

Michael Lavers. *After Earth*. Tampa, Fla.: University of Tampa Press, 2019. 89 pp. Paper: \$14.00. ISBN: 978-1-59732-172-3.

Sunni Brown Wilkinson. *The Marriage of the Moon and the Field*. New York: Black Lawrence Press, 2019. 65 pp. Paper: \$16.95. ISBN: 978-1625570048.

Lavers and Wilkinson know they deserve better and have left the exclusively Mormon world of letters in search of it. Each of these collections concludes with a long list of journals where poems were first published, and the collections, filled largely with these vetted works, are uniformly strong. The percentage of the work that is, on the surface, Mormon in content is low, but when these poets engage with Mormon ideas or themes, they do so in striking and original ways. As Wilkinson's book had a standalone review in the Fall 2019 issue of *Dialogue*, I will focus more on Lavers here, but know that both books are strong entries overall and in their Mormon content specifically, and both stand as striking rebuttals to the institutional difficulties mentioned in part one of this review.

Although, in his acknowledgments, Lavers acknowledges at least five Mormon poets (at least two of whom bristle at the term), I don't know that the notes in my copy's margins comparing him to R. A. Christmas and Michael R. Collings reflect the poet's own intentions or are merely an unavoidable aspect of being a Mormon poet—we wade through the same waters—which is what makes the originality of his Mormon pieces all the more important.

To simplify the task, let's examine a smattering of poems addressing creation. The titular angel of "The Angel in Charge of Creating Earth Addresses His Cohort" begins by asking "Who cares if more important worlds have been / assigned to those more skillful, who make crusts / that never crack" (1–3) and ends by advising, "Don't envy them . . . let them / envy you, not doomed to mastery, / still stunned by your mistakes . . . the accidents of beauty, which, once realized, / can never be forgotten or undone" (32–34, 36–37).

One of the primal tensions in Latter-day Saint doctrine is its confluence of flawed humanity with eternal godlikeness. The notion

that a perfect being desires our company is an offshoot of this sublime absurdity, and one of the great tasks of “‘Mormonism,’ so-called”² is to navigate this familial/worshipful relationship, as Lavers does in his “Alberta Psalm”: “Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me” (Psalm 50:23), notes the epigraph, and Lavers responds, “I get it, Lord. Who doesn’t want to be loved?” (1) before wondering first at creation then at “what else am I supposed to say? Well done? / Kudos to you? What do you need with all / that flattery? What is a trout’s hymn / to a hawk?” (16–19). Or, to turn the head further away from worship and toward familiarity, “Just how savvy can you be to make me / thrilled by so much less than you?” (21–22).

This is risky theology. “The stars look so close, but are not. // This is Earth. We must walk” (“Daedalus to Icarus, if He Had Survived,” 13–14). While the angel, standing in for God, created a flawed earth, then God apparently created an earth so perfect that we are more awed by it than by him, in “Linnaeus’s Prayer,” the great taxonomist suggests a way toward a partnership when he prays, “thank you Lord for creations so numerous we have something to do with all these words” (1) and begs forgiveness for “thinking your great work unfinished. . . . I do not express myself. . . . [T]each me to speak so that they will rise and greet us . . . that this work might continue *in excelsis* forever amen” (6, 10, 17, 21).

This co-creative, child-of-God task, Lavers expresses again and again, is the role of the poet. To be like God, creating flawed creations—because they are the truest, most beautiful creations—but also because the work was left to us, as “azaleas can’t see themselves” (“The Burden of Humans,” 15).

Thus, while Lavers—and Wilkinson—do not often let their Mormonism surface, there is a suggestion of a perhaps-teleology throughout their collections. Certainly, there is a sense of cohesion and focus—as opposed to merely completeness, as we saw in the collections by Christmas, Otterstrom, Douglas, and Piersanti.

2. Brigham Young, *Discourse of Brigham Young*, compiled by John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1925), 4.