

# MORMON POETRY NOW

An editor examines  
the best of what  
Mormon poets are  
trying to publish.

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Literature is of all arts most social—because its medium, language, is most fully the property of its audience. Unlike painting and sculpture it must be performed to be appreciated. And unlike music, drama, and dance, literature can be comfortably performed by its audience. It is, in fact, the only art whose audience must be its performers. For lovers of literature, even a reading by the author is not enough. The reader wants to enjoy the work by himself—for itself.

This is usually a solitary pleasure. One performs, say, a novel in relative silence and isolation, shutting everything else out to live the story. This should not be true of a poem. Although it can certainly be studied in silence, a poem can only be enjoyed in full voice. You must *speak* a poem to perform it; you must *hear* a poem to receive it. In this, poetry is more akin to music than to a novel. The score of a sonata is not its music; it is only the tablature, instructions to the performer on what the composer wants the audience to hear. A poem is what the poet wants *you* to say, hopes *you* will hear.

Reading a poem without moving your lips is like eating without tasting your food. The elements of verse that contribute to the taste of a poem in English are largely in the sounds of words, rather than what the sounds mean. That is so because of the nature of language. Use of language is the first ability a child develops

#### EDITORS' NOTE

*This is the first in a three-part series which looks at the state of the art of Mormon poetry. The first installment looks at poems centering on the poet, his family and friends. The poems in part two deal with religion, Mormonism in particular and Christianity in general. This broadening of scope continues into the third article, with poems on the natural world, the social world, the political world, finally widening into an invented world with Orson Scott Card's long fantasy, "Prentice Alvin and the No-good Plow."*

*Since its acceptance for publication in this issue of SUNSTONE, Dixie Lee Partridge's poem "Angles" has been published in the poet's collection *Deer in the Haystacks* (Boise: Ahsahta Press, March 1984).*

toward being human, and the foundation for all others. And the same elements that so delight the learning child—the sounds, the rhymes, the consonance, assonance, and dissonance of sound clusters, rhythmic chants and breaths, puns and wordplay—these are what make verse. People want to hear verse and to recite it because they have an inborn *need* to use language, a need manifest at birth.

That's why people will gladly quote even a bad poem in sacrament meeting, rather than try to say the same thing in their own words—not for the message, but because they find the poem beautiful, regardless of how stupid it might be. Pedant that I am, I believe that only ignorance of good verse—that only not knowing well-written poems in their own language—leads people to settle for the likes of Edgar A. Guest. But it is in their own language, the one they learned, the one they speak, that they want poems.

Occasionally, when Mormon writers and readers get together and talk over in *their* own language those things of interest mainly to themselves, some one of them will ask if there truly is, or can be, a distinctively "Mormon" literature. I have made that mistake. I have even been so rude as to insist on pursuing the specific question, "Is there a Mormon poetry?" Well, there are poems which deal with Mormon subjects. And there are poems spawned by Mormons. But the social nature of literature provides a better answer than the topical or the genetic: To know whether there is a Mormon poetry, we must answer this question: "Is there a Mormon audience for poetry?"

This article, and the two to follow, are my attempt to answer this second question—to force an answer really, by encouraging an audience. I will share some of the poems I have read for *SUNSTONE* in the past few years. They are not a scientifically sound random sample of Mormon poetry as it is now practiced. Selected on the basis of my own responses and showing my editorial biases, they can hardly constitute a definitive record of what Mormon poets are writing. But they do fairly represent the best of what Mormon poets are trying to publish. And poets try to publish their best work. It's their way of earning an audience.

#### POEMS OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Donnel Hunter's "The Stone" is a poem structured by contrast. Because it underlies most jokes, contrast is probably the most common way to give to a story or speech a structure which the hearer will readily grasp. The poem sets up a comparison of a tropical paradise, Hawaii, with a winter exile (perhaps Idaho, Hunter's home state). The contrast is set up in the first two stanzas; the last two play against that contrast. Living things, as well as locations, are contrasted: Just as the only active creature in stanza one is the rock crab, so the owl provides the active center of

stanza two. The crab is scavenging; the owl, delivering.

As it takes up the first half of the poem, this comparison of paradise with farm must be important to the poet. But what does it have to do with the stone? "The stone is clear glass," and the speaker "can't read what is written on the stone." The whiteness of blankness and the writing are enough to identify the stone with that of Revelation 2:17: "To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it." This identification, if correct, helps clarify the poem—even solve it (poems are often akin to riddles and puzzles, more so than poets care publicly to admit).

### THE STONE

I wake hungry for raw fish,  
my nostrils pungent with Oahu ginger  
and warm plumeria. Glissades of foam  
cross the beach where rock crabs  
comb the dark detritus for bits of fin.

But outside it's winter. Winter  
with blue stars, the beach a fallow field  
where an owl blinks twice,  
drops a white stone in the snow  
and glides away without a sound.

The stone is clear glass.  
I can remember now, someone died,  
his voice a clear bell,  
his name written in sand.  
Why can't I think of his name?

"It was in the morning of the first  
day," I tell the wind. The sun  
cracks the flat horizon.  
I can't read what is written on the stone.  
"Morning," echo replies, faint, then gone.

—Donnell Hunter

In the contrast between Oahu and Idaho (or could it be Montana?), the poem repeats the contrast between the Garden, and the fields, of Eden. It is a bitter reminder of the exile: It should be his new name written in the stone; he can't read it. Who died, "his name written in sand," "his voice a clear bell"? Abel, whose blood cried to God from the ground? Christ (of whom Abel was a type, an emblem)? The new man, whose new name is illegible? Though Christian in its imagery, the poem is no simple allegory of salvation or damnation. Intensely personal in the mystery of the fading name, clearly elegiac, it sounds the loss of paradise in Reagan's recovering America.

Another poem centered on the private agonies of being human, Stephen Gould's "To Silence," plays a little with its grammar in portraying loneliness. For example, the first sentence, "Water

... slides in the granite chute," a prelude to the description of the water's motion, is interrupted by a two-line appositive to water; the last four lines in the sentence describe the water's fall in five noun phrases; the reader expects them to be compound subjects of one verb. Yet the verb, following both a line and a stanza break, is singular ("plumes"). It is the stream which "plumes into silence," a silence that "is the silt of waterfall." This line is probably best understood by listening to the sound of a waterfall after leaving it.

### TO SILENCE

Water,  
sluice of lights twined off  
the pool of mountain shadow  
slides in the granite chute:  
the stone sill and stone fall,  
the cliff-face, stream fall, and the stream

plumes into silence.  
Water's tremble: silence  
hovers along stone. Silence, and not stone  
is the silt of waterfall.

Then what, when (before  
the dominant resolves,  
tone-vanes skin the cliff-face, parting  
silence from the stone) I rest  
not there

but on a third floor where, at dark,  
the window faintly  
mirrors me? The room  
I stay stands wholly opposite, anchored  
at the pane abutting space; myself-

who-watches-me sets down  
a dish in perfect silence,  
turns away.

—Stephen Gould

The fourth sentence is again complex: "Then what, when . . . I rest not there but . . . where . . . the window faintly mirrors me?" If the sounds of water falling plume into silence, if the natural world defines to silence, what of the situation of a man in a third-floor room who finds the faint mirror of the window more real than himself? "The room I stay" is the room mirrored in the window, anchored at the pane; it is stayed—braced, supported, propped up—by the person watching. But "myself-who-watches-me" could be either person—reflection or breather. In extremes of isolation, the individual often feels no more substantial than his reflection, and *this* reflection is mirrored faintly in space. The person, the watcher, "sets down a dish in perfect silence, turns away." The dish is left over from a meal—normally a social occasion—eaten in utter loneliness, whether anyone else is present or not.

It would be hard to depict a more bleak isolation, a less inviting silence. The silence of the waterfall is an invitation to listen; the speaker listens, only to turn away. It seems that only by turning away does the speaker refrain from joining the watcher out there in space—unless it is the watcher who turns away, refusing the speaker.

### ELEGY

The plums suddenly ripe,  
a crop falls in a day.  
I am too slow to preserve  
more than a row of small jars.

I used to loiter in the shade  
for the first green lobe to swell,  
purple, and drop into my lap.  
One day the leaves above me  
laughed with your voice,  
the branches whipped and shook  
till plums pelted me  
and the ground applauded.  
*There!* you cried. *Now eat your fill.*  
At my feet the fruit lay  
hard as jade eggs.

The orchard I leave now to its heaven:  
the plush soil studded with agate pits,  
the roots steeped in cordial  
that dazes the bees,  
and the limbs, plucked in a breath,  
spared the drooping wait,  
flung wide.

I might have been ready  
with nets and baskets  
to save more than my bottled share.

—Alison Booth

The next poem, though elegiac, is not so desperate: Alison Booth's "Elegy" is the verse equivalent of the "row of small jars" in line four; her attempt to preserve "more than my bottled share." As with Hunter's poem, there is a strong contrast at work here. The outer stanzas speak of a harvest of ripe fruit; the second stanza, of green fruit "hard as jade eggs." The world of the outer stanzas is autumn; of the second, spring. The ripe plums drop from "limbs plucked in a breath"; the green are whipped and shaken loose. The exuberance of that voice in the tree is preserved as fully as the ripe plums—and as skimpily. The intoxication of the friend in the spring limbs matches the mellow mood of autumn's roots "steeped in cordial that dazes the bees." The tree rejoices, "the limbs, plucked in a breath, spared the drooping wait, flung wide"—a joyful gesture in strong contrast to the frenzy of whipping and shaking that flung the green fruit.

The poem is an elegy for two losses: the lazy ease of youth, and the ripe fruit of maturity. We feel no need to mourn green fruit when young;

when older, we often seem to lack enough “nets and baskets” for the full harvest. The feeling of personal loss comes through strongly, but without bitterness.

### SATISFACTORY CONDITION

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*The driver of the car, male, aged 37, was killed instantly. The only passenger, his wife, is listed in satisfactory condition.*

The femur's a dotted line  
shot on a shadow  
echoing an ulna  
and three ribs.  
Skin—invisible  
to that pernicious  
eye whose lid is lead—  
swells mottled like old fruit.  
A cut that has not dried  
divides the back of a hand;  
another makes one eyebrow  
into two

and what I want  
to know about is  
Who puts out the names  
for how we lie in bed,  
and does He know  
what each ache means  
in a body less than dead?  
Is He not smart enough to know  
I am not satisfied at all?

—Patricia Hart

That is not true of Patricia Hart's "Satisfactory Condition." It is a bitter poem. The verse is itself sour, with short lines, compressed clauses. This sourness is heightened in the first stanza by the speaker's refusal to use personal pronouns in describing the damage to her body. It is not until the last line, in fact, that we know for sure that she is talking about herself. The lines of the poem are short and sharp, using all the tricks of verse to avoid sounding prosaic. Alliteration ("shot on a shadow," "echoing an ulna"), consonance ("whose lid is lead"), assonance ("back of a hand")—all are used with care, as are the ugly sound of "pernicious" and the image of mottled skin, to knot the first stanza into a tight bundle of dissatisfaction, tender with fury and pain. It is ruptured by the anger of denied suffering; where the poem breaks, rhyme is used to stress the patient's hostility to the physician. But the poem is aimed higher than at the local quack; in capitalizing the pronouns referring to the doctor, Hart is both mocking the exaggerated respect we tender the medical profession, and assailing at least the easy reassurance we offer each other about the Great Physician.

The speaker's bitterness seems earned. It doesn't matter whether Hart ever had the experience. Whether based on its author's life or not,

a poem is fiction. This one is convincing; I feel this speaker's rage at being ignored, at being swallowed up in a category.

### POEMS OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS

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Because most of us spend most of our lives in the clutch of one or another of our families, a number of poets explore these relationships in their work. Poems about family risk becoming sentimental by asking us for more emotion than they offer. How each poet deals with that risk affects the making of her poems. Less concerned with her own feelings, the poet will at times disappear.

### MY FATHER

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My father rests in a cane chair  
next to the pond he built  
with his own hands.  
The smoke from his cigarette is carried  
off by the sound of water.  
Floating on the surface a maple leaf  
gathers light and paints  
a broad hand on the cobblestone bottom.  
It's his hand,  
laying the stones,  
smoothing the mortar,  
priming the pump that draws  
water, quietly, incessantly,  
to the top of the fall  
where it trickles down stone  
by stone in the mottled light  
measuring the days of my father's life.

—John W. Schouten

"My Father" by John Schouten is a loving, carefully observed sketch of the man. In mentioning that his father built a pond, Schouten reminds us, however obliquely, of God creating the earth. However, he discharges the tremendous static load the word "Father" carries for Mormons with the image of the cigarette smoke "carried off by the sound of water." While the image of a floating, fallen leaf carries with it associations with age and death, Schouten imagines the shadow as his father's hand, making the pond—and the poem. That long last sentence describing both the building and flowing of the pond makes this verse a poem: The trickle of water in its miniature ecosystem measures the poem as well as the father's days, its sound carrying off the smoke of his rest as the sentence exhausts the reader's breath. The poem carries respect and affection for the man *because* Schouten refuses to sentimentalize his father, to overpraise his work, or to deny his age.

The next poems are a cluster about death, in each case a grandmother's death. In "Mourning," Sybil Johnston contrasts the death with that of a boy's pet dog. The boy can understand the dog's death; he carried the body, felt the bones, chose to leave the collar on. All he understands about

Grandma's death is that it is like the dog's in one way: She's buried with her collar, the lavalier, on. The boy feels guilty about his inability to mourn her. Details of the dog's death work against sentimentality in the poem. However unpleasant, the poem is true to the experience of many children, who are asked to feel a loss where there is none, who are asked to share the burden of their parent's grief over someone they never knew.

## MOURNING

Jowls; the lavalier  
around her throat  
was cold in carved wood.  
I did not cry, but Grandma's grave:  
I'm cold, I thought.  
Did I cry the day the bulldog died?

Old fruit crates in the cellar,  
kept from summer;  
"Your dog, boy, box him up,"  
and old figs dropped, bounced,  
as I banged up the basement steps.

He was heavy in my hands; damp,  
he was vomit-sodden, still  
warm; his bones were small, hard  
at my hands. I left his collar on.

They put a wreath on Grandma's grave.  
Someone cried.  
I thought about the day the bulldog died.

—Sibyl Johnston

Michael R. Collings's poem "My Grandmother, Dying" tells us more about the woman. It is an elegant exercise in containing strong emotion. By making the title also the first line of the poem, Collings brings us quickly into the world of his grandmother, where each word is necessary to hold things together and all energy must be conserved. Collings evokes this worn world in such phrases as describe the crocheted peacock: "dowry then, rosary now of memories" tells us swiftly how worn the peacock is and why, making the next lines almost unnecessary. The image of her as a sun for her family, light weaving "outward from the cooling core," compounds the meaning of the phrase "light webs" which characterizes the crocheted bird and the well-knit family. They are fraying. The dowry, her bride-wealth, will unravel, spilling out the light and raveling the family knit together by her life. Collings uses well the short line and spare imagery to suggest the constricted life of his grandmother.

Dixie Lee Partridge's poem "Angles" shares only the subject with Collings. It is an elegy of innocence and youth, flashy in form but gentle in substance. The device of shaping the poem is one of those things that works best when kept sim-

## MY GRANDMOTHER, DYING

settles into rusty cushions.  
The faded armchair enfolds her  
in velvet pile

worn thin. Dying slowly  
she touches a peacock  
crocheted in blue

and gold—dowry then,  
rosary now of memories.  
Thick fingers

tremble, touch  
intricate webwork  
knots. Her eyes

cloud silver-blue, tearless.  
Behind clouds  
once billowed

light. Now veins  
and nerves and  
flesh breathe

the glow alive. Light  
webs weave  
outward from the

cooling core, passing  
being and beyond, toward  
her family.

But now, settled  
in rusty cushions,  
she feels fraying knots.

Soon the peacock  
pattern will unravel  
beyond repair—and light

spill outward uncontrolled  
leaving darkened fingers poised  
over emptiness.

—Michael R. Collings

ple, as this is. The shape suggests the prow of a ship—not a freighter laden with meaning cleaving an ocean of woe (for there's no self-pity in this poem), but a cruise ship. The shape also mimics the angle that the father's spine is acquiring, and the trees that "grow at a slant to northeast with the wind," as we travel down the poem and backward in time to the supple life of a child, when nothing is stiffened by its nature into "unchosen angles."

But the poem is not a flight from the rigidity of age. Partridge tempers with surprise the references to herself in childhood: "My childhood watched her form brittle until she couldn't walk" (that use of adjective as verb is effective partly because such an unusual verb gives a crisp tex-

ture to the sentence), and "across from my early years, trees grow straight," give space to memory. These are the expressions of one who has "lived a future," "as in some half-forgotten dream." The poem moves backward, looking for the speaker's future but finding it rooted in her early delusion about trees. She cherishes the image of trees fanning the air into a wind because it denies the invisible and relentless pressures of time on the body. This process is desirable, not because it is a comfort, but because it points beyond the grave to just such a supple existence.

## ANGLES

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Gram died with most of her joints frozen  
At right angles. My childhood watched  
Her form brittle until she couldn't walk;  
After that her frame assumed unchosen

Angles of the wheelchair and cracked like  
deadwood.

When I see my father now, I feel  
A bloodrush back: his spine congeals  
From the hips—a rigid angle forward.

As in some half-forgotten dream  
I've lived a future; it persists  
In hard lumps on my wrists,  
A bamboo gait and a grip growing lame.

Here where I live the trees grow at a slant  
To northeast with the wind; they calcify  
In traction. Across from my early  
Years, trees grow straight along the  
ditchbank,

Each shaped like an ostrich feather.  
Enchanted child, I think they've volatile  
Powers to create the wind as they will  
By fanning still air.

—Dixie Lee Partridge

The next poem in this group, "Decision" by Richard Ellis Tice, is addressed to an older friend (a minor rarity in contemporary poetry; most poems addressed to "you" are to the poet's alter ego, or lover—sometimes one and the same). With a compassion that keeps a respectful deference, refusing to peep into the friend's emotional life, the speaker guesses at "days that threaten to repeat." These we have all had, yet they seem more frequent with this person. They are not "what you could feel each morning there." Instead, the repeating days bring a narrowing effect and force a choice "between the narrowing of walls or narrowing of world."

Tice conveys all this in verse that is a model of brevity and concision. For example, the verb "repeat" is put to double use by the medium-strength pause of the comma, first characterizing "days" and then, because the pause is brief, making "choice" its object. With a period or other strong punctuation, only the first would happen;

without punctuation only the second. This kind of quiet competence strengthens the poem without risking sentimental excess.

## DECISION

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Dawn, and you walk the street again  
apart from younger friends who come  
uncalled to windows, wondering  
what you could feel each morning there.  
You've talked enough of eighty years  
to guess. There's something about streets  
less limited than walls on days  
that threaten to repeat, the choice  
each day between the narrowing  
of walls or narrowing of world.

—Richard Ellis Tice

## A FRIESIAN DIGGING SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

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My mother bends,  
Blends with the sun,  
Blond in the glow,

Kneels to the bed,  
Wielding her spade,  
Turning a row,

Flush with the fervor  
Of forebears who diked  
The flooding North Sea,

And parents who plowed  
Nebraska with mettle—  
Willed now to me?

Did they pass it to her,  
Their first to forsake  
The farm as she grew?

My mother lifts,  
Shifts in the shining—  
So fragile a clue.

—Karen Marguerite Moloney

The same is also true of Karen Moloney's "A Friesian Digging Southern California." The poet carefully uses a number of devices of sound and rhythm, most of which belong to an older prosody (the Anglo-Saxon, appropriate for this Friesian subject), which serve to strengthen the poem and remind the reader that this is meant to be spoken, to be heard, to be fun—as well as sincere. The pun in the title, the play on "mettle" in the fourth stanza, help Moloney achieve emotional distance from what may seem a slight matter. It isn't. She is asking "Who am I?" (but without the portentous drumroll) and answering, in true Mormon fashion, with a little genealogy. But the focus of her asking, her mother, is clearly shown as an individual, rather than a name on the list or a line in the diagram of one's charted life. We are told little of the mother but share the

respect in which Moloney clearly holds her. We also share the presence and the mystery of the individual personality, "so fragile a clue" to our own lives.

### ODE TO DIRT

Dirty dishes, dirty laundry,  
Dirty diapers, dirty floors,  
Dirty walls, and dirty oven,  
Dirty fingerprints on doors;

Filthy toilets, smudgy windows,  
Muddy footprints, dusty stands,  
Dirty trash, and dirty garbage,  
Little children's dirty hands,

Sneaky dustballs, creepy cobwebs,  
Crayon faces on the wall,  
All combine to war against me—  
Me, alone, against them all!

Still I battle bravely onward,  
Till there's no more strength to borrow,  
And each night I sleep victorious—  
Just to find more dirt tomorrow!

So it seems a losing battle.  
Fighting dirt takes all my time.  
How can I remain "unspotted"  
In a world of dirt and grime?

When my life on earth has ended  
And my hands no longer hurt,  
When the fight I've fought is finished  
And I'm buried deep in dirt,

When my eyes at last are opened  
And I see that heavenly shore,  
Will I find the rest I've worked for—  
Free from every grimy chore?

Will my days be long and restful?  
Will my home stay squeaky clean?  
Will I spend my time in leisure,  
Like a spoiled and pampered queen?

Will I garden dirtless flowers?  
Will my windows gleam and shine?  
Will my hands stay soft and silky  
As a blossom on the vine?

Will my dishes never soil?  
Will my floors stay shining bright?  
Will my laundry never mildew  
While I lounge from morn till night?

Or, when I receive my glory,  
Could it be? Aye, there's the rub—  
Will I find, in that great mansion  
More celestial floors to scrub!

—Dawn Varner

The next poem offers a complete change of pace. Dawn Varner's "Ode to Dirt" is one of the few funny poems submitted to SUNSTONE—and one of the even fewer good ones. Varner uses the relentless pounding of the trochaic foot, with its leading stressed syllable, in much the same way that rock music uses its heavy rhythm. Yet Varner is skillful enough to rein in that rhythm when it would be intrusive, as in the fifth and sixth stanzas. Her control of the rhythm lets her control the mood of the poem, and hence its humor, far better than the usual humorous poem. Its mild mocking of our preoccupation with tidiness points up the Relief Society's occasional elevation of the trivial to importance.

But it is not a poem intended to deride the sisters—just to help them laugh a bit. "Light" verse, by whatever definition you find it, is usually careful verse as well. If not well done, it becomes at most funny (though rarely that, lacking discipline) and usually just tedious. Despite the slight matter of the poem, "Ode to Dirt" manages to be funny and still retain good humor—not the same thing at all.

### FOR KATHLEEN

—marriage—

memory won't fade with seasons

like voices in the wind, heard  
clear for miles

(winter winds  
rage in trees

but turn playful in spring  
caress twigs to bloom  
and summer green

in autumn winds  
and leaves  
discuss Glories)

eventually intelligible

—Rob Hollis Miller

A pair of contrasting poems about marriage will serve to round out this segment. Both are about wives (SUNSTONE's received very few poems about husbands; maybe Mormon husbands don't inspire love). Rob Hollis Miller's poem "for Kathleen—marriage—" has a dual structure that echoes the dual nature of the title. There are two sentences in the poem that amplify the vow, "memory won't fade with seasons." The first is a description of a memory that won't fade, though it reach the mind across the years as a voice on the wind across the miles.

The second sentence, in the parentheses, inverts this concept. Here the wind does not carry voices; it is a voice among leaves, howling with rage in winter, playful and caressing in spring and summer, discussing glories with its leaves in autumn. The autumn leaves and far-off voices are signs of a time when marriage has mellowed. The poem promises a full lifetime of love, from the blankness and awkwardness of first meeting (winter, not spring, is the better image for the beginning of love), when all is potential and our rage is the passion of our passion, rage at feeling so all alone, to the time when, in the season of mist and mellow fruitfulness, our age is a glory, when the harvest is our legacy rather than our labor. That is the time when our memories become intelligible across years.

### PLAYING SOFTBALL AGAINST THE POLYGAMISTS

Dad's the pitcher, and his sons are  
the infield, the outfield.  
The stands are full of Indians, and wives.

The jock who has cancer hits one into  
the Church parking lot—  
but our shortstop, coming across

to make a tag, breaks a collarbone.  
Dad strikes everybody else out  
in Enterprise, Utah, and goes home—

or homes—for us, a 100 mile round-trip  
to get our butts kicked.  
East of Newcastle, an owl swoops low

and smacks me flush on the license plate  
while I'm having an argument  
with the only wife I have in this world.

And I vow to be rid of her at any cost.

—R. A. Christmas

"Playing Softball against the Polygamists" is an entirely different work. It is a closed, violent poem. Instead of unfolding one idea, R. A. Christmas takes two seemingly unrelated events—a softball game and the break-up of a marriage—and yokes them by violence together. The viciousness of that last line seems to come out of left field. My first impression was that it is unrelated to the poem. But the subject of the poem is loss: the loss of the softball game, the loss of love in a marriage. The first helps the speaker see the second, for the game is summarized as a disaster: Except for one possibly good hit, everyone else strikes out; the shortstop breaks his collarbone trying to "make a tag." Even the one good hit is made by "the jock who has cancer"—a detail unnecessary to characterize the batting, but essential to the mood of the poem. It is as if all the

tension, injury, and disease in the first three stanzas were noxious elements in a chemical solution, the owl were the catalyst, and the violence with which it smacks his license plate had precipitated in the heart of the speaker his brutal "vow to be rid of her at any cost."

The owl "smacks *me* flush on the license plate," as if the speaker had suffered the blow physically, as if it were part of the argument. Contrasted with that violence are the polygamists: wives (and Indians) filling the stands, family unity in their team (truly an example of making teamwork of marriage)—and a dad who "strikes everybody else out . . . and goes home—or homes."

The poem breaks on that word "homes," a word whose plural makes no sense for a monogamous man. The poem then shifts the focus from the homes of the dad to the homes of the losing team members, related to the former's homes only by the bitterness of defeat, which will foul the losers' homes like a burnt breakfast. In that fracturing of "homes" lies part of the impact of the poem. It splits the poem, softball dropping out and the marriage becoming dominant.

If this analysis of the line's attention-getting ability seems a little arcane, remember that your command of English grammar is unconscious, if not innate. The effect of this kind of grammatical quirk is also largely unconscious. You don't know why it affects you until, and perhaps even after, you analyze it. Most of the poem's emotional effect comes from the sudden wrenching effect of that last line. Yet it seems on second reading to hang together, even if you can't tell why.

The unity is helped by the skillful use of present-tense, first-person narration, which prepares us to accept such a sudden change of subject. I normally dislike present-tense verse. I find it ineffective, because it is most often used to describe a static or near-static scene, tonelessly, almost as a way of dampening emotional response. Yet as Christmas uses it, it draws the reader into the emotional process that mars the marriage. That the poet can use to shattering effect such a tired technique is evidence of his mastery.

In his use of the technique, Christmas writes like most American poets today. In fact, most of the poetry printed here is right at home with its American contemporaries. Varner's light-hearted "ode," because it wants to be formal and funny, and Gould's "To Silence," because it is cryptic, are less at home than the rest. And that's probably the best short answer to my earlier question. There is English poetry by Mormon authors; it resembles contemporary American poetry, but tends to be more formal and traditional. So there are Mormon poems then. But is there a Mormon audience for poetry? Well, as I said, I'm trying to encourage one.

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