

MORMON POETRY NOW

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

Second in a Series

For a Mormon, the distinction between family and church is one of scale. We talk of being children of God with Jesus our elder brother, of being sealed in eternal families, of being adopted into Israel. But we feel these concentric families much as a spider feels its home: through a network of lines and connections, of angles towards a center. Our distance from the center is more a matter of feeling than of lines of authority. We believe ourselves to be children of God, of loving parents—but as adults we often feel more like teenagers of God, tangled in a web of contradictory emotions, with responsibilities no one and nothing has prepared us for, facing an uncertain future dominated by parents we no longer fully trust.

"Hungry Sunday" reflects such anxieties. Tension develops from the difference between act and expectation, beginning with the title: "Hungry Sunday" is "Fast Sunday" by another name. This awareness is necessary to understanding the first stanza; the poem does not return to Fast Sunday until the eighth stanza.

The opening lines are a man's meditation on falseness and faithlessness. Centered on the girl, his thoughts range from the peccadillo of crackers in her purse through the breakup of their romance to the major failures of her first husband's

EDITORS NOTE

The poems in part one of this series, looking closely at the individual and his family—at times the same thing—may have induced claustrophobia in you as a reader. Recent American poetry has that effect. The poems in this article deal with a larger family—God's. You may find them a little more familiar; more of them are about you.

D. Marichen Clark

adultery, the apostasy of the polygamous missionary, and the girl's bankruptcy (although, in such a catalog of faithlessness, "belly-up" could mean more than bankruptcy). Even the falseness of a diseased tooth has major consequence in this reverie.

The eighth stanza returns to testimony meeting—and the crackers. Contrary to normal Mormon usage, the narrator does not use the word *fast* for the meeting or the day—because "most of the rest of us" don't fast, but are "lukewarm from first to last, barely able to bear it." Yet the speaker *does* bear his testimony (or is it "bare"?): "The Gospel is true, is true." With merciless clarity he says gospel, not Church. The people he has been thinking of are the Church, and they are included in the last line. Everything else in the world may be false, at one time or another, in one circumstance or the other. Both Peter and Judas were false to Jesus. The gospel alone is true.

Richard Tice pictures a different kind of truth in "Church Historical Library." He presents history as something *seen*. The poem is an image—in its purely visual treatment of subject, its idea of history as crucial event and aftermath, and its shape: an hourglass. Its neck is the verb of the poem, the action through which time is passed: "filled with." Above that neck, history is the physical setting of an exhibit. It is clear and concrete, each line with one noun linked skillfully by sound. Beneath, a similar parallelism occurs—until the third item, the "one word," is given the last two lines and finally becomes the base of the

HUNGRY SUNDAY

*I remember the girl
who brought crackers in her purse.*

*After we broke up, she married
a returned missionary (from France)*

*which lasted until she caught him
sleeping with one of the widows*

*of a polygamous French missionary apostate
who died (I'm told) of complications*

*arising from an abscessed tooth.
Later, as I vividly recall,*

*the girl with the crackers went belly-up
in Utah, and moved to Independence*

*with her second husband and eight children,
leaving me (and most of the rest of us),*

*devoured by the zeal of the Lord's house,
to drag myself to testimony meeting*

*on a full stomach, lukewarm from first
to last, barely able to bear it.*

*The Gospel is true, is true.
Everything else is anybody's guess*

—R. A. Christmas

hourglass, the foundation on which our measured time rests.

The title is the top of the hourglass, and its other base. The Church Historical Library is pictured as a place where the artifacts of history accumulate, as sand accumulates in an hourglass, as time accumulates in the memory and bones of a man. One gets the impression, however, that this glass will never be turned. Time is captured in it, static: the poem does not contemplate change. For Tice, the sand is still running; this word is at the foundation of history, unchanging.

Gloria Tester's poem "Service" shares the clarity of Tice's small scale, but is nearly as abstract as his is concrete. Too, it is as generally Christian as his is specifically Mormon. A poem in praise of Christ, "Service" shows how it is that sinners can yet bear his comfort to others. A large part of its effectiveness is in the central metaphor, which is introduced with the word "buoyant." This word is normally associated with water, yet the imagery associates it with air: the individual as a balloon borne on the wind. (This kind of surprise

CHURCH HISTORICAL LIBRARY

*Inside a cherrywood case
beneath a glass pane
lies a front page
of an old paper
filled with
one long ode
a long article,
and one word longer
and larger than any other:
Martyrdom.*

—Richard Ellis Tice

SERVICE

*Thy kindness kept me buoyant
above a world despairing.
Thy mercy gave me freedom
when all the world was bound:
not for myself, o Savior,
but as a pure wind, bearing
Thy health to those who suffer,
far as the need is found.*

—Gloria Tester

AS SHADDAI DESCENDS

*The grasses sing and the trees shout
as Shaddai descends to receive his bride.
The stones laugh and the rivers leap;
as he kisses her mouth the clouds rain wine.
In the meadows of Eden he lies with her,
and the issue of her womb is heavenly lights.*

—Colin Douglas

ADONAI: COVER ME

*Adonai: cover me with thy robe;
Let me rest against thee.
I have traveled in far places;
Where thou hast sent me, I have gone.
Among serpents I have laid my bed;
I have risen to go among wolves.
I have walked in dry places
Where the rocks held no water;
I have climbed high mountains
Where frost was my covering.
I have gone unshod;
My feet have bled.
I am weary;
I have found no rest.
Let me rest against thee.
Shelter me with thy robe.*

—Colin Douglas

TWO POEMS IN HIEROGLYPHICS

1. The Breathing Permit

*If, at last, bosom friends will mutter through linen screens
Not catching the faithful word,
Nor passing, yet wondering what passed—
Then the pressed soul presses on its bounds:
Expressed through linen pores
Is sweat like blood, supposed to speak
How ably to subtle bents of mind.
And yet the gag and the seamless gown
Absorb sound and sweat; statuelike, such a thing
Crumple at its knees, and weighs down rock, or prays
Like a ka, with upraised arms,
Forsworn, commanding, mute.
Some still say it was not an open agony
Hung on a cross, that died, that saved,
But a wrought-up one that
Could not cry through many mouths,
So bled through many pores.
But I only lived when he cried for thirst.
Only to actually speak is to actually save—
Silent shuffling in line will not do,
Nor such agony as oil painters imagine,
And manufacturers of cheap prints.
Yet they count each red dot
And suppose each an advantage.
Iron nails are true advantages,
Like lightning in clouds,
Sealing earth to heaven.
You hearers, if, as the Egyptians say,
An adze of meteoric metal can animate a corpse,
Search the desert rubble for such and such a stone,
Try it in the fire (which never proved metal yet)
And make a man.
Rouse him if he sleeps in the west,
And make him look on what he longs to see—
On men whose smiles direct their lives—
On the cliff-like face of an established creed;
Or let him call on Jesus Christ,
Who was bruised like a bay leaf,
Who was poured out like oil and wine.
Let him call on blessed Jesus, God's holy child.*

*When there is breath in his lungs—
When his mouth is open—
Then let him.*

2. The Final Vignette, With Jubilation in the Temple of Wisdom

*What will the souls construct
When all the souls are saved?
(The souls will never all be saved.)
Yet, I hear that the banner is unfurled,
The lamp lit, the assembly hushed.
And though I swore furiously
That I was an initiate,
As a match flares shortly,
With a dying hiss in the dark,
I was not believed by the seven Candlesticks,
Or by the stone with seven eyes
(The messengers of God).
They spoke to each other in tongues—
And they signed to each other below the frame,
Where I could not see.
As for passwords,
Who can trust these sibilants
My mouth betrays me with detested lisps,
Un-adamite;
And my finger bones
Won't accommodate
These unwonted
And uncertain shapes.
If this darkness is light to other eyes
Then the ecstatic pyramid of man
Sealed to Adam and each to each
May be spiraling upward,
Surmounted by the open eye,
Forever out of reach.
Then, the answer to my question is all too clear,
Like a silly tune of a glockenspiel,
Like the look on the lips of the Queen of Night.*

—Mark Solomon

LTM

*I become a burly girl,
Gnawing candy bars, muttering Dutch.
There's a feeling of marathon—that it can't go on, but
it does, it does.
Every day the same bricks, the same windows, the steps,
the lessons.
We stand in a circle and chant our offerings
Reciting the red pulp of our bones
In the ritual of the unlikely—the daily impossibility.
Some of us stare at the ceiling, some at our shoes;
We squint and clench and finger the lint in our pockets
and grind
Out the lines.
I preach every night in a language I can't speak
To a wall that has heard it all before
And tells me again in the echo of my whispers
I know it perfectly well
With the finality of settling wings in an aerie,
A falcon nesting in the simple and bloodied cliffs.*

—Kira P. Davis

makes poetry what it is—twists of word rather than plot, language reminding us of how much more we know than we normally use.) The blowing wind frees the speaker from the despair of the world to become a bearer of health. We think of service more as assigned labor than as a response to a need revealed by the Spirit. But “Service” is a poem about grace, Christ’s aid freely given through us, from each according to ability, to each according to need.

Colin Douglas has in mind a different grace with “As Shaddai Descends”: Christ’s gift of an end to time. The neurosis of living in sin is absent from the world of this poem. It is purely a cry of joy, a love poem like “Service,” but with flesh. Hebraic in its prosody, it makes the return of the Lord a little less familiar: The end will be a climax, not the butt of frayed endurance. In its erotic imagery the poem keeps faith with the scriptural image of the Church as Christ’s bride, his love for it sexual (e.g., Matt. 9:14-17; Eph. 5:22-32).

Again emulating the poetry of the prophets, “Adonai: Cover Me” strengthens the Hebraic element with imagery familiar to us from the Psalm of Nephi: “O Lord, wilt thou encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness” (2 Ne. 4:33). It is familiar to any reader of the Old Testament. To keep his poems simple, Douglas uses contemporary English syntax, avoiding the dialect of the pseudobiblical. With accurate use of obsolete pronouns and inflections, he keeps the diction mildly archaic yet familiar. It is the Godspeak we know, transmuted to that “plainness” in which Nephi delighted (2 Ne. 24:4).

Mark Solomon offers no such help with “Two Poems in Hieroglyphics.” We must interpret them in light of our own experience, including the esoteric: the temple endowment and the Gospels; Mozart and the Book of Abraham; the mysteries of the gospel and its doctrines.

Although all of these help in understanding the poem, none of it is necessary to grasp its mood, which is, in fact, the key to the poem’s hidden meaning: regret. While the temple endowment provides the image which opens “The Breathing Permit,” it is an image of despair, of one “not catching the faithful word, Nor passing.” Though most of us do not picture ourselves being rejected at the veil, this one does. In the rest of this meditation on “what passed,” he asks why—and gives us a warning.

This breathing permit joins a body of documents with, to use Hugh Nibley’s words, “particular value to the dead and the living . . . as a textbook of vital instructions” as well as passport, letter of safe conduct, and guidebook through the underworld (*The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri*, p. 75). Its prime instruction, the last stanza, urges what the gowned and gagged soul of the second stanza can no longer do: “call on Jesus Christ.” Three strands of imagery lead through the labyrinth to that instruction: the

temple endowment, Egyptian funerary practice, and accounts of the passion of Christ.

The meditation gathers around the last, with the speaker asserting that it is Christ’s “open agony” on the cross which offers salvation and not the “wrought-up” agony in the Gethsemane “of cheap prints.” The latter is the agony of the gagged soul, “sweat like blood” of one who does not pass, the suffering of one who has undervalued and cheapened Christ’s crucifixion. To skeptics he proposes a test: reanimate a corpse, as Christ reanimated Lazarus but using Egyptian magic (the “meteoric adze”), and let him look “on the cliff-like face of an established creed; Or let him call on Jesus Christ . . . When there is breath in his lungs . . . Then let him.”

The second poem uses the same rhetorical strategy: In imagery derived from the same sources, an excluded one speaks to us of a similar understanding, too lately acquired. “The Final Vignette” plays off of our expectations of salvation. Drawing on hymns, the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, the temple endowment, and Egyptian and Masonic ritual, the speaker describes his exclusion from the assembly. The elaborate context emphasizes the pain of that exclusion while the third stanza defines it: atrophy. The atrophy has resulted in skepticism, which returns in the final stanza (“If this darkness . . .”). It conditionally precedes a vision of what may be, that pyramid surmounted by the open eye—seen on a dollar bill garnished by inscriptions reading ANNUIT COEPTIS (“he has favored our undertakings,” an appropriate motto for a tomb) and NOVUS ORDO SECLORUM (“a new order of the ages”). Links connecting this symbolism, Freemasonry, and the decoration of the Salt Lake Temple are well known. Solomon closes the poem with a reference to Mozart’s opera *The Magic Flute*, which is rife with Masonic symbolism expressing Masonry’s emphasis on the improvement of mankind through moral action. Solomon does not try to rationalize the connections he finds among endowment, opera, and Freemasonry, but he points it out and asks us to notice it, to ponder what in our religion is cultural baggage, and what is truth.

Solomon’s poem discusses an agony the missionaries fail to mention. Through aggressive reaching out, the Church has embraced many cultures and planted itself among their peoples. The fingers of that outreach return, at times dyed by the contact, at times crippled. But some knuckles get skinned even before the fingers do their walking, an agony Kira Davis writes about in “LTM” (the Language Training Mission, now the Missionary Training Center, which converts its trainees: “I become a burly girl”).

The long lines of “LTM” are a departure from the other poems discussed here. Their grammar is straightforward and simple in contrast to the turmoil they record. The agony of “There’s a

feeling of marathon—that it can't go on, but it does, it does" is heightened by the way the line stretches time. The diction of the poem is nearly as colorless as those bricks, windows, steps, lessons, walls. There are quiet pleasures, felicitous words like "burly" that we too often forget when groping for the right word; collocations like "gnawing candy bars, muttering Dutch." These do not shout. Then there is the line "Reciting the red pulp of our bones." It seems melodramatic, overdone, in the context of chanting memorized snatches of a foreign tongue.

But in the connection between it and the last stanza the poem achieves poetry. It takes an understated personification, the wall that talks back, and an unstated figure of speech, beating one's head against the wall, and combines them in the metaphor that ends the poem: The echo of the speaker's practice becomes the whisper of "settling wings in an aerie." The wings are those of a predator; the prey is the preaching sister and all her predecessors. The image of "the simple and bloodied cliffs" harks back to the earlier metaphor of "the red pulp of our bones": the LTM has become a bird of prey, rather than a brooding dove—a raptor, rather than a comforter.

In contrast to this pain at the mission's outset is the joy of coming home. Yet Dixie Lee Partridge, in "Release," does not gloss over the ambiguous nature of the mission. She presents it as a family experience (the departure of Jade, the poet's missionary brother, is the subject of her poem "The Call" [SUNSTONE, November-December 1980, p. 54]). But it is the family's part to wait—a role Partridge underlines by her reference to the concurrent release of the Iranian hostages "free in Wiesbaden." In small ways Jade acts like a released hostage: photographing the American flag on the grounds of the Seattle temple, hoping that "Mom won't cook rice." In addition, the family brings him a parka, protection from his new freedom.

But the mission is voluntary. The poem expresses joy that Jade arrives safely but it concerns "greeting Jade," the family's release from waiting, and their westward journey to Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (the nickname "Sea-Tac" seems a deliberate metaphor). They travel through a drab, dun winter land devoid of wonder or fun, "ski-mountains oddly bare," to meet a "magenta marked" ferry from the tropics bearing Jade, who "gives us baby magenta orchids from Thailand." He comes almost as an alien, entering not at Customs but at Immigration. "A tropic brown has replaced the hayfield tan," and he wears "a batik tie." "Relieved there is no snow . . . he shivers into a parka."

These details are counterbalanced by Jade's acclimation (not acclimatization), which begins almost immediately. The vibrant colors of the tropics (airplane, tie, orchids, jade) pale, like the flag, "translucent against the albino winter sun." Jade arrives not as a harbinger of spring but as a

refugee from it. The change begins immediately; the narrator watches him molt, taking on the winter of his native climate. "For this brief acclimation, he's ours." The poem is her acclamation, her welcome.

The next poems are about exile—from the garden. Each adopts Eve as voice, but the treatments are radically different. "For Thy Sake" establishes locale and identity early on. Collings's Eve is the gardener to Adam's plowman, raising the fruit to stand beside his wheat, "remembering Eden" as she works. That she remembers only the beauty of Eden fits the optimism of the poem. Eve has accepted the world of her exile and finds beauty in it. As a gardener she has tried to recreate Eden, imitating the work of God who planted the original, rather than living in bitterness for the past, or misery of the present.

While Collings looks on the bright side of the exile, Penny Allen, in her poem "Blackberry," shows the thorns close up, with the hunger for Eden a dominant theme. Until the last line, in fact, the plucker is not identified as Eve—and then only elliptically. This berry picker could be any woman. Moreover, the first two lines describing the berry are ambivalent, describing it as attractive and ripe as well as bloated and horrible, "sucking *darkness* into swollen lobes." The berry is doubly evil: Not only does it fail to satisfy her hunger, but the thorns which guard it also cause pain. Allen's heavy use of alliteration is like the pulse of pain in torn skin: the "ragged red rivulet on the wrist," the "thumb-pad pierced by a point in the process." Pain and hunger cause Eve to flinch "into the tangle" of canes and close-woven briars, "sighing 'Oh, Eden, Eden.'"

Pain of a different kind informs Donnel Hunter's "The Lure" (recently published in the poet's collection, *The Frog in Our Basement*, 1984). Hunter speculates on a common metaphor for missionary work, that of fishing for men. He ponders what it would feel like to be, not Peter nor a modern Apostle nor even a knot in the gospel net, but the lure on the end of the line. What if the Apostles were fly-fishing instead of seining? What if they wanted only certain fish, not any carp that swam by? And if the Apostles are the fishermen, what—or who—is the lure? And what is caught? A fish worth the wait, one the fisher has been hoping to draw from the shadows—one matched to the lure. Even the "casting and missing, missing and cursing" is part of the drama of fishing just before the sun is to drop "into the kingdom of darkness where stars refuse to shine."

"The Lure" is related to an old missionary joke: "The Church must be true. If it weren't, the missionaries would've destroyed it long ago." The poem expresses some of the frustration felt by anyone who is part of an established order: "the fish are right: anyone who would cast me out will never come up with the idea change is in

RELEASE: GREETING JADE
BACK FROM THE INDONESIAN MISSION

"As the cold of snow in the time of harvest,
so is the faithful messenger to them that
sent him;
for he refresheth the soul. . . ." Proverbs 25:13

On the three-hour drive to Sea-Tac
we hear radio reports of the hostages,
free in Wiesbaden, close
to us as we move toward
another homecoming.
Snoqualmie Pass is dry, ski-
mountains oddly bare this January.
Magenta marked, the Thai 747 eases to the ramp.
We spot him first through glass,
down-escalator bringing him to Immigration:
we wave wildly, he returns
jubilation and that same easy smile.

A tropic brown has replaced the hayfield tan
(. . . seedtime and harvest shall not cease).

In white shirtsleeves, a batik tie,
thinner, he comes
through customs to our seven sets of arms
and a new nephew who touches his cheek
then hides his face on his father's shoulder.

Leaving Sea-Tac, he shivers into a parka
we brought him, says American air
smells different from the tropics,
is relieved there is no snow.
He gives us baby magenta orchids from Thailand.
We talk of eating
steak and french fries later.

("I hope Mom won't cook rice . . .")

Early tomorrow we will see him off,
home to Wyoming snow and twenty-below.
But for this brief acclimation,
he's ours.

Our first stop is the temple at Bellevue.
(Now then we are ambassadors for Christ . . .)
Just through the gates, he stops, raises
his camera to the flag unfurling
slowly, translucent
against an albino winter sun.

—Dixie L. Partridge

FOR THY SAKE

I spaded in the garden again today,
Adam being in the fields to husband wheat;
and I spaded in the garden, remembering
Eden: Roses twining glossy Ivy on
smooth Oak trunks, such massed perfumes
that I could scarcely stand. Or Apricots
and Peaches—gold and blush—bowing stiff-spined
branches earthward. I needed merely look
or pluck and eat, or smell.

And tomorrow, I shall spade again—for now
the apricots, the peaches, and the rose belong to me.

—Michael R. Collings

BLACKBERRY

Sucking darkness into swollen lobes,
It rides the cane over in its plumpness.
She wants it—enough to thread a careful hand
Through the thorns, etching a ragged red
Rivulet on the wrist and pricking tiny
Rubies where she wavers until her fingers
Lightly pluck it—thumb-pad pierced by a point
In the process. She pulls the berry back
Through close-woven briars; it stains startled
Fingers pinching at the pull of a thorny
Anchor. She plunks it into her wet mouth.
Delicious. More desirable than the first
Death she ate. Yet long after her tongue
Forgets the sweet, her throbbing thumb remembers
The pain, and still hungry, into the tangle
She flinches, sighing, "Oh, Eden, Eden."

—Penny Allen

THE LURE

The thread of my life is waxed,
ready to be wrapped on a hook, decorated
with fur and feathers, then slung in a pond.
The fish below—shiners, bluegills, pout—
will watch me floating, dangling helpless.
They will laugh themselves dizzy asking
what fisherman could be sucker enough
to fall for anything phony as that.
They will take turns swirling up through clear
water, at the last moment turn tail
and veer away. The man on the wrong end
of the line will see the ripple and twitch
back his pole. He will curse anxiety and luck,
make another cast. The fish will laugh again,
releasing bubbles of mirth.

This will go on
afternoon after afternoon. The sun will beat down
on the fisherman. He will keep casting and missing,
missing and cursing, cursing and—you may wonder
why doesn't he reach down into his tackle box
and try another lure? But the fish are right:
anyone who would cast me out will never come
up with the idea change is in order.

One day the pond will produce the fish who can match
wits with the fisherman: a long pike or heavy trout.
The others will scatter in panic, leaving him
to swim alone, under my shadow. Reflex will turn him,
slowly ascending, opening the dark cave
his jaws make when he holds his breath, gills slack,
tongue flat on the floor. He will feel the hook
tear flesh. His bones will tighten.
The reel will sing to the fisherman whose hands
will remember what to do. I will fall
in love with my captor. His pain will be mine
because he is the only one who ever wanted me.
Together we will rise just as the sun
drops into the kingdom of darkness
where stars refuse to shine.

—Donnell Hunter

IN MORMON HEAVEN

*You get to make babies,
and God is the President.*

*There ain't no bad niggers,
homos, or hippies.*

*Everybody shaves and believes
in the same thing,*

*even B. Young and Port Rockwell
(your neighbors—just down the street).*

*And someday your wife's gonna let you
take those cute girls next door*

*to a Disney flick where you'll fall in love,
and after that you'll get married, and married,*

*and have zillions of kids who will always,
always obey.*

—R. A. Christmas

SABBATH FLOWER

*It is all grown quiet;
even
the last soft spadefallen soil
is settled, is quiet.*

*The congregated celebrants
in passing
from their own seed-time
germinate beneath their taken wind.*

*Let omen be the name of spirit:
the seed-place passes
in its time.*

*This is a street-corner funeral.
Behind the heavy plate-glass windows
lettered gold on black
mimicries, false shadows of letters,
the funerary audience masses,
drugged for sacrifice, withheld
among our bitter or our sweetened drinks
from gusts that flex the glass, quake
rampant at its barrier.*

*The victim
has named me master
of sacrifices, the priest. I am to know,
but bite the silence in my mouth.*

II.
*That bridge that is the work of hands
admits the stream beneath;
this bridge that is the work of hands
purports the traffic of our feet—
beneath the bridge, our flower-boats
and from the bridge false lovers watch
our sport of men.*

*This is a winter-bound island
and awning. People
here in meadows, hills, populations, streets, doorways,
solitudes
braid cables of their dawn and dusk of voices
coil the cables on the sidewalk
under the dripping awning.
There are no strangers in the neighborhood today—
there is no one to be recognized as strange.
A German shepherd on a leash has nuzzled
at the hands within his tether's range,
received no food;
sits by his mistress's leg.*

III.

*That bridge that is the work of time
is mark and pace-mark of the flow:*

*across the wooden arch across the stream
we gathered the flowers and we wove the garland
for the neck and shoulders of bronze
steadfast Buddha:
the shrine today is redwood benches, jasmine
tea and fortune cookies*

*and we watch the naked sparrows, just
beyond us, wet, and picking seeds.*

*Let omen be the name of flower.
Let veil be the name of smoke.
There is no shelter but these depths.*

*The batter of iron on iron sides,
the clatter of the anchor-chains
is the censer, diesel-smoke the incense,
garland and life-ring,
rescue of broke packing crates
and styrofoam cups near an oil slick.*

IV.

*Let flower be the name of seed-time,
seed the time.
The omen is the bird's blood-flashing wing.
The garden is the Buddha,
bronze the garden's child:*

*three
whirl-winds flank
an ornamental pond
on a cold,
haze-buried day.
That central walks the water
and grows white; those
flanking follow, right and left; they
lock their triangle
with that of glancing shadows in the pond.
Let the omen be the name of spirit.
Then*

*all is grown quiet, even
as the named immersion's prayer
is growing, still.*

—Stephen Gould

order." This sounds more like despair than humility. Certainly there is a humiliation in being rejected by the shiners, bluegill, and pout that could make one desperate. And that would explain this speaker's almost neurotic response to success: "I will fall in love with my captor. His pain will be mine because he is the only one who ever wanted me." Not quite the same as "how great shall be your joy with him in the kingdom of my Father"!

"In Mormon Heaven" offers a different view of joy in the kingdom that Mormon males inarticulately expect. This satire of our folklore about heaven gains force from Christmas's epic understatement—as in the title, which echoes the term "nigger heaven." It usually derides the aspirations of others. Here it's used to help us laugh at our own easy satisfactions.

With savage satire Christmas mocks only a few of our folk beliefs about exaltation: we'll all be there with the prophets and heroes; eternal increase means more, but easier, pregnancies; the American Republican political system is the model for celestial administration. What Christmas is satirizing, it seems to me, is our perversion of patriarchal order (defined in D&C 121 and Ephesians 5 as a heavy burden demanding sacrifice, conferring no power on males that love cannot claim). What do we make of beliefs which permit a man to be serially sealed in eternal marriage to more than one woman except the crude caricature of the last three stanzas? Nothing, if we are not prayerful—nothing, that is, but a target for the jeers of outsiders.

Yet Christmas is not an outsider. Despite its flip diction, there is too much pain in the satire—pain like that in the final denial of free agency, leaving us to ponder what we ask of our kids. I don't want to overly solemnize the poem, but I believe that its satire is just, that it probes some abscesses of our religion. It makes me wince.

In strong contrast to the clarity and sharpness of "In Mormon Heaven" is the mysticism of Stephen Gould's "Sabbath Flower." As the final blossom in this arrangement, it may seem a bit exotic: a Buddhist exercise in mystical comprehension of matters Christian, of wonder at worshipping a death. But try it on.

The first three stanzas seem to look at death from the other side, through the eyes of celebrants "passing from their own seed-time" as the seed-place will pass in its time. The fourth stanza sees the funeral from our side, held in a storefront chapel, "withheld from the wind." But "the funerary audience masses" seems to name our ways of celebrating the Eucharist, and the lines "the victim has named me master of sacrifices," though startling, are an accurate view of Christian ordination. It is as if the celebration of the Lord's Supper were a funeral.

Section II pictures an unnamed urban locale (where a storefront church would fit—say, San Francisco). Everything here suggests loneliness:

voices as cables, the dripping awning, an unfed dog—a German shepherd with no flock, watching over a neighborhood where the only strangers are familiar ones. But the bridge is a puzzle. There are two bridges, or one seen doubly: the bridge that frames, places, defines the stream, and the bridge that "purports the traffic of our feet." *Purports* is a strange verb here. The root sense of the Latin, *proportare* ("to carry forth") fits, but the current meaning suggests that the bridge is a deception, an ornament, like the false shadows used to give letters depth.

Real or not, the bridge moves us to section III. Imagination moves across "that bridge that is the work of time," memory, towards an encounter at a Buddhist shrine. The garlanding of the Buddha has become a "mark and pace-mark" of the speaker's life. He travels back to it during a private sacrament of jasmine tea and fortune cookies, a communion not protected by plate glass nor awning, a communion sanctified by the incense of an ocean port: "Let omen be the name of flower. / Let veil be the name of smoke. / There is no shelter but these depths." If the flower here and at the beginning of section IV are the seed and flower of Alma's discourse on faith (Alma 32), then the seed-time and seed-place of the first and fourth sections are particles of faith. The sabbath flower of this meditation is the bloom of that faith.

Both sections I and IV include the line "Let omen be the name of spirit"—too strange an equation to be Christian, as *omen* is usually associated with the occult. But not so strange for Mormonism, considering the way we often talk of manifestations of the spirit. *Omen* serves as metaphor, a way of reading nature as God's will. These omens, "the bird's blood-flashing wing" and the whirlwind walking on water, seem to define two things: the Holy Ghost as a witness to Christ's blood and the effect of the named immersion, baptism, which stirs the water. Like his response to Job out of the whirlwind, the Lord answers the loneliness and isolation of this life with an omen, speaking in silence, "even as the named immersion's prayer is growing still."

This is an unusual testimony of Christ. Indeed, all these poems are a little unusual as contemporary American poetry, as much in their open avowal of faith as in their creation for an audience who share the authors' culture and beliefs. As Mormon poetry they're also unusual in their fight against sentimentality. The hardest task most poets face is avoiding sentimentality, for whether the sentiments are fashionable or not, using them to appeal to the reader's emotion is always easier than capturing emotion in words. The reader's task is to avoid being suckered by the poem. Read these poems again—do they succeed?

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