

David L. Wright

from
RIVER SAINTS
INTRODUCTION TO A MORMON CHRONICLE

RICH, THE DEAD BROTHER

The Poet's mother, scrutinizing
A photo of his dead brother, says,
: It seems a thousand years since he lived.
True, the Photo's glossy grin parodies
A millennial past
Once worth a poet's words running toward,
In eras when thought was linked to hope,
Before the breakable trusts of steel and stone
And supersonic this and space probes that
And the minor hypodermic of trivial acquisitions
Spun his "creative" yelps toward less than
The old fisherman's river silence.

Yet, the valley's poet still walks
Within the brother's life,
Still disbelieves the soundlessness
Of that grave Matthew Daniels dug
A millennium ago,
And sees two boys riding horses
To the silver pond
In nightfall glows of opal
And iridescent dancehall lights
Beneath the lap of Baldy Mountain;
Justin too! Now ten steps away,
Decaying in another final bed
Picked and shoveled to cadences
Of Maori tunes.

He, the constable, the conscience third
To everyone's duet,
Muttering to himself that night,
Walking the lane to the silver pond —
 : Law and order. . . . Won't put up with tomfoolishness . . .
 City folks got no right setting up dancehalls here . . .
 O no ya don't surrender in the name of the law . . .
 The riders listen and laugh
 Infused with youth July and moon,
 Reign up while the old man
 Passes through the fields
 grumbling this gawdy commercialization
 Of the village's peace and mountains.
Before the cruel summer was over
The boys found a human skull half buried
Deep in Pine Canyon.
: What would it be like to die?
: Ugh!! Like this!
Dirt from the skull's eyesockets
Sifted through their hands.
Half thrilled, half brave, half joyed,
They swore their wills upon it
Secretly consigning possessions to the survivor —
Ponies, dogs, pocketknives, girl friends,
And whatever increase came of
A dollar and eighty five cents.
But now Baldy's runoff waters
And gophers of cemetery hill
Portend a future play and horror and vow
In hands of other huckleberry boys,
Believers too in millennial time
And everlasting selves.

THE ATTIC BOY

He won't leave his parents in peace,
As they pray he will,
To practice their God-fearing,
Because he knows they can no longer

Shove his face in milk whey
Whip with willows or
Yank by his hair from Sunday School seat;
He has lived the seven years since high school
In the old house's attic
Smoking, reading novels, watching TV,
Careful always to remove the stepladder
After he has ascended into his ceiling cave.
: It is almost more than a mother's heart can bear,
His mother says,
An ungrateful son steeped in irreverance.
For did she not drill him countless hours
To memorize faultlessly his Sunday School talks;
Didn't she stand over him every night
Of his childhood life
While he repeated hourly from the Book of Mormon?
What more could a loving mother do?
: We brought him up in the ways of the Lord . . .
Now look at him . . . !
But the poet looks instead at her, Phoebe Jamison Wayne,
Knowing she had her rivers too
And saw them cruelly drained;
Sixth daughter in a family of a dozen,
Dwelling in a log cabin in a grove
Next the mountains, above Silver Pond,
Her parents primitives pioneering
Long after privation was necessary, a hard life, hers,
Divorced from the flows of village life.
Long the teenage winter nights
Staring at genealogy books, recording baptisms,
Tracing her father's lineage back to Adam;
And dim the kerosene lamplight,
Smokey in the wind the logs and gunny sack
Never could keep out;
Married a meek sheepherder, Owen Wayne,
And moved into the village,
Where her son, she vowed, would outsmart
And outreligion the children
Of people who danced at the Silver Pond
While she fed her father's hogs.
But he, born frail and frightened,

Offended her by loving the animals he was ordered to slaughter,
Preferred tracing flowers and mountains
To genealogy and Joseph Smith's vision,
: Why do you think he did it?
The poet asks, earlier knowing from the attic boy's tale
Of the evening last summer when he,
Hearing the family assemble downstairs took
His .22 from its peg,
Climbed down the stepladder,
Leaned against the living room doorframe
And fired a bullet into the picture tube,
Returned to the attic, drew the ladder up,
And turned on his own TV full blast.
: Because he went to the city,
She says, dead certain,
: And got a janitor job there, that's why. He couldn't
Stay here and help his poor father and mother . . .
No, and after all we done for him . . . No, he had to
Leave us here a-workin ourselves to death,
And running around with a rough bunch of gentiles,
Who taught him to smoke and drink and swear
And the good Lord only knows what else . . . !

What else the poet secretly knows
For the attic boy's eyes broke their hardness
Last night,
Telling of four years ago when Kathryn,
His crosslots village sweetheart,
Who rendezvoused with him in pastures
And made love's promises,
Gave birth in a sheepcamp
To her father's child.

THE OWNER OF THE SKULL

The old fisherman babbles nowadays
Who was the owner of the skull;
There was a moonshining hermit, ex-Mormon,
Who as a youth watched federal marshals

Bullwhip his polygamist father,
Tie him across a saddle, like a dead elk,
Proceed ostentatiously through the village
For all the saints to view the error
Of their sanctified matrimonial principle,
And haul him to gentile court, then jail;
Impoverished, the family suffered, the mother died.
Well, it was a federal marshal who learned
Of the mountain still
And caught Lenny's bullet between his eyes.

The old constable knows for it was he
Who heard Lenny confess,
And took the haunted man fishing below Pescadero
And baptized him back into the graces of God,
In the river;
And caught fifteen trout that day.

THE PHILOSOPHER'S MOTHER

We'll never kick him out,
We'll always, as after his destroying the TV,
Call him down to supper,
And suffer in silence.
: I thought of going to college . . .
Seven years ago and since . . . Got A's in high school,
The attic boys says, smoking,
His feet propped on the bedstead.
But the poet sees in the steel-dreary eyes
Only the affection of change,
And thinks: No, you are your own school,
And this family, this people, this valley.
Leaving him, blowing smoke rings,
And certain that the fragilities of the boy
And of his mother
Blend into kinds of counterpoles,
Each exhausting and sustaining themselves
Another hundred years
By their rivers' catalyst of mutual love.

A GATHERING OF SAINTS

They softened into visiting,
After the weed fire,
Parking their cars and trucks
In the wide part of the dirt road,
Halfway between the homes the poet lived in,
The two decades of his village life;
Visiting of matters apart from this emblazoned threat
To the township's long, inherited peace,
Shaped by less peaceful pioneers who carved
A civilization from a valley Jim Bridger
Swore to Brigham Young could not be humanly inhabited,
Infested with wild beasts, winters in July, and
A swollen river.

Now, the blaze controlled, they talk gently
Of sons and grandsons making more money in a month
Than they in a year;
One a biochemist for the *USDA*,
Another, executive for *IBM*;
A business accountant, a military officer, etcetera,
But saying nothing of what the poet knows
To have been their sacrifices for offsprings
Whose fortunes had to be sought apart from the heritage,
In worlds of stone and steel —
Selling cows, sheep, ancestral lands
To send them through universities,
Reducing poverty to want;
Wise, these old, to see the cast
Of the world's change did not lie with villages,
Though hurting somewhat that it were not so;
Hurting, even yet, for the progeny rarely returns and,
Returning, gives scarce evidence of honoring the heritage,
Even the language or the values; and jittery
Anxious to return to whatever they chase,
"Bright" beyond the above villages now, with computers,
Promotions and all, oblivious of
What the mountains once meant,
And scarcely with memory of or connection
To those in Cemetery Hill who never made it through;

Yet, they are proud of their go-getters, these old,
Unaware of or disbelieving driven nerves
Scraping beneath flannel suits and tailfin cars.
Educate them – the only way nowadays –
Help them “get started” (sell another cow)
For family cannot cleave unto family anymore
And land must be sold for a gentile’s money,
If that’s what it takes to pay tuition.
And even now (sell another cow) when somehow
The big salary turns to bad luck or recession
Or business overturn. Sell the north forty;
Get them through, he’s got a degree, he’ll prevail;
Like his letter says expenses are more nowadays.
Just think, everything he eats comes from a grocery store!
We don’t know, don’t understand, send him a check,
And he’ll be all right.
This they don’t talk of,
But the poet knows, for he too was educated, and home now
By way of sold cows.

Now in the sundown, the weed blaze smouldering dull,
Their first emergency since the old fisherman disappeared
Last winter and they had to hook up the town’s
Only team (belonging to him) and fetch him
From the river –
Only at such crises times do the saints gather now,
Discounting church where they worship mostly silent now,
Often sleeping through services, nudged awake
By the ghosts of intense ancestors,
To sip the sacrament waters,
Then settle again to the thrumming pulpit platitudes,
Not to be disturbed anymore by loud Maori chants,
Nor conscienced by milky intensely blue eyes and shaking mouth;
For the conscience of the village has been quieted.
Not at ball games do they gather, for there are none,
Nor school plays, for the children are bussed
Into the city’s consolidated schools
And the long-suffering Sadie has hushed the only link
To their collective memory.
The fire, spreading from leaves the incompetent attic boy
Had left untended

Smokes gently in the slow, delicate declining hour
Of Sunday,
The sundown disc backlighting the Pescadero Hills
And flaming the poplars at the poet's "old place"
With yellows of autumn leaves
Which cannot sublimate the darker meadows
Where the splendid brother flushed cows home
From willow bush hideaways,
In days when these were mid-aged
And the pioneer houses of the village
Seemed likely to be repopulated
By the blood of youth in the heritage;
Not left to rot as now, each log house,
Or inhabited and remodeled,
Respirited by workers imported by Monsanto to work
In the city's phosphate plant;

Workers moving on, most likely, next year,
Wherever the company trumpets them to.
(Would the splendid brother be Mr. IBM now?)
The poet looks into the darker meadows
And a millennium ago,
Only slightly hearing the villagers murmur
Upon the death of Enoch Henry, one of their number,
Yesterday, at 80, 27 days older than the old fisherman
(According to the attic boy's mother, who
Having traced her blood to Adam, now traces for others)
And repeat as if it's incredible
That he is now town patriarch,
Not knowing, as the poet knows,
He has always been the oldest. . . .

(Horace Mahonri Barnum and Bailey Tate)

Who, in his 70's, fat, stubby, watery-eyed, peppery,
Always Santa Claus at the children's Christmas party,
Leans his elbow on his truck window, squints his eyes
Into the faint smoke, and tells of his chartered excursion
To the World's Fair.
Is of the opinion New York
Was a damned waste of somebody's money,
New Yorkers
Worse than stampeding animals,

Except animals are more friendly.
Stopped in Times Square to tell a wino
About the saving graces of Mormonism
When a hurried elbow knocked his hat off,
And stooping, another bowled him over,
The potential convert quickly disappearing
By the time he pulled his Santa's rotundity together.
: Oh they could tell I was a sheepman. . . .
Saw it in their eyes. . . .
Hell, if living there means getting ahead. . . .
I wonder what's the use of. . . .
His voice quits, and the poet finishes the memory,
Of his son Rex, city dwelling, making money,
Who put a bullet in his head five years ago,
: Life wouldn't be worth living if
It wasn't for the church . . .
Continues, describing the claustrophobia, the speed,
The noises, how, trapped, he couldn't escape
Because the bus was chartered,
And finally, hardly able to breathe and trembling with
Outrage and invective,
Of collapsing halfway through Nebraska,
Making the trip from Wyoming in an ambulance.
I'm all right now, he says, back home,
Convinced only a fool would ever leave the elixir
Air of mountains and the everlasting gospel;
: Starting life all over again,
He laughs, prying his mouth open.
: Looky here, starting to grow teeth again!
Takes the false ones out, plops them into
The poet's surprised hand,
And arranging the angle of his head,
Shows reddened gums with white edges of enamel
Protuding in three places. . . .
(James Simon Armetus Montgomery Ward Tate)
Ex-Bishop, taps his cane
In the fire's weed ashes, saying
: When a president of the United States stands up
Without batting an eyelash and says the farmer is better off
Than he's ever been, he's nothing but a dang-busted liar . . .
Unable to connect the drop to ninety nine cents in wheat prices

To the farmers' voted insistence upon a free market.
Financially indentured to a future that Democrats, somehow,
Have cheated him of, he had not and would not sell
His grand piano,
Bought in war-time prosperous years
Despite tone deafness, without exception, in his family.
: Not on your life . . . finest piece of furniture
In the valley.
Nor had he sold any other of his finest and superfluous
Commodities to pay his debts, despite court orders.
For unlike his Santa Claus brother, James S.A.M.W. Tate
Never reduced his standard of living for his children's sake,
And they now remain in the valley or near,
Adding yearly to their father's posterity,
Thus increasing his and their rewards in heaven
(For so it is written).

But it was the Bishop's son, the poet knows,
Who slew himself in the Pescadero Hills,
Before the poet's time.

He walks among them, from group to group,
Noting the members missing from their number —
Uncle Arnold Davis, thrown to his death five years ago
When his tractor struck a badger hole, circled
And ran over him —
Pete Hart, retired shepherd, inveterate Jack-Mormon,
Who boasted of hitting a foul ball off Walter Johnson
When Walter was a lumberjack and everybody else fanned —
Found frozen in his house,
A week after his death, in the posture of prayer —
Uncle Milt Jennings, after three years of insanity
And memory-clear juvenility —
And dozens of others,
And now Enoch Henry who searched for 30 years
The walls of his cabin
As the old fisherman searched his river for eighty,
Of these the poet ponders,
While the decimated and feeble remainders of the heritage
Mill contentedly among the ashes of a fire
That threatened their peace,

Their lives now a continuum
Of selling cows
To progress the world into enrichments
Their children assure them exist,
Somewhere out there
In the space of fast moving planets
Where ours will dump its problems –
Soon – one day;
Long before millennium.