The Things We Make True

Michael William Palmer. *Baptizing the Dead and Other Jobs.* Peterborough, N.H.: Bauhan Publishing, 2019. 128 pp. Paperback: $16.00. ISBN: 978-0-87233-302-4.

Reviewed by Susan Meredith Hinckley

As a kid growing up near the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, I spent most of my time plotting my escape—from childhood itself, but more specifically from a Mormon childhood in Utah. I wrote away for literature from boarding schools on the East Coast. I dreamed of being a nanny in any big city to which someone might be willing to send me a plane ticket. I vowed I would at least go away to college. I couldn't bear the thought of hanging out in the same student union where I'd spent lame Saturday afternoons bowling with my brother. How could I ever go to class on that campus where, about two years after every self-respecting kid on the block, I'd finally learned to ride a bike?

My ward chafed. Mormonism itself made me itchy, as if I had been born with an allergy to it that my parents either failed to notice or hoped I would grow out of. I spent a lot of time bouncing back and forth to extended family in Utah County. My inability to fit was even more glaring there, telling me that no matter where I went in the state, I'd likely never feel at home. I'm not sure why, but many decades later I still can't think of my childhood in Utah without also thinking about wishing I could be anywhere else. I also can't quite stop missing it.

So although I was unfamiliar with his work, I felt an immediate recognition of the voice behind the extraordinary essays in Michael William Palmer's *Baptizing the Dead and Other Jobs*. This prize-winning collection forms a coming-of-age memoir that is not so much *about* Mormonism—or growing up in Utah—as haunted by it.

As I read, I settled almost too easily into the places and people of someone I've never known, completely at home in the unease of another's fraught adolescent footsteps. It was a bit unnerving to know so well some details of a story I was seeing for the first time.

The author's list of early jobs reads like a pretty ordinary roadmap to adulthood, at least for a kid from Utah County. Convenience store clerk, telemarketer, nighttime janitor, knife salesman, Jazz-obsessed basketball fan (okay, some are perhaps not so much *jobs* as states of being). The unremarkable occupations and experiences he describes form a backdrop for the people that shape him, reminding us that a life story is never so much a catalog of the mindless jobs we'd rather forget as a deeply ingrained inventory of the love and losses we can't.

In the first essay, "7-Eleven Clerk," Palmer is remembering a friend who has died. He writes, "Blake once told me that one of the things he liked best about tattoos was the way they mapped a person's life—for him, there was nothing sad about a straight edge tattoo on someone smoking a cigarette, or the name of a long-irrelevant lover scrawled across someone's heart, because of the way those tattoos were honest about the past" (9). Reading these essays felt like I was looking at a person covered in tattoos they didn't choose but are used to living with—as if they wrote the past all over themselves as they lived it but unwittingly let the ink sink under their skin. Now it simply can't be helped.

We watch as Palmer feels his way from the middle to the fringes of the church in which he was raised, until eventually he stands on the outside looking in. Even after he has outgrown his religion, there's a feeling in these essays that relationships and experiences continue to be filtered through the old lens, as if he can set it aside but can't quite stop looking at himself and everyone else through it. Mormonism continues to not just inform his perspective but somehow lurk in his personal shadows until it feels to the reader almost like it must inevitably chase him from the physical places of his youth.

And yet, in the haunting essay from which the collection takes its title, he uncovers meaning and so finds comfort in a memory of his first experience attending the temple with the youth from his ward. This suddenness of beauty pulled from the past is deeply moving. He recalls waiting nervously in line for his own turn in the font, watching as the friend whose suicide he now vainly struggles to reconcile ascends the steps after completing baptisms for the dead. He writes, "I know that ritual is creepy and audacious to a lot of people, but that image of water falling from Steve's eyes and hair as he crossed to the other side of the baptismal font made all my years of church and seminary and broom hockey and all the other Mormon activities worth it. When I think about that, I almost become religious again, or at the very least feel as though the things we make true are true" (172). Palmer's ability to hold the sacred and meaningless together in an easy way that gives both full expression contributes to the feeling of raw truth in the experiences he selects to tell his story.

His descriptions are delivered with a measured neutrality that somehow heightened meaning for me. I know how deeply Mormonism is tangled into our families and relationships. I know what's required to leave it behind. You don't miss that story behind the story just because Palmer doesn't really tell it. Although it isn't the focus, we glimpse the difficulty occasionally, as when he writes, "One day my mom, doing her best to contain her frustration with the church-free and directionless adult I'd become, asked me, 'What is it you want, exactly?' 'I just want to live my own life,' I said. She rolled her eyes. 'What *else*?'" (21)

Which is, of course, exactly what he's trying to figure out himself.

Eventually, Palmer ends up at the University of Utah (as did I). He's finally launched on a trajectory out of his Utah County childhood, but in the kind of cosmic "not so fast" one might expect when trying to escape one's former self, he ends up working at 7-Eleven for a second time.

Surely it's written somewhere that you can take the person out of Mormonism, but you can't take Mormonism out of the person? Something like that. In this case, the friction created in shaking off his old skin generated a spark of truth that continues to testify long after I've finished the book. Someone else knows just what it's like to grow up in that particular place, and that particular way, focused mostly on the vague goal of escaping it. But the goal is complicated by the same details that drive it—the familiar faces of the mountains he loves, the endless feel of certain folding chairs in a cultural hall, the taste of punch forever mixed with Sprite.

"I just want to live my own life," says every adolescent at some time. But are Mormons allowed to say it out loud? It somehow never felt that way to me. This collection of essays says it clearly and yet doesn't feel quite as sure as those words sound. Artfully subtle but unmistakable, its tacit unrest will speak to anyone who's ever felt conflicted about the unique combination of place and people called home.

Maybe we're not so different—maybe Palmer's experiences are the same as that of every kid, love/hate roots sunk deeply into the first place they landed through no choice of their own. Those roots retain a certain wistfulness for their early soil. As he describes it, "I'd shed my skin, but while I might have walked outside afterward feeling like a new person, what I remember when I think about it now is what I left behind" (18).

Palmer experiments with form in ways that are not only creative but particularly effective, yielding a collection I found as engaging to read from the standpoint of craft as from our shared cultural experience.

In a short entry labeled "Zion From My Rearview Mirror," he describes driving away from Utah for the last time on his way to his new life in Texas. "I was relieved to escape, even as I grieved anew the reality of fleeing the place I once thought I'd never leave. I watched the mountains in my rearview mirror as I drove west toward the freeway. The sun blazed on Timpanogos and I knew exactly where I was. I

don't think I'll ever feel that certainty in another place" (97). The wholly unexpected depth of resonance for me in these collected essays makes me wonder whether any of us will. I'll undoubtedly return to this book again, whenever I need a reminder that I'm not the only one whose heart carries the complex, indelible imprints of growing up exactly where and how I did.

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Karin Anderson's Excavation of Ghosts

Karin Anderson. *Before Us Like a Land of Dreams.*
Salt Lake City: Torrey House Press, 2019. 375 pp.
Paper: $18.95. ISBN: 978-1-948814-03-4.

Reviewed by Lauren Matthews

Mark 5:9—"My name is Legion: for we are many"—opens Karin Anderson's masterwork *Before Us Like a Land of Dreams*. Anderson lyrically pools her ancestral narrative in sweeping loops, eddying history, religion, and landscape. Ghosts speak elusive, needling "truths." Homesteads are temples of their own. The narrator is excavated as artifact—the individual is not individual, the collective not merely alive.