All of the majesty that such as it
 Could stand, God went to win it to His work.
 It oozed into a spongy slime beneath
 His shine and trembled there. All fearful and
 Voluminous, its herd of squinting eyes
 And gnashing teeth much sooner would have crept
 Away than face its Lord. In misery,
 But unable to know its wretched state,
 The Void cried out confused, "How be it that
 You come all armed in might to take from me
 My ease with your perfection? I, who yet
 Have never known the burden you call wrong
 Nor ever felt the freedom you call right,
 Have little cause to speak with you and would
 Have less." Then spoke the Lord of All and said,
 "Have peace, and still thy corpulence from its
 Unbridled shaking. I come armed alone
 With pleasant speech and words to show thee how
 Thy place in paradise might be acquired."
 Thus, pacified in part, its shaking ceased.
 Yet still inside the churning madness of
 Its mind it feared, for well it knew the strength
 And might the simplest word of God possessed.
 "But how can you, who claim to know all things,
 Believe that I can be convinced to leave
 My endless, free existence in exchange
 For anything that you could have to give?"
 "I come as ever I have come," said God,
 "To heal what would be healed and nothing more.
 I make no secret of my task because
 By it shall glories come, such as surpass
 Thy will to be without them." God spoke again,
 His heart filled with compassion for the Void,
 And said, "Behold this suffering which thou
 Wouldst have me deem a life is nothing more
 Than the continuance of timeless pain,
 And hurtful beyond every waste it is,

For while one half of thee consumes itself
 The other in an endless birthing is,
 And naught is ever gained by this but pain

.....

"Behold, the new God-tailored robes I would
 Array thee with and learn the scope of this
 Presented covenant." God blessed the Void.
 His purity stretched far and wrapped the horde
 Resplendently. His power beamed upon
 The gloom until no remnant of the dark
 Remained.

.....

Behold the mercy and the gentleness
 Of Him to whom belong both Earth and Heav'n.
 Though powers past the measure of man's mind
 Are His, God ever has decreed that there
 Be choice; and though He gives the world his law
 He will not force his subjects to be saved.
 Instead He brings to pass His will by show
 Of purity and matchless love without
 An end that has forever been His joy.
 Thus, having freed the blackness of its sloth
 And disorder, the Mighty King of All
 Was well contented, for he knew it now
 Would hearken. Then He spoke, His voice the
 Sound of rushing wind, and said, "Let there be
 Light." And thus it was and it was good for He
 From whom all good has sprung had willed it so.

As when, by prophet's word, the Red Sea swept
 In twain and so was split as He desired,
 So too did darkness and the light break free
 Of one another that they might receive
 Their given names; for light, the Day, and for

The darkness, Night. Then the angelic hosts
 In union gathered round their King to do
 Him honor as befit their place and His.
 Then on the morrow God and angels both
 With firmament, the young and forming sea
 Did gird to make a gulf between the top
 And water, which was down beneath. All through
 The day they toiled and when the work was done,
 God then, with His all-piercing eye, looked out
 Upon that work of morning, noon and eve.
 And “Heaven” was the name that God ascribed
 To that day’s toil as all passed into night.

The waters then they made submit to land,
 As from the briny depths they brought land forth.
 The mighty Lord of Hosts inspection made,
 And all who worked did pause to give Him praise.
 Of Seraphim, a little one, was sore
 Amazed by all the toil and knew not why
 So many worked to raise that mass of rock
 And mud from where it hid its formlessness;
 So went he to the foot of his great God
 To seek for wisdom that, in perfect faith,
 He knew to there reside. In reverent
 And prayer-like way he told his loving God
 His heart and, smiling all his fears away,
 God then began to sing, so sweet that each
 And every note a miracle of range
 And harmony became, as would the song
 Most mean if lips of Him most high were heard
 To sing it. As He sang, the Earth bore fruit;
 And grass and living herbs and seeds sprang up.
 Then, laughing with the joy and beauty of
 This sight and song, that young seraph flew down
 And with the members of his belov’d class
 Went through the fields and orchards and made
 Sport of singing snatches of God’s song to see
 What fruit or vegetable they might perhaps

Coax out of void—of nothingness—to life.
 ’Twas thus that the more homely plants took
 Shape, for though the Seraphim lack not for good,
 Their singing best becomes the choirs of heaven
 When greater orders sing the harmony,
 And Michael, with his careful glance, can keep
 God’s little ones’ attention on the words
 And on the rhythm of the song; or else
 With ease they may forget and improvise
 Their own. And though in all angelic choirs
 No discord sounds, the higher harmonies
 Are lost when Seraphim are left to sing
 Unbound. God, still amused, pronounced the name
 Of this new land as “Earth.” And water down
 Beneath the firmament He gave the name
 Of “Seas.”

.....

and then some twelve
 Archangels brought both orbs into their skies.
 The Sun and Moon then both shone down on Earth;
 For though both had dominion in their spheres,
 They were both glad to be ruled by their God
 And shine upon Him as with all His hosts
 He stood upon the beach and taught those hosts
 To form the beasts and give to each one life.

They watched in awe and eagerness as He
 The shining scales of a small fish did form.
 And gently, as He knit them into shape,
 He made the eyes and gills and last the tail.
 It rested in His hand and felt the bliss
 That only can be got by those who know
 Themselves to blamelessly be in the palm
 Of God. Then, with that small creation done,
 He lowered it into the surf. And soon
 Beneath his watchful eye each angel, too,

Was crafting fish to fill the sea. And each
 Aquatic masterpiece portrayed the joy
 Of those who, by God's power, gave them life.
 The angels all began by doing what
 Their God had done. In all exactness they
 Formed fish in image and in likeness of
 The one He first had made. But soon, at His
 Insistence, They began to make all sorts
 Of forms, colors, and sizes that they could
 Conceive of and put, resting, in the sea.
 And God encouraged then, as He does now,
 That all use inspiration, which He gives
 To work the miracles that He would work.
 And as the angels worked the will of God,
 None thought to take the credit for their own;
 But even as their hands did toil, they cheered
 And gave all praise and all the glory to
 Their God alone, whose instruments they were;
 For well they knew their place in His great plan
 And had no thought save their desire to serve
 Him and be swallowed up inside his love.

.....

The next day brought the conjure of the beasts.
 The dawning of that morn found all God's hosts
 Contesting, not as mortals do, with one
 Raging against the other, but instead
 They locked in competition with themselves
 To each do better than each yet had done.
 Each angel's prize became the doing of
 A greater work and masterpiece than he
 Or she had yet preformed for God and by
 Internal effort overcome what once
 Had been their best. The creeping things were first
 To heed the angels' call and to begin
 Their land-bound lives. The creeping things then

Saw as hoofed and hornèd beast were made and as
 The angels taught them how to walk and move;
 For angels ever shepherds were. And so
 The angels expertly guided the beasts
 Into their many herds, where always they've
 Found safety from the godless dangers of
 The world, after the Fall of man brought down
 God's curse for men's own sakes, making this life
 The crucible of souls to sear away
 The dross and try the metal of mankind.
 That done, the angels, moved by God, began
 To craft the beasts that yet remained unformed,
 And God beheld these wonders of the world
 And said, "Your diverse majesty is great,
 And I have laws for you and for your kinds."
 The beasts all heard God's laws and knelt down
 Low before Him. And when they had each received
 Instruction from the God of days and dreams,
 They ran in haste to go and do His work.
 Then God went down and walked upon the Earth,
 And God created Man out of the dust;
 And since that act it often seems that God
 Belittled dust by making men of it;
 Because unlike the dust, men heed not God.
 But truly it is man who by that sin
 Belittles dust. For God exalted dust
 When in His image and in likeness of
 Himself He made the Man, and endowed him
 With every attribute of Godliness
 By resting into dusty frame of Man
 An angel's soul, that men might be above
 The beasts and learn to live up to God's gifts.
 Except that God withheld the knowledge of
 Both good and evil; for divine nature
 Could not remain in perfect form if it
 Were by God's hand that evil found its lair—
 Foreseen but not condoned—inside men's hearts.

Yet, good must be discerned from evil or
All things of worth would ever be unknown.
If God's children should ever hope to reach
Their long-proclaimed inheritance then they
Must learn to choose the good and right. So God
Allowed Adam to Sin, as all men know
By having lived within this fallen world
So long, just as He lets all men today
Walk blind except for faith to find their way
(Which God-ward fumbings of the human heart
Can be more sure and more direct than all
Of sight and touch and smell combined can be)
And God explained to them the world and showed
To them the beauty of the beasts and skies
And seas. He gave to them commandments and
They walked with Him as the cool evening breeze
A vigil kept; as did all of the world
That it forever could recall this act,
This crowning act and true beginning of
What true creation might achieve.

From: *The Nephiad*, Book XII

Michael R. Collings

And Nephi saw a sport of his own branch
In deep despair beneath a Doom of Death;
For Wickedness held sovereign sway among
All peoples in pale Nephite's nation's bounds,
And subsequent cruel Death decreed for them
Who credence placed in Samuel's Prophecies
Thrown from the walls of Zarahemla's might
(Mighty Citadel, now grown through false choice
Into a *Pandemonium* to infect
The fertile Promised Land with evil's blight),
Thrown in face of rampant vileness;
Yet some believed—a prophet *Nephi* named
In token of his parents' hopes that he
Might grow in stature mighty, and in faith,
Descendant from true loins of Nephite Kings,
In prayer sincere, suppliant, sought his God,
Him to entreat for Mercy's sustenance
And justice paid unto God's faithful ones.
And Lehi's son beheld this man in prayer,
His namesake kneeling on sand-scoured shores
As Oceanus' waves caressed dry Land
And fiery Sol descended into Night.
Long had he knelt in feeling prayer, this son
Of Nephi's posterity, long craved surcease
From deep uncertainty through Light revealed;
And Lehi's son beheld the consequence
Of righteous faith implicitly applied—
For as the *Sun* impinged upon

Far waves dyed true cerulean by depth,
 And with fire's tender touch a blush called forth
 Throughout blue Heavens up to the Virgin *Moon*,
 Behold, bright *Day* diminished not in might,
 Nor *Darkness* spread his soporific cowl
 In one symphonic harmony
 Upon the face of yet-unsleeping *Earth*;
 And through cool, lightened, freshened, living *Air*
 Breathed out a Voice triumphant, gentle, hushed;
 And he upon jeweled shores looked up in Joy,
 As if his heart's desires accomplished were,
 As if his heart infuséd were with Joy
 And that for which he hoped had come to pass.
 The Voice breathed hushed, and thus the Message spake:
 "My Son, I see thy Faith, and I rejoice.
 Because of thy abounding Confidence
 In me, and in my Words engraved upon
 Cold Metal Plates of Prophecies preserved
 Through generations—from thy Fathers' flight
 Into waste Wilderness unto this Day—
 Because of thy unfailing faith I speak:
 Behold, I am *Jesus Christ*, thy Lord,
 The *One* foretold from Time's beginning Day—
 This Night I come unto Near Eastern spheres,
 This Night shall I, as Child, in flesh descend
 And in the Morning be as Man on Earth;
 As proof thereof, behold my Sign!—*Christ's Star!*"
 Sounds as echoes died into *Night's* still;
 And as the golden disk of Nature's Eye,
 The lidless Eye unfailing, regal gold,
 Slow-slipped behind blue Water's curvature
 A flickering Light appeared in Eastern skies,
 Diminished, flamed—then pulsed in glowing Might,
 Steadily increasing in its Might,
 Until its brilliance seared the mortal Globe
 And one great Star encompassed all in Light.

And then it seemed that all was muted, soft,
 As far away, within a stable warm,
 A Maiden sat, with Infant-Babe in arms,
 Wordless Infant, Word of God's abiding
 Love for daughters, sons encased in flesh;
 And in awed Nephi's ears a melody
 As if of Choirs Seraphic lingered long,
 Fading, yes, but echoing through his heart
 (As it would echo long through all the Earth,
 Resounding in the Songs of Christmas-Tide
 Outbreathed by Children's Voices to the night,
 Voices joined unto the Angel Choir
 In homage-odes sung to the Greatest Child's
 Nativity)—Echoing through his heart
 To join with Nephi's own impelling song,
 Song of Praise, yet muted Lullaby.

.....

And as the Time drew near when *Christ* should die—
 Thirty years and three since Samuel's Sign,
 The *Star*, betokened His Nativity—
 Behold, dissension threatened faithful flocks,
 Pollutions spread abroad through all the Land,
 As if in clouds of noxious smokes exhaled,
 Instilled by greed exterior and pride,
 By loss of faith among professèd Saints

.....

This Nephi saw, and fain would turn away
 Tormented eyes from scenes calamitous;
 Yet turned he not, for *Horror's* fascination
 Held him bound, as did the Heavenly Voice;
 And now great happenings were seen abroad;
 Across the guiltless face of suffering Earth

The Promised Land withdrew in horror-fear,
 Tempests, floods, and quakings o'er the Land
 With fracturing force disrupted Spring-smooth soils;
 Molten bowels of Earth herself spewed forth
 In agony; cities vast consumed
 By sulfurous flames, by whirlwinds' deadly breath,
 By wild encroachment of the savage seas;
 Smooth-hewn stones, close-joined to form high ways
 On which trade, commerce, and civility
 Depended once, severed and destroyed;
 High places thrust down low with violence,
 Low places elevate above green heights
 Assigned according to His primal Will
 Who erst composed this whirling turquoise Globe.
 And though three hours in desolation passed,
 All these occurred within the space of breaths
 To Nephi's frightened soul, nor failed loud cries
 Of dying tongues to pierce his woe-filled ears;
 Yet comfort none did Lehi's son perceive
 Amid destruction, cataclysm, death;
 For when had ceased all perturbations of
 Distressed Earth, internal flames subsided,
 Turmoiled Seas withdrew from muddied shores,
 Behold, and all was calm and pacified,
 Quiet with heart-stopping silences,
 Then stretched from Eastward shores a Cloud of Night,
 Coldly boiling Westward, until all
 Beneath *Diana's* silvery, singing Sphere
 Was husked in thick, impenetrable Mist—
 Mist darker than the mist of *Paradise*
 That evil whispered to Eve's nighttime dreams
 But this no evil cloud but rather loss,
 Absence of all Light, now God lay Dead.
 And thus it came to pass that vaporous Black
 Invested all the Land, 'til none might see,
 But only feel soul-choking, blinding Damps;
 None might see, who had survived the throes

And sympathetic wrenchings of pained Earth,
 Who felt within her molten depths sharp pangs
 For her Creator, thrust upon a Cross;
 Yea, none might see, for Light was nowhere found—
 Dry and splintered woods, tall waxen tapers,
 Torches drenched in oils combustible—
 None would flame with fires visible
 Though fire perchance consumed their matter raw,
 Flame and oxidation's heat consumed,
 Destroyed, transformed to ash—*but with no Light*;
 Nor could *Apollo's* hidden face be seen,
 Or form of Moon, or Stars, who in the hush
 And solemn still funereal, constrained
 And veiled their incandescent powers in shame;
 For He whose Spirit is the Light of *Sun*,
 Of *Moon*, of *Stars*, of *Earths* eternally,
 Was gone, withdrawn into that crystal Sphere
 Beyond all mortal ken; three days withdrawn,
 And yet three days immured within dread dark
 Of Earth-Leviathan's sepulchral Maw,
 His mortal husk upon a stone-slab bier
 Within a Garden near *Jerusalem*—
 Innocence slain lest multitudes dwindle,
 Perish, and sleep in timeless unBelief.
 And in the Western Spheres had many died,
 Many in darkness, though not all;
 Light had failed, yet lived the Nephite folk
 With righteous Lamanites conjoined in tears,
 While from the Mist's benighting density
 Rose forth unto the ears of Heaven's God
 Great mournings, howling, weeping from men's hearts,
 Groanings of survivors in their fears . . .
 And from one place could Nephi hear their moan:
 "O, had we but repented of our sins
 Before the Coming of this Day of Death;
 For then our Brethren's flesh had not been burned,
 Consumed in mighty Zarahemla's fall."

And from another place he heard sad words:
 “O, had we but repented of our sins
 Before the Coming of this Day of Doom;
 O, had we not true Prophets of our Lord
 Despised, stoned, and cast into Death’s Wilds;
 Then had our mothers and our daughters lived,
 Then had our sons and fathers yet drawn breath,
 Then had our children laughed unto blue skies
 Who now lie deep-entombed within wall-graves
 Of crushed Moronihah, beneath dark earth.”

This spake frail voices from Morian mists;
 And Nephi wept, and raised in mourning tones
 His own lamenting, tearful harmony;
 Yet spake the Messenger to Lehi’s son,
 With Voice triumphant, Mien victorious:
 “Behold, thou son of man: The wicked pass,
 Unjust ones stain no longer Western Lands,
 And Righteousness alone survives harsh Death;
 Look now, thou son of Adam’s long-lived Seed,
 And see the Culmination of thy Hopes!
 Witness now Salvation in the Earth,
 And final meaning of all Prophecy!”

At these exultant syllables all sounds,
 All wails and lamentations silent fell,
 Until a calm unbroken conquered worlds;
 Then from bright depths of Heaven’s hidden Soul
 A Voice was heard by all in Darkness’ grip,
 A Voice of Power, which thus its message framed.

.....

And as it spake, the worlds in their circled
 Orbs, the Stars and Galaxies that wheel in
 Vast precision through distances of Space
 Gave Voice in one grand, triumphant Chord,
 As if the universe its Voice had found
 To sing in praise its God’s creative Hand,

And Myth transposed to stark Reality
 With Music signaling, symbolizing
 God’s unbounded Love, redemptive All.
 All this bold Nephi heard and saw and knew;
 Yet failed not the impetus of Sight,
 For Nephi thus saw three Days pass away;
 And on a Morn the Dark dispersed and fled
 Beneath bright flaming might of Heaven’s Son;
 The firm Earth ceased to tremble and to quake
 And all tumultuousness dispersed away;
 Indeed, a remnant of the folk was spared,
 The moiety more righteous than the rest,
 More adamant in heeding principles
 Whose operation mediates for Earth
 Rich blessings from sweet Heaven’s heights; yea, these
 Of Lehi’s loins who had believed were spared,
 Nor sunk and buried in Earth’s loam, nor drowned
 Beneath black, briny froth and welling waves,
 Nor burned by flaming fire, nor cruelly crushed,
 Nor borne away within wild whirlwinds.
 Mourning and lamenting voices ceased,
 As morning swelled with joyous praise informed,
 Praise unto Man’s Lord, Earth’s Christ, Heaven’s King.

.....

And now it seemed as if all Space had changed,
 And all perceptions of Degree and Form
 Altered were to Nephi’s o’erfilled mind;
 It seemed that Nephi knelt no more upon
 The Mountain-Height next Heaven’s Spirit-Form;
 Instead, the son of ancient Lehi stood
 As if among a spacious multitude,
 A Congregation vast assembled
 Before a luminescent Edifice
 Of ungrained brilliance, snowy-white and bright.
 In the distance, shattered Towers mute—

Gray stone, red fire-hardened brick, veined woods—
 Bespoke internal powers that shook grave Earth,
 And all around were signs of recent ruin;
 Yet stood the Temple's parapets unharmed,
 Its pillars rising as two fiery Beams
 In supplication to their burning God,
 As long before the Golden Ones were raised
 Before high portals by *Solomon the Wise*,
 "In Him is Strength," and "He will Establish"—twins
 Of precious ore erected to the Lord,
Jachin and *Boaz* on *Zion's* heights;
 So appeared the ornamental fires
 Before the Temple's glow in Bountiful;
 Near high Eastern portals, golden-bronze,
 Where People gathered, deep in thought and prayer,
 Speaking softly of this *Jesus Christ*
 Whose death-signs had convulsed and wrenched great Earth.
 And it came to pass that as the people stood,
 They heard a Voice as if from Heaven's depths;
 They cast their eyes about in wonderment,
 For none could understand the meaning of
 Celestial tones to mortal ears downsent.
 Again the Voice rolled forth—nor harsh nor loud,
 Though piercing in its mild simplicity,
 That every breast be caused to quake, each heart
 To burn, and every Soul to yearn for Light,
 For Truth, for God. A third time came the Voice;
 And auditors terrestrial up-looked
 Steadfastly toward Deep Heaven from whence it came,
 Until at last they understood the Words:
 "Behold, behold my Lovèd Son, in Whom
 I glorify My Name—Hear ye Him!"

Final Thoughts

Michael R. Collings



A word of explanation—and a *caveat*.

It is eminently unfair to publish excerpts from an epic.

Everything about the form demands a vast canvas. Fable, themes, characters, structure, style—all work most effectively in the context of the poet's vast, cohesive vision. Yet to attempt even a glimpse at the diversity of such poems now being written by Mormon poets requires precisely that which threatens to undercut its own purpose. What appears here represents at best a fragmentary insight into an exciting direction for Mormon poetry, but nothing more. And if I have in any way misrepresented longer works in my choices, deepest apologies to the poets.

And now the *caveat*.

When I first completed *The Nephiad* and shared it with a few readers, several took strong exception to it. Clearly it was based on the Book of Mormon, but some of the elements of the poem manifestly did not appear there. At least one reader roundly condemned the ill-advised attempt at resurrecting "seventeenth-century iadic poetry" and demanded forcibly to know why, since the Book of Mormon already covered the same ground with admirable simplicity, I wasted my time writing this poem. Another noted the presence of a nonscriptural angel early in the poem and wondered if it might thereby confuse readers, make them wonder which version of the event told the truth.

Perhaps my fellow poets have had similar experiences. Certainly some will have been told that long, complex, highly structured epics simply aren't readable today.

In response: These poems, for all their strengths and/or failings, for all the ambition of form and length and content, are *poems*. They pretend to be neither history nor theology; and where they diverge from either, they represent artistic decisions, not attempts to rewrite the Book of Mormon, Mormon history, or

the words of God. Elements in some of the poems may strike readers as distorted or unusual; these are the poets' contributions and should not necessarily be taken as criticisms, emendations, or adjuncts to scripture.

I Choose the Highway

Excerpted from the novel *Donovan's Winter*

Charlotte Hilton Andersen



I hate flowers. Seriously, who did the flowers for this thing? My mom probably picked them out. They're all carnations and mums and other frilly looking things that are definitely not me. If they'd really wanted to represent me, they'd have picked—oh, I don't know—a cactus maybe? You'd think a guy'd at least get his way at his own funeral. Still I guess it probably had to be flowers. You know, social convention and all that. Do roses come in black? Heh. Now that would be cool.

"Ah, man, check this out! This is the new Element Fiberlight deck!" Van's voice pulls me away from the flowers.

"And these are Grind King titanium trucks, baby!" Kyle says too loudly as he grabs my skateboard away from Van and runs his hand lovingly over the shiny metal chassis. Sister Jonelle, my neighbor, shoots him a nasty look from her perch, presiding over the buffet of finger foods the Relief Society set up right next to the table showcasing all the memorabilia from my seventeen years of life. I didn't think there would be that much, you know, but the table's pretty much packed. So's the church, actually. I really didn't think there'd be this many people here. "I didn't know he had these!" he sighs with obvious envy. I grin. Just got 'em a week ago, pal.

"I bet he got killer air on this," Van says quietly as he spins the wheels—the Spitfire Backstabber wheels I customized with Black Panther bearings. I got bigger air than you'd ever believe. Seriously.

"Yeah, probably coulda jumped a whole freakin' highway," Kyle says with his hyena laugh. My stomach clenches as he finishes, "If he'd a wanted to." Another glare from Sister Jonelle.

"Dude . . ." Van stares at Kyle, white-faced, before turning away to look blankly at the picture of Christ on the wall, as if it's suddenly going to come to life and tell him the answers to everything. Well, I've got news for you

Vannie-boy—I've been on this side of things for, oh, well a few days now I guess, and I certainly don't have any of the big answers yet. If He's talking, He sure ain't talking to me. Of course, I haven't exactly been looking for Him either. I mean, I know I wanted to leave in a bad way but somehow, it's just more . . . comfortable here, where I still have all my old stuff. Even if all I can do with my board now is watch as Kyle fondles it. Dude! Already I'm beginning to forget what exactly was so bad about my life.

"What do you think they're going to do with this?" Kyle asks casually, dropping my board and kicking it easily into his hand. I see the gleam in his eyes. Hands off my board, dude. I reach to slap it out of his hands but of course I can't. That still throws me.

Van shrugs and shifts his gaze from Christ to my mother's blanched face and searing eyes. Her flowered dress looks too hopeful for this setting but it kind of matches the room, so maybe she's got a whole motif going on. I hate seeing her like this. Even more than I hate the awful flowers. I didn't think it would be like this—I thought it would be easy. Easier for me, anyhow. Certainly easier than going through the whole process of trying to make it all right and then realizing I couldn't. Just cut to the end, you know. Except this isn't the end I planned on. I mean, clouds and halos and singing it ain't, but it isn't hell either. It's more like I'm, well, stuck. Like I'm waiting for something but I don't know what. I still feel like me. That's the problem, I guess.

My father returns from his fortieth trip to the bathroom in the last two hours and resumes his duty, propping my mother up. Sister Jonelle brings them both a glass of red punch. Relief Society punch. The kind with floaties in it. I know they're supposed to be artsy or flavorful or something but in the end they're still floaties. Just like the kind I used to get when I backwashed into my Mountain Dew. I miss Mountain Dew. If this was really my gig, they'd be serving Mountain Dew and barbecue chips. Breakfast of Champions. I watch as Mom waves Sister Jonelle away, but Dad takes both glasses and throws them back. He winces as if he's swallowing two-buck chuck, even though I'm sure there's nothing stronger than sherbet in there. I do not miss two-buck chuck.

"So should we . . . ?" Kyle motions Van towards the line of people waiting to talk to my parents. He's still holding my board, the slim green wood eased casually against his leg, the trucks still shiny in their newness. If anyone gets it, I hope Van does. Kyle's a hack; he'll have my deck smashed in a week flat.

Van picks up my board and gently places it back on the table, even artfully draping my armor over the edge—just like it was when they found it. When

he looks up, he has tears in his eyes. Not the sobby, weepy kind like my sister's been oozing, the kind that line her face in black and matt her long eyelashes into clumps. My sister—she has beautiful eyes. She never needed mascara; I probably should have told her that. I left a lot of things unsaid.

"Do you think it hurt?" Van's voice squeaks just a little, like it used to when we were deacons, like it never does anymore.

"Ah, wha . . . ?" Kyle stammers, looking uncomfortable for the first time since they walked in.

"Do you think, you know, he felt it?"

Blink.

"Son, son," I hear the voice loudly in my ear, "can you feel this?" No, and I can't see anything either, so I have no idea what he's even talking about. "Are you in any pain?" No, I don't think so, although strangely, I'm not sure. There was pain. At the moment of impact. Now there's more of a numb, floaty feeling.

"I can't find a pulse," another voice says in a tight tone.

"Did you try his leg?"

"Which one? They're both crushed."

"That's what happens when you go under a semi," is the clipped reply. "It's a lost cause, Joe." Go under a semi? So I did it. Huh.

"Maybe so." The first voice, the one who called me son but doesn't sound like my father, huffs, "Maybe so." He grunts rhythmically and I realize he's doing CPR. Strange, but I can't feel it. I did CPR once—on a dummy as part of my lifesaving merit badge at Scout camp last summer. I remember the dummy was shaped like a woman except she had no hair and she was wearing this ugly brown seventies zippered sweatshirt. We had to pretend like it was the real deal and get her shirt off before we could start compressions. I remember I felt totally weird about that.

"You call life flight?"

"As soon as I got the page," not-my-dad gasps. It sounds like he's working really hard. CPR wasn't that hard on a dummy, but maybe it's different on a person. "Boy meets semi. Didn't even have to see it to know."

There's a long pause and then, "You sure you want to keep this up? Pat can't find a pulse anywhere."

"There's nowhere to find a pulse!" Pat says indignantly, as if her medical skills are being unfairly maligned.

"There was a pulse when I got here," not-my-dad grunts.

“An erratic one.”

“A pulse.”

Why can't I feel anything? Am I paralyzed? For the first time since the idea entered my head, fear chokes my already-muted throat. I hadn't considered that possibility. Being a quad would be worse than either living or dying.

I hear boots crunching by my head. “Now slow down, sir, and tell me one more time what happened here.” I can tell just by his voice that he's a cop. I hate cops. They always ask you questions they already know the answers to like, “Do you know how fast you were going?” Once I answered, “No sir, I'm too dumb to read a speedometer. That's why I had to drive as fast as I could—so you would pull me over and tell me!” I got a ticket for that. A big one.

“I uh, uh,” a deep male voice stutters and then retches. I hear the splatter down by my feet. At least the spot where I think my feet are. Honestly, I'm not sure how tall or short or thin or wide I am anymore. In the few minutes my eyes have been closed I've lost all sense of myself. Is that a sign of paralysis?

“Calm down, sir, calm down.” I hear the cop moving the man away from me. Good.

“I was just, um, driving my usual route,” the low gravelly voice starts, “when that kid, he just popped into my headlights. Like a ghost or something.”

A ghost. Heh, that rocks. I wonder what I look like now.

“I was real surprised. I mean, my route's rural so I never see no one, right? It just happened so fast.” His voice cuts off with a choke and then a cough. When he starts again he's much quieter. “He jumped. Right in front of me. I didn't even have time to hit the brakes y'know!” Another cough.

“Jumped right in front of you.” The cop says it as if he hears stuff like this all the time, like kids just jump in front of semis for weekend fun—check out the special on *20/20* if you don't believe me. But it really pisses me off, you know? These cops—they think they know everything. Well, he doesn't know everything.

I miss the trucker's reply because a deafening sound blocks out all peripheral noise. All I can hear is not-my-dad yelling something about checking for debris so it won't get caught in the rotor wash. Life Flight must be here. There's a veritable stampede of footsteps running towards me and then a commanding voice, “Call it.”

“Excuse me?” not-my-dad says, and I hear the emotion in his voice. He sounds genuinely upset. Maybe I know him after all? I had a Scout leader once that was an EMT, but I can't even remember his name anymore.

“Stop CPR. He's dead. There's nothing we can do. Call it.”

“Time of death . . .” Not-my-dad's voice is the last thing I hear. The white light of the semi was the last thing I saw. Exhaust was the last thing I smelled. Blood was the last thing I tasted. I already can't remember the last thing I felt. I think it was pain.

Blink.

I wince painfully in the bright sunshine. “Halley!” I yell, but she doesn't hear me. She's running fast, arms bent and pumping, ponytail swinging, high-lights throwing around the early morning light. I shade my eyes with one hand, trying to compensate for my altered pupils. Still, she looks sexy. “Halley!” I yell again as I pull up next to her and thump the side of my car with my hand.

She stops with a jerk, yanking her headphones out, and stares at me with a panicked expression. “Oh, Cole,” she pants. “You scared me.”

“You shouldn't run with those things in,” I scold, feeling suddenly protective of her.

“And you shouldn't be driving,” she says bluntly, crossing her arms over her thin tank top. “I thought I hid your keys. What are you doing out here?”

I bristle at her accusation. I'm perfectly fine to drive. “What are *you* doing out here?” It's the only thing I can think to say. I'm fine to drive and all, but my mind isn't exactly up to a debate right now.

Surprisingly, she drops her arms and sighs heavily. “Oh, you know—just trying to run off last night.”

I glance at her slight figure and smile. “I don't think you need to worry there.”

“Not that way.” She frowns, her eyebrows creasing. I grin. I know I look like an idiot, but I can't stop myself. She's cute. Plus I'm still flying a bit. “I just needed to get away, get out, breathe some fresh air.” She looks pensively over her shoulder, even though we're blocks away from Jimmie's house and all its unconscious inhabitants. “I figured you guys'd be out cold until at least eleven. I didn't think anyone would miss me.”

“I missed you,” I say, surprising myself. Halley and I have known each other practically forever. We grew up in the same ward, went to the same stake dances and youth conferences, even shared a seat on the bus in middle school. In fact, she's pretty much the only one from the old church crowd I keep up with. And yet I've never really liked her before. Why now? I shake my head. It doesn't matter why. All that matters is she is unbelievably hot. Stretching out my hand, I brush her arm. She jumps back like a startled deer. The look on her

face is not welcoming. I have to say I'm a little shocked. Not that I'm Don Juan or anything, but I've never had to try very hard to get the ladies to come to me, you know? Besides, I watched her hit on Jimmie all last night, and I know, *I know*, I'm better than him. "So you want a ride back?"

She laughs. "Actually, the point of running is to, well, run." It takes me a moment to get the joke, but I laugh good-naturedly. I can take a joke. I love jokes. "Besides," she says smiling again, "I really don't think you should be driving."

"I'm *fine*," I reply, exaggerating and extending the lone syllable. "I'm so fine. In fact, I've never been more fine!" That should convince her. It's true too. I'm fine fine fine.

"Okay, now *I know* you're still high." She gives me a look I can't quite figure out and then jerks open my door. "Move over," she commands, "I'm driving you home."

"Not home," I moan. My mom will kill me and I'm sick of having this fight with her. The first thing she always does when I walk in the door is sniff me like she's some dog.

"Then back."

I should probably protest but instead I slide over, then rest my head easily on her shoulder as she starts the car. "You smell like sweat," I say. "I like it."

Pushing me back onto my side of the seat, she mutters, "I'm sure you do."

"Aw, Halley," I croon. "Why don't you like me?"

"I do like you," she replies in a tone that suggests we've had this conversation before. In fact, I think we have. Last night maybe? I can't remember. I start to scoot closer again but she pushes me back. Hard. "Just not like that."

"Why?" I ask plaintively. She doesn't respond. "Seriously." I try to sit up a little straighter and look at her. "I really want to know."

"Cole," she says impatiently, as if I'm a two-year-old.

Anger flashes through me, and I glare at her. "I just want to know, okay? What's wrong with me? Jimmie's a total sleaze and yet you were all over him last night, so it's not like you're that picky." I know it's a low blow but the girl pissed me off.

Her fingers tighten on the steering wheel, and she takes a deep breath as she pulls my car back into Jimmie's driveway, which is actually his front lawn, but whatever. Waiting, I stare at Jimmie's dilapidated, trashed-out country rambler. It has "crack house" written all over it, and that's not too far from the truth, actually. "You want to know what Jimmie's got that you haven't," she says flatly,

but when she turns to me I can see the emotion in her tight lips and flared nostrils. She's trying to appear calm, but I can tell I got under her skin. I have that effect on people. Really, you should see me fight curfew with my mother. Heh. "With Jimmie I know what I'm getting."

"Ah, wha . . . ?" I stammer, badly masking my surprise. I'd expected her to say something about how he's older or in a band or has a hot motorcycle. Maybe even that he's better looking. Except he isn't.

"Who are you Cole?"

Now she's under *my* skin. "I'm not a strung-out junkie gas station attendant who thinks he's the next Kid Rock, I can tell you that much."

Narrowing her eyes, she just shakes her head at me.

"What do you mean *who am I*?" I continue indignantly. "You've known me your whole freaking life! You know who I am!"

She shakes her head again and gives me a smile sad enough to break my heart. I turn and stare out the window so I don't have to feel the accusation in her eyes as she finishes, "Not anymore, I don't."

"What are you talking about?" I spit out the window. And then I remember exactly what she's talking about. I groan and run my hand through my hair. I'd apologize for last night except that we've been here before—at least with the apologizing—and it hasn't made me quit being a jerk yet. "Stop judging me," I growl instead. "I don't have to explain myself to you."

"Nope, you sure don't."

But I feel compelled to try anyhow. I wouldn't do it for anyone but her. "I wasn't saying that I don't believe it. I know it's true. I just, well, I just . . ."

"Don't act like you do," she finishes for me. "See, with Jimmie, he lives what he believes. Now I may not entirely agree with what he believes, but at least he's honest. At least he's true to himself. At least I know what to expect."

"Oh, so what you're saying is, it's fine for him to smoke pot because it's practically his religion, but it's not okay for me because I'm supposed to know better or something?" I know my argument isn't really to the point and sounds childish but I can't help it. I'm going from my gut now.

"You're better than this," she waves at the house, the pile of old cars, the collection of "No Trespassing" and "Anarchy" signs.

"Okay, right, so now I'm better than them, than my friends, because some Sunday School teacher somewhere along the line told me what was wrong and what was right? I hate that crap. It's such crap. All of you are so condescending like that all the time! You think you're so superior because God picked you to

be *special* in the premortal life and you have all these *special* talents and so now you have to be *special* and live up to all your *special* potential, and whatever you want for yourself be damned. Well I'm sick of it. I'm sick to death of being judged all the time and held to this impossible standard."

I see the tears well up in her eyes, but there isn't an ounce of "sorry" in me now.

"I'm not judging them," she whispers, "or you. I'm the last person that could judge anyone else." A shadow passes over her eyes as I realize she's talking about last night. Guilt involuntarily clenches my stomach.

"I didn't mean it like that, Hal." I sigh and touch her hand. She looks so vulnerable. "You're a good person, you really are." And I mean it. Maybe that's why I suddenly love her.

"Um, thanks." She tries to laugh it off. Then she turns her large lovely eyes to me and repeats, "Cole, I mean it. I may not know who you are anymore, but I know this isn't it. You're better than this."

Finally it hits me what she means. A parade of images flashes through my mind as I remember who I used to be—the master of strategy that led the teachers to win every game of capture the flag during Wednesday night activities, the brownie baker that won rave awards from his family for his Family Home Evening culinary achievements, the geek who loved math and biology, the deacon passing the sacrament for the first time—they're all alive in my head. But they're not in my heart anymore. That's what she doesn't understand, and what I finally get. I get it. The kid—the one with all the godly gifts and potential—he's gone. He's gone because I killed him.

I bite my lip so hard it hurts. "If *this* is such a bad place to be then why are you here, huh? Is it so easy for you to sit in your meth house with your junkie boyfriend—who you can't save no matter how much love you pour into him—and give me advice?"

"Jimmie doesn't have the background in the church like you do. He doesn't know what you know, about life and eternity and stuff."

"Ah, your double standard again. Well at least I know I'm not better than this," I say huskily. "Not anymore."

She considers me for a long time before saying shakily, "If that's true, and I don't think it is, but if you really believe that this is what you are, then I don't know how you live with yourself."

As soon as the words drop from her lips, everything becomes crystal clear. This is the first moment of real clarity I've had since I entered my pot haze

yesterday. Maybe the first moment of clarity I've ever really had. The feeling vibrates throughout my being, cutting through the fog of ever-increasing anxiety and depression that had defined the last six months of my life. She's right. I can't live like this. *I can't live with myself.* I say the words slowly in my mind, testing them out. If I can't live up to my grand potential, then I shouldn't be living at all. I'll never be that kid again, but I don't have to be this one now, either.

Now that I know what I have to do, the chronic knot of fear in my gut is completely gone. I'm no longer afraid of myself or my potential or my squandered gifts. The answer is simple and complete and clean.

"You're absolutely right," I whisper, not meeting her eyes for fear she'll see the sudden passion that has taken control of me. She nods and I think again how beautiful she is. I realize it's because I can see her potential. Limitless. She hasn't screwed up like I have. Yet. "You deserve better than Jimmie, you know that, right?" I say seriously.

She laughs a little. "Yeah, probably."

Pushing the door open, I step out into the sparking sunshine. A thought forces its way through the muck in my mind—*it doesn't have to be this way; there is another way, even now.* The words of the long-ago memorized sacrament prayer filter through my mind and I pause, thoughts straining. How many Sunday school lessons on repentance have I sat through? I should know this stuff. Then the last few months come crashing down, their weight crushing the air out of me. "I can't," I mumble to myself, shaking my head. It would be too much. It's just too hard. "Thanks, Halley."

"For what?" She looks concerned as I grab my skateboard off the seat and back away from the car. "Wait, where are you going?"

"I'm just going to walk down the road a bit," I call resolutely over my shoulder. After months of crashing, it's time to fly. "To the highway."

Blink.

"It's my way or the highway, dude, so just live with it," Jimmie intones sagely as Kyle complains about the one-square toilet paper rule he just arbitrarily imposed on the house.

My way or the highway chants in my mind in an endless loop. "Hey that rhymes," I giggle, breaking up their quarrel.

"Dude," Kyle says as if this revelation is the most important thing he's heard all day.

“Dude, what are you doing?” Jimmie exclaims as we watch Pete fall backwards down the steep stairs to Kyle’s basement, his head striking the corner with a surreal thwack. Pete doesn’t answer immediately; he’s too busy rolling around the floor like a puppy chasing its tail, except Pete’s chasing his head. Kyle starts to laugh, setting the rest of us off, which only serves to make Pete more frantic.

“My eye! My eye!” he yells. “I’ve got a hair on my eyeball! I can see it but I can’t get it off!” He claws spastically at his eye, making us laugh even harder. “Help me!” Finally Halley comes down the stairs from where she’s been talking with Van in the kitchen.

“Dude!” Kyle laughs as Halley wrestles Pete’s hand away from his face, where he’s actually managed to draw some blood.

“Stop!” Halley orders Pete, and he finally listens. “There’s no hair on your eyeball, okay sweetie?” Pete nods like a child. “So stop scratching it; you’re going to hurt yourself.”

“Du . . .” Kyle starts again but Halley silences him with a glare.

“The next one of you to say ‘dude’ sleeps in the backyard. Got it?” She pushes her hair out of her face and looks at each of us to make sure we get it.

“Hey! My house, my rules,” Jimmie whines. “It’s *my* way or the highway.” It still rhymes. I giggle.

Halley rolls her eyes, “Say whatever you want, just don’t start it with ‘du-’”

“Don’t say it!” Pete shrieks, “Or you’ll have to sleep in the backyard!”

Even Halley smiles at that one. “You guys ready to watch the movie? I made caramel corn.”

“Ooooh! That sounds deeee-viiiine,” Kyle says, slowly drawing out each word until Halley looks ready to smack him.

“Come here, baby,” Jimmie tugs her down onto his lap. “You’re too uptight.”

I watch, interested to see what she’ll do. She stays.

“I love you,” he nuzzles her neck.

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” She shakes her head and starts to stand up, but he pulls her back down.

“Why don’t you take a drag?” he says coyly, holding out his joint to her. “It’ll loosen you up, make the movie a little funnier, make Pete here a little less obnoxious, and, you know, just smooth out these rough edges.” He runs his hands down her arms as she shivers.

“No thanks.”

“Aw come on, baby. You’re no fun.” He pushes as Pete, Kyle, and I all watch. I’ve never seen Jimmie push her like this before; usually he just waits for girls to come to him. And they usually do.

“No.” Halley is more insistent this time and tries again to stand.

Jimmie wraps his arms around her and holds her tightly to his chest. “Just give me one good reason and I’ll let you go.”

Halley looks nervously around the room, her eyes settling briefly on me, and I can tell she’s trying to think of an answer to pacify Jimmie.

I wish I could help her out, but all I can think of is *my way or the highway*.

“I don’t want to.”

“Uh-uh, not good enough.” He laughs, warming up to his game. “Trust me—you want to.”

“Jimmie . . .” She sighs and I wonder where Van is. He always knows how to shut Jimmie up when he gets like this.

“Don’t you trust me, baby?” he coos and kisses her cheek. “Or is it the Mormon thing?” I see Halley go rigid in his arms. “Are you still playing like you’re a good little Mormon girl? Because I don’t think good little Mormon girls would be in a house of sin like this one in the first place, would they?” He’s toying with her and I find a deep sense of irritation intruding on my otherwise pleasant buzz.

“House of sin,” Kyle chuckles. “That rocks.”

Maybe Van left. I should really go try and find him, except I’m just so comfortable.

“Come on,” Jimmie urges her, “we won’t tell your bishop. Will we guys?” I wince at the mention of her bishop. Technically, he’s my bishop too.

“Lay off her, dude,” I say loudly, surprising even myself. “It’s a real buzz-kill,” I add, trying not to make this into a big deal.

It doesn’t work. “Ah, the prodigal son speaks. That’s right, Cole. Tell little Miss Molly over here about all the benefits of the bud.”

“It’s great.” Heh. I can’t help myself. Halley glares at me and then I realize I’m back on the wrong side of the argument. “Seriously, man, just let her go. Being LDS isn’t really my thing anymore, but it doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with it.”

“Nothing wrong with it?” Jimmie says, facing me with a cocked eyebrow.

I know that look. He’s about to launch into one of his famous mind-bending logic games that I can’t even keep up with sober, much less stoned. Talking

people in circles is his favorite pastime, and generally it's pretty funny. Unless it's you.

Jimmie sneers, "We don't smoke, we don't drink, we don't screw, we don't do anything. In fact, we have so many rules that it pretty much ensures every single one of us is a walking hypocrite."

"Halley's not a hypocrite," I snap, feeling a strange churning in my gut.

"Oh, really? Is that true, baby doll?" Jimmie turns the full force of his intense eyes on her, and I watch her wither. "You've never done anything against your principles then, Molly?"

"I didn't say that," she mumbles.

"Oh, so you're not perfect then." He sighs dramatically. "Too bad. Guess you're going to hell."

"It's not like that," I intercede. I hate watching him do this. I hate watching her take it. And I hate that I'm too stoned to even work up a good hate about it. "That's not true."

"Oh listen, everyone," he replies with mock excitement. "Doped-up Cole is going to tell us about Truth with a capital T."

"I'm not saying that," I mutter defensively. "It's just, well, you don't understand." The churning feeling works its way up into my chest cavity.

"And you do?" he says dismissively then stops. "Wait. Are you saying you still believe all that propaganda they fed you?"

When I don't immediately answer him, the whole room goes silent, and all I can see are Halley's big eyes. She still believes all that church stuff, I can tell. I want to deny it, deny everything. I mean really, talk about a buzz-kill, but I can't do it. Maybe it's years of processing like Jimmie says, or maybe . . .

"It's true," I whisper, my heart thudding so hard I can feel the blood pulsing in my fingertips, in my eyeballs.

"What?" Kyle hoots. I don't know how he does it, but he seems to have escaped all of the inner conflict I've had since we both took our first drink together at that party up the canyon. Our soft-core rebellion had seemed like a joke then, a crazy, wild, fun way to impress the college girls we were partying with, but now I realize there is no punch line. And honestly, I wish I could take his tack. It would be easier. Much easier. Right now my guts feel like I just downshifted from 5th to 2nd on the highway.

"I know it's true."

"You're a fool," Jimmie says snidely. I don't argue.

Blink.

"Stop arguing with me and just do it!" Kyle hisses.

"I can't! I really don't think I can." I balk, feeling a little sick to my stomach.

"If you don't do it then your parents are totally going to be on to us!" He presses the sacrament bread into my hands. "Just say the prayer and get it over with. It's not like you don't already have it memorized."

It's true; I've had the sacrament prayers memorized ever since I turned twelve. I considered it an honor then. "I'm sorry." I can still smell the pot in my hair since I didn't shower after I got home last night—well, this morning. I can't bless the sacrament with the scent of pot in my nose. It's too much. Even for me.

"It was just one joint and we can talk to the bishop right after, I swear." He's sounding more desperate now and I hear the panic in his voice. "Come on, man, my parents are already suspicious. This'll be just what they need to ground me for life."

I look out at the congregation blithely singing the sacrament hymn and shake my head. "It would be . . . wrong," I hiss. "Besides, the prayer wouldn't mean anything. Would it even take?"

"Yeah, dude, of course it will. You've done this tons of times, and it's not like God is going to hit you with a lightning bolt or anything."

I glance at the ceiling. I can't help myself.

"Besides, the symbolism is the important thing, right? We're not really doing anything to the bread by saying a little prayer over it." I stare at him as he wheedles. "Come on dude, no one's going to know the difference."

"I'll know," I whisper and start to back away from the table, motioning Matt to take my place. Kyle grabs my arm and jerks me back into position as the hymn ends and an entire roomful of heads bow in anticipation. My stomach is in my throat and I swallow the bile, wishing to God I could take back last night. As I kneel hesitantly, it occurs to me that if I'm not worthy to bless the sacrament, I certainly can't take it. Panic hits me as I search for the nearest exit. I think I'm going to throw up.

I start the prayer, the words flowing smoothly from my lips as my heart races. What am I *doing*? I shouldn't be here at all. I want to scream. The words I speak over the bread don't feel rote today—every single one burns into my mind until I think I can't take this anymore. I can't take this hell. I know what I have to do. I have to make a choice. By the time the congregation is to amen, I know: after today, I'm not coming back. It'll be easier for everyone this way. The bishop gives me a considering look as I step back and clasp my hands in front of me.

Blink.

The bishop clasps my hand in his and shakes it firmly. It's the well-practiced shake of a successful businessman, and he finishes it off with a hearty pat on the back. "Come in, come in, boys." He ushers the priests into his office for our lesson. "So glad to see you, Cole," he nods at me, "and Kyle. Missed you two at young men's the past few weeks. Where you been?" The question is casual, but I squirm as Kyle shoots me a knowing look.

"Cow tippin'," Kyle jokes, slugging the bishop in the arm.

"Midterm project." I blurt simultaneously.

"Wow, a midterm project about cow tipping!" He laughs, and the other guys laugh with him. "I bet your research was intense!" The pressure's off us now as the bishop goes around the room, greeting each priest by name and asking about his weekend. Actually, we were at a party. It was awesome, totally amazing. We closed down the house after the local skate show and battle of the bands.

"How'd you do last night?" Dell leans over and whispers as the bishop reads his array of dry-erase markers for the lesson.

"Good, good," I whisper back, letting the pride leach into my voice. "I'm getting a name for big air on the ramp."

"Awesome," he replies, and I can see the envy in his eyes. I deserve it. I've been working really hard to jump this big.

"It's all in the takeoff," I say, a little too loudly. "I've finally learned how to control myself, hold off until that absolute last second before I kick the board. It makes all the difference, dude." I'm just about to offer to show him on the ramp I built in my backyard when the bishop interrupts.

"Ah, Cole, funny you should bring up the topic of self-mastery! That happens to be our topic for today. And you're right, it does make all the difference, *dude*." The class snickers as the bishop hands me his triple combination. "Maybe you could start us off by reading this scripture?"

I make a face but take the large scriptures from his hands and read aloud. "Alma 34:34. 'That same spirit which doth possess your bodies at the time ye go out of this life, that same spirit will have power to possess your body in that eternal world.'"

"So, what do you think?" The bishop is looking at me.

"About what?" I ask demurely, even though I know exactly what he's talking about.

"What does that scripture mean to you?"

"It means that Alma must be one cool dude since he can use the word 'doth' in a sentence." I know I'm being dumb, but it cracks Kyle and Dell up something fierce. Heh.

The bishop looks at me over his glasses, "This is serious stuff, Cole."

"Yeah, yeah," I mutter, "my eternal happiness and all that. It's a big deal. I get it." How could I not get it? They've been drilling this into my head since I was three. Probably younger, except I can't remember back that far.

"I'm not sure that you do." The bishop counters my bantering tone with his soft one. "Today, right now, every choice you make is shaping the eternal individual you will someday be." Okay, now he's getting deep on me. "I particularly hope that you understand this, Cole. You've only been a priest for a few weeks now, but it's more than just a name change. Part of your priesthood means you bear the responsibility of acting for our Lord, in His name. Like when you bless the sacrament, for instance."

I feel the smirk sliding off my face as the weight of his words hits me in the chest. He's right; I know he is. There's something special about the sacrament. I've felt it ever since I remember first taking the bread and water, even before I was baptized. And to bless it—well, I've been working up to that since I first heard my dad say the prayers.

"The sacrament, well, that *is* a big deal," he finishes, and settles back onto the edge of his desk.

I nod solemnly. "I know. I've had the prayers memorized since I was twelve."

He smiles at me and I detect a tinge of relief as he replies, "I know you have, Cole. I know you have."

"Ah, Cole-sy's such a gwoood boy!" Kyle pats my head. I squirm uncomfortably.

"He is a good boy. And he's going to be a wonderful missionary someday." The bishop rests his hand heavily on my shoulder. I smile at the floor.

Blink.

"I believed him." The girl's voice trembles, jerking my attention away from Halley's pale ethereal face. "I don't know why. But I did." Believed who? About what? I'd missed the beginning of this conversation due to my preoccupation with Halley. She looks beautiful in black. Really amazing.

"I'm sorry," my dad squints down at the slight girl, inadvertently unbalancing my mother, who had been leaning heavily on his arm. "Who are you?"

"Oh!" The girl covers her mouth in embarrassment. "I'm, uh, Leigh. I was a friend of Cole's." Right! *Leigh*. Van's girlfriend. I knew I recognized her. "Well

I guess, I am still a friend of Cole's. Or something. Since he's still around and all." Halley's eyes widen and I think my mother might faint. "I'm sorry," she stammers, her voice going high and tight, "I've said the wrong thing. I've never been to a Mormon funeral before and I, uh, don't know much about this whole 'next life' thing." She glances at Halley, who just shakes her head. Leigh sighs. "I don't know what to say except that I'm sorry he's dead. I really really am. He was a good kid. Or is a good kid. Or whatever."

"Why did you say you believed him?" my mom asks hoarsely. *Thanks Mom.*

"Um . . ." Leigh stammers. I wait. I have to admit I'm interested. "I dunno. There was just something that I felt, I guess, when he talked about stuff."

"What stuff?"

"Like religious stuff. About God and heaven and whatever. I could tell he really believed it." She shrugs. "And I believed him."

My parents look at each other, the confusion obvious in their faces.

My dad clears his throat. "Why?"

Leigh shakes her head slowly and I find myself wanting to give her the answer. If I could whisper it in her ear, I would. I mean, *I know* what she felt. But I can't tell her anything any more. At last her eyes settle on the casket in the room. It's closed, thankfully. "I don't know, now." She shakes her head again. "My feelings are all screwed up."

Regret. I finally feel a shock of real regret and this is what brings it on. Why?

Staring directly at my mom, she finishes, "I've been kind of a mess ever since I heard."

Mom hugs her. Hard. "Me too."

"Thank you. Thank you for telling us that," my dad says creakily. For the first time today I notice tears behind his rimless glasses.

Blink.

I'm flying. At least it's the closest to flying I've ever come. The air rushes like liquid over my skin as I aim for the sun. The earth has no hold on me. At least until I land. But that only lasts until I can skate around my backyard, ramp up again, and jump.

♦ **Editor's note:** *This story is the third-place winner of the 2005 IRREANTUM fiction contest.*

Mark D. Bennion

We Have

Left the hill-canton of limestone
maintaining all we knew of pillar and roof—
all we remember of slat and mud plaster—
and made yerida from our upper rooms,

Deserted the tabret for sore feet and wildness,
bickering over quarters of emptiness,
trying to fashion out of rock or brier
a trace of home-reed courtyard and pole,

Abandoned the protective, generous Millo
towering above Kidron and Hinnom,
Salem abundance piled high on threshing
floors brim with the vigor of wheat,

Lost the taste of it near the Salt Sea's
wave as we burned for grapes dripping
mush and skin, the sticky juice
circling our wrists like bracelets,

Dropped down from the conduit of the fuller's
field, the amethysts of Judah, backsliding
from tradition and ossuary of Josiah
or the glory of mantle and Hezekiah,

Extended to the root with driving hunger
and travailed to evade fire and gin
while the wide plains expose us to slave
commerce or bribery or a foreign tongue,

Removed from the gloss of our youth
 those ornaments tinkling in the sun,
 the forbidden kohl and expensive nard,
 our want to wear a garland again,

Altered under the midday pyre,
 our prayers once ascending near the flesh-
 hooks on Mount Moriah, above the cool
 Gihon ready to slake our thirst,

Dried up to a three-day grumble, the next
 meal always an afternoon in front of us,
 and years from the kindness of Samra,
 Ahinoam, Amira, Banat, Dalal,

Forgotten the veils of Hasab, Miriam, Yumm,
 Haya as we slog through quarrels and heat,
 our father—a tomb—our memory ablaze
 with Zion's center in the center of the world.

For the Daughters of Ishmael

- ♦ *yerida*—emigration, but literally means to descend.
- ♦ *kohl*—a makeup used in the Middle East to darken the rims of women's eyes.

Nahom

He stiffens beneath the tent,
 stationary on his sickbed,
 watching the red-brown puffs of myrrh
 burn more than a fortnight of our journey.
 Two camels bow near the door,
 an emblem of fatigue about to kneel down,
 but raise up, step back into the dry air.
 The sand separates and stings.
 No one speaks
 but the lone fowl with a broken wing
 perched on the hill above our caravan,
 waiting for us to leave or die.
 My sisters and I divide work
 under the advancing *khamsin*,
 and narrowing sun.
 We listen again for our father's
 breathing and dither as the air does.
 He awakens to each of us moving in
 and out of the tent. Wind continues
 its blast and whine; stray brush
 succumbs to the inevitable spin,
 conceding to the desert sheen.
 How the lizards shrink beneath the rocks.
 Our husbands return from a hunt,
 heavy, breathless, spent for water
 as the sand turns into wave,
 a winding curl blocking daylight.
 Abba pants something about wells
 and then sighs, "Brass plate."
 He knows it's here, plateau and pathway,
 and the camels come back,
 prod the flap of the door,
 probing for shelter from the storm.
 His brown eyes retract
 to the top of the tent,
 the terrain shifts, his trek now
 a certain escape
 from the howl blowing in.

Deja Earley**Winchester Cathedral, Tower Tour**

The tower begins in the crypt.
 A stone statue of a man
 is reflected in the flood at his feet.
 Sunlight perches on his shoulder.

Climbing the spiral, I grip
 the rope railing, curve into
 the wall, create ballet positions
 to fit my feet on the steps.
 A century ago, I would have fit fine.

Recalling the tiny slippers
 and slim rose dress
 in the Brontë's museumed bedroom,
 I see Emily flip these corners
 just ahead of me.

My feet echo.
 But her words,
 her ache for shadowed heaven,
 loop in my mind,
 lead the way up.

I twist past a butterfly
 lying in a windowsill
 with dust, cobwebs, flies.
 I imagine the orange wings
 finally landing, settling slowly.

If pinned down,
 would Emily say we will have wings—
 red, feathery,
 sprouting from our shoulder blades
 like the angels in the stained glass?

Or will we use our feet—
 tired, covered in dust,
 wading through flood,
 like the statue in the crypt?

Heaven could meet in the bell chamber at noon.
 Emily and I could host lunch in twelve beats,
 the butterfly perched on her ear,
 teaching the angels how place their feet,
 teaching the statue how to fly.

Cada Regalo Perfecto

Sonora, Mexico

Watching three orphans scramble on half-buried tires,
and the others grip pencils and crayons as if we'd given them chocolate,
I turn my purse inside out.

The Altoids to a boy who sketches me on his new chalkboard,
looking up again and again to get the nose right—a Sesame Street oval.

My lip gloss to a slouching girl with an unpronounceable name
who loves geography and sweeps the cloistered walkways every day.

The crackers to a sweaty kid I snatch at group picture time
to be my friend for the count of three.

My frozen water bottle to those
we watch through the back window of the bus
who jump and wave
in the dust and trash and shattered flowerpots
next to the technicolor Christus in the dry fountain
His robe magenta,
His arms open,
a plump bird perched in His hand.

Tyler Chadwick

Figurine

He cradles the infant
in the vale of his lap,
hands supporting head,
his nameless body
wrapped around his fruit
as its feet press his ribs,
echoing
what the mother felt
pressing within.

As a Grandpa Does His Own

(For Delbert Eugene Beck Sr.
March 4, 1922–May 12, 2006)

I was a boy; you
a graying man who
scooped me into your care
at church. Week after week
you whispered meaning
into my understanding,
showing how a father's faith
can extend
across pews and blood-lines
to adopt those not of his seed.

Hudson's Geese: Reprise

(For Leslie Norris)

Day's last reflections
catch on windswept ripples
as two geese throw shadows
across watered silence.
Embraced by echoes,
each circles the other.
Tracing this current,
I watch Hudson's pair
venturing back
across the continent:
Her wings bear no scars
of hapless encounter
with fox or wolf or man;
his body carries
no hunter's spray,
the lead that felled him
to the dogs. They bask
in this dusking plane,
watching the horizon
gather them, leaving
phantom indentations
in the eyes of those who
understood their love.

P. G. Karamesines

The Pear Tree

When early autumn's storm wrung from the clouds
Summer, wearing the last thundering rain thin
And sharp on the wind's rasp; when thorns
Of the first frost bloomed over the grass,
And the morning glory hung, brown and bitten,
On the garden fence; on those first nights
Of cold window glass and the drip of chill
Onto the plank, when I wrapped in the blanket
And the dog curled at my feet, I heard,
Above the clay clink of wind-churned chimes,
Above the wag of the unlatched screen door,
Round blows of fruit fall against the ground.

I have been here three years' windfall
Not hearing the bump of pears, but when the tree
Burst blossoms against the window, I watched
Crawl across the floor shadow from ten thousand
Swaying cups lifted into the storm of pollens,
And when after petals leaves screwed from the nodes,
I looked out into green overcast: Fruit had pushed
Off flower and bent boughs as with old age,
But more mystic that blunt drop of fruit earthward
That jerked my ear like a new word.

Someone else should hear it: I could better tell
How, when the wind rattled its sticks upon the houses,
I heard a pear fall to a bruising; how it struck
Above the rip of water from passing cars' tires;
How, as I let slip with sleep my garment of senses,
A tree caught the last thread and plucked it
With a ripe pear; and how I lay awake beneath rainy
Leaves or sat for spells by the window, as one haunts
Heaven those nights her globes bear down the branch
For a single star to fall away in flame.

Evening Drive

Mountains and evening:

Aspen leaves,

Pale as moth wings,

Reclaiming the wood.

The car clove spring.

Flocks of yellow blossoms, heads hung—

I wanted to stop,

But seeing you, said nothing.

You were not much in your face,

Your voice, off remembering

Some exalted childhood

Passed upon this road.

On the ridge, winter's white rags

Whipped up in farfetched winds.

We rode through the green flush below,

Windows pleasantly rolled down.

With twilight, winter came a little down.

On the road above the gorge

I sat in the car's window.

Raindrops broke on my face,

Burned off in the wind.

You turned the wheel

As if you held the reins

Of a mare, a bold girl

Standing on the saddle.

Beside us like a hound

The river ran panting.

The last brightness flowed down

Snowmelt branching like ivy

Through the road cuts.

Your mountains, losing

Their faces like sleepers,

Slumped out of the light.

The car went always

Toward the edge of that small clearing

Its headlamps cut.

Inside, your face,

Your chest, glowing faintly

From dash lights

As if you stood in a room

With a fire.

When I came in at last,

Breezes still flowing

Over my skin,

My hair cool as grass,

I had no warm words.

You had no cold,

So we sat like two birds

On the same wire.

I thought,

Language is an odd thing:

We can get no farther

Than we have words for.

Timothy Liu

And Their Sins Shall Be White as Snow

The town's five baseball diamonds neatly groomed.
Verging into solipsistic terror.
Hay-loft hanky-panky as the hat goes round.
With boredom at the root.
Tract homes across America approximating field.
Holiday malls strung out in Xmas lights.
Purveyors of a terra incognita.
Human travail.
Trapped in a moral hell but making beauty just as well.

The Desert Fathers

Singing hymns which had more scope
than a one kiloton nuke. Thirteen million
dead from AIDS—the life expectancy
in Botswana less than forty years of age.
Wiping out an entire nation. Not for lack
of drugs had we come for this: emotion-
laden buggery levied against God's word—
a world at odds with a go-as-you-please
self-serving style, the sacred rendered
void. As meanings can be mean, choose
ye this day windfall hopes proscribed
in medias res—cadential points cobbled
together for emotional effect—jazzed-up
jihad mufti muzaked through the roof.

Fatal Broken Heart

An Excerpt from the Unpublished Novel *The Kumina Man*

Darvell Hunt



I helped kill a man while serving my two-year LDS mission. I didn't even try to help save him when I had the chance—and I *did* have that chance, but I passed it up. So much for the parable of the good Samaritan. So much for loving your neighbor.

It was Halloween. I don't know why I bother to mention that, as it really has nothing to do with this story. Halloween just happened to be the excuse for a bunch of Mormons to get together and eat, that's all, and it ended up becoming the event in which a man would die.

I wouldn't say that I was directly to blame for his death. Not really. It's not as if we set out to kill a man that day. It just happened somehow. There were five of us there when we helped send a man back to God: four of us Mormon missionaries and a teenage girl.

Sometimes I think about that evening often, sometimes not all at, but mostly I think about it at Halloween. I don't attend ward dinners any more and I don't help dress up the kids to go beg candy from strangers. The memory of helping end a man's life has ruined those things for me. Both Halloween and ward dinners always seem to rustle up old memories from the fall of 1988—memories that I wish would just stay buried. Memories that, more often than not, flood back into my conscious mind like the rush of crashing water, burying my entire body and making me feel cold and afraid—kind of like *he* must have felt at the last moment. Sometimes I even seem to be drowning in those cold, smothering memories, and I find myself gasping for air.

"I baptize you in name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." With those words I submerged Nicholas Filton beneath the water, a full two weeks before attending the ward Halloween dinner. Despite the rather chilly temperature in the font, he came up grinning widely as I pulled him from the water—which was no easy task for me to do, considering his excessive weight.

“Thank you, Elder Wilson,” he said as I released my left hand from his wrist. He reached out and briskly shook my right. Nicholas wasn’t a particularly smart man and he wasn’t very good looking, either, but he was always cheerful. I don’t think I’ll ever forget that happy look on his face when he came up out of the water. I have compared that look of happiness on his face to the very different, expressionless face that I watched turn blue as its owner lay on his back on the gym’s hardwood floor. Only two weeks and a hallway that led around the corner separated these two events.

Nicholas Filton was never very popular—not in school and not in life. He was an obvious social misfit, but he was a friendly guy if you got to know him. Most people didn’t. He was thirty-eight years old and still lived with his parents. I don’t imagine he’d ever had a girlfriend. In fact, I doubt that he had ever tasted a girl’s lips pressed against his own that weren’t those of his mother. In the simplest terms, Nicholas was a nobody.

I helped Nicholas up the stairs that led out of the font and away from the waist-deep water. We returned to the dressing room to remove our wet baptismal clothes and we dressed in white shirts and ties. I put my suit back on, but he wore a pair of brown polyester slacks—and an awful orange tie.

His loud pumpkin-colored tie was plaid and way beyond four fingers wide. This was the eighties and wide was out. Three fingers was the standard test for a good tie. Four was borderline, but anything past four screamed SEVENTIES, and the color and pattern only confirmed it. But he didn’t care and neither did I—I was performing my first baptism ever.

To know what I mean, you really have to understand the mentality of a young Mormon missionary and the idea of getting converts to the Church. I was serving in rural Tennessee and this particular ward hadn’t seen a convert baptism in well over a year. I hadn’t seen any. We didn’t get many converts in this area and Nicholas Filton was our sole “Golden Contact.” He gobbled up every word we said and he still was left wanting more. I only got one baptism for my two years of missionary service and *he was it*.

To say his parents didn’t like us would be like saying the Holocaust Jews didn’t like Hitler. They hated us. With a passion. The Filtons were a fifth generation Baptist family, with a few preachers thrown into the mix for good measure, and to become a Mormon was like death to them. If we had told them it was a funeral for their son instead of a baptism, perhaps they would have attended.

“I don’t want to see you in this house again,” Mr. Filton had screamed at us after he had cut the third discussion short and showed us the door. That was the last time I ever stepped into his parents home. For the first two discussions, they had been glad that Nicholas had found some friends; at least until they discovered that we’d committed their son to be baptized—to become a *Mormon*.

I don’t think they understood our true relationship with Nicholas until then. Sure, they were suspicious, and I guess I can see why. Finding friends was not something Nicholas did well—or at all. But I think they maintained a bit hope for their son. We were two clean-cut young boys, neither of us yet twenty-one, and we were giving him more attention than anyone had before. As for us, I don’t think it was just the greed to get a baptism. I really don’t. I felt sincere compassion for this guy. I wanted to help him and I honestly thought that we could. I even think we did.

The Halloween party at the church was Nicholas’s first experience with ward dinners. But it certainly wasn’t ours.

“Why are we going to some stupid ward Halloween party?” asked Elder Jenkins. “Can’t we find something better to do?”

“How can you turn down free food that you don’t have to cook yourself?” I asked.

Free food! I’d like to think that we went to these ward dinners to make contacts with members to find people to teach. But no, it was generally the free food.

“Yeah, okay,” Jenkins said after a brief pause.

So we went. We took our blue Reliant K-Car—that same old “reliable automobile” that the Barenaked Ladies would buy if they had a million dollars and the same one for which I wouldn’t give ten—and drove down to the ward building.

“Good evening, Elders!” said Sister Graham, an elderly lady in the ward and the first person we met after arriving. We faked smiles at her and shook her offered hand. She was especially nice to the missionaries since her husband had died, but she always smelled funny, so we tried to keep our distance.

“Hello, Sister Graham,” said Jenkins with a smile, apparently not getting a whiff of the smell of cats that had followed her.

Before Sister Graham could say another word, a cute, young blonde ran up to Elder Jenkins and started forcing his hand up and down as fast as she could,

as if Jenkins were an old water pump and she was dying of thirst. The old lady stared disapprovingly at the clasped hands, and then looked at the faces of Jo and Elder Jenkins. She mumbled some comment that none of us heard and walked away.

Jo was sixteen and was the kind of girl that could get a missionary sent home. She was all smiles—all the time—and her smiles were always emphasized with bright red lipstick. She had the kind of long, blonde hair that always made me think of The Big Bopper singing “Chantilly Lace.” In fact, that whole song could have been written about Jo. “A pretty face and the pony tail” and the “wiggling walk and the giggling talk.” That was Jo. (It’s strange, but I can’t even remember her last name. Funny what you remember—and what you don’t—from traumatic experiences.)

Elder Jenkins was older than me—almost twenty-one. Jo was just sixteen. Jenkins was a good missionary, but I could see something in his eye when Jo was around. Neither Jenkins nor Jo knew about the events that would come to pass that night—things that would bind them together in a horrific way that neither would ever forget. I can’t quite imagine the experience they shared that night and to this day I wonder why it hadn’t been me who had taken the primary role in what I would later simply call the fatal broken heart.

The giggling blonde turned to me and shook my hand as well, giving me the same greeting as Jenkins. I think this made Elder Jenkins a bit jealous, even though he knew nothing could happen between them, but I ignored him. I hadn’t had a date with a girl in over a year and any attention—even an innocent handshake—from a cute girl was a welcome activity. She quickly rushed off to meet her friends—with that *wiggle in her walk*—and the two of us were left staring after her.

We made our way into the gym where tables and chairs had been set up for dinner. There were a few autumn decorations on the table, though nothing really Halloweenish, but there was plenty of food. Missionaries were attracted to free food like flies were to cooling flesh.

After all of these years, I can only remember one dish that was served that night: macaroni and cheese. Kind of ironic, considering how much of the yellow death that we, as missionaries, consumed over a two-year period, but this was different. This macaroni and cheese was made with real cheese—mozzarella, to be exact. It tasted like home to me. The other events of that evening completely overshadow most of what I remember from that dinner, but I never forgot about that white cheesy macaroni.

“Hey, what’s up?” asked Elder French, after entering the gym with his companion, Elder Ross. Both young men were tall and athletic. Elder French had played a year of college basketball at Utah State University before his mission and Elder Ross had played in high school. French carried a badly worn basketball under one arm.

“What say we get up a game of b-ball with the members afterwards?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said. “Why not?” I didn’t play ball very well and, technically, we were only supposed to play ball on our prep-day, but hey, we were making contacts with members, right? Who better to get investigators from than members? *Missionary work with a ball*, as French liked to say.

Nicholas Filton then walked in. His long, usually messy hair was combed back quite nicely and he wore a hint of cologne. His clothing was atrocious, however, especially his four-fingered-plus orange tie.

“Hey Nicholas, my man!” said French in jock-speak. I rolled my eyes. French raised his hand—or rather placed it out sideways so Nicholas could reach it—and said, “Gimme five!”

Nicholas beamed, as if, for the first time in his life, he was in a group cool enough to slap some skin. He quickly smacked French’s hand and the tall missionary added, “Gimme ten!” and Nicholas smacked his hand again, after which Nicholas immediately lowered his hand and turned it backwards, his palm facing away from his body, and French said, “And here’s your change, buddy.” He slapped the lower palm of the heavy man, who just grinned back, looking as if he was about to burst with pride. He was in with the in-crowd now. I felt both proud and sorry for him at that moment.

“What’s up, Nicholas?” I said, expecting a common greeting response, like, “Not much, what’s up with you?”

“My mom almost didn’t let me come tonight,” he said, the corners of his mouth turning downward. He sighed and his frown quickly faded. “But I told her I’m old enough to make my own decisions.”

Darn right, I thought. *Almost forty is old enough*. But I didn’t say anything.

“So here I am,” he said.

“Glad to have you, Nicholas,” I said, and he grinned even wider.

“Wanna catch some b-ball after we stuff our faces?” asked French.

A concerned look passed over Nicholas’s face, but it quickly turned back into grin. “You bet.”

I didn't think Nicholas had ever felt as if he fit in with any group of people before we showed up. It was as if we breathed life into his very soul. I didn't think he wanted to play basketball that day. I believed he had agreed to play because he wasn't about to deny himself the chance of playing with his new friends simply because he wasn't very good at it. As it turns out, his hesitance to play was more complicated than that.

"You going to get yourself another helping of that mac and cheese?" Jenkins asked me, trying to hold back a laugh, but not succeeding.

"Hey, don't knock it," I said. "This stuff's pretty good. It makes a difference when you use real cheese." Elder Jenkins laughed out loud at the thought of me enjoying a plate of macaroni and cheese. A few of the members glanced at us with curious expressions and Jenkins went silent.

"My mom brought the mozzarella mac!" Jo said proudly. She sat next to Jenkins, with a friend of hers, Danielle, on her other side. Danielle had reddish-brown hair and was more reserved than Jo.

Nicholas sat next to me, across from Jo and Jenkins, and looked a bit uncomfortable to have two young attractive girls within the same square mile. His eyes darted back and forth, as if he were one of the nerdy kids in high school who had accidentally sat down at the jock table. He remained quiet as he ate his meal of five different types of pasta salad, bringing his fork to his mouth silently as he went around his plate selecting a different salad for each bite. I happened to catch him glancing at Jo once in awhile with a strange look on his face—as if he honestly had not seen a girl this close up before. I noticed that he wasn't looking at her eyes or her long hair or even her protruding chest. He was looking at her bright red lips. Longingly, even. I was a little embarrassed for him, but he didn't seem to notice me, and Jo didn't seem to notice, either. I felt pretty sure that I knew what he wanted: to kiss her.

I don't think that feeling was unique at this table, but I was surprised to see it from him. A thirty-eight year-old overweight man was staring at this young sixteen-year-old girl and wanting to kiss her. If I hadn't already gotten to know Nicholas over the past eight weeks as well as I had, his gaze might have made me nervous. But I just smiled, letting my embarrassment turn into amusement, and let the idea of a kiss between Nicholas and Jo drop from my mind—which is rather ironic when you think about the events that would happen within the next few hours.

"How long you been out now, Wilson?" asked Elder Ross, who had just recently been transferred into the area to work with Elder French.

"Oh, not that I'm counting," I said with a grin, "but it will be seventeen months next Thursday."

"I've been out nineteen months," French said in satisfaction—as if nineteen months was really that much more than seventeen.

"Where are you from, Elder Wilson?" said a high-pitched voice, which I soon realized was that of Danielle, Jo's quiet friend.

"Huh?" I said, surprised to hear my name. "Oh, I'm from Salt Lake City. Nothing special about that, huh? Probably half the guys you meet are from there."

Danielle just nodded, apparently derailed from her chance to make conversation.

"So, where are you from?" I asked, immediately feeling stupid for asking a question routinely returned to other missionaries, but not local ward members.

"Right here from Tennessee," she said, exaggerating her accent to the point of drawing snickers from everyone within our little group, except Nicholas. He was still examining the bright red lipstick of Jo's lips, though I didn't think she'd noticed yet.

"Never been more than a couple hundred miles from home, 'cept once we all went to Kentucky to visit my aunt and uncle," she said.

I continued to stuff white macaroni and cheese into my mouth while trying to convince myself that it had to taste better than Jo's red lips did, but I was probably wrong about that.

"Nicholas grew up here, too," I said between bites, noticing he was still staring at Jo. He immediately jerked at the sound of his name and seemed to forget about Jo's lips for the moment. He looked at me.

"Uh, yeah," he said uncomfortably. "Just down the street from here, not more than five miles. I've been to eight different states, though, and one foreign country," he said.

Jo was now looking at Nicholas. She had a look of surprise mingled with amusement on her face.

"What country is that?" I asked, glancing away from Jo and back to Nicholas.

"Uh, Jamaica. My mom and dad took me there five years ago. It was fun." He paused and glanced around the small group of people, excluding Jo, apparently testing the response of his entrance into the conversation. He smiled and dropped silent, appearing content that he had made his contribution. We

didn't hear another word from him until we'd finished eating and French asked who wanted to play some basketball. Nicholas immediately spoke up, apparently to make sure he wasn't forgotten.

Nobody but Elder French had apparently planned any activities for after dinner. We helped a few of the men put away the folding tables and chairs and then made our way to the far end of the gym.

"Well, we got five," said French, noting Jenkins and me, himself and Ross, and Nicholas. "We need one more to make the teams even," he said. He began to eye a couple of the men who were sliding the table and chair trolleys underneath the stage.

"I'll play," said a voice that made French jump. It was Jo. He looked at her dubiously. "Oh come on," she said. "I can play. Whichever team gets me will win, guaranteed." She made a squealing sound that seemed more appropriate for a cheerleader than one of the players, but French nodded and she squealed again. I think I caught a grin on Jenkins face, but if it was there, he wiped it away quickly. Nicholas suddenly looked more nervous than ever.

The four of us Elders laid our suit jackets out on the stage and everyone but Nicholas loosened our ties, but none of us removed them. Jo wore a loose modest dress with a floral pattern, though she seemed a little over-dressed for a Halloween party.

French said he and Ross should be on separate teams to make it fair, and Jenkins complained about it, even though he knew it was an appropriate way to start the teams. But before either of the taller guys could pick team members, Nicholas and I had migrated toward French and Jenkins; and Jo, toward Ross. Well, actually, Jenkins went toward Ross, and Jo followed him.

"Who gets skins?" joked French, but nobody answered and he seemed to feel stupid for asking.

"Game is to twenty-one points," said French, "and we get the ball first, because it's my ball."

No one argued. French passed the ball to me and I quickly ran around Jo and Jenkins and to the hoop for an easy lay-up, which I promptly missed. French rebounded the ball and sank it with ease.

"That's two," French shouted. He caught the ball before it bounced and shot it quickly from his chest to Ross, who took it out at half-court. He passed the ball to Jo, who quickly passed it to Jenkins, who dribbled toward the basket past Nicholas and took an easy shot, which he missed, too. Jo rebounded and

made a two-handed shot that hit only net, proving that even in a dress, she *could* play.

"I'll take two," she said with pride, holding up two fingers.

Jenkins looked embarrassed but not unhappy. He caught the ball after it bounced once and tossed it to me. I took it out and quickly passed it in to French. He dribbled like a pro around all three opponents, jumped, and slammed it in with ease.

"Four-two," he called as he chucked the ball to Ross again.

I made four points in the next thirty minutes. French or Ross made most of the rest. And I mean made, not attempted. The rest of us threw plenty of them away, especially Nicholas. A full twenty-five percent of his shots hit nothing but air. He was breathing pretty hard after a half-hour of playing, but he had to drag around a lot more weight than the rest of us did. I could hear him wheezing as he'd go for the rebounds, of which he caught many, but he never did make any points. It wasn't for lack of trying, though. We went on to win the first three games before they got one on us and I think that one was because of Nicholas's wild shots.

Jo bumped into Jenkins more than once. She even bumped into me a couple of times and I had to admit that I didn't dislike it. It was kind of fun playing with a girl, but it wasn't much fun playing with a girl who was better than you. She was small and fast and made her share of shots. If she didn't make them, Nicholas would often get them and run it back and then toss it toward the hoop, although his exertion often caused him to hunch over with his hands on his knees to rest.

"You okay?" I asked Nicholas on more than one occasion. He nodded every time and would eventually get back into the game.

We were into our fifth game when I started getting tired. Ross's team was up by six points and Nicholas had made a good rebound and quickly took it back so he could change possession of the hoop back to our team. He wheezed past me, but I didn't follow him, as I knew he was going to pass it to French, and we would make two more easy points. I continued to face the hoop, ready for the ball to come into play, but it didn't come. I turned to look at Nicholas and he looked exhausted. He took a couple of deep breaths and chucked the ball hard to Ross, but . . . Ross wasn't on our team. I ran for the ball as Ross darted for the hoop, with Nicholas somewhere behind me.

Then I heard a loud, dull thud echo through the small gym. It sounded as though a fifty-pound bag of flour had been dropped flat onto the floor.

I turned toward the noise and saw Nicholas, who had—just like a freshly cut tree—fallen flat onto his back, without using his arms to break his fall. A few people not playing basketball rushed to him. The rebound from Ross's missed shot bounced away unnoticed as Jo bolted past me, but I just stood in silent shock.

I walked over and saw Nicholas's face and immediately felt sick. His face was turning a light shade of blue. His chest wasn't moving and his open eyes stared blankly at the ceiling.

I thought I could almost sense the life seeping out of his body. He was dying—right in front of me.

"Somebody call 911?" French asked, but nobody moved. We all stood in stunned silence.

"Anybody know CPR?" asked a man wearing a tweed jacket.

CPR. Of course I knew CPR. I was an Eagle Scout. I had taken CPR, but it had been three or four years ago. I couldn't think of the steps. Tilt the head. Five breaths. Compress the chest. Was that right? No. I was forgetting something. Move the tongue out of the way? Check for blockage? I had taken the classes and even practiced on the dummy. I knew this. But I didn't. Thoughts of my CPR training drifted away from my pounding head like a ghost from a dead body. I didn't want to kill Nicholas by doing it wrong, so I just stood there. I was afraid to help. Was he dead already? His skin continued to get bluer and some foamy bubbles appeared on his lips.

"Who knows CPR?" someone asked. *I know CPR*, I whispered to myself, but nothing came from my mouth.

I was in Scouts. I know CPR.

But my mouth remained shut and my feet remained still. I couldn't seem to concentrate. I remember thinking, *I just baptized this man and if I try to do anything now, I will kill him.*

Jo started to cry, but forced herself to stop. "I know CPR," she said in a quivering voice.

"I know CPR, too," I said, but so quietly nobody heard me. My feet were locked and my head pounded. *I baptize you in the name of the Father*, I thought. No. No! That's not right. Five breaths, one compression. Something about the tongue. *I can do this*, I told myself.

Jo knelt in front of the big man and wiped the bubbles from his mouth. She quickly checked his neck for a pulse and apparently didn't find one, because she checked his wrist. Then she put her ear to his chest. She put her right hand

under his neck and lifted it upward and put her bright red lips over Nicholas's blue ones. She grabbed his nose with her left hand and forced air into his body. I looked at his chest for movement. Nothing. She tried it again. Nothing. His cheeks ballooned outward like Dizzy Gillespie's playing the trumpet, but his belly did not rise. Jenkins immediately knelt down on the other side of the body. He loosened the man's tie, which was still tight around his neck, slipped it off with a jerk and tossed it aside. After checking for the xiphoid process—the little bone protrusion at the base of the sternum—he spaced two fingers up from it and placed his left hand on Nicolas's chest. He placed his right hand directly over his left hand and pressed downward, let go and counted, "One one-thousand," and pressed again.

"Two one-thousand." Another press. "Three one-thousand." Again. "Four one-thousand." Another press. "Five one-thousand." A final press.

Jo placed red lips to blue lips again and blew as hard as she could. Nothing. Her air was going nowhere. She tried it again with the same results. "He's not getting air," she said in frustration. "He's not getting any air." All she was accomplishing was turning his blue lips red with her lipstick.

"Check his air passage," somebody in the crowd said. Had it been me? I didn't know. I had certainly thought that, but I didn't think my mouth opened.

Jo forced Nicholas's chin upward as hard as she could from the nape of his neck, then reached into his mouth with her painted fingernails, which came out with a stretching stream of saliva.

"Has someone called 911 yet?" somebody said.

Nobody answered. I had seen no one leave and decided I should redeem myself from not volunteering to do CPR by calling for an ambulance.

"I'll do it," said Ross and rushed from the gym toward the double doors that led into the hallway.

Jo gave two more breaths and nothing happened.

"Turn him on his side," said a voice that I didn't know, but Jenkins was already doing his five compressions. When he finished, three men tried to turn him onto his side, but he was too big. A few others joined in and they got him on his side. A sick gurgling sound issued from his mouth and a mass of green and yellow vomit spewed down his cheek and onto the floor. It did not look like food. A few of the young girls bolted from the room, but not Jo. She stood firm.

"Get him on his back," Jo yelled and they turned him again.

Jo wiped some of the green slime from his red and blue lips, and raised his neck from behind, forcing his head to look straight up from his body. Her pretty red lips again went down onto his cold bluish ones. I felt a gagging sensation, but forced it back. This time his big chest filled with air and then fell when she pulled away. She quickly gave him another breath. His chest rose again and then fell. Without being told, Jenkins started chest compressions, and when he had reached five, he paused while Jo breathed oxygen into his lungs. Jenkins took over again and then Jo. They alternated for about ten minutes as the small crowd looked on. A little color returned to Nicholas's pudgy face, but not much. They continued for five minutes more, with Nicholas's chest rising and falling and Jenkins compressing his heart. Jo was methodical and strong, with no sign of repulsion or weariness. Nicholas's lips were not quite as blue any more, but Jo's weren't quite as red, either. Most of her lipstick had rubbed off onto Nicholas's mouth.

Finally, we heard the sirens. The emergency personnel rushed in and asked everyone to move aside. Jo slid down along the wall and bent her knees under her dress. She rested her chin upon her intertwined fingers and stared straight ahead in a daze. She sat there for at least a minute while the technicians worked on Nicholas.

I looked over at Jo and saw her rocking gently with tears beginning to fall. I don't know where Jenkins was by this time, nor Jo's friend Danielle. I couldn't see either of them. I wanted to comfort Jo. Tell her she did an excellent job. Probably saved his life. But I couldn't. I was still frozen.

Nicholas looked like a big piece of wrapped meat sitting on a wooden cutting board. There was no life in him. No breath that wasn't forced in by somebody else. No heartbeat. Just dead meat. And for what? A game of basketball?

Jo's mother rushed up to her and tried to comfort her.

"You did good," I heard her tell Jo. "You couldn't have done better. I'm so proud of you."

I agreed. She had done better than I could have. A sixteen-year-old girl had outplayed me in basketball and outperformed me in saving a man's life. She had earned the right to cry and I wished her mother would just leave her alone for a minute or so.

The emergency personnel put Nicholas into the ambulance within three minutes of their arrival. I heard one of them tell Jo that she had kept his body alive long enough for them to arrive and that she had done an admirable job. Then the ambulance was gone. And so was Nicholas. All that was left was his ugly orange tie, which I numbly picked up and slipped into my pocket.

The ride to the hospital was mostly quiet. My tie was still loose and my jacket was still sitting on the stage back at the church. I knew Nicholas was dead. I don't know why, but I think we all did. Jo was the first to speak.

"You think he's going to make it?" she asked.

No answer. The car was silent. I hadn't had the heart to tell her that she couldn't ride with us in the church's car—only missionaries were allowed in the Church's fleet for insurance reasons. Her parents had taken Danielle home, but Jo had refused to go with them. She wanted to find out what had happened to the man she had tried to kiss back to life. So, insurance or not, we let Jo ride with us. I don't think her parents ever knew.

"He was cold," she said. "His lips were cold and rubbery."

No one in the car spoke for almost a whole minute.

"Cold and rubbery," she said again. Then she forced a smile. "I got my first kiss a couple of months ago. It was nice." She paused. A tear rolled down her cheek. "But Jimmy's lips had been warm. And they kissed me back." The other three missionaries acted as if they weren't listening, but I knew they were. "But his blue lips were dead. Cold and dead." I thought maybe she wanted to cry, but that single tear was the last to come. She sighed. "Nicholas wasn't in there any more. He didn't respond. He wasn't in those eyes any more. They were blank. They stared at me, except that—"

She paused for a long, silent moment. "Except there was nobody inside them."

I heard French, who was driving, sniffle a little. I didn't dare myself. My nose was starting to run, but I didn't sniff. That would have admitted audibly that I was on the verge of crying. No one spoke for what seemed like a long time.

"I saw him staring at me at dinner," she said. "I don't think anybody else saw him do it, but I did." I didn't tell her that I had seen it, too. "His eyes were alive then. It made me feel nervous to have him looking at me, but I didn't get that same feeling after he—" Her voice began to quiver and I didn't know if I wanted her to continue. "When he lay there on the floor, his eyes were on me, but he wasn't looking at me. I gave him breath, and Elder Jenkins sent my breath into his blood, but he couldn't use it. The life was already gone from his eyes."

I could feel her body quivering as she made tiny little inhalations, as if she was on the verge of crying. She paused for an uncomfortable amount of time. I heard the whine of the engine and the occasional whoosh as a car passed in the opposite direction, but little else.

“He was gone,” she said. “I tried *so hard* to bring him back. And so did Elder Jenkins.” She breathed out deeply as if in acceptance. “I hope he’s okay. Where ever he is, I hope he’s okay.” Then she began to quiver against me.

A tingling feeling went down my back and I knew he *was* okay. We didn’t know for sure what had happened in the ambulance and we didn’t know what had happened at the hospital. Yet somehow, we did. And I knew he would be okay.

“Yeah,” I said. “Nicholas will be okay. I know it.”

“Really?” asked Jo. “You think so?”

“No. I don’t *think* so. I *know* so.” As I said it, I knew it sounded corny, but I didn’t care.

She reached her hand around my neck, pulled herself in close and put her wet cheek next to mine, and said, “Thanks.” French watched us curiously in the rearview mirror, but didn’t say a word.

The waiting room at the hospital was already crowded by the time we arrived. It looked like half the people from the Halloween dinner were there. Nicholas’s parents were already there, sitting in a couple of those ugly-fabric waiting room chairs with steam-curved wooden armrests. I didn’t know if they knew what we did—that Nicholas was probably dead—but I did know that they would undoubtedly be even more upset with us now than when they had thrown us out of their house.

“Elders, we’re so glad to see you,” said Janice—Nicholas’s mother.

I stared at her with a confused look on my face. She stood up and reached for me as I got closer. She gave me the biggest hug I think I’ve ever had before in my life, and I wondered if I would need Jo to pump my lungs back up with her precious air, but Mrs. Filton let go before I blacked out. She did the same thing to Jenkins. Franklin, Mr. Filton, stood and shook my hand after Mrs. Filton released me.

“I know Nicholas liked you,” he said. “I guess it’s good he found some friends.” He glanced away nervously, and then back. “Thanks for that.”

“It’s okay,” I said.

“It was his heart, you know,” Mr. Filton said and breathed out deep and sad. “Always his heart.” He looked at me and smiled, but his smiling face looked very sad.

“This isn’t the first time,” said his mother. “But it will certainly be the last.”

I looked at her with my eyebrows furrowed. *Yes, they know.*

“His heart,” she said, “it was bad since he was a baby. His first heart surgery was just after he was born. He’d have died if the doctors hadn’t worked on his tiny little heart back then. This was his third heart attack. Myocardial infarction, they call it.”

I was as silent as when Nicholas had fallen.

“His doctors and his meds prolonged his life beyond what we should have naturally expected. We were just happy to have him as long as we did. Every day since he was born has truly been a gift from God.”

I nodded but still didn’t say a word. Neither did Jenkins nor Jo.

“I’d always hoped we’d be with him when he left us,” his mother said. She sighed. “But I’m glad he was with you boys when he died. You all have been the best friends he ever had. We’ll always be grateful to you for that.” His father nodded in agreement. I was still so shocked at their change of heart that my mouth didn’t work.

“They say you boys performed CPR on him,” Janice said, looking up to me and smiling.

I didn’t smile back. “Elder Jenkins did,” I said. I motioned with my head to the girl who stood next to him and said, “And Jo helped, too.” His mother looked surprised at the revelation, but his father didn’t show anything at all. I didn’t bother telling them that their son might be alive if I hadn’t hesitated so long and had just gotten to work a little faster.

“Dang right they did,” added Elder French, who didn’t really know the parents. “They kept him alive until the ambulance arrived. Elder Jenkins pumped his heart while Jo breathed air into his lungs.” Jo almost looked as if she was going burst from embarrassment, but Jenkins didn’t seem to have much emotion in his face at all except shock.

Nicholas’s parents looked at the two of them with forced smiles. They shook hands and hugged Jenkins again and then did the same to Jo, who began to cry. “Thank you,” said his mother. “I don’t know what to say. Thank you so much.”

Another couple of hours passed, mostly in silence. Waiting people stared out into space or fiddled with something in their hands. The party was certainly over. But what was taking so long? Hadn’t Nicholas pretty much been dead when they brought him in? What was going on? Was it possible that they were still working on him and that he just might make it?

“Where are Mr. and Mrs. Filton?” someone asked. I looked up to see a man in green scrubs. A number of people pointed toward the Filtons and he

approached them. He began to speak very fast without much feeling, as if he did this sort of thing every day.

“Well, as you know Mr. and Mrs. Filton, Nicholas had a bad heart. And this was a massive infarction. There was really not much we could do for him. If he had been in the hospital when the heart attack occurred, then maybe we could have done something, maybe not. The damage was just too severe.”

I figured Nicholas’s mother had already accepted that she would never see her son again, but she still burst into tears. His dad didn’t, but he did have the same look that I imagined he’d had when he first found out his son was going to become a Mormon. He just hadn’t known then that within two weeks after that, his son was going to be a *dead* Mormon.

The doctor asked if they had any questions and left immediately after they said they didn’t. The fading footfalls of the doctor’s feet left us in silence.

We ended up getting home at about one o’clock in the morning—breaking another missionary rule. We were getting good at that. I didn’t sleep much that night. I kept dreaming about Nicholas on his back on the floor. And that green slime that spewed from his mouth when they turned him over, and the contrast between the green slime and his blue face smeared with red lipstick. But what bothered me the most—and I’m pretty sure it kept Jo up all night as well—was Nicholas’s eyes. His eyes had been open, staring straight up at the ceiling, but nobody had been looking out of them.

After what seemed to be only a couple hours of sleep, the phone rang. I looked up at the large red display of my digital clock to see three numbers. A six, a three, and a one. Promptly to bed at ten-thirty, promptly up by six-thirty.

“Hello?” I answered groggily. My head hurt for lack of sleep and I was powerfully hungry.

“Who is this? Wilson?”

I knew that voice. The zone leader. And he was angry. We hadn’t called anyone yet about what had happened. I groaned.

“Yes,” I said.

“This is Elder Rawlins. Aren’t you up, Elder?” His voice sounded ever angrier.

“No,” I said groggily. “What time is it?”

“It’s six-thirty, Elder. You should already be up,” he said. He called me *Elder*. Not *Elder Wilson* or just *Wilson* as he usually did, but *Elder*. He was mad.

Elder Rawlins ruled his zone with an iron Book of Mormon. We hadn’t called him the night before to tell him what had happened and we’d probably

take some flack for that, but I didn’t care. I didn’t like Elder Rawlins. This was one time he wasn’t going to bully me.

“Yeah, but I didn’t get much sleep,” I said, as if I had been out partying all night.

“Yeah. I noticed that,” he said curtly. “Where were you guys? I called until ten-thirty and you didn’t answer. French and Ross either. Were you guys together? What were you doing?”

I took a deep breath.

“Well, we were at the church at the Halloween dinner last night. You remember Nicholas Filton?”

A pause. “Yeah, I remember. I interviewed him before his baptism a couple of weeks ago. Nice guy.” A little of his anger was gone, but not much.

“He died last night at the church. Heart attack. Jenkins did CPR on him, but he didn’t make it. We were at the hospital until quite late last night.”

Long pause.

“You serious, man?” he asked, the anger in his voice replaced with suspicion.

“Dead serious, man,” I said, the pun unintentional, but fitting all the same.

Another long pause. “That ain’t funny, you know,” he finally said, with only a hint of suspicion left in his voice.

“No, it ain’t,” I said coldly—as if *he* needed to tell *me* it wasn’t funny. I waited for him to answer.

“Okay,” he said in apparent acceptance. “When’s the funeral?”

“Don’t know. We’ll probably find out today at church,” I said.

“Okay,” he said again. “Let me know.”

“Yep,” I said.

He hung up. I was surprised he didn’t want to know more.

We introduced Elder Rawlins and his companion, Elder Black, to Nicholas’s parents the next day. I couldn’t believe it, but the Filtons showed up at church on Sunday—the day after their son died in the same building. It shocked both Jenkins and me. I got transferred or I would have gotten credit for their baptisms. I guess they were so impressed with the members’ response to their son’s death and the bishop’s handling of the funeral that they ended up finding what their son had found, though it certainly didn’t happen overnight.

Nicholas’s heart may have had a fatal defect, but in the end, it was a good heart. An honest heart. An honest, defective heart that helped break open the hardened hearts of his parents. I wouldn’t dare say Nicholas’s death was a good

thing, but his death did, I believe, save his parents. I *would* dare say Nicholas gave his life to save his parents, but that may be stretching the truth somewhat. Even so, he had been a like a saint to his parents in helping rid their lives of the bitterness they felt toward us, and, ultimately, the Church.

To this day, people still ask me why I wear a worn-out, plaid, pumpkin-colored tie to church almost every single Sunday. I don't bother to tell them about the man I helped return to God. I just smile and explain to them the tie was a gift from St. Nicholas and leave it at that.

♦ **Editor's note:** *This story is an honorable mention of the 2005 IRREANTUM fiction contest.*

Two cultures, both imbibed with Liberty
In Hancock County, where we lay our scene . . .

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Lance Larsen

A Necklace of Ants

To a clown, is grace a pair of floppy shoes?
To a waitress in Duluth,
a favorite bra she washes in the sink, then hangs
by the window, hoping it will dry
by morning? I don't mean we slip God
on like a favorite accessory but that He delivers us
in ways we didn't know we needed.

Think of the farmer taking off
his oiled belt and winching
to safety the bawling colt trapped on a ledge.
I say *grace*, but I mean
something more layered and symphonic,
like *Methusala*, like *Andromeda*,
but for every vowel a sunny country.

In addition, grace has a job: to hurt us
toward the good—
if we lie, a necklace of ants,
if we grind upon the poor, a shirt of bees.
Some days that voice chirps
and any idiot knows
to avoid the forklift backing through the alley.

More often, it whispers so far inside
we swear we're picking up
rogue radio waves or eavesdropping on angels.
We have to gargle our mistakes.
Say *no* and mean the world. Re-tune.
We have to taste that delicious
itch of air the way the blind hear light.

♦ *Originally appeared in Southern Review*

Suburban Revelation

She loved her late news, my aunt. So after a microburst
snapped the roof aerial, Uncle climbed to the bedroom
each night, arms wide, and played antenna for her.
And again their house was haunted by technicolor ghosts.

She drank in tsunamis, plagues, commie invasions. What if
aliens? What if the San Andreas fault line? What if
Haight Ashbery slid into the Pacific, sending every unwashed
hippie on an acid road trip to her backyard in Idaho . . .

And still he stood at the window, human rabbit ears,
in torn pajamas, like a framed study by Edward Hopper.
Not with a martini or rosewood pipe, or a crossword
about English fox hunts, but staring east, across uncut

grass and the car he hadn't garaged, toward foothill
cedars hunched in sleep. Trying to taste some scrap
of mystery beamed down from on high before satellites
scrambled it into news even his bones knew were lies.

♦ *Originally appeared in* Southern Review

Friday Mass through Stained Glass

Inside it looks like all the bus stop benches
in town and the bottoms
warming them have gathered here
for a secret audition for *The City of God*.
Outside, we jog in place,
rain falling on us in tattered veils.

If only the hunger of our bodies could guarantee
us a place in the next life.
If the priest glanced back, would he see
a pair of penitents among his stain-glassed cherubs,
or sorry tourists? My love is rain wet
and almost forty-one, and children like seals

have pushed through her cries.
Tired rain, wash us clean. Fall on us,
smoky light and give us a morsel
of God. It is Friday, all flesh
but His forbidden. Half my life
I've touched and failed to touch this one I love.

♦ *Originally appeared in* Image

soon the rhythm is a room
soon the rhythm is a room
soon the rhythm is a room

chants dancing
in steam and rain

Jennifer Quist

Boy

sucks his spine,

a convex bow,

back and away,

Knob by knob,

vertebrae like fossils

out of rock.

Shrinking

nearer to where

my vision slips into his nostrils

up through the cribriform plate to the newly seared cortex.

And he knows and says,

“Just call me by my real name.”

Whispered

low in the hospital

so the nurses wouldn't hear,

clawing down the curtains,

baring the pretender,

her breasts packed hard with pebbles.

Warren Hatch

Pruning the Blood Plum Tree

More than any winter I had known, that winter.

In evening I pruned against winter's loss.

The sky echoed from the first spring's rain.

At my touch, the tree quivered, beading.

The tree arched like two hands cupped,

reaching up, fingers outstretched.

Sarah stood in the light of the door,

leaning against a white pillar,

calling me home from the dark;

as each branch snapped,

water fanned out,

each sphere gathering her warmth,

or a last narrow band of red in the West.

The Voice of Water Here

Imlay Barrus built our neighborhood, started with this chapel,
 dun brick, hunched under a vault of hewn ribs as if cast from ocean.
 From the chapel, the homes sprawl across the lay of the land.
 Decades later, we find no two pair of joists equidistant, and cuss him.
 He is deaf to most tones, although not to certain passages of water.
 He lives still in the smallest of these homes,
 at the brink of houses, outsheds, gardens.
 He lives where alfalfa flows into sage,
 then into dry lake beds crowding the north horizon,
 folding into sky.
 Has lived there, seen the proof of life in its cycles and pauses,
 the possible depth of encroaching dark.
 In evening, sitting before the desert, he longs for his wife,
 mourns his great-grandson Rainey,
 still sees the boy running under his orchards.
 I live on, I live on, he says, measuring a loss
 grown deep against the frail joys left him.
 On his walks, he listens to irrigation water in ditches
 like a child's voice, or at times like stones turning deep in earth,
 speaking through the wood of his cane.
 He passes between giant trees in his yard, an Ash and an Elm.
 The trees have grown beyond parable
 from a sermon he no longer remembers,
 one straight, the other warped, huge over the yard.
 A stream writhes past Imlay's yard like a serpent
 undercuts and lays claim on the giant trees.
 He returns each day to the corner home where he raised his family
 and now Michelle Chaudoine raises hers.
 He sits in her kitchen for its morning light.
 Sun on a Singer sewing machine in rivulets on ebony,
 or composed under the cast-metal pattern of the treadle.
 Together, they consider the orchards beyond the kitchen window.
 Peaches, crescent shards of autumn sun
 from trees Imlay Barrus and his sons had planted against winter.
 Trees wizened, frozen, groping like lightning startled out of earth.
 They struggle, he explains. They, far north of their climate.

Grafts among them are Castillian, brought up the Rio Arriba
 by Franciscans a half millennium ago.

These grafts too know time.
 Having grown comfortable together, Imlay and Michelle seldom talk.
 They see coming years we would define by the darkness of their winters
 like the Chaudoine border collie's chain path around the woodshed,
 winding him short to his post.
 Certain of her sons fall, minds darkened by alcohol or such gifts.
 Some farm the land, or traverse the world, missionaries in strange
 countries.
 Her husband leaves her and returns.
 Imlay Barrus no longer goes up into the chapel,
 no longer stands in the shadows of its Scandinavian gables.
 Sabbath, a priest and a deacon bring sacrament to his home.
 In the kitchen, the deacon fills pleated white paper thimbles with
 water,
 brings a tray of these to the coffee table.
 They sing hymns of remembrance
 that to Imlay are like wind trembling in taut ropes.
 Then the priest breaks bread into a tray next to the water.
 He kneels over the bread, sanctifies it
 in remembrance of the Son, of His body, broken.
 They pass bread among themselves.
 He prays again, in remembrance of His blood, shed for them.
 They share water.
 After, they visit on the porch into evening.
 An ash-scented breeze ebbs around the great trees.
 Imlay cannot hear the trees,
 cannot hear meadowlarks in sage or the deacon's frail, shouted talk.
 Imlay listens for the tones left him:
 The kitchen tap drips.
 Water in a porcelain bowl, half-full.
 What? the water asks, what?
 Rainey's voice, what?
 Until Michelle Chaudoine walks between the cottonwoods,
 with two children made solemn by twilight.
 The children hold bread wrapped in a towel
 and a quart jar of peaches.

Carol Ottesen**Woman with Bound Feet**

Christian Church, Jinan, Shandong, China

You, in black, sit primly on the bench, feet
 Just above the floor—
 What distortions fill your padded shoes?
 Did you weep the day they bound your feet?
 How did you balance water on your back,
 plow the field, follow water buffalo?

In China Church is not wholly acceptable.
 You risk. And wear the clothes of everyday.
 Perhaps you come to see the nail marks in His feet,
 the body a grim monument to pain,
 see suffering as a cloak of holiness,
 or maybe there is nowhere else to go.

I think my feet hurt, bound as in a dream
 of trying to get somewhere and not.
 My mother standing at the mirror says,
 “It takes pains to be beautiful,” my dear.
 I work and try again to fix my eyes.
 Vanity crushes spirit, with a price
 too high for what we get or give.

Your wrinkles are small pleats of furrowed silk,
 Gathers of time sewn on your face.
 I want to sweep you up into a waltz,
 both of us moving gracefully, unbound,
 unfettered to the rhythm of His feet
 beyond the cruel confines of beauty.

Nothing Is Lost

The leaves have lost their tree,
 spun by the wind into a dance

across the grass until
 they lie together vein to vein,

until a vacuum sucks
 them into a mash of molded mulch.

Oh, my leaves, my children,
 though we are shuffled, smashed and tossed,

remember when we lay
 together vein to vein for warmth.

Consider what you know,
 hope as familiar as your hand.

The wind has brought the frost.
 Winter is here. Believe. Nothing is lost.

Cancun Beach, Mexico

What kind of God has made this sapphire tide
stroking the white sand mouth of Yucatan
extravagant, a place
fit for the baptism of kings or God

and yet has made the lizard-woman, begging
before the church's splintered threshold, curled,
diseased, her hand a darting tongue for coins,
who made me also, stepping over her

in my designer jeans and gold earrings?
I look beyond the pierce of yellow eyes
thinking: to feed her begging is no help,
there are so many, what can I do?

The church is dark whispering with nuns
shuffling in shadows sallow candles light
a waxen, dying Christ, above
a garish mash of dusty plastic flowers.

So little holy water—
it cannot cover us
What have we done to be sapphires or lizards
smooth or splintered, stars or stones?

To a College Roommate Killed by a Drunk Driver

In those days
we all wanted a man to cover our shame,
the nakedness of being a woman alone.
A degree, yes, unless,
He came

to carry us to some kind of heaven
where breasts were always firm, ample
like yours maybe I could get a man
who would love me for my mind.

We laughed at *Pride and Prejudice*, never
quite seeing them as us,
studying as if it mattered more than
someone loving us forever.

Then when Your One drove up in his old Ford
and ran over your illusions,
you married the lone and dreary world,
with your beautiful body had seven kids, got fat, laughed
at contradiction like this was your dream come honestly
truer than we ever thought.

Then you were ready for the drunk he
got your body but not
the you that knew

to get a man is nothing
to keep a man, to have someone
who after years of ordinary clings to your hem as you leave
for just one last touch
is all.

2007 IRREANTUM Fiction Contest

The Association for Mormon Letters is pleased to announce the seventh annual IRREANTUM fiction contest. Because IRREANTUM is a literary journal dedicated to exploring Mormon culture, all contest entries must relate to the Mormon experience in some way. Authors need not be LDS. Any fictional form up to 8,500 words will be considered, including short stories and excerpts from novels. The first-place author will be awarded \$250, second place \$175, and third place \$100 (unless judges determine that no entries are of sufficient quality to merit awards). Winners agree to give IRREANTUM first publication rights.

Deadline: May 31, 2007

Submission Instructions

Only electronic submissions will be accepted. Please email your entry as an MS Word, WordPerfect or rtf file attachment to submission@irreantum.org. In the subject line, please write “2007 Fiction Contest.” Include your name, the title of your submission, and your contact information, including address and phone number, in the body of the email. To facilitate blind judging, **no identifying information should appear in the story itself** other than the title of the manuscript, which should appear as a header on each page.

Winners will be announced August 31, 2007

From the Archives



Since the beginnings of the Latter-day Saint religion, poets have found ways to express their Mormon beliefs. While some early writers published poetry before joining the church, others were inspired to versify by their new religion. According to the Mormon Literature Database, poetry of the nascent religion was used “to celebrate the Restoration and praise Church leaders, to describe the gathering of Zion or the pioneer movement, and to expound scripture and doctrine.” Poets found consistent publishing opportunities within such nineteenth-century Mormon periodicals and newspapers as *The Evening and the Morning Star*, *Millennial Star*, *Times and Seasons*, and the *Deseret News*, as well as the *Contributor*, *Improvement Era*, *Juvenile Instructor*, and the *Woman’s Exponent*. The *Young Woman’s Journal* and the *Relief Society Magazine* also published some poetry during their runs in the early twentieth century, and poets in the late twentieth century found publication venues in places such as *The Ensign*, *BYU Studies*, *Dialogue*, and, of course, *Irreantum*.

The *Woman’s Exponent*, precursor of the *Relief Society Magazine*, typically (though not exclusively) published LDS women’s poetry in an unofficial “poet’s corner,” beginning with its first issue in 1872 and continuing to its last issue in 1914. As Maureen Ursenbach Beecher pointed out, religion was the most common topic for *Exponent* poetry, though that topic was approached from various angles, be it in the form of specific LDS-doctrine, general Christian beliefs, or simple encouragement of moral rectitude (59). Rarely were the poems striking or even particularly well done. However, though the poems were often amateurish attempts, mimicking the form and style of everything from epics to sonnets and everyone from Milton to Shakespeare, the content is sincere and presents valuable opportunity for cultural, sociological, and doctrinal study.

Eliza R. Snow, bequeathed the title of “Zion’s Poetess” by Joseph Smith, is the most famous LDS female poet of the nineteenth century, known by most Latter-day Saints today for her poem-turned-hymn, “Invocation, or the Eternal Father and Mother” (“Oh, My Father”). Born January 21, 1804, in Massachusetts, the precocious Eliza wrote her homework assignments in

verse and published her first poem in the *Western Courier* (Ravenna, Ohio) in 1826 at the age of twenty-two (*Eliza* 7). Her influence in the church and over women in late-1800s Mormon Utah can hardly be overstated. Present at the organization of the Nauvoo Female Relief Society in 1842, she served as its first secretary, then later reestablished the society under Brigham Young's direction in 1867, and served as the Relief Society "Presidentess" until her death on December 5, 1887. She also performed and administered ordinances in the Salt Lake City endowment house, the St. George and Logan temples (earning her the titles "Priestess" and "Prophetess"), helped establish the Young Women's MIA and the Primary, and chaired the governing board of the Deseret Hospital. Besides being a powerful public figure in her own right, she was married first to Joseph Smith, then to Brigham Young, and she stayed close to her biological brother, the prophet Lorenzo Snow, throughout her life.

Eliza R. Snow published nearly 500 poems during her lifetime, waxing philosophical about special occasions, as well as American history, Utah's historical events, church doctrine and, less frequently, personal subject matters. As with many LDS female poets, death was a frequent topic, be that in eulogistic poems, doctrinal expositions or metaphoric comparisons. In "My Sister, Leonora A. Morley," Snow expounds the Latter-day Saint theology of the afterlife in her distinctive, rather high-toned style, her characteristically grandiose and formal tone, underscored with fascinating—and somewhat atypical—personal revelations, prompted no doubt by her close relationship with Leonora, her biological sister.

Kylie Turley

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"My Sister, Leonora A. Morley"

Dedicated to her friends in Brigham City, where she departed this life,
February 11, 1872

'Tis hard to part with those we dearly love,
But parting comes to all.
No purer tie—
No holier sympathy warms human breast
Than that of loving sisterhood, where heart
To heart is joined and interwoven with
A long, well tested and unbroken chain
Of mutual confidence—a confidence
Unstirred by envy, jealousy, or breach
Of sacred trust: Where the broad stream of thought
Flows unabridg'd: where each can think aloud.
Such was the love inspiring confidence,
Strengthened as years accumulated with
My sister and myself. Ours was the sweet
Recipocation where each sentiment
Found safe repository—safe as heaven's
Eternal archives.

But my sister's gone!
I feared—I felt—I knew she soon would go;
But when beside her bed I watch'd, and saw
The last faint breath which fed the spring of life
Exhaled, it seemed frail nature's tend'rest cord
Was rent asunder, and a crushing sense
Of loneliness, like solitude's deep shade,
In that unguarded moment made me feel
As though the lights of earth had all gone out,
And left me desolate.

I knew 't was false—
I knew that many noble, loving ones,
And true, remained; but none can fill
The vacant place—it is impossible;

Th' endearing ties we hold as saints of God,
 The ties of consanguinity, secured
 By sacred cov'nants which the Priesthood binds
 On earth, and 't is [*sic*] recorded in the heavens,
 We shall perpetuate beyond the grave;
 Eternal union with the cherished ones
 Will crown the glory of immortal lives.

True love may multiply its object mosts [*sic*]
 Extensively without diminishing
 Its strength, but love accepts no substitute.

When the fond mother lays her darling down
 In death's cold, silent sleep, though others may
 Be added to her arms, the vacancy
 Remains until the resurrection shall
 Give back her child.

My sister faithfully
 Life's changeful battle waged—her life was full
 Of years—her years were fill'd with usefulness:
 Her trust was in the living God, who hears
 And speaks as He was wont to hear and speak.
 She loved the Gospel and exemplified
 It in her life. Her heart knew no deceit,
 Her lips ne'er moved with fulsome flattery,
 Her tongue with guile. Other positions of
 Responsibility, as well as those
 Of wife and mother she has nobly filled.
 Her sun went down in peace. For her death had
 No sting—the grave will have no victory—
 Her noble spirit lives and dwells above.

The casket rests—The pure component part,
 Th' eternal portion of the human form,
 In life combined with the gross element,
 Sleeps in the bosom of our mother Earth,
 Secure from nature's changing processes—
 Despite decomposition's complex skill.

But the gross, earthly substance, that which is
 Both tangible to mortal sight and touch—

Formed with affinities that downward tend
 Strength'ning [*sic*] our hold on this our lower life,
 Clinging to earth as like adheres to like
 This, soon as life becomes extinct, by dint
 Of one of nature's fundamental laws,
 The law of restitution, has commenced,
 And separates till all is disengaged—
 Till every particle shall be restored
 Back to its native element, to be
 Transformed in infinite varieties
 To new creations and in other forms—
 Through every grade of life and being here,
 From earth and herbage up to brute and man—
 From land to land—from clime to clime transferred;
 Leaving the pure unchanging element
 (When all that is corruptible has been
 Dissolved and passed away) to rest—to sleep
 Until the glorious resurrection more
 And then come forth in triumph from the tomb
 And clothe the spirit with immortal bloom.

Adieu my sister, we shall meet again,
 And live on earth when Jesus Christ shall reign.

A Family Review of *States of Grace*: Compassion, Community, and Redemption

A review of *States of Grace* (2005; written and directed by Richard Dutcher)

Bruce Young, Robert Young, and Margaret Blair Young

◆ **Editor's Note:** *When an analysis of Richard Dutcher's film States of Grace was originally commissioned from Bruce and Margaret Young, it quickly became apparent that, because of the film's profound effect on their entire family, such a review would benefit from individual accounts rather than being co-written. The review that follows is therefore divided into three sections in which Bruce, Margaret, and their son Robert each share their personal thoughts about the film.*

Loving *States of Grace*— and Wondering Why Some People Hate It

Bruce Young



When we learned that a new Richard Dutcher film would be coming out, my wife Margaret and I looked forward to its release with excitement and anticipation. On November 1, 2005, we attended the Salt Lake City premiere of what was then called *God's Army 2: States of Grace*. The film was even better than we had expected. We were eager to have our children see the film and soon took them to showings in Provo. Our oldest son, Rob (then nineteen), was so impressed that he called friends from the the-

ater while the closing credits were rolling to tell them about the movie. I told my BYU students and even gave them extra credit for going to it.

But then we watched as the film was dropped from theaters as Thanksgiving and then Christmas approached (despite its being, in significant ways, a Christmas movie), pushed aside by holiday blockbusters like *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. *States of Grace*, as Margaret and I preferred to call it, was one of the best films I had ever seen, by far the best LDS film I had seen, and yet it seemed to have run its course within a few weeks.

So I was grateful when the film had a second chance in 2006. I dropped in on a free showing at BYU on January 19. Now definitively titled *States of Grace*, it opened in theaters around Utah the following day. (The earlier title of *God's Army 2* erroneously suggested that it is a sequel—it is not—and also led some to think it was just “another Mormon movie.”) Again, I enthusiastically promoted *States of Grace* with my students and colleagues, and I took friends and family to see it. Shortly after its second opening, I took my then seventeen-year-old daughter Julie, for whom *States of Grace* had acquired profound personal meaning, to see it a second time. Later I took my parents and a brother-in-law—partly because I wanted others to see this film that I loved but also so that I could see it yet again. Since ads for the movie kept emphasizing its imminent departure, I was grateful that it continued playing at full-price theaters in Utah Valley until at least mid-March.

States of Grace was apparently not quite as successful in Salt Lake Valley, where it went to discount theaters a few weeks after its second release. And, though it was also released in California and elsewhere, it never became the nationwide phenomenon we had hoped it would. I hope its release on DVD (October 2006) gives many more a chance to see a truly stunning film and will allow those of us who love it to see it again and continue to be affected by its deeply spiritual and human power.



States of Grace is set in Santa Monica, California, and focuses on two missionaries—Elder Lozano, who is soon to return home, and Elder Farrell, his junior companion. The final weeks of Elder Lozano's mission are transformed as he and his companion stumble into an explosion of gang violence, save a gang member's life, begin teaching him the missionary discussions, and encounter other characters—a street preacher named Louis and an aspiring actress named Holly, who has been rejected by her family—who challenge and change the missionaries' understanding of themselves and the gospel.

“Breathtaking”—a word some reviewers have used in connection with *States of Grace*—does not seem to me an exaggeration. The film is beautifully crafted. One reason I've watched it so often is that it is a joy to savor the deft and sometimes surprising transitions and juxtapositions and the threads of symbolism, which I have found an integral part of the film's power and meaning. Every major cast member seems to me to fill his or her role with believable and appealing humanity. Some actors are exceptional, and almost all the acting is first-rate: honest, convincing, and often powerfully moving.

The film has its obviously and outwardly intense moments. The violent scenes are gripping and appropriately appalling. They are in no sense gratuitous. They ought to leave viewers with genuine heartache at the senseless destruction the cycle of revenge leaves in its wake. But the film's greatest power is in its quieter moments, when characters encounter moral dilemmas or engage in hard self-examination or reach out with empathy to others. Rather than rushing us from one action sequence to another, *States of Grace* allows us to spend time with characters, experiencing their perceptions, feelings, and struggles in a nuanced way. Their faces, as well as their feelings, are presented with warmth and sensitivity, so that as we listen to the characters and view their faces, we are invited again and again to respond with tenderness and compassion.

Some of the film's most memorable stretches are conversations or even, essentially, monologues, such as when Holly tells her story or Elder Lozano recounts his conversion. What makes these and other such moments memorable is the way they represent the honest opening of one person's heart to another. Each of these scenes is acted with subtlety and grace. There are also scenes—for instance, the rooftop dinner—that strike me as magical, like those luminous moments of convergence and harmony that occasionally come in real life.

At the same time *States of Grace* raises difficult questions: What does it really mean to be a Christian? How can I be wise and appropriately careful but at the same time show genuine compassion? When I make terrible mistakes, can I be truly forgiven?

The film is explicitly centered on Christ, not just because it refers to him directly but because it is filled with the spirit of his teachings and example. The film can be viewed as an extended commentary on the parables of the good Samaritan and the prodigal son. Like these, it contrasts goodness that arises from love with pseudo-righteous legalism based on self-protection and fear. It struck me while viewing the film for the fourth time that its message could

be summed up in the phrase, “The greatest of these is charity.” At the heart of the film are the atonement and the possibilities of change and redemption it provides. Can a gang member truly become a follower of Christ? The film’s answer to that question is affirmative but not as simple and easy as we might like. The effort to change one’s life and character and be newly related to others and to one’s past is shown to be excruciatingly difficult. And what do we do when others stumble? The film suggests that many of us, despite or perhaps in part because of our religious pretensions, too easily fall into the role of the older brother who resents and feels superior to the returning prodigal—or worse, that we pass by on the other side of the road, rejecting those who sin and burdening them with isolation and despair in addition to the self-contempt they already feel.

The film also suggests—rightly—that none of us is without sin (we are all prodigals) and that in him who refuses to forgive remains the greater sin. But along with these hard truths, *States of Grace* presents the glorious truth that the complete healing and redemption promised by the Savior is real, is truly available to those who open themselves to it.

States of Grace ends with a live nativity scene, rich in symbolism but for that very reason drawing varying responses from viewers. The first time I saw the film I thought the scene went on a bit long, was slightly confusing at moments (Why does Holly rush down from her apartment? What leads everyone to drift to the nativity scene?), and became so symbolic that the film’s realistic mode was partly compromised. But as I watched the scene again—maybe because I knew it was coming and had already pondered its possible defects—I was almost completely taken by it, blown away even. On this second viewing, the realistic and symbolic elements of the scene merged and became one. And it struck me that the baby in the nativity scene not only represents Christ but also represents each of us, our original innocence and our potential cleansing. By the time I had seen the film a third or fourth time, I saw that this connection had been carefully prepared for. In fact, we are told explicitly that God loves each of us now “just as much as when we were babies.”

Like the similar scene in *Mr. Krueger’s Christmas*, the nativity sequence can be taken as involving more than literally meets the eye: a nativity, whether a “live” one or one made up of figures sitting on a shelf, can prompt us to remember and even imaginatively take part in the holy time and place when the Redeemer “was made flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).



Shortly after seeing *States of Grace* a second time, I interrupted the normally calm discussions in several of my classes with an explosion of excitement I felt unable to contain. I told my students how extraordinary this film was and encouraged them to see it as soon as possible. On reflection, I realized not all of them would respond as positively as I had. So in the days that followed I put my assessment of the film in writing to share with my students. I did the same thing the following semester after the second release, as the film became for me almost an obsession. I knew it would be too much to hope, but I wanted everyone to appreciate and love *States of Grace*, and especially to be touched deeply by its message, which I believe is the gospel message of redemption and compassion.

Some students responded very much as I hoped; some did not. And then I took part in a somewhat heated exchange on the “Letters to the Editor” page of BYU’s *Daily Universe*, which continued privately as an opponent of the film and I exchanged e-mails.

Clearly this was a film that touched a chord, but not always a harmonious one.

One result of these exchanges is that I’ve thought long and hard about *States of Grace*. Having tried to understand criticisms of the film as generously and honestly as I can, I still believe this is one of the best films I’ve ever seen and that, at least for anyone with genuine spiritual maturity who approaches it with an open mind and heart, this film can provide a profoundly moving and potentially transformative experience.

I can perhaps best convey the film’s impact on me by sharing some of what I told my students.

“*States of Grace*,” I wrote, “is masterfully made and beautifully acted. I can’t help feeling it is ‘Best Picture’ material (if the Academy Awards really represented the best films); it is certainly many cuts above the average LDS movie. Most important, it is a profound depiction of the power of the atonement amidst the realities of life in our often dark and difficult world. The film’s message is relevant to every Latter-day Saint, every Christian, and ultimately every human being.

“At the same time, I need to acknowledge that not everyone will like everything in the film. Some viewers don’t like to see ordinances depicted in films, though I would point out that some Church-sponsored films do just that. (There is a confirmation in *States of Grace*, presented sensitively and even movingly.) The movie also depicts gang violence—but it also depicts the redeeming

power of the gospel that can overcome violence and hatred. The missionaries in the film experience more highs and lows in a few days than many real-life missionaries experience in two years—but this is, after all, a movie, with a little over two hours to affect its viewers.”

Many of my students loved *States of Grace*. (Comments included, “This movie was amazing”; “My hope for LDS cinema has been rekindled”; “EVERYONE MUST SEE THIS FILM.”) But some viewers have reacted with harsh criticism, claiming the plot is unrealistic or predictable, that the dialogue is didactic, and, worst of all, that the film is morally corrupting. Obviously, opinions differ. But though the film depicts reality in heightened and condensed form, I have had no problem suspending disbelief and have found the dialogue by turns delightful, moving, and illuminating. Despite its imperfections (and there are a few), I find the film spiritually inspiring and morally compelling. In my opinion, the camera lingers a bit too long on the girl-watching moments. But apart from that, on what grounds could one make moral objections to the film?

Some viewers have seriously argued that no film should present anything “inappropriate”: that is, a moral film cannot portray sin and its consequences. Others have been more specific and discriminating, indicating that *States of Grace* is excessive, even sensationalistic, in its depiction of violence; that it is “too easy on sin” or indulges in “ cliché compassion”; and that it is dangerous in presenting some of the characters’ wrong choices with sympathy or even with approval.

As for the violence, its effect, as I’ve already noted, is morally sobering. The film does not glorify violence but shows its appalling and tragic consequences. But the film also offers hope that violence can be overcome and its effects redeemed.

The charge that *States of Grace* is “easy on sin” seems to have something to do with its sympathetic presentation of characters who have been involved in serious wrongdoing. I am tempted to say that the distaste some viewers have for sinful characters who are nevertheless presented as real and likable human beings reveals more about the viewers’ moral deficiencies than about the film’s. At least one viewer has referred to Holly as “the seductress,” a label that, among other things, grossly distorts the plot. Many have echoed the judgment that Mormons don’t want to see movies in which “a missionary has sex with a porn star.”¹ (By the way, in *States of Grace* the act is not portrayed, described, or even named.) Is it being forced to think about such a sin that bothers viewers? Or,

as the labels “porn star” and “seductress” suggest, is it revulsion at people who commit such sins? What would such viewers say if confronted with a woman taken in adultery—in the very act? Would the response “Go thy way and sin no more” seem too indulgent? Would they be among those who pick up a stone?

I may be misjudging such viewers. This is, after all, only a film, and viewers who react harshly to fictional characters may be much kinder to real people. Yet the habit of dismissing anyone as a “porn star” or “seductress” seems to me a dangerous one. Anyone who has been involved in a Church disciplinary council knows that it is contrary to the spirit of such a meeting to label and dismiss the transgressor simply as an “adulterer” or “embezzler” or “pervert.” We are dealing with a complex human being; we seek to extend understanding and compassion; and we want to help redeem the sinner, as well as protect the innocent and the Church. In the play *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare’s character Angelo is incapable—until he himself has seriously transgressed—of seeing wrongdoers as anything other than objects of disgust who must be punished and, ideally, eliminated. He refers to a pregnant woman casually as “the fornicatress.” His failure to use her name or speak to her betrays a deeper failure to see her as a human being. This heartless character has as yet no appreciation of his own need for mercy or of the redemptive power of the atonement. He is unable to condemn the sin without also condemning and dehumanizing the sinner. As the play amply demonstrates and as the scriptures make clear, in him lies the greater sin.

There may be more justice in some of the subtler criticisms of the film. Perhaps *States of Grace* fails to show us how dangerous some seemingly innocent acts are. Perhaps it dismisses as straitlaced an approach to living the gospel that is entirely sincere in its attempt at constant and faithful obedience. Perhaps it is too complex or even unrealistic in the sorts of moral choices it asks us to consider. My own experience with the film, however, has persuaded me that it has struck just about the right balance between sympathy and judgment and between complexity and clarity.

For me, one of the film’s strengths is how effectively it presents challenging moral dilemmas and invites us to worry over the choices the characters make. Some viewers, it is true, find disturbing the very possibility that characters, especially missionaries, could struggle over some of these choices and end up making wrong ones. Yet as it admits this possibility, and as it invites us into the experience of moral struggle and shows us the consequences of characters’ decisions, I believe *States of Grace* becomes *more* deeply moral, not less. Art

that avoids such struggles is not moral; in fact it is arguably immoral in indulging a fantasy of victories won without real effort or thought. As Milton long ago pointed out, true virtue is not “fugitive and cloistered” but must be won through “dust and heat” (728). But some critics go further and suggest that *States of Grace* presents some of the wrong choices with approval—for instance, Elder Lozano’s insistence on breaking the rules by taking in a stranger, his failure to prevent his companion from committing fornication, perhaps even the fornication itself.

These various “wrong choices” must be treated separately. The last one, for instance—the fornication—clearly does *not* have the film’s approval. The sin comes after a series of more ambiguous actions. But I would argue that, though the film is more interested in showing the characters’ struggles than in judging their actions, it does not promote all the choices it depicts. For instance, the film leaves us free to judge Elder Farrell as mistaken if he thinks that holding Holly’s hand is the only way he can show compassion. He could in fact have found another way of making it clear he is not hardening his heart to her pain. But in his inexperience and immaturity, he blows it, as many of us do, daily. Certainly, the film shows the danger of confusing compassion and attraction. And it is absolutely clear in its assumption that the fornication itself is wrong, Elder Farrell is being sent home. The mission president expresses both judgment and compassion, embracing him while saying, “Stupid, stupid kid.” The erring elder is in despair and doesn’t know how his life can go on. Though many of the characters extend compassion, some don’t—or don’t know how to, perhaps because their pain is too great. The film’s response to sin is clearly something other than “ cliché compassion.”

Elder Lozano’s failure to prevent the act is more complicated. To begin with, it’s entirely possible he doesn’t wake up and notice his companion missing until the deed is done. Once he wakes up, he tries to rescue his companion, knocking on Holly’s door. Perhaps he should have done more, perhaps breaking down the door and dragging his companion out. But I’m not sure violent, coercive, and, in this case, illegal intervention would have been the right choice.

Some have suggested that Elder Lozano’s wrong choices begin much earlier when he invites Louis into the apartment and asks a neighbor (Holly) to check on him. This, presumably, is what sets in motion the events leading to Elder Farrell’s downfall. This seems to me a spurious, or at least impractical, criticism. It condemns Elder Lozano for facilitating several friendships and

not predicting what some of the people involved will choose to do. On this argument, to be safe from evil we would have to avoid all encounters that could potentially lead to danger—which would make mortal experience in general, let alone missionary work, impossible.

Perhaps I am letting Elder Lozano off too easily. Maybe he should have insisted that none of the dinners with their neighbors take place, though these seem to me reasonably innocent. The real danger begins after dinner when Elder Farrell and Holly begin conversing unattended while Elder Lozano is talking with Louis. (This could also be viewed as Elder Farrell’s own first immature slip, as he too would know the mission rules forbade being alone with a girl.) I agree: an ideal senior companion would notice the danger and intervene sooner. In fact, *States of Grace* can be read as a cautionary tale with precisely that moral, underlined by the fact that Elder Lozano is quite ready to blame himself. But I believe the film conveys an even more important moral: All of us, even senior companions, are imperfect. Even with the best of intentions, we miss clues and fail to see where we could have made a difference, sometimes until it’s too late. Part of our anguish is seeing the results of our inadvertent, ignorant, or careless actions. That anguish can lead us to greater compassion and a deeper sense of our dependence on a perfect and perfectly loving Savior.

Still, given the premise that missionaries are not to give shelter to strangers, Elder Lozano does break the rules—something that, if I were ever a mission president, I wouldn’t want missionaries to do unless they checked with me first, if only because I would be responsible for their safety. The film’s opposition of the “rules” to the “commandments” perhaps provides dangerous grounds for rationalizing easy, foolish, or self-indulgent choices. Yet I don’t see how I could be a genuine Christian if I always gave the rules, set institutionally (and wisely) for particular situations, an absolute authority above Christ’s commandments, especially when a crisis seems to cry out for a different response. For instance, the grave dangers of infidelity or even perceived impropriety have led to strong cautions that married Church leaders should avoid ever being alone with anyone of the opposite sex. But does that mean I must leave a woman stranded on a dark and dangerous street when there seems to be no alternative except giving her a ride? I hope I can act with inspiration when faced with such challenges.

It seems to me the problems *States of Grace* confronts us with are genuine ones. What are we to do as followers of Christ when there seems to be a

conflict between temporary rules and enduring commandments? Maybe even more important, since we'll face it more often, is another problem: How do we choose between self-protection and caring for others (a theme Dutcher also treats in *Brigham City*)? It's true, as Elder Farrell puts it, that "There's a difference between being a good Christian and just being a fool." But it's also true, as his companion responds, that "It's a fine line sometimes."

Apparently—whatever the rules are and whatever prudent self-protection may generally dictate—real-life missionaries sometimes shelter nonmissionaries. After I took my brother-in-law to see *States of Grace*, he told me that, during his mission, he and his companion had taken in a recent convert to protect him from a violent father. Later, the father succeeded in killing his son. Such a real-life incident, supplemented by others, could exonerate *States of Grace* of the charge of lack of realism. But it does something more important: it shows that missionaries inevitably face dilemmas like the ones portrayed in the film; for instance, they have to balance wise self-interest with Christlike responses to the urgent needs of others. It's only fair to add that they may sometimes choose wrong, erring in either direction, and that disasters may result. Any follower of Christ is going to face such dilemmas and such dangers.

When a student wrote a letter to the *Daily Universe* claiming that both *States of Grace* and *The Work and the Glory 2* are worldly and degrading, I responded that "we must all be careful and honest in our choices. But because our sensitivities and experiences differ, we should avoid judging each other for how we respond to challenging works." I pointed out that the scriptures too depict violence and illicit romance, as anyone keeping up on the Old Testament knows. In fact, the purpose of the scriptures requires them to include such material. If nothing else, the scriptures demonstrate that all, including those who know and are seeking to follow God, are subject to sin and in need of salvation. In particular, the message of redemption in the Book of Mormon would not be nearly so effective if it were not for the horrors presented (for instance in Ether and in Moroni 9), which make clear how desperately Christ's atonement is needed. The crucial question is how the hard things are presented.

My view of how evil and violence should be depicted has been shaped both by the scriptures and by over twenty years of teaching literature. I am easily distressed by gratuitous violence and sensuality, yet I've found that works dealing with sin, even in its most horrific forms—*King Lear* and *The Brothers Karamazov* are examples of such works—can, if they do it right, be powerfully

moral. For me, *States of Grace* does it right: it shows the evil of sin but also conveys in an exceptionally effective way the redeeming power that can overcome violence, hatred, and despair.

It's true that the film leaves some of the moral problems it raises unresolved. As it ends, for instance, Carl (the repentant gang member) still faces serious legal problems. He rejects violence at the last moment, yet he is still an accessory to murder and must face the consequences, something the film doesn't mention. But, though that loose thread bothered me the first time I saw the film, on a second viewing it faded in importance compared to the larger truth that even serious sin does not put us beyond the pale of redemption. I take as literally true and as of the essence of the gospel Elder Boyd K. Packer's statement that, "Save for those few who defect to perdition after having known a fulness, there is no habit, no addiction, no rebellion, no transgression, no offense exempted from the promise of complete forgiveness" (19).

States of Grace is explicit about the need for repentance. The missionaries and the street preacher repeatedly offer the invitation to repent. The film closes with several characters committed to the challenging and at times excruciating process of changing their lives. Yet along with repentance, the film emphasizes the need for trust in God's love and in his power and desire to redeem. This theme begins with Carl's fear of damnation and with scriptures referring to forgiveness ("though your sins be as scarlet" and "I, the Lord, remember them no more") and ends with the nativity scene. *States of Grace* shows its characters struggling in the messiness of human life. It says, in essence: "Humans sin. Sin produces anguish and darkness. There is hope through the atonement of Christ. If we hope to partake of the power of the atonement ourselves, we need not only to repent of our transgressions but to have compassion for and seek to help those who transgress." Its message includes the profound truth stated by Elder John H. Groberg, among others, that "there is always hope; there is always hope; there is always hope."

States of Grace remains for me not only one of the best-crafted films I know but also one that can, used carefully, serve as an instrument for softening and expanding our hearts. It's true that the horror, grief, compassion, and hope we experience in watching the film are in a sense *virtual* emotions, prompted by imaginary characters and events. Yet these characters and events are presented with such skill—with realism, humanity, humor, warmth, and compassion—that responding to them allows us to learn and to practice ways we ought to

respond to those we encounter in the course of our non-cinematic lives. *States of Grace* has affected how I view and treat my children, my friends, and others, including myself. And it has impressed strongly on my thoughts and feelings the power and reality of Christ's teachings and saving work, so strongly that I find it impossible to think of the film without thinking of them.

Note

1. This phrase is from Dave Hunter of HaleStorm Entertainment, as quoted by McKee.

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States of Grace and Community

Robert Young

Generally when I have written reviews, I have tried to find a single word that describes the feeling or message of the film. With *States of Grace*, however, I find I am unable to do so. Compassion, Community, Faith, Love, Humanity, Redemption—all of these words could be used. But instead of trying to write an elaborate review that hits on all points, I would instead like to focus on one aspect which has been very important to me, that of community.

The idea of "Mormon culture" has been the main focus of many recent comedic LDS-themed movies. Though they all attempt to include a spiritual lesson, these messages have felt to me more like a tag-on or insert than the main focus of the films. *States of Grace*, by contrast, is the polar reverse of this.

Instead of focusing on our "silly" culture, *States of Grace* focuses on the community we build, both inside and outside of the Church.

There are many prominent characters in the movie. Some are LDS and some are not. It made me very happy when I found that the LDS characters were never disguised as perfect—never even as purely good—but rather as people who, despite their mistakes and inadequacies, were trying very hard to be as good as they could be. The fact that complemented and completed this, however, was that the non-LDS characters were presented in the same way.

The Pentecostal preacher, the actress, the gangster. The ex-gangster who becomes a missionary. The missionary who falls in love. The stories of all these characters are interwoven to create the main plot of this film. Each character is good at heart but flawed, as every human is. The beauty, however, lies not in the individual narrative strands but in the way their stories come into contact and affect each other. For me, this story was about the community they formed—not because they were LDS, but because they were humans, all on the same journey, all striving for the same things. As the characters form a community through their friendships, they find ways in which they help each other experience the realities of love, compassion, faith, and redemption.

Throughout the movie, you can see different tools being used to help build this sense of community, both for the audience and for the characters. During the times when one character is struggling, shots of other characters watching and being affected are often used. One thing that I feel greatly aided this sense of community was the inclusion of a second religious character, a Pentecostal preacher, not to be converted, but to show the sort of community we may form with other faiths. In fact, during the closing credits the movie presents a very lively sermon from the Pentecostal preacher.

No aspect of the movie was perfect. There were some actors who didn't measure up to others, some parts where the writing felt lackluster, some parts where the film lacked technical consistency or realism. But, through it all, the message still came across loud and clear. There were even points where there was a blatant choice to set aside consistency or realism in exchange for meaning and power. To me it was clear the filmmakers had made the right choices for the film.

I loved *States of Grace* because it was not the sort of narrow-minded movie aimed at conversion or comedy that I have come to expect from Mormon cinema. Instead, it was a film that opened doors. This film reached out to its audience. It was not a film I felt I could never invite nonmember friends to. In

fact, when I finished watching it, there were several friends I knew I had to call. Some of them were struggling with faith, or just with life in general. I knew this movie would have a profound effect on each of them. I feel that almost anyone would experience the same thing. No matter who you are, what faith you belong to, or what you hope for in life, you'll take something powerful with you from *States of Grace*.

A Truly Christian Film

Margaret Blair Young

Years ago, Richard Dutcher expressed a concern that LDS movies were becoming cultural burlesque routines, based on a series of inside jokes gently mocking home teaching, singles wards, and other peculiarities of Mormonism. He was concerned that we were not focusing on the real power of our faith: the atonement of Jesus Christ. I knew that his film *States of Grace* would be Dutcher's answer to this concern.

It is a masterpiece.

My husband has summarized the film in his review. I will merely add that scriptures ran through my mind throughout my viewing of *States of Grace*, and tears ran down my cheeks.

When Holly talks to Elder Farrell as though she were at a confessional and reveals her tragic choices and their consequences, I could imagine the Savior saying, "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much" (Luke 7:47). As Elder Farrell confronts his own potential for sin and realizes his dependence on the love of God, I could again imagine the Savior whispering, "He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live" (John 11:25). For me, one of the most moving moments was Carl's baptismal interview, conducted by Elder Banks (played by Desean Terry, one of the few returning cast members from *God's Army*). Carl is concerned about his past, and Banks recounts the story of the people of Ammon, who buried their weapons in the ground. When Carl asks what happened to those people, Banks responds, "Somewhere, deep in the earth, those weapons are buried still." Though he takes this to heart, Carl's further complications with gangs *after* his baptism and his own renunciation of violence lead to one of the most thoughtful and poignant commentaries ever created on any portion of the Book of Mormon.

There are moments of brilliant, deeply symbolic filmmaking, the most obvious being the stylized juxtaposition of Carl's confirmation with the gang murder of a young teen. We see one group of men circling with outstretched knives, and another circle of men surrounding this new convert to lay their hands on his head. The gang's victim closes his eyes; Carl opens his. We see the victim abandoned by his murderers, and immediately move to the priesthood circle, where the men are embracing each other and Carl. It is a one-minute microcosm of what the gospel does: invites all who would partake to open their eyes and see the potential of each person around them, to bury their weapons and be reborn into a new life of love and inclusion.

The world that Dutcher presents is full of temptation, sin, violence, and despair—but also, because of its focus, full of redemption, renewal, and hope. He offers no easy answers to the hard questions we encounter in these seductive times, but portrays the need for a Savior and the power of the atonement better than I have ever seen it portrayed before.

I am extremely selective about the movies I see and even more about the DVDs I'll have in my home. I did something very rare with *States of Grace*. Not only did I see the premiere with my husband, but I took my children to it three days later and paid full price (we generally wait until movies come to the dollar theaters), and we have already pre-ordered the DVD. After seeing the movie, my daughter wrote Dutcher a personal note, thanking him for making a "Mormon movie" which went so far beyond stereotype. My oldest son, whose review is included here, was deeply moved. And my youngest son (then fourteen years old) gave it the best compliment he could produce: "Wow. That was really good."

This is one movie which speaks to the essential concerns of all Christians, and Dutcher makes an effort to include a variety of religions in his characters—Baptist, Pentecostal, Lutheran, and Catholic. Ministers of other faiths have, by and large, responded enthusiastically to it, though, sadly, movie ticket sellers outside of Utah were often instructed to tell potential buyers that *States of Grace* was a *MORMON*, not a *Christian*, film (apparently in response to complaints from moviegoers who didn't realize the Christian experience would be framed in a Mormon setting).

States of Grace is in fact one of the best and most faith-affirming Christian films you could see. It is consciously geared to the great gift of the Son of God, and ends with a nativity scene as a fitting climax to all "the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to" (*Hamlet* 3.1.61–62). This film left

me and my family with a renewed commitment to live more lovingly and more forgivingly in our own varying states of grace, facing our challenges with gratitude for the possibilities the Savior opened the night the angels sang, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Luke 2:14).

IRREANTUM Call for Submissions

We will publish an issue on “Youth” in 2007. We seek submissions of short fiction written for a young adult audience. We also seek submissions on any topic in the form of fiction, poetry, and personal essay. We especially would like to see translations of works written by, for, or about Mormons in languages other than English. Send inquiries or electronic manuscripts (MSWord, WordPerfect, or rtf files) to submissions@irreantum.org.

LaBute’s Horrible Horror Movie

A review of *The Wicker Man* (2006; written and directed by Neil LaBute)

R. W. Rasband

♦ Spoiler alert for both the 1973 and 2006 versions of *The Wicker Man*.



People like a good horror film, and the PG-13 variety has been commercially very successful in recent years, with remakes of Japanese films like *The Ring* and *The Grudge*. Neil LaBute has attempted another redo of this kind of film with his new *The Wicker Man*, a reimagining of the legendary 1973 British film (which relatively few people have actually seen). Unfortunately this is the first LaBute-directed film that seems to be completely incompetent in execution. His other films were strong and vigorous, whatever else one could say about them, and I have been a fan. But this movie as a genre piece is tentative and strangely inert. The photography is pedestrian. The music by the great Angelo Badalamenti (David Lynch’s main man) is uncharacteristically mediocre. The set design is ugly and unconvincing. The pacing is turgid. And Nicolas Cage is a zombie. The reviews have not been kind, with some justification. But aside from these flaws the film is thematically inadequate in a way that would have sunk it even if everything else had been okay.

The original *Wicker Man* told the story of a stern Calvinist policeman named Neil Howie (note well that first name) who is summoned from England to an isolated island off the coast of Scotland to investigate the disappearance of a young girl. He encounters a smiling cult of pagans led by the smooth Lord Summerisle, played with sinister charm by horror-film great Christopher Lee. Sergeant Howie comes to believe the villagers intend to sacrifice the child as part of a fertility rite. The film plays like a mystery with a certain grim humor until the last fifteen minutes, when it plunges into pure horror with a shock ending that was new when M. Night Shyamalan was still in kindergarten.

LaBute has reproduced most of the plot but has changed some things, and not necessarily for the better. This time the pagans are a matriarchy led by a

Sister Summerisle, played by a deeply un-scary Ellen Burstyn. The men are downtrodden, mostly silent, and in some cases retarded; they are even eventually referred to as “drones.” (The chief export of the island is honey from a large colony of bees.) The title of “sister,” by which the ladies refer to themselves, and the presence of a large number of beehives might cause the LDS moviegoer to pay closer attention. Sister Summerisle calls herself the “earthly representative” (think “prophet”) of the goddess, and we’re told that “pioneers” brought this singularly closed-off society out west in the 1850s. And I guess it’s supposed to be an inside joke that Cage’s protagonist Edward Malus (“male-est”) is deathly allergic to the bees.

In the remake, it’s the cop’s former fiancée who gets him to investigate the vanishing of her (their?) child. We’re told that she’s from the island but ran off to live in “normal society,” where she met Cage’s character, whom she eventually left to return home. Given how things work out at the end of the film, one has to wonder if LaBute isn’t venting some bitterness about the LDS ex–Mrs. LaBute. The ex-fiancée turns out to be part of a conspiracy that means no good for the policeman, and at the end he asks her, “Why did you do this to me?” But considering his track record, I suppose LaBute will be accused of misogyny whether his women are victims, as in most of his earlier films, or the victimizers, which they are in this version. Still, one envisions LaBute asking why he came out to the wastelands of Utah in the first place. The Cage character’s paranoia is realistic in the context of the film, but does that mean LaBute thinks any of his residual anger against the Church is justified? (This would be an opinion LDS audience members probably would not share.)

At the most recent Sunstone symposium of 2006, LaBute described himself as having been separated from the LDS Church because he didn’t feel as though he could create art within its narrow cultural horizons, yet a powerful creative tension—perhaps engendered by those very restrictions—has been the engine of much of LaBute’s work. You could feel him testing boundaries, seeing how far he could push his energetic (some would say harsh) moralism by creating horrifically bad examples in his plays and then setting his work within the context of a church that seemingly stresses art as a matter of creating a “positive” vision.

In the original brilliant screenplay by Anthony Shaffer (author of *Sleuth* and brother to Peter of *Amadeus* fame), Christianity was pitted against paganism in a struggle of worldviews, with both coming out wanting. But you came to like the upright, stubborn Sgt. Howie (played with sympathetic starch by Edward

Woodward) even as you see that his rectitude is the cause of his downfall. In a cruel irony, if he had given in to the sexual temptations offered by the sensual cultists, he would have been saved. The islanders needed a virgin, you see. (LaBute said in interviews—before *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* came out—that he had to change this because audiences wouldn’t accept a middle-aged innocent, yet despite this awareness he betrays an unfamiliarity with actual LDS and other Christian sexual norms.) In the remake, Nic Cage’s character has no religious feeling. He’s another one of LaBute’s schlubs, born to be victimized by smarter, meaner people. He is a devotee of self-help literature (at one point he asks plaintively, “Where are my ‘Everything’s OK’ tapes?”). Basically he’s just another unmoored postmodern guy who gets through life with loud bluster to cover up his fear and uncertainty. And here is the film’s big thematic weakness: There’s really nothing at stake. Cage gives a weirdly affectless performance; one never connects with him at any level, unlike Woodward, whose certainty effectively changes to sweaty terror. Therefore, Malus becomes a defeated character from the start and, in the end, doesn’t represent anything except contemporary inner emptiness. He is just a pitiable fly in the spider’s web, and his fate has no resonance.

In one of the original film’s creepiest scenes, Howie discovers the children in a schoolroom, covertly torturing an insect. You see the smiling masks of the pagans slip for an instant; their sadistic true faces are revealed. Motivated by Christian morality, Howie stops the torture. In LaBute’s version, a crow comes flying out of a school desk so fast and with so little emphasis it has almost no impact except as just another silly “gotcha!” moment. It’s almost as if LaBute has given up the struggle to create a moral vision now that he has left the Church. The passion and rage of *bash* was motivated, I think, by close contact with other Church members, as was the dark satire of *Your Friends and Neighbors*, which could have been set in the student wards of BYU, and *In the Company of Men*, in which the white shirts and ties made the film resemble the meanest missionary “office politics” imaginable. LaBute seemed to draw strength from his loyal rebellion, his conscious contrariness about the conflicted, all-too-human Saints he saw around him. I’m afraid, in contrast, that *The Wicker Man* has “I surrender” written all over it. It feels as though LaBute tried to sell out by making a commercially more viable horror film, and failed terribly. The vitality produced by his connection with Mormonism has been replaced with pallid, washed-out resentment. The original film’s final sequence, featuring laughing, happy pagans dancing in a circle to some hair-raising folk

music, showed up in my nightmares after I saw it. There's just something so monstrously authentic about that 1973 movie, with its gnarled, peasant extras, the grungy British architecture, the echoes of half-remembered Celtic religion, the spine-chilling music, and Shaffer's clockwork-perfect screenplay. As one critic said, *The Wicker Man* is the missing link between the hippies and the Manson family. LaBute's vision, however, is laughably artificial. In his mind, he may have modeled some aspects of his matriarchy on the LDS Church, but on the screen there is no life in the cultists at all. A final example that tells the difference: in the original, Sgt. Howie disguises himself as the archetypal Fool, which becomes highly symbolic. At a similar point in the remake, Cage dresses up in a stupid-looking bear suit, for no discernible point whatsoever except to provoke unintentional laughter in the theater. If this proves to be typical of how LaBute's separation from the Church has taken the energy out of his work, it would be sad indeed.

A Glimpse Inside the Last Wagon

A review of *Angie* (2006; directed and photographed by the Tom Russell family; edited by William Newman)

Randy Astle

"The cinema more than any other art is bound up with love."

—André Bazin (6)



At the October 1947 General Conference, after Latter-day Saints had spent the summer commemorating the centennial of the pioneers' arrival in the Salt Lake Valley, President J. Reuben Clark delivered possibly the finest, and most literary, discourse of his ecclesiastical career. "They of the Last Wagon" extols the work of the dusty, weary, rank-and-file Saints, "unknown, unremembered, unhonored in the pages of history, but lovingly revered round the hearthstones of their children and their children's children," those who "worked and worked, and prayed and followed, and wrought so gloriously" without ever receiving public adulation for their life-long efforts (155).

The Fit for the Kingdom documentary movement (begun around 2000) is designed, among other things, to bring out of anonymity some of the usually anonymous Saints who make up the heart and soul of the LDS Church today. Using consumer-level video equipment, the men and women who make up this informal coalition of documentarians strive to shoot portraits of average yet remarkable Latter-day Saints in their personal environments. The result is visual records of what Neal A. Maxwell might have described as people working out their salvation within their own individualized mortal laboratories. The roughly two dozen films—twelve of which, as of this writing, are available online at <http://fitforthe kingdom.byu.edu>—are generally known by their protagonists' first names: *Emilia* the curious toddler, *Ramona* the hassled mother, *Rusty* the unlikely poet, *Leroy* the octogenarian crossing guard, *Earl* the mischievous Primary child, and so on.

Into this mix of five- to fifteen-minute films comes *Angie*, a fifty-three-minute longitudinal record of the last years in the life of Angie Russell, a young mother of three teenagers who is dying of breast cancer. Such a potentially emotional issue is deep water for the Fit films to swim in—they usually tend to find their richest material in quotidian moments like family scripture study or a girls' camp snipe hunt—but *Angie* performs brilliantly, with restraint and without emotional exploitation. This is certainly partly due to the fact that it was Angie's family that shot the footage (her husband Tom is a film director and professor at BYU). The filmmakers therefore had unrestricted access—a documentarian's dream—that allows for glimpses into their family's life that would be extremely difficult for an outsider to capture. It also means, however, that much of what goes on before the camera is sarcasm and tomfoolery; during the poignant, heartrending moments, the camera was appropriately off as the filmmakers lived through their lives and their grief. (One prominent exception, and one of the most moving moments in the film, comes after Angie's hysterectomy, when Tom silently carries the camera down a hospital corridor into her darkened room and reaches out with his left hand to stroke her hair.) This paucity of overly emotional material is not to the film's detriment, however, as the online preface notes:

This is a private and dramatic story. We were anxious to respect that privacy and let the drama emerge on its own, without any interference or rushing or exaggeration by us. So the film takes its time, like the Russells did, showing their interactions and processes that are all the more precious for their plainness and simplicity. *Angie* has some of the difficulty of the events it describes, and hopefully a bit of the deep feeling that they engendered (Duncan).

To assert that in order to engender deep feelings the film needs to include all the tears and pathos that accompany losing a wife and mother would be to reject, or at best misunderstand, the very premise on which the Fit for the Kingdom films are founded. Much of the foundational thinking for the films stems from the work of Paul Schrader, a screenwriter and director probably best known today for his screenplays of arguably redemptive Martin Scorsese films like *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, and *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Nevertheless, it is his 1972 doctoral dissertation *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* that has most influenced critical thought on religious cinema and has proven a particular focus among serious LDS cinematic critics. In the book's conclusion, Schrader describes a polarity between abundance and sparsity that

has characterized much of the world's religious film. The abundant techniques or means, he claims, have generally been the favorite of Hollywood, typifying the "sex and sand" Biblical epics of Cecil B. DeMille and others. Special effects allow the religious propagandist to "simply put the spiritual on film. The film is 'real,' the spiritual is 'on' film, ergo: the spiritual is real. Thus we have an entire history of cinematic magic: the blind are made to see, the lame to walk, the deaf to hear, all on camera" (163).

Sparsity, on the other hand, requires more work but yields greater dividends. Schrader quotes Jacques Maritain's 1930 work *Religion and Culture*, which originally proposed the abundant-sparse dichotomy, to explain sparsity as a spiritual means or technique: "The less burdened they [the sparse techniques] are by matter, the more destitute, the less visible—the more efficacious they are. This is because they are pure means for the virtue of the spirit" (154). Therefore, the filmmaker intent on thus expressing the transcendent must

gradually eliminate the abundant means and the earthly rationale behind them. The moment of confrontation can only occur if, at the decisive action [or "spiritual climax" of the film], the abundant means have lost their power. If the "miracle" can be seen in any humanistic tradition, psychological or sociological, the viewer will avoid a confrontation with the Transcendent. By rejecting its own potential over a period of time, cinema can create a style of confrontation. It can set the abundant and sparse means face to face in such a way that the latter seem preferable (164).

The miracles-on-screen tendency has had a long and distinguished career within the LDS filmic canon, and the Fit for the Kingdom movement was consciously conceived as a concrete dialectic means to challenge such films' hegemony. The irony of these sparser movies—and, indeed, of much of life itself—is that the life-changing spiritual manifestations, the ones that are so *abundantly* rich and powerful, often come to us through the sparsest of means. It is not the whirlwind, earthquake, or fire that carries God's message to us, but his still small voice. We need not always make our movies about the prophets, the architects, and the martyrs, although they have their place. We may also include the occupants of the last wagons: the Michele Meservys (*The Plan*, 1981), the Arthur Kanes (*New York Doll*, 2005), the Lethe Tatges (*Joseph Smith: The Man*, 1980), the Elaine Darts (*Elaine Dart: Not Like Other People*, 1977), the cripples, the teachers, the housewives, and the Marthas. There is a reason, I believe, that Luke recorded the story of Christ visiting Mary and

Martha immediately after the parable of the good Samaritan: there's more to Martha's side of the story than we generally give her credit for. There is, after all, some equation to be made between the anonymous Christian who goes about binding up wounds and the one who devotes herself to preparing a meal for her Lord.

And there is an equivalency for Angie as well. If her *activity* of discipleship is less obvious than in some of the other *Fit for the Kingdom* films, then we must realize that her duty is being performed precisely in her ostensibly formal sit-down interviews that the other films tend to eschew: these, it turns out, are her action shots. She is a wife and a mother, and she *mothers* her children through the medium of the camera they point at her. The Russells use the camera to discuss, evaluate, and finally reenter their familial lives enriched for the experience. This process is obvious, for instance, in the family council when they decide to shave her head for family home evening, but its most poignant example comes later, on Mother's Day of 2004.

The sequence begins with a child filming Tom as he prepares an omelet for Angie's surprise breakfast in bed. There is hushed banter over the quality of the cooking, in which all take part, and we see that even in her absence Angie is a unifying force for her family. The children, though ever sarcastic, radiate as they bring the food into her bedroom, and the viewer receives a privileged look into a poignant moment when a family is, for a change, serving their mom. This is a potentially spiritual scene despite—or perhaps because of—the dialogue about mundane, or *sparse*, subjects such as missing napkins and movies.

Cut to later that day as Mom, dressed for church (another weekly duty), sits on the porch to be interviewed by her twelve-year-old son Isaac. In this incredible dialogue, Angie takes the opportunity to subtly interview *him* about his life and emotions, although he is the one behind the camera. Like a true mother, she takes every chance to shepherd her child through mortality, including the very difficult experience of *his mother's* illness. She has not thought of herself, but only of how it may be affecting him. At the scene's end she arises, Martha-like (even on Mother's Day, and, as they joked in an earlier scene, "even with cancer"), to go prepare dinner. As she walks past Isaac, he stops her to request one last smile for the camera. She obliges, hamming (in a moment reminiscent of the pioneering cinema verité film *Lonely Boy*), then asks, "Is this good?" There follows a pause that becomes poignant in its innocence; though she meant nothing profound by her unanswered question, as the strains of "If You Could Hie to Kolob" filter from the house, one must contemplate the family

and their future beyond their present suffering, and the response has to be, "Yes, this is good."

Through a great many moments like these, *Angie* is more than capable of standing on its own. But perhaps the most remarkable thing about it is that it does not have to and is not meant to; it is not an individual film released into the whirlpool of the commercial marketplace, left to rise or sink based upon the efficacy of its marketing and, only secondarily, internal merits. It is, rather, one of a collective of films—grouped together, unadorned and unadvertised, and available free of charge to anyone in the world with an Internet connection. The *Fit for the Kingdom* movement, in other words, represents not just a single film or even a type or style of film, but a *mosaic* of films. Each individual piece interlocks with, then complements and balances the others. They are short enough and sparse enough that no individual title can give a complete perspective of its subject's life, but together the films can and do allow just such a comprehensive glimpse inside modern Mormonism in its totality, something which will be increasingly true as the films grow in number and geographical purview.

Angie, therefore, calls attention to the beauty of the entire body of the Saints, of *Emanuel* and *Lloya* and *Heather* and the others—of each one of us. As President Clark said:

There is no aristocracy of birth in this Church; it belongs equally to the highest and the lowliest; for as Peter said to Cornelius, the Roman centurion, seeking him: ". . . Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him. (Acts 10:34, 35)" (160).

Therefore, President Clark's tribute is as true of *Angie* as of all the nineteenth century pioneers:

So for a full hundred years . . . these multitudes have made their way to Zion . . . that all might build up the kingdom of God on earth—all welded together by common hardship and suffering, never-ending work and deep privation, tragic woes and heart-eating griefs, abiding faith and exalting joy, firm testimony and living spiritual knowledge—a mighty people . . . (159).

The glimmering mosaic of the individual films comes to life within a single scene of *Angie* when the fairly insulated world of the Russell home, at least as we have seen it, opens up to include their entire community. In a drizzling rain,

we witness a mass of people gathered to participate in a “Walk 4 Angie.” No context—exposition of who they are, who organized them, how the money will be spent, or other details—is given, but the moment is all the more powerful for its reticence. What we are left to see is a silent multitude of faces, all of them with their own joys and their own trials and worthy of their own films. This is a community of faith pulling together to buoy this family’s lagging wagon out of its particular mire, proving that the Saints do indeed bear one another’s burdens, mourn with those who mourn, and comfort those who stand in need of comfort. The moment is summarized in a quick shot of the tarp-covered bake sale, including a neon paper sign reading, “Help Us Help Angie Our Hero.” This brief depiction of a suburban Zion is a crucial moment, not just for this film, but for all of LDS cinema, as it encapsulates the potential community-building power inherent in film.

This unifying potential is particularly true of online digital cinema. Productions, like *Angie*, distributed in this way can potentially reach and unite even the most geographically distant branch of the Church. Furthermore, when we realize that, for some, Salt Lake City constitutes the other side of the world, then we truly begin to see online cinema’s egalitarian potential. Not only can it connect the entire wagon train, it can eliminate the very concept of a train by creating a global cinematic *web* of Saints; as we see with the walk in the rain, when the wagons are circled, no one is in the rear. Contrast this unity with the higher-stakes arena of profit-driven LDS theatrical feature films, where even the best intentions must submit to the exigencies of the market. Though this system can obviously result in occasional yet spectacular gems, within LDS cinema over the past few years it has too often yielded public mudslinging and generally worthless films that land far short of goals like fostering personal discipleship or uniting the global Saints; even when operating at its best, commercial cinema, including DVDs, can reach only a fraction of the Church’s population. Of course, many Latter-day Saints in developing nations cannot currently access the Internet to the extent possible elsewhere, but as the technology and accessibility increase, we must be prepared. Allow me to quickly clarify that I am not advocating the abandonment of commercial LDS cinema—it stands to reason that our best filmmakers will generally be the ones who make a living at it—but I am asserting that, as one component of a multifaceted cinema, films like the *Fit for the Kingdom* documentaries can help bring LDS cinema out of its pageant-esque DeMillian roots into aesthetic, social, and spiritual maturity.

Angie, and films like it, forces us to consider cinema as a stewardship, and therefore as a crucial component of our discipleship. It challenges us to consider what our cinema is and to what purpose we shall apply it, as a hammer or as a hammock. As a film, *Angie* is remarkable. But only as a force for increased unity and love will it prove a tribute even remotely fit to memorialize Angie Russell as we have glimpsed her. Though among the least of the Saints, Angie—like Martha, the good Samaritan, and millions of others—proves to be well described by the Savior’s words: “He that is greatest among you shall be your servant” (Matt. 23:11). If we as viewers can apply that lesson to our own lives, then the film will have done its work.

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The Nelson Whipple house, built in 1854 in Salt Lake City, is now the home of Signature Books. Drawing by Keiko Jones, courtesy the artist.

To Capture the Soul

A review of Jacquelyn Mitchard's *Cage of Stars* (Warner Books, 2006) and Rae Meadows's *Calling Out* (MacAdam/Cage, 2006)

Phyllis Barber



Jacquelyn Mitchard's latest novel, *Cage of Stars*, begs the question: can (or rather should) writers write about things they don't know intimately? Of course, they are free to write about anything in the world. Fiction doesn't have to shoulder any undue burden of accuracy.

But has Jacquelyn Mitchard—a former syndicated newspaper columnist from Madison, Wisconsin—written a convincing book? Has she, who, after all, was the first author to have a nod from Oprah's Book Club with her book *The Deep End of the Ocean*, done justice to this culture, even with careful research and a good intention of "humanizing the adherents of a religion that still suffers from widespread negative stereotypes" (*Booklist*).

Mitchard has made a sincere attempt to write a moving account of a young girl whose faith is put on the line because of horrific crimes done to her two younger sisters, crimes to which she is a soon-after-the-fact witness. Protagonist Veronica "Ronnie" Bonham Swan, a young Mormon girl from a "liberal" Mormon family in rural Utah, genuinely agonizes over forgiveness, compassion, and the meaning of sin. In this, Mitchard has made an admirable effort to humanize Mormons and to write a believable story.

So, maybe it's unfair to require Mitchard, a novelist in this instance, to be accurate with the culture. This is a novel, after all. But bottom line, the question may be: Even if you're a "good enough" writer, can you write about cultures you're not familiar with and bring them authentically to the page?

As hard as Mitchard tried, in my opinion, she captured neither the soul of Ronnie, nor the soul of her beliefs. Maybe most readers will feel satisfied to have this perfunctory peek into a Mormon world and heart. But to anyone who understands the interior culture, there's apt to be a longing for the feel of real.

First, there's the question of diction, which seems more Catholic than Mormon in Mitchard's hands. For instance, Ronnie Swan says: "I knew there had to be something that would make me normal. And being LDS, *it had to come from the Holy Father*" (71). In my experience with Mormon culture, no one refers to God as "the Holy Father." Another instance: "Uncle Pierce . . . came down for our Sunday services and *for holy days*" (16). Mormons are unlikely to refer to special days as holy days. And a third example: "Mama . . . made a small ceramic *statue* at the entrance . . . inside *the sanctuary*, we had movable *pews*" (17). This *could* happen, but statues are not ordinarily found in a Mormon chapel, and the terminology (*pews* and especially *sanctuary*) is not indigenous to the culture.

Then there's the business of cultural miscues. While Mitchard is right on the mark with many of her references, there are enough that miss the mark to make me mistrust this author across-the-board. She mentions a temple in Cedar City: "Cedar City . . . big enough to have a college and a temple as beautiful as a Russian castle" (15). At this writing, there is no such temple. Another instance is her confusion about both temples and priesthood: "That week, my father took me and the baby to the temple *in Cedar City to seal Rafe to our family, for time and eternity. As a father and a priest, he had done the same for all of us*" (76). To those who understand the priesthood in LDS culture, the father would need to hold the Melchizedek priesthood to seal Rafe to the family. The author also intimates a serial sealing performed for each child, which happens only if the children are adopted.

One more among many other examples: "'Ronnie,' he said, 'if Becky and Ruthie . . . *had needed to be baptized*, I would have wished that you could be the one to do that.' He hugged me. 'I think they would have wanted that'" (76). The reference to a father wishing his daughter could baptize the girls might be a debatable point among LDS feminists, but is not something the father would likely say. The better point here might be that Mitchard has not portrayed the father well enough for the reader to understand why he would take this stance.

Indeed, characterization is sometimes thin in this book. Mitchard has used a point of view she can only guess at and a context she doesn't fully comprehend. The text feels rushed at times—as a text will that is skimming over surfaces—and the author's exploration of an essential topic ends up feeling shallow.

I don't want to continue to take Mitchard to task. She may write what she wants. She is a writer with imagination, with an idea, with Google at her

fingertips, a Mormon friend for reference—someone who just wants to do what she loves doing best: write. But still, has she served her subject well? And while we're at it, could a Latter-day Saint do better?

Maybe not. While Mormon culture may be incomprehensible to an outsider, Latter-day Saint authors may be too close to it, and to the expectations of its readers—the inside language, and the inside jokes and references—to write to a larger audience. Finally, arguably, many Mormon writers and publishers wouldn't want to take risks with themes or explorations that offend their injunction to uphold the kingdom of God. Is there "forbidden territory" for a writer who chooses to honor such an injunction? Is it necessary to create a world where everything is light—veritably shielded from the world's darkness? At least Mitchard allowed for complexity in Ronnie, for rebellion in a girl who balks at her parents' easy forgiveness of a man who murdered her two younger sisters.

With that in mind, it seems reasonable to ask why a writer wants to write novels and for whom. To make a genuine contribution to the world of arts and letters? I think one has to put oneself on the rack to write a good novel, and not just another hack novel filling up space at a grocery store. There are many risks involved in a moving, authentic account of anyone.

Rae Meadows's *Calling Out* is just such an account, even if she refers to the celestial kingdom as the "lowest one" and even if her publicist promotes the book by saying that her protagonist works for a "Mormon-endorsed escort agency"—one of those cute tricks of publicists to get the public salivating/"oh-yeahing" about the hypocritical Mormons.

Meadows doesn't exhibit any desire or inclination to write from a Mormon point of view. She uses "sacred and profane" juxtapositions in her story—a young woman working in the escort business set against the backdrop of the Salt Lake Temple—and clients who mention their connection to Mormonism in one way or another. Meadows bases her protagonist, Jane, on her own experience which is cited in her publicity material:

My first job was writing obituaries for the *Salt Lake Tribune* which gave me a crash course in the vocabulary of Mormonism and a steady stream of anti-LDS vitriol from my coworker who was the granddaughter of a polygamist. Then I answered a classified ad for a phone manager at an escort service, and my immersion into Utahan culture really began.

Jane carries the book much more convincingly than Mitchard's Ronnie in *Cage of Stars*. Jane is caught not only in the crossroads of the West, but in the

crossroads of her own life. She doesn't get buried as a main character by trying to establish herself as an authority on the foreign world of Utah, but admits to being a foreigner in a sometimes contradictory world.

An eastern transplant who has recently broken up with her boyfriend, Jane is trying to find her way through a labyrinth of personal relationships. She has found a job as a phone manager for an escort service which is micromanaged by the police and which subscribes to very definite rules. "Kiss, cuddle, caress, tease, strip, take a shower, nibble on his ears . . . and anything else not on the can't-do list" (50).

Jane eventually becomes an escort herself and finds it to be a mixed bag—exhilarating, adventurous, and even compassionate, as when she attends to stroke victim Virgil (a visit paid for by an anonymous friend). After she puts him to sleep by talking to him, she discovers he is a heartbreakingly brilliant still life photographer. Meadows does an excellent job of portraying complex male clients, including a few Mormon faces. But when one of the girls is almost raped and Jane herself has to fend off a frightening sexual assault, she has to come to terms with the dark side of her business.

Even though there are a few cheap shots here and there, I consider *Calling Out* to be a moral novel which engages the question of prostitution and escort services and how they devastate their employees: "Sometimes things just suck and there's no explanation that makes it better" (186). Meadows doesn't pull any punches. She's out there telling it like it is, even though some LDS readers may be horrified at the suggestion that there are Mormon men who would engage prostitutes, and others might reject this book as a foul-minded and foul-mouthed effort. But, Meadows' world is made of many composite parts; there is opposition in all things; there are people examining and inhabiting every inch of the spectrum of life and figuring out where they belong.

Finally, I don't sense Meadows has any personal vendetta against Mormons, even though she takes some of the hip positions common to the culture's critics—a few jabs at Little America for instance: "Mormons like to stay here when they come to pay tribute to the founding fathers. We send a lot of girls here" (84), and then, the too-cute: "clients may not appreciate foul language" (85).

But Meadows also tips her hat: "Whatever one thinks of Mormon ideology, the way they took control of this place, bent it to their will, and forced unforgiving land to make sense is admirable" (94). "I make a few loops around Temple Square. . . . whole families hold hands. The contentment on their faces is enviable. Linked together in this holy destination, they seem wanting of

nothing" (110). Meadows is not immune to Mormon goodness, but she's very aware of some discrepancies. She is encountering something broader here. As she says at the book's end, "The thing about Utah is that despite its wholesome veneer, I've come to see it as it is, to know it in my way, and it's a lot messier and more alluring than it appears on the surface. . . . Yes, given the options, I choose to live here, to pitch my tent in this place that's seemingly far away from everything. For now, anyway" (278).

So, should authors write about what they don't know? Should a non-LDS author write from a Mormon perspective? Of course, but if a writer is going to create a main character as a Mormon, she should know the culture as intimately as fingers can feel the inside of a rubber glove. She should not depend on the vast number of clichés extant. Otherwise, readers have but another shallow book to add to the many written about Mormon culture, a culture which few people (except converts) take the trouble to understand.

Tales from Terrestria

A review of Walter Kirn's *Mission to America* (Doubleday, 2005)

Paul Swenson



A golden figure, his arms outstretched, appears in the blue sky above a two-lane blacktop leading to a mountain range on the cover of Walter Kirn's novel, *Mission to America*. The levitating body is the source of lustrous rays projecting off the page in all directions.

At a glance, the figure might register as an icon, perhaps a cross or crucifix. For Mormon readers, the familiar association likely to leap to mind is a statue of the Angel Moroni. But this apparition wields no trumpet, and on close examination is a generic pop cartoon of a mortal male, however shiny.

Kirn, a literary critic and author of such novels as *Up in the Air* and *Thumb-sucker*, is a former Mormon whose family converted to the LDS Church when he was twelve, and some reviewers have misapprehended that *Mission to America* uses Mormonism as a model for his isolated Montana sect at the heart of the novel.

It's true the missionary who narrates the story, Mason Plato LaVerle, and his companion, Elias Stark, travel as a pair, wear short-sleeved white shirts and are both called "Elder," and it is equally true that Mason's surname may have been borrowed from that vast compendium of odd Utah given names that have achieved legendary satirical status. But such minutia don't validate *New York Times* critic Paul Gray's conclusion that "Mormonism clearly provided Kirn with a helpful template."

Mormonism seems to serve Kirn not so much as a template, but as a tempting appetizer tray, from which he steals an occasional hors d'oeuvre to set up the convoluted humor of the novel's mulligan stew main course. Perhaps he intends an ironic in-joke for the few who would get it, in his inversion of Mormonism's male authoritarianism and preoccupation with global growth, and a governing matriarchy of Aboriginal Fulfilled Apostles, who are led by an aging Seeress and whose numbers are fast diminishing.

Having requisitioned a repossessed green Dodge camper for transport, LaVerle and Stark are dispatched from the sect's Bluff, Montana headquarters into "Terrestria" (as the AFA refers to the outer United States) to find new blood—read: new brides—to replenish the community's depleted gene pool.

Painting LaVerle and Stark as representatives of a strict and abstruse religious lifestyle, Kirn seems to be taking readers' bets on whether the pair's astringent presence in mainstream America will have the slightest effect or whether they will be quickly swallowed up by the larger culture. The Aboriginal Fulfilled Apostles subscribe to a private economic system with its own outsized currency, to a controlled initiation into sexuality called "The Sanctified Midsummer Frolic," and to a collection of theological constructs that reflect elements of Christian Science, Hindu, and Hopi beliefs. There is the occasional reference to such esoteric minor deities as the "dainty Lady Vegetalis, a garden sylph of cloudy origins." While Kirn has an ear and an eye for this kind of odd detail in *Mission to America*, his dense prose, stuffed with extravagantly poetic jargon or tortured aphorisms, is also often cloudy and tends not to advance the storyline.

The missionaries forsake instructions to sleep in the van and to stick to a prescribed diet that will not exhaust their assigned budget. They have discovered fast food outlets and the cheap entertainments of roadside motels and television game shows by the time their supervisor catches up with them by phone somewhere in Wyoming.

Trying to stave off probing questions, Mason LaVerle finds himself burbling, "Can I be completely honest with you here?"

At this point, Kirn stops the narrative for LaVerle to tell us

In the instant before I asked this question, before my mind sent the order to my lips and while I still had time to say some other thing, my higher mind—my Etheric, floating mind—reasoned out, composed and signed a pledge never again to ask it in my lifetime, and not to ask it now, if possible. The pledge was swiftly delivered to my lower mind and its logic thoroughly explained (requesting permission from someone to be honest is really a way of accusing the other person of being so demanding or overbearing that you couldn't be honest all along—and eventually it always brings on a fight), and my lower mind agreed to take the pledge as well and did. (65)

These periodic asides sometimes pay off as oblique insights into Mason's quirky character, but when they do not, they manage to throw obstacles in the path of the narrative's laborious, picaresque progression. Although, admittedly,

being able to stick with Mason's evolving consciousness is important, since so few of the novel's multiple characters invite our affection or identification.

Kirn's satire is not aimed primarily at the idiosyncrasies of a small religious sect, but instead at the violent, materialistic, sex- and celebrity-obsessed wider culture. In a trendy ski resort town in Colorado, LaVerle's concern for the hidden sensitivities of Betty, a former Internet X-rated star, contrasts with Stark's attempts to proselytize Errol Effington Sr., a billionaire with irritable bowel syndrome and five hundred head of buffalo.

Although Kirn's introduction of religious naïfs into the cynical slipstream of American life is not without wit or imagination, we expect a more challenging scenario. By the time Mason circles back to Bluff for the novel's less than satisfying denouement, the snapshots of Western America we have seen through his eyes are almost as constricted and forgettable as the narrow view of those who have remained behind. Thus, a dispiriting journey with a cast of characters we care too little about.

Holistic Dissolution in a Boomer Faust

A review of Larry Rigby's *The Jäger Artist* (Faustus Publishing, 2006)

Steven J. Stewart



The Jäger Artist, a new novel by Salt Lake City writer Larry Rigby, is a story of a man who wins complete freedom for himself and then must grapple with the question, “Now what?” The novel’s protagonist, Preston Wright, after years of travail in the business world, completes a deal which gives him millions and the chance to live off the fruits of his labors and resurrect his long-dormant aspirations as an artist. After a bow-hunting trip during which Preston demonstrates his prowess as a hunter, he is ready to take his newly liposuctioned body and repudiate his prior existence, doing away with the conforming “old man” that he had been and becoming a “new man” for whom prior rules and restrictions do not apply. Preston leaves his wife and family and flies to Germany to take up the existence of a Bohemian artist for an extended (and ever extending) time period. There he begins taking art classes and meets Malik Mahan, an art promoter and sociopathic pimp who is interested in Preston’s series of paintings that depict pathogenic organisms. As the story unfolds, Preston the hunter becomes the hunted, hunted by Mahan (a Mephistophelian figure with abilities that sometimes appear to border on the supernatural) who, in offering Preston anything he wants, clearly wants Preston’s soul in exchange. *The Jäger Artist* is a well-plotted thriller whose clever twists had me turning pages briskly as the action built.

It is also a book that asks to be taken seriously, one that offers meaningful explorations into human freedom and morality, and it’s on these themes that I’d like to focus. With his millions in hand, Preston, after a lifetime of living by the rules of his Christian faith and culture and of striving for security, is ready to choose another way. He feels regret for all the time he has lost to sacrificing his freedom (as he sees it) for the expectations of others and is ready to

let temptation have its way with him. One poor choice leads to the next, and by midway through the novel Preston is on the verge of having sex with one of Malik's prostitutes. Summing up what got him to this point, Preston thinks:

My life has been bridled. I have sacrificed. Deferred gratification: I'm the master of that misinformation. Oh, how I have deprived myself! My life is a story of deprivation. What little I have experienced! A fifty-six year old emerging from the monastery! Finally ready to experience! To feel the primordial thrill again! (183, italics in the original)

What began as economic freedom has morphed into a more holistic dissolution; in a short amount of time he has come to believe himself intellectually free, sexually free, and free from consequences.

Preston's struggle is interesting and well rendered. And it also has meaningful implications for Latter-day Saints. When the novel begins, Preston has lived a moral life not out of conviction, but out of inertia and fear, not unlike some Mormons. Though Preston isn't a Mormon, he often reads like one in his demeanor and thought processes. (In an interview, Rigby, who is LDS, says he originally wrote his protagonist as a devout Mormon but decided to change Preston's faith to a nondescript Protestant in order to achieve a wider audience with his book.)

The doctrine of agency is a fundamental tenet of Mormon belief, and the struggle for freedom is a major theme in the Book of Mormon. Freedom denotes the capacity and responsibility to make choices, and Rigby's portrayal of Preston and his struggle with how to exercise his agency speak to the contradictory nature of what we normally understand the word "freedom" to mean. Real freedom can be a terrifying thing, and many religious people, including Mormons, are afraid that to truly embrace freedom would start them on a slippery slope where the inevitable result would be to end up, like Preston, dabbling in iniquity. Though they draw close to freedom with their lips, they're afraid of it in their hearts.

In many ways, this conflict is basic to Christian belief, a conflict that is played out in the hearts and minds of Christians, and certainly Mormons, everywhere. As Christians, we are willing to give up a measure of freedom in the here and now for the reward of being saved or exalted. While mention is sometimes made of the traditional Christian idea that being God's servant is the truest freedom (1 Corinthians 7:22), this notion lacks real, experiential meaning for many. Many of us fit Sartre's characterization of beings who fear

freedom and who actively work to curtail their own. Preston is the antithesis of this mindset. As the "new man," he has given himself permission to do what he will. As he spends time in Germany, Preston proceeds to use his freedom in ways that violate his previous moral standards, exploring the dark sides of life. It's tempting to view his experiences in Germany as seeming to validate the fear that many seem to feel when faced with the hard choices freedom affords us. After all, if an upright, hardworking family man like Preston, someone who has done everything "right," and who has lived into middle age without serious transgression—if someone like this can't be trusted with freedom, then perhaps the novel is saying that freedom itself *is* a problem. This, however, clearly isn't Rigby's point. Rather, by creating such a morally ambivalent character, he challenges our complacency regarding our assumptions about freedom.

Moral ambivalence poses a particular challenge to Mormon readers. As a professor of literature at Brigham Young University–Idaho, I come across many students (far too many, frankly) who consider a work immoral if it simply contains depictions of actions or realities that the students consider to be immoral. Of course this standard won't do, as it would mean that the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon are profoundly immoral books. Other students, however, are willing to look at a work as a whole and judge its overall intention, to ask whether any depictions of things they object to are working toward a moral or didactic end. By either of these standards, *The Jäger Artist* would fall short. Nevertheless, some writers such as Czech novelist Milan Kundera locate the morality of a novel precisely in its moral ambivalence or ambiguity. For Kundera, a work of art that moralizes is guilty of kitsch, of misrepresenting reality in an ultimately destructive way. Kundera determines the morality of a novel by its approach to representation as opposed to its explicit content. He believes that art should take us to what is perhaps an *amoral* space where we can laugh, cry, and play in ways that are meaningful and transformative but divorced from any overtly didactic purpose.

At its best, Rigby's novel can take us to this space, but not in a way that is likely to be palatable to many Mormon readers. One of the most interesting, and perhaps troubling, aspects of the novel is its ambivalence towards Preston's actions in Germany. Preston is a complex character, and his actions and the plot lack clear blacks and whites. As a Mormon, I'm trained to expect consequences for evil. This is one of the hallmarks of Mormon fiction (certainly of the didactic strains but also of less didactic Mormon writers): characters may do bad

things, but they need to face negative consequences for their actions. I think this is how many of us tend to define moral fiction. But Rigby's novel doesn't fit this mold. Yes, bad things happen in the novel (some very bad things), but not as clear consequences of immoral behavior, or rather not as personal consequences to Preston of his immoral behavior; indeed, the way the novel plays out seems to validate Preston's idea of the "new man" to whom regular rules don't apply. He *can* in fact do as he wills, and consequences for him and his soul, though present in the novel, are not emphasized. Contrition on Preston's part is expressed, but it's certainly not dwelt upon; it is difficult to find repentance here that most Mormons would recognize as such. Nevertheless, I'm inclined to consider the novel moral, precisely because it challenges me and forces me to consider my own notions of moral behavior in a constructive way.

Philosophical considerations aside, Rigby's novel is, ultimately, a thriller. As such, it functions well. While the book drags a little at the beginning, it picks up speed as it goes along, the action and plotting exciting and well described. While not all of the novel's characters emerge as fully as I would have liked, Preston is lively and complex. Not only do the novel's depictions of internal matters like Preston's struggle with how to behave prove appealing and believable, but so do its depictions of external realities like the existence of human slavery in Europe. (As would be expected, Preston's encounters with human slaves in the novel provide an interesting counterpoint for his own freedom issues.)

One of the novel's weak points is its uneven dialogue. At times the dialogue sounds unnatural or rings untrue, particularly when Preston and Mahan are talking. At other times it rings too true, in a painful way, as is the case with the character of Preston's daughter Allison who says the word "like" nearly every other word. While this may be an accurate depiction of how many adolescents actually speak, it's not particularly readable; sometimes a writer, rather than giving a dead-on representation of speech, needs to give an impression of speech, to suggest.

In spite of its occasional shortcomings, *The Jäger Artist* is an entertaining and worthwhile book. The primary test of a novel is, after all, whether or not it is enjoyable to read. Beyond that, it's nice if it can change the way we perceive the world. Rigby's novel satisfies both of these criteria.

Broken Songs

A review of Timothy Liu's *For Dust Thou Art* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2005)

Heidi Hart

A fast-busy signal.

A prerecorded message saying all circuits are busy will you please try again.

And you do.

Again and again and again and again and again.

(from Timothy Liu's "A Prayer")



Poet Timothy Liu is a listener. Like the sound sculptor Bill Fontana amplifying vibrations from the cables of London's Millennium Bridge, and like the poet Marina Tsvetaeva noting pieces of conversation on Russian trains in 1917, Liu takes in what he hears and makes it audible to us as well. In his latest collection, *For Dust Thou Art*, he becomes an instrument of mourning.

Liu's life has tuned him with painful acuity to a contradictory world. Named after the Chinese poet Hsu Chi Mo, he grew up in an immigrant family in San Jose. He studied under the late Leslie Norris at BYU, served a Mormon mission to Hong Kong, and later came out as a gay man. In a 1999 interview for *Poetry* magazine, he said, "I went from being a priest in the Mormon Church to what Wallace Stevens would call 'a priest of the invisible'" (Zawinski 4). Liu's work reckons with these tensions as well as with his mother's sexual abuse during his childhood. But to reduce his work to these difficult personal subjects is to fail to hear it for what it is: the sound of witness in a time when, as poet Joy Harjo has put it, "Our voices change according to our response to the intimate emotional landscape, to the shape of our evolving nations" (23). Liu's voice, known for its oracular music, has broken.

Vox Angelica is the title of Liu's first collection, published in 1992. It's aptly named. The voice in these poems sings with a lyricism that belies the danger of its words. Listen to these lines that close the title poem:

I think of how the mystics read
by the light of their own bodies.
What a world of darkness that must have been
to read by the flaming hearts
that turn into heaps of ash on the altar,
how everything in the end is made
equal by the wind. (22)

The speaker in this early collection is a keening, spiritual apostate. He writes about "the mother who ran her mouth all over my body" ("Canker") and about "a man with two tattoos on his biceps / bashing a fag on Christopher Street" ("Passion"). His work "releas[es] textual energies that our culture seeks to suppress" (Zawinski 3). The poems are often syllabic, moving against the grain of spoken, accentual English. And yet, for all this semantic and syntactic rub, the poems' surface tension does not break. It's a "desecrated battlefield," as Richard Howard notes in his introduction to *Vox Angelica*, but it's beautiful (xi).

Fast-forward thirteen years. Add four more poetry collections and the bruising passage into maturity. Add September 11 and its aftermath. A poem called "Trespass" in *For Dust Thou Art* begins like this:

The lake's ice breaking up in springtime's
sudden thaw, a father's drunken breath

pinning a child's shoulders to the bed—

The poet's music breaks up, too. Later in the same poem, he writes:

Must loss be sullied
by our need to love whatever survives?
Why give voice to any of that?

There's loss on every page of this collection. The poet seems to want to hold his breath, to stop his own impulse toward singing. What lines come out don't spin like melody. They're end-stopped or left hanging, Dickinson-like, with a dash. Some race for three pages without punctuation, as if hurtling toward a cliff's edge. There are brutal curses ("Secret Combinations"), obscene gestures ("At

the Grand Bazaar"), lines like "Nothing heals" ("Cemetery"), and fragments of speech the poet may wish he hadn't overheard ("Honey, is that a dumpster or the smell of . . ." in "Terrorism" and "The Afghan over there. Make him pay for it" in "Dining Out after the Attack"). Even Liu's lines about music—and there are many—speak not about its beauty but its brokenness. Here are a few examples:

The St. Petersburg Orchestra
trying to rebook, eager to risk their lives in order to
perform Rachmaninov's "Vespers." So much rehearsal

wasted. So many bodies to recover.
(“On Broadway”)

my voice

that icy pitcher waiting to be poured—
(“Anniversary”)

this room where I sleep filled
with one of Haydn's late quartets
in a key I cannot name because
everything keeps on shifting
(“On Hearing the Seven Last Words of Christ”)

Vocalise haunted still by faces smeared with ash.
(“Dau Al Set”)

These poems echo the screams of catastrophe, "spray-painted codes / marking bodies that were heard, / not reached" ("An Inferno"). The poet cannot bend these sounds to beauty. When he takes on a liturgical voice, it doesn't sing but comes out in uneven jags ("May this tomb never be / Desecrated / And may this soul and its Lord / Never be desecrated / In the hereafter" [from "The Book of Abraham"]). The speaker, referring to the Egyptian hieroglyphics in an appendix to Mormon scripture, seems to be mouthing ancient words that have lost their meaning. Protection? Mighty godliness? Even poetry can't answer the longing for the divine in Liu's shattered world. Still, he titles poems "Holy Law," "A Prayer," and "On Hearing the Seven Last Words of Christ." His work carries a religious tincture that is powerless to heal.

In translating what he hears, Liu sometimes seems to lose his own voice, that mysterious mark of originality poets are so keen on finding. This loss is not a weakness. The speaker—or, to be more accurate—listener in these poems knows he's part of the cacophony around him. He tunes in:

Confessions he heard by a chaplain aboard the cruise.

Having relegated the work of feeling.

Some wicked static on a 1-900 phone-sex line . . .

One grows more suspicious of lyric self-reflection.
("Something Coming")

Yes. The self-reflective lyric, the received poem of late twentieth-century America, may be near death. Liu is mourning, even as he turns his back. This is no longer his parents' promised land nor that of the Mormon scriptures he read as a teenager. It never was, but now the poet answers that hard truth with his hard words. American writers may no longer have the luxury of crafting subtle lines about childhood wounds and spiritual crises. Our battlefields may start to smell like battlefields. We're no longer safe inside the old illusion that we are exempt from the world's violence and our complicity in it.

Unlike the Polish poet Adam Zagajewski, whose inheritance is heavy with war and who still witnesses with a mordant sense of hope (his "Try to Praise the Mutilated World" appeared inside the back cover of the *New Yorker*, the week following September 11), Liu cannot find words for any form of praise. His prayer meets only the "fast-busy signal" of emergency, the "batteries . . . gone dead." And yet he keeps on trying to connect, "again and again and again and again and again," despite himself, despite his own lines that keep closing down or dropping off into the whiteness of the page. Poets can't help it. The broken songs of Liu's *For Dust Thou Art* are still songs, after all; although without sharp edges, they would lose their truth. To quote Zagajewski, from his essay "Poetry and Doubt":

Poetry and doubt require one another, they coexist like the oak and ivy, like dogs and cats. But their relationship is neither harmonious nor symmetrical. Poetry needs doubt far more than doubt needs poetry. Through doubt, poetry purges itself of rhetorical insincerity, senseless chatter, falsehood, youthful loquacity, empty (inauthentic) euphoria. Released from doubt's stern gaze, poetry—especially in our dark days—might easily degenerate into sentimental ditties, exalted but unthinking song, senseless praise of all the earth's forms. (52)

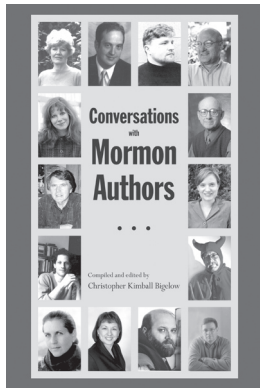
Liu's songs may not praise, but they manage, however haltingly, to register and amplify the world's cries, from the poet's place at the "liminal edge / of what has been—" ("Terrorism"). He asks us to meet him there—and not turn away.

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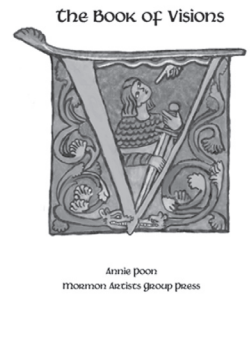
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Readers Write: Leslie Norris Among the Mormons



We want to inspire you.

“Readers Write” includes essays on a preannounced topic that our readers can address in a short form. If, as Mary Lythgoe Bradford suggests (in citing Eugene England), the personal essay for Mormons is a variation on the testimony as literary genre, then we hope you will find inspiration here akin to what can be found in the best of testimony meetings: personal edification, a sense of community and the fortitude to share your own story. Submissions may address the topic from any perspective, but should be thoughtful and honest.

Topic for Next Issue: Inspired by Theater

Elder Boyd K. Packer of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles once said, “[b]ecause of what [artists] do, we are able to feel and learn very quickly . . . some spiritual things that we would otherwise learn very slowly.” For the Mormon Stage issue of IRREANTUM, we would like to collect some short personal accounts of how a theatrical experience (writing, directing, watching, or in any way participating in a play, road show, dance concert, or musical performance, etc.) has moved you, inspired you, or jolted you into a new feeling or understanding about life, the universe, and everything. Deadline for submission is **January 30, 2007**. Please send your Readers Write submission electronically to the guest editor of our next issue, Scott Bronson, at bronsonjscott@juno.com with “Readers Write” in the subject line.

Leslie Norris was a highly regarded poet of international repute, originally from Wales. He chose to make his home with his wife Kathryn (Kitty) in Orem, Utah. He was poet in residence for several years in BYU’s English Department. He never joined the Church, though he was a mentor and friend to his Mormon colleagues, students, and neighbors. What can you say about the anomalous figure whose influence in the world of Mormon literature may be felt for generations?

Walking the White Fields

Behind his eyes lie the slim silver boys called by my name.

He was a Welshman, this Leslie Norris, who came to the Rocky Mountains by way of Seattle, a two-semester stint that turned into twenty-five years. And we, lucky novice poets, fell under his sway. Who was he? Epithets fail but fail beautifully, so let us begin there. Singer of stones, pilot, gardener, bicyclist of the clouds, soccer maven, translator (only sometimes of words), CEO of the seasons, cataloger of grasses, late Romantic, medium, raconteur, pantheist, scop, publicist of hummingbird and hawk, amateur pugilist, pacifist, fisherman, walker of white fields, Isaiah of the senses, critic, breeder of love birds, dog whisperer, keeper of earth, wind, water, and fire.

The poem stands on its firm legs. Now I am cleaning the teeth in its lion jaws with an old brush. I'll set it wild on the running street, aimed at the hamstring, the soft throat.

A poet who taught—and teaching, helped others to see—that was Leslie. I can conjure the lessons in craft we scribbled in our notebooks and, we hoped, on some permanent wall of our psyches. “After finishing your masterpiece, cut the first five lines and the last.” “No adverbs.” “Worry about verbs first, then nouns.” “Use adjectives only if they remake the noun. Never a ‘large elephant,’ but maybe, just maybe a ‘tiny elephant’ or a ‘scholar elephant.’” Then there was the advice about audience, also crucial. “Write for the little old man in Chicago who hasn’t gone to college.” Other lessons remain harder to sum up. Once, visiting him in his office, away from the hurly-burly of the classroom, I asked, “What else can I do to become a writer?” He looked out his window at craggy, snow-covered Mount Timpanogos. “Take a walk, sit,” he said, “be alone, preferably in the natural world.” Part of me wanted to dismiss this as Wordsworthian nostalgia, okay for Leslie, but not me. And yet, and yet. Something underneath rang true. He was trying to explain that beneath or inside the words of any decent poem lies an essential confluence of solitude, perspective, vision—in short, a lived life. Self knowledge. We must all become poets, he once said on another occasion, whether or not we ever write a decent poem.

A full voice sang of such inhuman longing that I no more can say which was the song or which the fiery star.

The girl I loved hailed from upstate New York by way of Peru, and I from Idaho by way of Colorado, both of us strangers to Utah, without a place to

receive friends hoping to wish us joy, or at least good luck, upon marrying. Wishes we needed badly, since Jacqui painted and I wrote poems, and neither of us had any intention of giving up and turning practical. So I asked Leslie one afternoon, “May I borrow your house?” He did not shrug his shoulders, or look at his fingernails, or explain that his current abode was not well suited for crowds, but said, “Of course.” So on the appointed evening, my two siblings sistered the refreshment table, gifts arrived, and well-wishers shook our hands. And none of us knew that Leslie and Kitty had squirreled away an entire year’s worth of cookies, in case we ran out of the refreshments we had brought.

Outside, the sprinklers, waving their spraying rainbows, kept America green.

In all, I took three classes from Leslie. Later, after completing a PhD, I returned to share time with him in the same department—more opportunities to bathe in his stories. I loved the way he told them, parceling them out like gumdrops, stories about Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, stories about pubbing with Dylan Thomas, about cleaning up John Masefield’s terrible nose bleed minutes before Masefield received a prestigious international award, his white shirt pink and wet but otherwise none the worse for wear. Whenever I suggested that Leslie should write up his anecdotes as memoir, he laughed. He was loath to attach himself to the famous in print. But catch him at the right moment, and his stories resulted in a kind of oral publication—or shall we call it transubstantiation? The stories taking on a new life inside us. Like this one, about once seeing a handbill for an upcoming medical lecture: UNUSUAL OBSTETRIC OCCURRENCES. A professional title, certainly. That is, until some wag scribbled beneath it, “Mary had a little lamb.” Just as the laughter subsided, Leslie would smile and say, “Quite true. Holy Mary, poor girl—she did have a little Lamb.”

A bridge launched, hovering, wondering where to land. A bridge is the path of flight.

Early Thursday morning, April 6, Leslie suffered a massive stroke, which left him unconscious. I learned of his stroke minutes after my eight o’clock class ended. What I had feared for years had finally taken place. I hurried to the hospital to keep vigil with friends and neighbors and writers and with dear Kitty, who sat beside him holding his hand. It was a strange and harrowing time. We knew Leslie would not wake or recover, but we behaved like children, believing ourselves safe from the full impact of loss as long as our friend kept breathing. And breathe he did—loud, open-mouthed, laboring breaths very

close to snores. Friends brought flowers, specialty soups, good will. One offered to build a pine casket. A fellow Welshman who had driven down from Salt Lake said, "Anyone have poems?" I dug in my backpack and handed him a collection by Czeslaw Milosz, from which he read to Leslie.

Next came my turn. I pulled out a collection of essays and read a short piece called "I Believe," by a Catholic writer, Brian Doyle. Holding Leslie's hand, I relearned what Leslie had taught me so many years before, that symbolic black marks arranged on a page sometimes equaled deep mystery. How else explain their ability to concentrate the mind, quicken the senses, and collect inchoate feelings like a lightning rod? A sample, then, of what I read:

I believe that the fingerprints of the Maker are everywhere: children, hawks, water. I believe that even sadness and tragedy and evil are part of that Mind we cannot comprehend but only thank, a Mind especially to be thanked, oddly, when it is most inscrutable. I believe that everything is a prayer. I believe, additionally, that friends are family. I believe that the best of all possible breakfasts is a pear with a cup of ferocious coffee, taken near the ocean, rather later in the morning than earlier, preferably in the company of a small sleepy child still in her or his rumpled and warm pajamas, his or her skin as warm and tawny as a cougar pelt. I believe that love is our greatest and hardest work.

Amen.

Could Leslie hear me? I don't know. I also don't know how many times I had to stop mid-sentence to collect myself. Here I was: a Mormon reading the words of a Catholic to a dying friend who confessed no religion but embodied an uncommon spirituality and wholeness. In my life, God had rarely leaned closer. Four hours later when it came time to say my final good-bye, I hugged Leslie, kissed his cheek and forehead, and inhaled—an indulgence I wasn't about to pass up. A cool, moist Welshness filled my head. Though he wore nothing but a hospital gown, I could smell his accent and poems, his debonair woolens and his chatty anecdotes about Dylan Thomas, and a raininess that fell that day and for weeks to come.

I lace heavy boots, break brittle ice, feel winter's bones under the snow. I hold my skull to the wind.

Less than two weeks after Leslie's passing, I happened upon one of my journal entries dated December 27, 1997. It came as a shock, as if someone else had written it: "In my dream we were fishing, Leslie Norris and I. Late afternoon, mid-December, but temperate. No snow. More like September, and the

day about that long. We were making our way up the canyon, crossing, then recrossing the river, Provo River maybe, though not that wide. Did we actually cast? I don't think so, though we had our poles out, flies ready. I was supposed to be acting as guide. Then we gave up and walked toward a cabin near the river. Or a community lodge. A man and his young son were eating pancakes, so we joined them. All this done wordlessly, though Leslie acted as negotiator. There were plenty of pancakes, and we kept drenching the pancakes with syrup, then eating. Behind us, a hearth and fireplace of stone." Ah, Leslie—even in my dream I seem to have gotten you right. A friend with whom to journey, a crosser of rivers, the welcomer welcomed by strangers, then the eating of a meal. How we hungered, how those pancakes steamed.

The small summer hangs its suns on the chestnuts, and the world bends slowly out of the year.

Lance Larsen

Funeral Oration for Leslie Norris April 12, 2006

An ancient prophet once declaimed: "O that I were an angel . . . that I might . . . speak with the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth . . . ! [Alma 29:1]. Frankly, my needs are considerably less ambitious: I'd be gratified if I could speak to you today with anything like a hundredth or even a thousandth part of the voice of Leslie Norris, who in his quiet way, in his own angelic voice, was quite capable of shaking our souls, if not the earth.

As I see it, the problem for all of us here today is to speak to each other in mortal language about the life and work of a man whose own mortal language regularly transcended that category, not seldom rising to the level of immortal praise, to that language ascribed by the Austrian poet Rilke to the legendary singing god, Orpheus. I use that metaphor because I first really began to understand Leslie's gift as he and I worked together to translate Rilke's fifty-five *Sonnets to Orpheus*.

The gift of true poetic language is part of a larger eidetic gift which enabled Orpheus, Rilke, and Leslie Norris to see, feel, smell, taste, and touch realities beyond the normal confines of the human senses, and beyond the normal confines of finite time and experienced space. It is a gift for crossing borders, as

Leslie once wrote in an elegy with that title for his friend John Ormand, the final words of which now apply to Leslie himself:

Border, boundary, threshold, door—
Orpheus moved either way,
the living and the dead were parted by a thin reflection
he simply walked through. But who can follow?

For all the boundaries I have crossed, flown over,
knowingly, unknowingly, I have no answers;
but sit in the afternoon sun, under mountains
where stale snow clings
in shadowy patches,
remember my friend, how he had sung, hope he is still singing.

For a poet, the other part of the eidetic gift is the gift of language, that ability to help us, his listeners, momentarily catch our own glimpses beyond the veil of the natural senses, beyond ordinary borders.

The true poet does not achieve this miracle by grandiloquent rhetoric mated to empyrean, transcendental subject matter, however. (That is the approach often taken by amateur versifiers with a burning spiritual message.) Paradoxically, the true poet is concerned with the small, seemingly insignificant things of this earth, with dogs, rocks, birds, trees, water, and children. It is in these things, which open their true nature to him, not in striving to see beyond them, that the true poet, the true singer, the true maker, experiences the totality of existence.

This insight is expressed beautifully by Leslie's good friend, the justifiably-acclaimed painter Brian Kershnik, speaking of poetry and of his own medium, the visual arts: "There is no poetry where there is only facility. The knowable, optical world is not art when it is the culled, unmediated transfer of visual reality. Art is not biopsy: it is alchemy. It is a rip in the seam of the other world, where a purer reality leaks out, intentionally or not. An artist is someone who can give that leak a shape."

I have time to speak to you briefly about one simple poem, which will serve as an example of what I had hoped to say to you about Leslie Norris. In his poem "Hudson's Geese," Leslie writes about a pair of geese, animals which mate for life. But this simple poem goes far beyond geese alone. It is a rip in the seam of the other world. And what is the purer reality that leaks out? That humans also mate for life, and possibly also for eternity. That despite all

hardships and hopelessness and even death, real love and dedication stay strong, determined, and—to use Leslie's word—indomitable. And is death the end? I ask you to consider what the final line means, which runs: ". . . and nothing but his body / to enter the dog's mouth."

For me it must mean the body is nothing. Death, the dog's mouth, claims no victory. The soul, the courage, the dedication, the love, all live on afterwards, must live on afterwards, for it is the indomitable nature of God's creatures, goose and gander, woman and man, to keep moving, to walk the length of a continent, to cross all borders, including that final one, as Leslie had written for John Ormand, "for which all others are a preparation."

This eternal truth Leslie had glimpsed through rips in the seams of the other world. As we read "Hudson's Geese" [printed in this issue of IRREANTUM] I pray we may all be comforted by a strong conviction that he, too, like Orpheus and like John Ormand, though having crossed over, is still singing.

Alan Keele

Remembering Leslie Norris

Wonderful Leslie Norris: the Welsh accent, the magical lectures, his bright eyes! I left his lectures and classes, my head spinning with the magic of storytelling and the influence of poets on our lives. My husband helped him find and purchase his first home. I listened to his radio programs.

But my most memorable experience was our dinner at my home on Little Rock Drive. When he first arrived, some exceptionally bright faculty member who thought I would be one of the literati introduced us (I think it was Bruce Jorgensen) and I hosted him and Kitty and two other couples. I can't remember all of them, though Craig Witham was one—an excellent writer who turned owner of the wildly successful Los Hermanos restaurants. I have photos of Leslie in his office with Craig and Bruce Jorgensen. I'm sure Leslie had forgotten all about me before he passed away, but I can remember how impressed all of us were with him. I can even remember what I fed him: a chicken broccoli casserole swimming in cheese, sour cream, and mushroom soup, and he had several helpings!

Leslie belongs to a tradition that I pray we can cling to—the joy that comes from the magic of language. He did us such a favor by coming here. He was

childless and we loved him like children. Like progeny, may we emulate him and remember what he has left with us.

Marilyn Brown

Leslie Norris Among the Mormons

Many years ago, before I met Leslie Norris, another well-known Utah poet, Dave Lee of St. George, told me all about him. Lee is a great admirer of both Norris the man and of his work, but he couldn't, for the life of him, figure out how a poet like Leslie Norris managed to survive and even to thrive at an "aggressively religious" institution like BYU. It was especially puzzling to Lee because Norris wasn't even a member of the dominant religion. "He's their pet Gentile," Lee told me, shaking his head in wonder. "And they treat him like he is their very own national treasure."

I've puzzled over this many times in my years of friendship with Leslie Norris. And in fact, at the beginning, Norris himself had doubts that he could be comfortable at Brigham Young University. But after representatives of the University assured him that no one would ever try to convert him to Mormonism, he agreed to accept a six-month appointment as a visiting poet. That temporary appointment, as we all know, resulted in a sort of "perfect fit" between Norris and BYU that lasted more than twenty years. If he were here right now, I feel pretty sure he would chime in at this point to say that in all those years no one ever did try to convert him to Mormonism.

It should be stated clearly at the outset of this conversation that whatever initial misgivings they may have had about the religious nature of the University, Norris and his wife Kitty both loved BYU. He told me many times that the students he taught at the Y were the best he ever taught. And this is high praise, considering that he taught at colleges and universities for many years in the U.S. and the U.K. He praised BYU students' eagerness to learn, their exemplary work habits, and their respectful attitude toward their professors. Kitty also taught courses at BYU and she says this about it: "They are just beautiful boys and girls. A joy to teach!"

It should also be said that he genuinely liked and was liked (even revered) by his colleagues on campus, and he felt real gratitude to the University faculty and administration for the manner in which he was welcomed and supported

at Brigham Young University, both as a professor of English literature and as a creative artist.

That needed to be said.

Another sort of man, another sort of poet, might have felt that he would either have to convert to the LDS faith or leave BYU. But then, none of us who knew him should be surprised that Norris had an easy time fitting in—and doing very well—at BYU, without conforming to the prevailing customs. Norris was an anomaly everywhere he went. He did not consider it a disadvantage being a non-Mormon at the Mormon Church's flagship school, because as a man and as an artist, he was, all of his life, the exception to the rule.

Everyone who knew him at all will agree that Leslie Norris was an extraordinary man. As proof of this I offer the fact that I rarely, perhaps never, had an ordinary conversation with him. Every time we spoke at any real length, I came away with something remarkable. My notebooks and diaries are filled with quotes, anecdotes, jokes, and facts from Norris. He scattered these little treasures liberally and gracefully in his casual conversation. He was learned, but never pedantic. And though I never had the opportunity to take a class from him, I can say with confidence that Leslie Norris was one of the greatest teachers in my life.

He understood from the onset that he hadn't come to BYU in order to become just like everyone else. There was no shortage of LDS professors on the campus. He knew it was his job to bring his special perspective, his great talent, and his vast experience to this place and to these people. For its part, the University also understood that Norris's differences were what made him so valuable to the institution. He offered something to BYU students that they wouldn't get in courses taught by a "home-grown" professor. So, in many ways, the fact that Norris was not a Mormon was an advantage to all parties and a thing to be celebrated, not corrected.

It was his habit to handle the issue of any religious differences with humor, usually a gentle sort of humor. While he was a deeply spiritual person, he found some aspects of religion quite amusing, and he thought that the way we navigate our religious differences were particularly funny. And, of course, he had a truly wonderful—one might even say wicked—sense of humor.

"I've had occasion to go to the wine store here in Orem," he said once, with a sly smile. "And I sometimes run into one or more of my colleagues from the Y." Here his smile widened a bit. "I always say to them, 'I won't say anything if you don't say anything.' And they always say to me, 'Deal.'"

A variation he told on this joke was how, when he would see colleagues from the Y at the wine store, they always explained that they were just picking up some red wine for a coq au vin. He would pause for a couple of seconds before saying, "I shouldn't think there would be a chicken left in the whole of Utah County!"

Lest any Mormon readers think that Norris was in any way disrespectful to their faith, I offer another of his humorous anecdotes about religion, this time about the Catholics. Norris was once watching a big rugby match in Cardiff, Wales, with his good friend, the poet John Ormond. Across the field from the grandstands where they sat watching the game was an abandoned brewery. As the two teams left the field at the interval, a sudden and inexplicable puff of black smoke appeared from the brewery's smokestack. "Look there, Norris!" said Ormond. "We've got a Welsh pope!"

Norris was realistic about his position in a predominately LDS community. He understood that while his friends and colleagues respected his wishes concerning religion during his sojourn among them, they harbored no doubts that they knew what was best for him in the long run. He knew this and accepted it. He told me once that the matter of his "baptism by proxy," and thereby his eternal salvation, had long been a settled matter among his Mormon friends. They were determined to take care of him in the next life, as well as in this one.

But to return to my point about Norris being an exception wherever he went: We should remember that when they came to Utah, Leslie and Kitty Norris weren't just non-Mormons among Mormons, they were true foreigners in the United States. This foreignness was brought home to me one summer several years ago, when, forgetting that they were from Great Britain, I asked them what their plans were to celebrate the Fourth of July. "Oh, we don't celebrate," he told me seriously. "We mourn."

Norris never took any steps to become an American citizen, just as he never showed any interest in becoming a Mormon. But this should in no way be interpreted as a lack of respect or affection on his part for his adopted home in Utah County, USA. He never regretted his decision to stay in Utah. He felt the choice was a good one for him, as an artist and as a man. In one of his later poems, "A Visitation of Welshmen," he quotes the ghost of one of his Welsh ancestors, who has visited him on the banks of the Provo River:

"You've a good place here,
right enough," Willie John says. "Tribal, Utes, Zunis
mountain men, Mormons. We Joneses would fit right in.
You've chosen well."

Norris did indeed choose well. He was as good for Utah and BYU as they were for him. His presence here "among the Mormons" these past twenty-odd years has enriched us all, Mormon and non-Mormon alike, just as his death has impoverished us all, irrespective of our religious affiliation.

Guy Lebeda

Bread of Heaven

The call came early, and as most everyone knows, when the phone sounds before the sun, you vault from your bed and sleep takes a hasty turn to panic: "Hello! Who's died?" On this particular morning, April 6th, there was no death to report yet, but a weary, stalwart voice on the other end of the line politely breathed woe into my ear: *We're in the emergency room. Leslie's had a stroke. Please come.*

Oh, Kitty. Yes. Yes, we're on our way.

Night yielded to a misting morning, and Rob and I drove to the hospital in disheveled, unshowered solemnity. April 6th. *Today is Christ's birthday*, I thought. *Of course He has invited Leslie to His table. What a gift to have a favored son come home; a celebration is surely being prepared.* But here with us, as if to reveal the mortal brightness that was being extinguished, the heavy sky, hungry for sun, turned gray and slow with weeping.

There he was and there she was, just like always, except that his saying and seeing had ceased, and nothing was left but the labor of his breathing on a borrowed bed, between the unnatural light above and the cold, aseptic tile beneath. Whispers and blessings, love and prayers, tears and pain, we few labored alongside him without knowing how.

What can I do? What do you need? Help, let me help.

Tansi, then. Tansi needs her morning walk. It will be her first walk with the unanswerable anxiety of absence. Is there even the smallest comfort for a cherished, grieving pet? She'll want tending.

Warbling song. It occurred to me that perhaps I would miss this most about Leslie. Funny to apprehend that the great man touched my heart most deeply singing snatches of contented tunes while seeing to everyday comings and goings: standing in the backyard, watching Tansi play; locking up the house and loading into the car; bringing in trash cans and taking them out; walking

slowly with Kitty and friends through a restaurant parking lot. I never recognized his meandering melodies; I believed them to be his own irrepressible inventions.

On her own threshold I encircled Tansi's neck with the familiarity of her leash and spoke kindly. She was tense and confused, sick inside as I was. Stepping through the doorway and urging Tansi forward, all I could think was that Leslie would be singing now. He would sing to Tansi as they walked the long drive and trudged down Carterville Road, following their customary route. The certainty of it filled my head. *All right*, I thought, *then I will sing for you today, my good pup.*

I laughed at myself, a justifiably reluctant alto. Never mind that. I could warble too for an occasion like this, only without the charm. *What should I sing? I know none of Leslie's songs.* Surely he would croon sweet melodies known to old Welshmen, but strange to radio ears. Nothing came to me. Nothing. Then a little something, a single hymn that lodged in my mind:

*Guide us, O thou great Jehovah,
Guide us to the promised land.
We are weak, but thou art able;
Hold us with thy pow'rful hand.
Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit,
Feed us till the Savior comes.
Feed us till the Savior comes.*

*Open, Jesus, Zion's fountains;
Let her richest blessings come.
Let the fiery, cloudy pillar
Guard us to this holy home.
Great Redeemer, Great Redeemer,
Bring, oh, bring the welcome day!
Bring, oh, bring the welcome day!*

*When the earth begins to tremble,
Bid our fearful thoughts be still;
When thy judgments spread destruction,
Keep us safe on Zion's hill,
Singing praises,
Singing praises,
Songs of glory unto thee,
Songs of glory unto thee.*

I cried as I raised my poor voice. Would Leslie balk at a Restoration paean? I felt foolish in my solo as I passed neighbors' houses—a stranger in black, singing a song of worship while walking a troubled dog—but I carried on. The hymn left no room for another anthem, so I repeated it, jumbling the verses—that didn't matter. Tears spilled from me. I kept time with my footfalls and imagined how Leslie would sing such a hymn. Where would he and this little Welsh Terrier wander together, and how? I yielded to my companion's tuggings, mimicked Leslie's pace and his endearments, and gave to Tansi as many memories as I could. The song flowed from me and Tansi and I relaxed. There was a spirit of comfort with us.

Late in the evening, after a devilishly hard day's work, Leslie went quietly home to feast at his Master's table and celebrate in good company the beauty of nascence. We who stayed behind scattered, our stomachs burning, beneath the blackened sky.

The question of song arose again as funeral plans began to unfold. He and Kitty had agreed that their services should be conducted after the manner of their Latter-day Saint friends and colleagues, but Kitty was fretful about having to sing their soulless songs. First one friend, then another, was given the job of making musical selections; a new widow's mind is understandably cloudy. No matter. The task appropriately fell to Wally, who appeared the next day, kindled, dependable, and reverent, with his choices. He thought it right to sing a traditional Welsh hymn to end the service—*Cwm Rhondda*? It was familiar to both faiths. *Oh! Yes*, Kitty answered, *please, Leslie would love that.* And what was the tune Wally began to sing then? The same that had, the day before, taken hold of my mind and rolled off my lips to soothe two forlorn creatures. A rush of connection filled me, and I knew that a generous nature was its source.

The correspondence didn't stop there. Reading the traditional text of *Cwm Rhondda* I felt afresh the surge of interconnection as I realized this hymn was *Bread of Heaven*, the subject of one of Leslie's final, marvelous, unpublished poems. I'd read that poem and read it again, and I'd loved it.

So the hymn we shared was Leslie's long before I knew it was mine. It began where he began and where my family began, in Wales. He grew to love the song in chapel. He learned a mischief to its tune in his mother's kitchen. He chanted it with mates at football matches after dodgy rulings by the referees. His fathers sang it in coal mines. I sang it to his dog. And we all wailed it soulfully to heaven in benediction to his life.

In a month and a half, it was Leslie's birthday. It was a day to spend with Kitty, but other family business called us out of state. It was a bittersweet trip—another early morning but not so gray as the last one we'd risen to meet, a quiet drive into unfamiliar territory, and a new life to consider. We joined our clan for a baby's blessing, little Scout's first occasion wearing handed-down ancestral white. Her father blessed her with the poetry of love and priesthood. As a family we shared the feast of the sacrament table and were filled. And then, miraculously, we sang, *Guide us, O, thou great Jehovah, guide us to the promised land. We are weak, but though art able; hold us with thy pow'ful hand.* When the regular congregation, that justifiably reluctant choir of Saints, reached the chorus, it couldn't be helped; I had to sing out, overflowing, *Bread of heaven, Bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more (want no more). Feed me till I want no more.* My tears fell then and again at home when I held my tiny niece. Privately I warbled the hymn for her, once more with the Welsh refrain, in the hope that she would always remember, feel connected, and be fed.

Georgia Buchert

Leslie Norris

Leslie Norris was my first mentor. Fresh off my mission, I came to BYU with a passion for poetry without actually having read much of it, only Sylvia Plath's posthumous volume *Ariel* and a handful of poems I'd encountered as a high-school senior—Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "Constantly Risking Absurdity" and ballads like "Sir Patrick Spence." I'd heard that Leslie was the official Poet-in-Residence, a nonmember transplanted from Wales, so one morning, I stopped by his office with three poems and asked him what he thought. After thumbing through them, he said, "Actually, these are not very good. But that doesn't matter. I've heard about you and know you are a serious poet, one in ten thousand, so just remember that you are a poet whether you write good poems or bad poems." I rode my bike home in tears, determined that I would be back, and it was three days later that I handed Professor Norris a new sheaf, asking, "And what about these?" After a brief interval that seemed like an eternity, he replied, "Something has happened to you. These are so much better!"

These initial meetings took place in the fall of 1996. In the three short years that followed, I took every course and workshop that he taught, from the English Romantics to the Modernists to workshops of every level, even sitting

in on a graduate workshop my senior year. At a certain point, Leslie said to me, "It's time for you to work with some American poets. I have taught you everything that I know. I have reserved a spot for you in Richard Shelton's workshop at Rattlesnake Mountain in the Tri-Cities. It's about a ten-hour drive from here. Better get in your car and go." And it was there that I also met William Stafford and Naomi Shihab Nye.

Several months later, I attended my first Writers at Work Conference, then held in Park City, and sat at the feet of Marvin Bell, Sandra McPherson, and Robely Wilson Jr. among others. At some point, I also enrolled in a workshop taught by Tess Gallagher when she came through Salt Lake. Upon graduation, Leslie said to me, "I think you should go work with Philip Levine—I think he has something to teach you." And so I headed off to New Harmony, Indiana, to work with Levine for a couple of weeks prior to entering grad school at the University of Houston, where fellow poet Lance Larsen had also started his PhD.

The thing is this: Leslie always made me feel that I belonged to the world of contemporary American letters. He'd show me the latest galleys Peter Davison would send him from the *Atlantic Monthly* and then say to me, "Tim, you should be sending your poems there too. Always send your work to the best magazines—you owe that to your work. Tell Peter that I told you to send him work." Leslie gave me courage to go out into the real world, and not content myself with being a big fish in a small provincial pond. As a nonmember, Leslie was also able to give me tremendous support as I came to terms with my own sexuality. He imparted a unique wisdom that was both in and out of the fold.

On my shelves is an inscribed copy of Leslie's 1986 *Selected Poems* (Poetry Wales Press). There's a sentence in the opening poem, "Autumn Elegy," that haunts me still. Here, the poet marvels at a landscape, knowing that his peers who've died in the war are no longer able to see it, thus magnifying its beauty and the poet's own sense of duty: "Yet, if I stare / Unmoved at the flaunting, silent // Agony in the country before a resonant / Wind anneals it, I am not diminished, it is not / That I do not see well, do not exult, / But that I remember again what // Young men of my own time died / In the spring of their living and could not turn / To this."

The life he lived made the poem true. He was the kind of mentor who went the extra mile at every possible turn. And I know that he did the same for countless other fledglings. And it is through this great example that his spirit now ripples on out through all of us who continue to do the work.

Timothy Liu

Leslie Norris**A Visitation of Welshmen**

This morning he takes the car up the hill
and parks at the corner of 4th and 10th.
It is early, but dawn runners in their sweats
have all jogged home; journeymen, their pickups heavy
with metal toolboxes, with shovels and pickaxes
and coils of electrical wire, have been an hour
at work. Business people and the professionally suited
have not moved from their breakfasts. It is between
purposeful times. He walks along the old road
as it attends the river or turns for some ancient reason
from the river's voice. Cottonwoods hang over him.
The runnels are full of their white tufts.

He is happy under the branches, stepping
in dappled light. In Slindon Woods, years ago,
he knew a tree which held beneath its tent
a clearly defined warm air, always warm and still,
even in winter. That was a small beech tree, young
in a company of veterans. And there were other trees,
untidy evergreens, restless and irritable, without
comfort. He did not have to think then of such things,
to recognize a wych elm, to mark how a wild briar
thrusts its simple blossoms among the hawthorns.
Here he has to learn by conscious observation
the trees he passes under. He forgets their names.

(But—an old superstition in his country—
he always stations at his gate a pair of rowans,
red berried, an arboreal safeguard against the evil.)
The sequoia, the bristlecone pine, the ponderosa
will not stand in the landscapes of his dreams, taller
though they may grow, nor the honey locust and
the northern catalpa. So it is surprising that there
come into his mind this alien country, almost
as if he had never left them, men of his family
he has not thought of for many years. Dead men,
all of them, uncles and great-uncles, his grandfather,
so long dead he could not recall the old man's face.

Yet here they smile at him in their living lines,
familiar as his own hands. "I saw you," says
his grandfather, "at Bethel Chapel door, penniless
outside the penny concert. A little boy, tense,
standing straight up, determined with another little boy.
'Let him in, Dadcu,' you said, 'let him in, he's my pal;
I liked that. I knew then that you'd go a long way.'
He stands among the approving ghosts, disturbed.
"I don't remember," he says. "Oh, we do,"
his uncle Jacko says, "It's not enough you could read
before you could walk. We've had to listen
all these years to stories of how wonderful you were.

You're Dad's favorite. But you have come a long way."
Smiling and nodding. "The Promised Land," says Willie John,
his dancing cousin, amused and tolerantly mocking.
"This is a generous country," he replies. "Great cities,
deserts no man has ever walked. An abounding country."
But even as he speaks it sounds like an apology.
Only death could have pulled these stubborn shadows
out of the sour fields, the poor streets strung
among coaltips. Not a man among them would have
walked to Birmingham to the factories or sailed
out of Aberaeron harbor with a cargo of salt for Liverpool.
Certainly not a man had worked the deep seaways and,

thinking he'd seen a ghost, had found his brother
 in the streets of Valparaiso. "You've a good place here,
 right enough," Willie John says. "Tribal, Utes, Zunis.
 mountain men, Mormons. We Joneses would fit right in.
 You've chosen well." Their laughter is around him,
 kind and fond, and he laughs with them, all distance gone,
 his daily questions calmed and rested. A small wind
 from the world startles him alert. His warm ghosts
 are going home. "All's well," his grandfather says, his voice
 not even a whisper. It sounded like 'All's well.' He walks
 in the dust as if he is young and the sun not yet a burden.
 Traffic is moving over the river bridge; but not a serene,
 momentary radiance which is his alone and nothing

to do with the morning is showing him a brief eternity.
 He has plenty of time. Three calling boys at the river's edge
 throw down their bikes. Thinking of six pound trout,
 they tie their hopeful lures, pay out their lines, and cast.
 into the lucent morning. "All's well," he says, "all's well."

Borders

(i.m. John Ormond, died May 4, 1990)

The border I knew best was halfway over
 the bridge between the town and Breconshire.
 Beneath,
 the river's neutral water
 moved on
 to other boundaries.

I walked the bridge each Saturday, stopped
 at a guess measure,
 lived a moment in adventurous limbo.
 Did I stand on air then, invisibly taken to some unknown world, some
 nowhere?
 Where was I then? I was whole
 but felt an unseen line
 divide me, send my strong half forward
 keep my other timidly at home.
 I have always lived that way,
 crossed borders resolutely
 while looking over my shoulder.

Not long ago
 driving in America
 in high cold desert country below the Rockies,
 I saw at the roadside
 parked on an acre open as the moon,
 a ring of shabby cars
 old Chevies and Caddies,
 some prosperous trucks.
 The Indians were showing on folding tables
 their ceremonial silver, heavy necklaces, rich
 with turquoise and hammered squash-blossom, oval
 silver bangles.

Navajo and Zuni,
 old tribes, hardy and skilled.
 They stood behind their work in the flat wind,
 not smiling.
 I love the things they make,
 haggled for a buckle for my belt,
 silver, a design
 rayed like the cold sun,
 and, walking away, saw
 cut into the concrete
 the meeting place of four states.
 Crouched there, I placed a foot in Utah,
 a foot in Arizona, my palms flat in the dust of Colorado and New
 Mexico.

Restless as dust, scattered

A man I knew, my old friend,
 moved out as I did, but returned,
 followed his eyes and crossed the borders
 into his own country. When he left,
 it was to see his place from a distance
 and peacefully go home. The world grew small
 for him, to one country, a city, a house.

His mother, calmly and nobly dying,
 asked on her last day for champagne
 which she had never tasted. She wet her lips,
 and in the evening called into her room
 someone unseen. 'Who would have thought it,'
 she said, very clearly, and crossed the border
 for which all others are a preparation.

And Sally Taylor, her mother dying in the next room,
 heard women's voices, young and laughing,
 come in to fetch the old lady.

Border, boundary, threshold, door—
 Orpheus moved either way, the living and the dead
 were parted by a thin reflection
 he simply walked through. But who can follow?

For all boundaries I have crossed over, flown over,
 knowingly, unknowingly, I have no answers;
 but sit in the afternoon sun, under mountains
 where stale snow clings in shadowy patches,
 remember my friend, how he had sung,
 hope he is still singing.

Contributors



Charlotte Andersen, a mother of three boys under four, is an associate professor of Computer Information Systems and writes novels in her spare time (between one and two in the morning). Her short stories have been published online as well as in *Chicken Soup for the LDS Soul*. She is currently seeking publication for her novel, from which “I Choose the Highway” is an excerpt.

Randy Astle is a freelance film editor living in Orem, Utah. He holds an MA in film production from the London Film School and is currently writing a book on the history of cinema and Mormonism.

A faculty member of the Vermont College/Vermont College MFA in Writing Program for sixteen years, Phyllis Barber is the author of six books—two books of short stories, a novel, a memoir about growing up Mormon in Las Vegas, two juvenile texts; individual stories published in journals such as *Kenyon Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Missouri Review*, among others, and articles and essays in journals such as *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, *Utah Holiday*, *Salt Lake Magazine*, and *SunStone*.

For the past six years, Mark Bennion has taught writing and literature courses at BYU–Idaho. His poems have appeared in *Aethlon*, *The Cresset*, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, and other journals. He and his wife, Kristine, are the parents of three daughters: Elena, Karen, and Mirah.

Tyler Chadwick is an at-home dad who resides in Ogden, Utah with his wife, Jess, their two daughters, Sidney (3) and Alex (9 months), and their two dogs. He recently graduated from Weber State University with a bachelor of science degree in English and is preparing to pursue graduate studies in literature and writing.

Dennis Clark holds three degrees of glory from the University of Washington, preceded by one not of glory from BYU. A certified master of Librarianship, Teaching (English) and Poetry (also English), Clark is also a certified retiree from the City of Orem, which he served for 26 years as a librarian. His sole

credential for wresting the words of Joseph Smith into verse, however, is his years of trying to twist his own words into poems. Although he aspires to be a poet, he has no aspiration to be a prophet. He would only be rejected again, and fall into deeper depression.

Michael R. Collings has taught literature and writing at the University level for over 30 years, 25 of those as the Director of Creative Writing at Pepperdine University. He has published multiple collections of poetry—including science fiction, fantasy, horror, mainstream, and Epic; book-length studies and articles on Science Fiction and Fantasy and on several key writers, including Stephen King, Orson Scott Card, and Dean R. Koontz; nearly four hundred reviews; and scores of individual poems.

James Dewey finished his MA in Portuguese at Brigham Young University in August 2006. He wrote his thesis on Mozambican poet Noemia de Sousa whose work he is currently translating. He lives in Washington, DC.

Deja Earley earned a Masters degree in English at BYU, and is currently pursuing a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Southern Mississippi. Her work has previously appeared in *IRREANTUM*, and she has received honors in several writing contests, including the 2004–2005 Parley A. and Ruth J. Christensen Award, as well as second place in the 2004 Hart-Larson Poetry Contest. She also wrote the Third Placing Essay in the 2004 Vera Hinckley Mayhew Contest, and received an Honorable Mention from the Academy of American Poets in both 2003 and 2004.

Heidi Hart received her MFA in creative writing from Sarah Lawrence College. She is the author of the memoir *Grace Notes: The Waking of a Woman's Voice* (University of Utah Press, 2004) and of poems and essays published throughout the country. She is also a singer and harpist who loves making music with her two young sons.

Warren Hatch teaches technical communication and environmental writing at Utah Valley State College. He is a former trades press managing editor, technical marketing manager, and engineering journal managing editor. His poetry has been published in journals such as the *Western Humanities Review* and *Prairie Schooner* and has won awards from WHR and the Utah Arts Council.

Darvell Hunt began his writing career in the fifth grade, starting with inspirational poetry, and moving onto novel-length fiction after serving his two-year LDS mission. He has written a total of about eight novels, none of which are

published. He is currently working on three novels, one of which he hopes will change that trend. Darvell also wrote for two years for his local hometown newspaper, the *Lehi Free Press*. He lives with his wife, Gayla, and their four children in Saratoga Springs, Utah.

Janean Justham obtained a BA in English at BYU and a master's in social work from the U of U. She works for the State of Utah and lives in Salt Lake City with her husband and children. She won the 2004 Marilyn Brown unpublished novel contest for her novel, *House Dreams*.

P. G. Karamesines's essays and poetry have won numerous literary awards. Her novel *The Pictograph Murders* (2004 Signature Books) won the 2004 AML Award for the Novel. "The Pear Tree" won BYU's 1987 Eisteddfod Crown Competition. Patricia has published in literary journals and in *Harvest*, an anthology of contemporary Mormon poetry. She is part of the team that writes for the blog *A Motley Vision*, which in 2005 received the AML Award for Criticism. She lives with her husband Mark and three children at the edge of the desert in southeastern Utah.

Thomas Kohler was born in Provo, Utah, and lived in South and Central America for much of his young life. He has three brothers, one sister, wonderful parents and a fabulous wife who have all taught him the joys of literature and verse. He and his wife are expecting their first child, a boy, in early January. He wrote "O Sing Now, Muse" while majoring in English at BYU. Following graduation, he moved to Tucson, Arizona where he is pursuing a law degree.

Lance Larsen's second poetry collection, *In All Their Animal Brilliance* (2005), won the Tampa Review Prize, the AML Prize, and the Utah Center for the Book Award. Recent poems have appeared or will shortly appear in *Georgia Review*, *Southern Review*, *Antioch Review*, *Orion*, *Field* and *The Pushcart Book of Poetry: the Best Poems from the First 30 Years of the Pushcart Prize*. A professor at Brigham Young University, he is married to Jacqui Larsen, an oil painter and mixed-media artist.

Timothy Liu is the author of six books of poems, most recently *Of Thee I Sing* (University of Georgia Press, 2004) and *For Dust Thou Art* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2005). He lives in Manhattan.

Alan Rex Mitchell cries out from the wilderness of Utah's West Desert, where he pioneers with his wife, sons, and myriad plant and animal species. As a poet, novelist, rancher, scientist, conservationist, and teacher, he is beginning to

realize the sins of the twentieth century and sees a blend of popular classicism as the solution to the quandary of Mormon Art.

Bryan Monte is an assistant professor of English at Fontys University, in Tilburg, the Netherlands. He is currently preparing a paper proposal on an intentional community in Independence, Missouri, for the 2007 John Whitmer Historical Association Conference.

Carol Clark Ottesen received a bachelors degree from BYU and a master's degree in English from Cal State University. She taught English and Native American Studies at both Cal State University and Brigham Young University. She also taught English at both Shandong Medical and Beijing University. Though a gifted teacher, Carol thought of herself first and foremost as a poet.

David G. Pace is the book reviews editor for IRREANTUM.

Jennifer Quist is a freelance writer/amateur construction contractor with a languishing sociology degree she earned from the University of Alberta. She and her husband are raising their four sons in a small town/fundamentalist Christian police state in central Alberta.

R. W. Rasband lives in Heber City, Utah. His essay "Without Mercy?: Neil LaBute as Mormon Artist" was published in *Dialogue: a Journal of Mormon Thought*, Summer 2003 Vol. 36, No. 2. He is the moderator of AML-List, the online e-mail discussion group of the Association for Mormon Letters.

Steven J. Stewart has published poems in such journals as *Diagram* and *Apalachee Review* and has published a chapbook of his poetry with Pudding House Press. He was awarded a 2005 Literature Fellowship for Translation by the National Endowment for the Arts. His book of translations of Spanish poet Rafael Pérez Estrada, *Devoured by the Moon*, was a finalist for the 2005 PEN-USA translation award. His book of the selected microfictions of Argentinean writer Ana María Shua will be published by the University of Nebraska Press in 2008. He currently lives in Rexburg, Idaho with his wife and two children.

With the launch of Faustus Publishing in early 2007, **Paul Swenson** becomes the editor of a new Salt Lake firm dedicated to the publication of high quality regional fiction and poetry. His first collection of poetry, *Iced at the Ward/ Burned at the Stake, and Other Poems*, was published by Signature Books in 2003. His second collection, *In Sleep, and Other Poems*, is awaiting publication with another publisher.

Laraine Wilkins, a poet, essayist, and scholar, served as the general editor of IRREANTUM. She worked as a language teacher, technical writer, software support technician, and Director of Development and Community Affairs for Ririe-Woodbury Dance Company. She received bachelor's and master's degrees in German from Brigham Young University and did additional graduate work in German literature at Harvard University.

Bruce Young has taught in BYU's English Department since 1983. Specializing in Shakespeare, he also teaches courses on C. S. Lewis, world literature, and other topics. He has published poetry, essays, and scholarly articles and is currently completing a book on family life in the age of Shakespeare. He and his wife Margaret live in Provo and have four children and two grandchildren.

Margaret Blair Young teaches creative writing at BYU and has published many short stories, essays, and six novels (including the award-winning trilogy *Standing on the Promises* about Black Latter-day Saints). She has also written two plays and helped write and produce the documentary *Jane Manning James: Your Sister in the Gospel*. She is currently at work on a documentary project titled *Nobody Knows: The Untold Story of Black Mormons*.

Robert Young (pen named Rob Faeth) is an aspiring novelist, having recently completed a novel titled *Broken Glass*. He has also written several short stories, has a collection of poetry, and is involved in writing various other works of fiction. He lives in Provo but spends a good deal of his time in Spanish Fork, where he acts for the Royal Palace Community Theater.

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