

# “I CANNOT DESCRIBE SALT”: ELIZABETH WILLIS, POETS IN EXILE, AND THE CHURCH INVISIBLE IN THE AGE OF PANDEMIC

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Ever since Socrates banished poetry in Book X of Plato’s *Republic* with a flippant “if . . . poetry can show any reason for her existence in a well-governed state, we would gladly admit her,”<sup>1</sup> Western poets have largely been on the defensive, mounting countless defenses of their vocation across the centuries (with Percy Shelley’s defiant “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world”<sup>2</sup> being perhaps the most notorious). However, plenty of other poets have in turn questioned why they should ever want to enter Plato’s Republic in the first place—which, after all, enthusiastically endorses censorship, openly denigrates democracy as being but one step from anarchy, and was written by a man who mounted spirited defenses of slavery and eugenics. As such, there has also arisen a long and storied history of the poet as intentional outsider, one in self-imposed exile from the repressions of the Republic: the wandering bard, the pastoral hermit, the cloistered monk, Dante in Ravenna, Whitman loafing at his leisure, agoraphobic Dickinson, the English Romantics in Italy, the Modernists in Paris, the Pre-Raphaelites,

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1. Plato, *The Republic*, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vols. 5–6, translated by Paul Shorey (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969).

2. Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Defence of Poetry,” in *A Defence of Poetry and Other Essays* (Charleston, S.C.: Nabu Press, 2013).

the Beats. Rather than seek entrance into the Republic, they have conspicuously and self-consciously remained outside it.

Of course, exile has practically become the default position of our twenty-first-century American poets, who overwhelmingly exist nowadays solely within the narrow niches of academia, fellowships, and school residencies—largely because they’ve had to. After all, hardly anyone outside of English majors reads contemporary poetry anymore (and even then), and haven’t for a while now. Yet this utter marginalization from the American mainstream also signifies that, for the most part, to become a contemporary poet is to know going in that one has already chosen self-exile; if their poetry is often obscure, it is perhaps because they are, of necessity, drawn toward the obscurity. This has a rough sort of logic to it: obscurity by definition hides that which cannot be found anywhere else. Once upon a time, such might have been called the Church Invisible: St. Augustine’s fourth-century concept (ironically rooted in Neoplatonism) that the true church is hidden from us—that the physical trappings of the earthly church only reveal it partially and imperfectly, “through a glass darkly.”<sup>3</sup> The idea of the Church Invisible was centuries later embraced by the Protestants (especially the Calvinists) to illustrate how the elect and saved are known only to God. The Roman Catholics would later seek to reclaim the term in the twentieth century. Yet, one place where the term has curiously not yet gained wide currency is in Mormonism.

Only during the COVID-19 pandemic has a space been opened, a possibility created, for the Church Invisible to become present within the broader LDS discourse. Recall how by the end of March 2020, all of the Church’s chapels, temples, visitors’ centers, college campuses, and conference centers had been closed for quarantine. Bishopricks everywhere were forced to authorize the membership to perform the sacred sacramental ordinance solely within the confines of their own

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3. 1 Corinthian 13:12.

homes—where many of us were shocked to feel in our living rooms the same Holy Spirit we had only ever allowed ourselves to feel in the chapel. This shift was radical not just in scale but in tendency: after an extravagant, multi-decade construction streak wherein the Church considered it a point of pride just how many buildings they had built (“the number of operating temples is . . .”, “the number of wards and branches are . . .”, “the conference center seats . . .”), suddenly the Saints weren’t gathering anywhere at all. “Family-centered, church-supported” had only recently entered the Church lexicon, but now it was literalized to a level hitherto unprecedented and unanticipated by the faith. Suddenly, it was as though there were no buildings at all. (And to be fair, we were far from the worst at this; as the sheer number of churches that fought viciously to hold live services throughout the lockdowns demonstrated, this failure to distinguish the building from the church has been general across the entire United States.) Without quite realizing it and forced largely by outside circumstances, the pandemic had impelled us all to acknowledge ourselves members of the Church Invisible. Eugene England once famously wrote that “The Church is as true as the gospel,” but that still only underscored how the Church is *not* the gospel—and that the buildings were never the Church. Ronald E. Poelman of the Seventy had been forced in 1984 to rewrite a general conference talk that dared to draw just such a distinction between the Church and the gospel, but now there was no church to be distinguished from at all. In biblical speak, there was an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake; there was fire, but God was not in the fire; there was pandemic, but God was not in the pandemic—and there were buildings, but God was not in the buildings, but a still small voice. Our chapels and temples and tabernacles and conference centers were aggressively built to be seen; but all at once, the Church was now officially where no one was watching at all.

And yet (and here is the remarkable thing) certain poets have been there all along—right there, in the obscurity, far away from the

buildings where we had not been looking, communing in exile with the Church Invisible, long before the pandemic forced us there as well. One such LDS-adjacent poet who has explored those obscurities in particular is Elizabeth Willis (b. 1961). As a professor of creative writing at the renowned Iowa Writers' Workshop, a Guggenheim Fellow, and a finalist for the 2016 Pulitzer Prize, Willis is often ranked as one of the leading lights in modern American poetry—which naturally means she is virtually unknown everywhere else. (“More people should be reading Elizabeth Willis, one of our most gifted and historically attuned poets,” raves a cover blurb—which, of course, only highlights how many people are *not*.) For that matter, few if any would accuse her of being a Mormon poet; her religious upbringing never comes up, one way or the other, in her various and sundry profiles, workshops, and interviews, and she has not apparently practiced in years, if not decades. Her self-exile from the Church mainstream seems complete, hers yet another name on the overwhelming rolls of the “less-active” (that is, if she hasn't already removed it of her own accord), whose Mormon connection is, at best, tenuous and incidental. Her poetry itself is of the contemporary cryptic variety: a series of delicate images and/or striking turns of phrase seemingly strung together without rhyme or reason, formed of the same long-standing lineage as the Imagist experiments of Ezra Pound and H. D., or the prose-poem improvisations of William Carlos Williams. Her language never forces itself upon the reader but, as in the avant-garde tradition of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets like Susan Howe (who has also praised Willis as an “exceptional poet”), invites the reader to create and tease out their own meanings from her collage-assemblage of phrases. She seems to stand as much outside the imperative “Thou shalt” religious language of the Church as she does outside of the cold, tyrannical chain-of-logic of Plato's *Republic*. She apparently has no church—at least, none that she has let us see.

But extratextual evidence indicates that although she long ago ceased any formal connection with the institutional, Utah-based

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, she has nevertheless remained engaged (in her own idiosyncratic way) with the Church Invisible, long before the rest of us were forced to out of necessity. At least, such is signaled by the fact that the Spring 2012 issue of *Dialogue* published a trio of her poems: "San Diego Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saints," "Nazarín," and "Good Government in the City" (the latter of which's title, for all its vague neo-Imagism, can't help but feel like a swipe on Plato's *Republic* as well). On the face of it, there is very little to recommend them as particularly Mormon besides their venue of publication; even their titles feel more vaguely Catholic than LDS (notably, none of them appear in her career-spanning 2015 collection *Alive: New and Collected Poems*). Their sheer presence in *Dialogue*, however, does still signpost that her oeuvre is entangled with a Mormon vocabulary—a heavily defamiliarized one, mind you, one that still works in "hints, types, and shadows"—but that is still all the more present for those with ears to hear and eyes to see. Like Abraham in Canaan, ancient Israel in the wilderness, the Rechabites, the Essenes, and John the Baptist in the desert, she apparently finds her purest expressions of faith in exile. Whosoever has ears to hear, let them hear.

Take the following example (first pointed out to me by a poet I home-taught in Iowa City) from Willis's 2003 prose-poem "Drive," wherein lies nestled the deceptively simple line, "I cannot describe salt."<sup>4</sup> For Gen-Xers and Millennials of a certain age, the phrase "I cannot describe salt" will set off a Proustian reverie for a time when Boyd K. Packer's 1982 address "The Candle of the Lord" was nigh inescapable, a fixture of endless seminary, institute, mission prep, and gospel doctrine classes. The talk recounts a conversation that Elder Packer once had with a "professed atheist" on some long flight, wherein he was challenged by his seatmate to describe the Holy Spirit by which he claimed to know that God lives. After Packer is unable

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4. Elizabeth Willis, *Alive: New and Collected Poems* (New York: NYRB Poets, 2015), 82.

to articulate those groanings beyond utterance and the peace which surpasseth understanding, the atheist claims to have caught Packer in guile. Yet feeling “pure intelligence” flow into him, Packer counters by challenging the atheist to describe the taste of salt, as though to someone who had never before tasted it. As the atheist hems and haws and describes only what it isn’t—“it is not sweet and it is not sour” (one almost wonders if Packer had read Derrida)—he responds, “My friend, spiritually speaking, I have tasted salt.”<sup>5</sup> (It is, arguably, the closest the authoritarian Boyd K. Packer ever came to sounding like a poet himself.) Ever since, “I have tasted salt” has joined Christ’s “Ye are the salt of the earth”<sup>6</sup> within the religious lexicon of Latter-day Saint speak.

So what, then, does Willis mean when she writes “I cannot describe salt” in her poem? Has she implicitly put herself in the position of the atheist in this narrative: the unwitting poststructuralist who can only describe what things are not? Does she mean to indicate that she has never felt this purported Holy Spirit either—or at least, that she has no answer for (or perhaps more precisely, no use for) the authoritative speech of Boyd K. Packer? Or does she in fact mean it the exact same way Packer means it, that she *also* cannot describe the Holy Spirit, though she has tasted it as well—and moreover that her decision not to describe the salt of the earth is part and parcel of her larger refusal to describe *anything* directly—that such in fact is the nature of her enigmatic poetry, which also leaves untouched the untouchable and the sacred? For that matter, is her decision to never directly describe the salt also integral to her self-imposed exile from the Church, her communion with the Church Invisible as distinct from the institutional one? But then, the Spirit itself is also in exile—from her words, from his words, from *any* of our words. As Packer demonstrated, words cannot hope to articulate the groanings beyond utterance; hence hers don’t try

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5. Boyd K. Packer, “The Candle of the Lord,” June 25, 1982, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1983/01/the-candle-of-the-lord?lang=eng>.

6. Matthew 5:13.

to either. It is precisely where her words fail to signify that perhaps the Holy Spirit has dwelled all along—unless, of course, she really *is* just referring to salt.

The beauty of the phrase "I cannot describe salt" is that all of these potential readings are co-present, co-existent with each other (in Joseph Smith's parlance, we might even say they are "co-eternal"), and mean all things and no things at once. Rather than narrow down the number of extant meanings (as is inevitably the intention, for better and for worse, of every General Authority statement), Elizabeth Willis by contrast multiplies the number of potential meanings, "to fill the immensity of space."<sup>7</sup> Long before the age of pandemic shrunk the Church down to the size of our individual households, Willis was exploring how this same exile could expand to encompass the universe—or even, god-like, create her own universe. To paraphrase another prominent LDS poem: as God is now, woman may become.

The salt also appears in her critically acclaimed 2006 collection *Meteoric Flowers*. In the prose poem "Solar Volcanos" (she has a real knack for titles, by the way), she includes the amplifying line, "Turning to salt, turning to stone, I'm turning into water."<sup>8</sup> There are a lot of scriptural allusions to unpack in this compact little line: Lot's wife turning into salt; the parable of the sower and the seed thrown among stones; the waters of baptism, and/or "how long can rolling waters remain impure?"<sup>9</sup> Let us take each of these allusions in turn: Lot's wife tasted the salt too, yet for her it was a curse ("the demons even believe, and tremble"<sup>10</sup>), as Willis perhaps implies it has been for her as well. Or could it be that Willis is rehabilitating Lot's wife, by turning her *into* the salt of the earth directly, reclaiming her away from yet another weary symbol

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7. Doctrine and Covenants 88:12.

8. Willis, *Alive*, 101.

9. Doctrine and Covenants 121:33.

10. James 2:19.

of backsliding—as though to imply that “backsliders” like herself are as possessed of the salt of the earth as anyone? For that matter, when she writes “turning to stone,” is she now claiming to be the stony ground that can no longer receive the word of God—or is she instead the stones that will themselves sing out if we were to restrain these little ones? Or, again, is she both: the stony heart that paradoxically gives fullest expression to the inexpressible spirit of God? And as for “I’m turning into water”: is she cleansed by the water, or has she herself become the water *that* cleanses—not *receiving* the authority (as she is presently denied as a woman by the Church—which perhaps explains her self-exile from the Church as well), but *becoming* the authority itself? Even more intriguingly: Is this line laying out a sequence of transformation (from salt to stone to water), or is she *also* presenting these all as co-present, co-eternal—we are *all* salt, *and* stone, *and* water, all at once? That she only applies a personal pronoun to “water” is perhaps telling: like water, her identity is also fluid, ever-changing and ever-shifting as she constantly navigates and negotiates between all of these potentialities. What’s more, if she’s all three at once, then she’s not just any water, but *salt* water in particular: the stuff covering 70 percent of the globe, touching all lands and thus all possibilities, and (in the grand tradition of the Book of Mormon) sailing the prophets themselves across her to promised lands, from depths that even they cannot fathom.

That is, she is inhabiting spaces that even the prophets cannot see—or at least, she doesn’t trust them to see. Her crisis of prophetic confidence is perhaps hinted at in her austere 2003 poem “Autographeme,” which contains the enigmatic line, nestled amidst all its other apparent non-sequiturs, “I was fluent in salamander.”<sup>11</sup> It is a non-sense line to the uninitiated, but to anyone even passingly familiar with the world of late-twentieth-century Mormon intellectual history, any invocation of “salamander” can’t help but ring some pretty significant bells: of Mark Hofmann, the fraudulent Salamander letter he sold at

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11. Willis, *Alive*, 47.



a premium to Church leaders and historians in the 1980s, his ensuing cover-ups and car bombings, the homicide investigations, and, above all, the higher-level concerns about a prophetic inspiration and purported "gift of discernment" that failed to detect Hofmann's forgery and fraud and murderous intentions before it was too late. Once one latches hold of the word "salamander," all sorts of intriguing questions immediately arise: assuming (and this could all still be too big of an assumption) that "salamander" at least obliquely refers to the Hofmann scandal, what exactly does it mean for her to be *fluent* in salamander? Could it bluntly mean that she, too, is fluent in detecting supposedly failed inspiration among Church leaders? Or, rather, that she is adept in deceiving them herself? Or, instead, that she, too, is capable of "forging" artifices—not fraudulently, but through the artifice of her own poetry, her own poetic universe, perhaps even of her own faith. For that matter, can *anything* be classified as a "forgery" when all writings are inherently artifices to begin with? Or am *I* the one forging meaning *ex nihilo* where none was previously present—at least, not until I forged it myself (the *raison d'être* of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets)?

One might here justly complain that I have raised too many questions that I have not even tried to answer over the course of this paper, save that raising questions is exactly the point. The multitudinous readings invoked by Willis's compact poetry seem to gesture toward the possibility of an alternative form of LDS discourse, one not centered (as noted earlier) on the self-assured declarations of the General Authority who seeks to forcefully pronounce once and for all, but rather one that expands its number of potential meanings till they fill eternity. Hers is a poetic voice that seeks not to "exercise dominion or compulsion upon the souls of men in any degree of unrighteousness," but rather that distills upon the soul "as the dews from heaven," flowing "forever and ever" like waters, creating and generating meanings "without compulsory means."<sup>12</sup> It is a radically different vision of what our Church discourse

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12. Doctrine and Covenants 121:45–46.

could look like, one that would be far less familiar to us, even as it would be far more in line with our own most treasured scriptural utterances. In this age of pandemic, it might also be worth exploring how our season of forced exile from the church building and into the Church Invisible might also expand our meanings and our visions, shifting us away from the programmed strictures of the prefab chapel and structured meeting block, to instead consider anew the infinite possibilities of eternity. “Thy mind,” said Joseph Smith in the King Follett Sermon, “must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity.”<sup>13</sup> Such an approach requires that we expand not the number of our meetings but of our meanings.

Further examples from her poetry, briefly: In the call-and-response of her 2011 poem “In Strength Sweetness,” she could be quoting directly from the Pearl of Great Price when she writes: “in the blood / spirit”<sup>14</sup>—that is, the blood of the Atonement signified by the presence of the Holy Ghost. When she then adds: “in the lion / the bee,”<sup>15</sup> she is likely alluding to Judges 14:18, “What is sweeter than honey? And what is stronger than a lion?”—Samson’s proud boast after slaying the lion, from whose carcass there emerged “a swarm of bees and honey.” Yet intriguingly, given her upbringing, she could also have in mind the Lion House of (and Lion of the Lord that was) Brigham Young, whose architecture frequently featured the beehive of the Jaredites, still present on the seal of the state of Utah to this day. Meanwhile, in the catalogue of worries that is her 2015 poem “Survey,” she makes a direct allusion to Doctrine and Covenants 89:20: “I worry that I will faint,”<sup>16</sup> rather than walk and

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13. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, compiled by Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 137.

14. Willis, *Alive*, 140.

15. Willis, *Alive*, 140.

16. Willis, *Alive*, 146.

not faint, nor run and not be weary. Her worries about the futility of the divine promises are further made manifest when she marries together Matthew 13:30 with Ether 12:27: "I worry the wheat won't tassel / that the weak things will become weaker,"<sup>17</sup> as she fears that the wheat will never actually overcome the tares, that weak things will never become strong.

But which weak things does she fear for specifically? It's worth here noting that her 2003 collection *Turneresque* features a poem entitled "The Book of Matthew," an elegy to Matthew Shepard, the gay teen whose 1998 murder in Wyoming galvanized the nation. Such would indicate that the root of her disaffiliation from the Church stems at least in part from its failures with the LGBTQ+ community (in which case she has merely been ahead of the curve), a definite weak spot in Church doctrine that has certainly not yet been made strong. When her poem says of Shepard, "You've been indexed / & written in pencil on bedroom walls / & like Shelley, writ in light,"<sup>18</sup> *Publishers Weekly* read it as "articulating at once Shepard's appropriation, historicity and humanity."<sup>19</sup> Such a reading is certainly accurate in part, but it still does not fully account for the valences of the word "indexed" in an LDS context, which carries connotations of temple work, family history, and the redemption of the dead. Her use here of the deceptively loaded term "indexed" can be read cynically—as in, the Church, by indexing Shepard, has appropriated something and someone that does not belong to them—but it could also, more charitably, signify the integration of something and someone into a doctrine of salvation that does not yet know how to account for him and yet he is all the more present anyway. Matthew Shepard, too, is in the Church Invisible.

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17. Willis, *Alive*, 146.

18. Willis, *Alive*, 79.

19. *Publishers Weekly*, review of *Turneresque* by Elizabeth Willis, June 23, 2003, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-886224-62-9>.

To be clear: I am far from advocating for an exclusively LDS reading of Willis's poetry. She clearly draws from a massive well of historical references, poetic allusions, cinematic touchstones, news items, and other wide-ranging religious imagery from numerous different faith traditions to assemble her poetry. For example, when she writes "I'm looking at the evil flower"<sup>20</sup> in her 2006 poem "The Similitude of This Great Flower," one can detect a rather obvious reference to Baudelaire's classic *Les Fleurs du mal*. Yet even within that same prose poem, she writes, "Heaven's voice has hell behind it"<sup>21</sup>—as though heaven can only be defined against hell; or the threat of hell must give weight to heaven's words; or heaven itself is a sort of hell for those unprepared for it ("you would be more miserable to dwell with the damned souls of hell"<sup>22</sup>). The poem concludes shortly thereafter with "It's misty in the dream. It says you promised to go on."<sup>23</sup> It's an image that cannot help but evoke, for a Mormon reader, the hazy darkness at the inception of Lehi's dream in 1 Nephi 8. As a poet in exile from both the great and spacious building *and* the iron rod (which we sometimes forget can lead one back *toward* the building just as much as away from it), she perhaps has chosen to exile herself into this misty dream intentionally. Furthermore, that enigmatic "It says you promised to go on" potentially alludes to the promise of 2 Nephi 31 that, after having passed through the waters of baptism, one must "endure to the end"—but the open-ended question unasked even by Nephi is to endure *what* to the end of *what*, exactly. For Willis, the misty obscurity itself is both what she and her poetry endure, and also what she and her poetry endure *toward*.

Also, to be clear: she has been just as forced into this obscurity as the rest of us were forced by the pandemic into the Church Invisible;

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20. Willis, *Alive*, 85.

21. Willis, *Alive*, 85.

22. Mormon 9:4.

23. Willis, *Alive*, 85.

to appropriate a line from Brigham Young, she went willingly because she had to. "I prefer clarity, when I can afford it,"<sup>24</sup> she writes in *Meteoric Flowers*—yet as her entire poetic oeuvre indicates, she evidently thinks she *cannot* afford it. This theme of the costliness of clarity is expanded upon in the title poem to 2015's *Alive*, which contains some of her (comparatively speaking) most explicitly religious language to date. On a personal note, I find this poem fascinating because in my own composition courses, I am fond of telling students that half of all good writing is simply stating the obvious, since what is obvious to them is not obvious to everyone else. I have found that, when coaching college freshmen in the messy art of essay writing, this simple nugget of advice helps them more than anything else to cover a multitude of sins. I, too, "prefer clarity" and love obviousness; I think obviousness gets a bad rap and deserves to be enshrined in the annals of good writing pedagogy. In fact, I often lean so hard on this piece of advice that I find Willis's "Alive" a useful corrective for me, as she examines the grave difficulties with trying to be obvious—which are never as obvious as they seem! She writes, for example, how "I hold some truths to be obvious enough not to have to say them at all."<sup>25</sup> My comp students often make the same mistake, skipping entire important points in their arguments because they feared it was too obvious to state openly—but then, so do we all. And my students are usually writing on relatively straightforward topics, like gun control or immigration; how much more difficult, then, is it to express the groanings beyond utterance, the peace that surpasseth understanding? In these moments, being "obvious" becomes downright impossible. I am forced to remember that I, too, often cannot afford clarity, just as I cannot describe salt—none of us can.

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24. Willis, *Alive*, 93.

25. Willis, *Alive*, 171.

That same frustration with trying to express the inexpressible comes up when she writes in “Alive”: “People think God is obvious, or not: everything or nothing. A hole held open by a word.”<sup>26</sup> I here suspect that Willis is critiquing the all-or-nothing binary approach of LDS apologetics in particular—“these things are true, or they are not”—as she rejects the binary and instead seeks a God who is neither obvious *nor* non-obvious, neither everything nor nothing, but something else entirely. Or, as she writes on the very next page: “When a mystery is made obvious people call it a revelation. But it was there all along, neither uncovered nor covered up.”<sup>27</sup> For it is here important to emphasize that the Church Invisible is likewise neither covered nor uncovered: it was there all along. If it was hidden in obscurity, it was only because we chose not to see it. I suspect that more than a few of us, as we blessed our own bread and water in the privacy of our own homes during the lockdowns, were likewise astounded to uncover something that was there all along, neither hidden nor uncovered, a presence and communion that never needed a building to experience.

But just because it was there all along doesn’t mean it was obvious, either. “When Paul was blinded by God and fell off his horse and said ‘now we see through a glass darkly but then face to face,’ *then* sounded like the past, but apparently he meant the future,”<sup>28</sup> Willis also writes in “Alive.” That classic Pauline line, “see through a glass darkly,” is for many of us our most honest expression of faith; we acknowledge something we cannot clearly see. Yet as Willis cleverly interrogates here, the “then” in that passage can be read to mean the future *and* the past, depending on where you weight the emphasis. She could perhaps be influenced here by the unique LDS doctrine of premortal existence, wherein we see God face to face both before *and* after this life—but in the meantime,

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26. Willis, *Alive*, 172.

27. Willis, *Alive*, 173.

28. Willis, *Alive*, 179.

we confess we are strangers and pilgrims on this earth. That is, we have *all* been in exile, all along—we are members of the Church Invisible without realizing it. It was neither hidden nor covered; it was outside the walls of the church building just as much as it was inside them, because it was everywhere on this earth and vale of tears.

But even to finally recognize our ever-present and continuous membership in the Church Invisible is not to make it any more obvious. "What's next isn't obvious,"<sup>29</sup> Willis warns, and she is right: for all our pontificating about the plan of salvation, we are no more sure of what the what-is-next will look like than we ever were. And even those "plain and precious truths" that we *do* have—the most obvious of all, you might say—are nevertheless often the least legible: "The writing on the wall is too big to see."<sup>30</sup> (King Belshazzar in the Book of Daniel couldn't read it either.) That is probably why we didn't look at the writing on the wall: we have preferred the narrow limits of the Church Visible and the comforting confines of our physical church buildings. Such, however, is not pleasing to the Almighty: "How vain and trifling have been our spirits, our conferences, our councils, our meetings, our private as well as public conversation," wrote Joseph Smith from Liberty Jail, "too low, too mean, too vulgar, too condescending for the dignified characters called and chosen of God."<sup>31</sup> But if our meetings have been trifling, it is of course because we have wanted them that way; since the Church Invisible has been too big to read, we prefer (understandably, I might add!) something smaller, something we can "heft" and handle. But the Almighty simply will not let us, and so one of the collateral effects of the pandemic has been to force us from the chapels for a season, exiles within our own homes—or, more precisely (and this is what probably drove the greatest number of people crazy during the lockdowns), exiles

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29. Willis, *Alive*, 179.

30. Willis, *Alive*, 180.

31. Smith, *Teachings*, 137.

within our own minds. We don't like to be alone with our thoughts and will go to incredible lengths—TV, internet, anything—to avoid it. We perhaps even feel like trespassers on our own thoughts—but then, as Willis reminds us, “The poet is a trespasser.”<sup>32</sup> And so during the lockdowns, we all became trespassers in exile. We were never supposed to join Plato's oppressive Republic in the first place; we should have been the first to leave as well (“Come to Zion” and “Babylon, we bid thee farewell” used to be hymns we meant quite literally). We were supposed to join the poets in exile—not to follow them, mind you, and *certainly* not to model them or copy them, but in order to become poets ourselves, creators of worlds. Like Whitman at the end of “Song of Myself,” the poet stops somewhere, waiting for us.

Final thought: In her 2014 poem “Oil and Water,” Willis writes, “To those who don't know we are drowning, the ocean has nothing to say.”<sup>33</sup> The corollary, of course, is that to those of us who *do* know we are drowning, the ocean has everything to say. We have all been drowning—in our own mediocrity, in our own doubt, in our own “trifling with sacred things;”<sup>34</sup> only during the lockdowns have we realized it. Now the ocean can finally say something to us—to help us repent, in other words. It is an ocean made of salt water, one that connects us all to each other and to the Church Invisible and to the promised land—and though we still cannot describe the salt, we still know what it tastes like.

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32. Willis, *Alive*, 181.

33. Willis, *Alive*, 155.

34. Doctrine and Covenants 6:12.

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