



# Fire in the Pasture

*twenty-first century mormon poets*

Edited by Tyler Chadwick



PECULIAR PAGES

# Finding Place

A fire in the pasture undulates  
of blue and white and yellow flower,  
a fire like a snake, iridescent by sunlight  
and undulant in the wind.

Here one will understand the Nazarene's joy,  
awash in the lilies of his own field, a spicery  
of uncommon radiance in a common hour  
rising from the dark, speluncular sod.

*Consider*, he said. Simply consider. Flowers  
catching light like the scales of a serpent's skin,  
a yellow apple sun delicious to the taste,  
and temptations to joy irrepressible!

The kingdom of heaven found on earth  
is like a pasture, a strange, little kingdom  
full of spicery, the undulant and speluncular,  
and all other words by which we frame it.

In this life we find the peaceable kingdom  
within, then above, beneath, and all around.

What can a person driven by grandiosity  
know of the quiet, hidden God found here?

—*Doug Talley*

# Preface

*Tyler Chadwick*

In 1985, *Sunstone's* poetry editor, Dennis Clark, began a four-part series for the magazine called "Mormon Poetry Now!" Once a year for four years, he surveyed "the state of the art of Mormon poetry" in order to examine "the best of what Mormon poets [were] trying to publish" (6). I'm sure his survey of the field dovetailed nicely with the work he was doing alongside Eugene England, gathering poems for the anthology, *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*. Together, these projects composed a unique moment in Mormon literary history—an intentional move to place Mormon poets center stage and to definitively represent what England called "the new Mormon tradition of poetry." As England had it, those working within this tradition tend toward "an unusually healthy integration of skillful form and significant content," toward the marriage of formal poetic training and the moral "ideas and values . . . they claim to know through religious experience." It's a union, England concluded, that leads them to "act with energy to communicate those ideas in confidence that they will be understood" and accepted by both their peers within Mormonism and within the field of mainstream American poetry (285).

Twenty-years before *Harvest* hit bookshelves, Mormon poet and playwright Clinton F. Larson spoke to the possibilities of such a union with the prescience of a poet-seer. He suggested that "[p]art of the spiritual record that must be kept [by the Latter-day Saints] is the poetry of the people." He warned that without a "body of significant and enduring poetry" to connect the Saints sensually and aesthetically to their religious experiences, Mormonism's cultural heritage would be in jeopardy. But if Mormon poets could, in his words, "take their work as seriously as they should, and by 'seriously' I mean that they become professionally responsible, then a significant and coherent literary movement can begin." In other words, if Mormon poets could meet the demands of their craft even as they faithfully responded to the demands of Mormonism, they would rise to their "literary promise" as a "believing people." They would earn an honored place in the Church, whose authorities would trust and accept them as "conveyors of individualistic truth" and experience (80).

Five years later, in 1974, Richard H. Cracroft and Neal E. Lambert published the first anthology of Mormon literature, *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints*. Although designed specifically for a course in Mormon literature at Brigham Young University, Cracroft and Lambert hoped it would be “a good beginning” in the development of a Mormon literary tradition, one worth boasting about as the Church became increasingly international. After all, the collection was intended to represent the growing quality of Mormon letters, which included some “good novels and fine short stories, . . . some stirrings in the personal essay,” and, of course, “a body of good poetry.” That body ripened over the next fifteen years into *Harvest*, which then became the standard for contemporary Mormon poetry and poetics.

And rightly so: England and Clark had gathered hundreds of poems from fifty-eight poets whose writing careers spanned the half-century before the book was published. The title of *this* anthology, *Fire in the Pasture*, is meant to honor the standard set by these poets while revising *Harvest*’s basic conceit. The scriptural notion of a harvest suggests an eleventh-hour reaping completed in preparation for the Lord’s return; thus the title, *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*, suggests, advertently or not, that the editors’ gathering was such an eleventh-hour act, meant to be undertaken once and for all. But farmers sometimes burn their fields post-harvest in preparation for another planting. This is where *Fire in the Pasture* picks up the metaphor.

The phrase comes from Doug Talley’s poem, “Finding Place,” which I believe speaks to the intersection of religious, spiritual, and moral experience with the aesthetic experience inherent in well-crafted poetry. Through metaphors we often use to describe and to connect with God’s kingdom (fire and light, the serpent, wind, gardens, planting, reaping, etc.) the poet takes up language as a form of worship—by which I mean that he uses it, yes, to *praise* God, but also to *emulate* God, whose words make worlds out of chaotic matter. If we think of poetry in etymological terms—*poesis* being the Greek term for the process of making—God, then, is the first Poet. His words and His worlds are constantly inviting us to reconsider our relationship to Him, to language, to the universe. Talley echoes this in “Finding Place” as he drops words like live coals on our tongues and invites us to “[s]imply consider.”

The title *Fire in the Pasture* is intended to invoke these associations—and more. But it’s not my intention to elaborate fully on these themes. Rather, as the editor of this collection, my intention is to showcase poets who have emerged or established themselves since *Harvest*, with special emphasis on poems written or published since the turn of the millennium. You’ll find a range of published and unpublished work from eighty-two poets, including new poems from eight of

the younger *Harvest* poets: Susan Elizabeth Howe, Patricia Karamesines, John W. Schouten, Laura Hamblin, Lance Larsen, Philip White, Danielle Beazer Dubrasky, and Timothy Liu. This vanguard joins seventy-four established and up-and-coming poets to provide an expansive look at 21st-century Mormon poetry. The poems range from artfully crafted traditional forms—including sonnets, sestinas, and villanelles—to free verse to prose poems to light verse to dramatic monologues to translations to cowboy poetry. All of these represent the varieties of the contemporary lyric voice; and the range of poets speaking here represents the varieties of the contemporary Mormon experience—a chorus of voices that calls again and again for us to reconsider our relationship to poetry, to the modern world, and to 21st-century Mormonism.

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## Works Cited

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