



## On Becoming a Lord of the Earth

And the Lord said unto Satan, Whence comest thou? Then Satan answered the Lord, and said, From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it. (Job)

### *Leaving the Tenant Farm*

My father poached an occasional venison. He quoted 2 Timothy 4:2 as rationale: “be instant in season, out of season.” He was only partly joking; he thought it his right to take an animal living on his land, planted there by God.

He was not the first poacher in the Bennion family.

In 1832, when my great-great-grandfather John was sixteen, instead of going to Sunday school he rambled with his comrades. His father, a member of the Methodist Society in Hawarden, Flintshire, Wales, “had taught his children strict morals and religion,” but “going to Sunday School and to hear preaching became burdensome.”

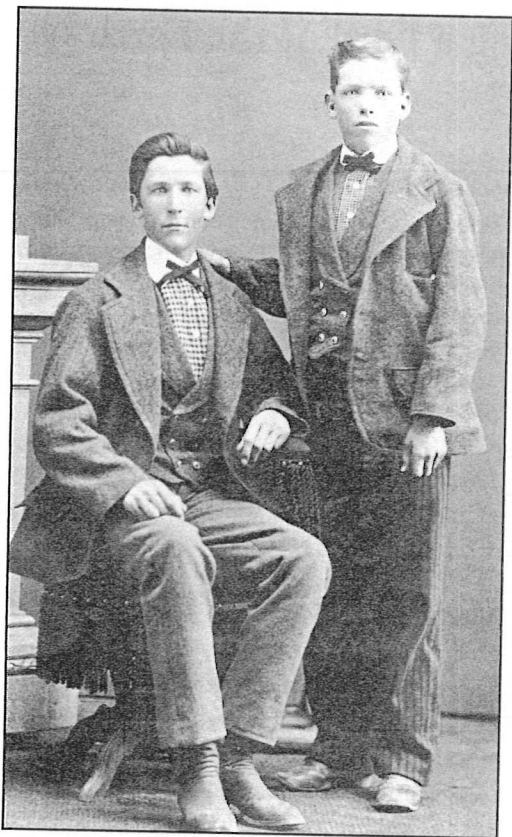
One Sunday John was chasing rabbits on the local lord’s property with two friends, and their dog caught one. A “watcher” accused them of poaching. They were summoned to appear the next day before a justice. John determined not to submit to such degrading proceedings. In “History of John Bennion by Himself,” he wrote, “I therefore took my departure another way and came to Liverpool.”

I have taken my departure another way a good number of times, not because I feared prosecution for poaching—although at about the same age as my ancestor I was guilty of that crime—but because I periodically get restless and leave my home in Utah. It isn’t the landscape I want to escape; I am addicted to the alkali flats and dry peaks of my west-desert childhood, the sculpted red and white sandstone of the Colorado Plateau, the alpine canyons along the state’s spine of mountains. It isn’t the people either: I’m fond of the irreverent ranchers, the

Shifra Sharlin  
 Nat Sobel  
 Nelson H. Spencer  
 Julia, Maura, Robert, and  
 Truda Spiegelman  
 Kathryn Starbuck  
 Robert A. Stein  
 Aryeh Stollman  
 Norma and Don Stone  
 Sandra Stone  
 Peter Tart  
 Ellen Coleman Terry  
 Marshall Terry  
 James Tilley  
 Daniel Tobin  
 William Tsutsui  
 Lee Upton  
 Mr. and Mrs. Joe E. Vaughan  
 Sally Warren  
 Jane Wetzell  
 John and Wendy Whaley  
 Philip White  
 Ross R. Whitney  
 Carter Wilson  
 James Wolcott  
 Jane Roberts Wood

**Donors**  
 Seth Archer  
 Wendy Barker  
 David Bergman  
 Robert Burlingame  
 Teresa Cader  
 Michael Carroll  
 Morri Creech  
 Brian Culhane  
 John Daniel  
 Drs. Joel Feiner and Gail Alexander  
 Neil Foley

Steve Gehrke  
 Tom Gossett  
 Caroline Patterson Haeefele  
 Louisa Hall  
 Bruce Heiden  
 John Hennessy  
 Roald Hoffmann  
 Jean Hollander  
 Victoria Kelly  
 Ann Keniston  
 Jennifer Key  
 Barbara Lefcowitz  
 David Lehman  
 Herbert Leibowitz  
 Tim Liardet  
 Elizabeth Macklin  
 John Mandelberg  
 Mr. and Mrs. Allen Maxwell  
 Jerome Mazzaro  
 Gardner McFall  
 David N. Moolten  
 Jeanne Morrel-Franklin  
 Elise Partridge  
 Michael Rosen  
 Abraham Rothberg  
 Doug Sanders  
 Mary Schiflett  
 Michael Shewmaker  
 Michael D. Spence  
 Lisa Steinman  
 Walker D. Stuart  
 Karen Swenson  
 Eleanor Ross Taylor  
 Bradford Gray Telford  
 Sally Van Doren  
 Helen Vendler  
 Caki Wilkinson  
 Lisa Williams



*As there are no pictures of John when he was sixteen, this picture shows, in the image of two of his sons, how he might have looked at the time he ran away to Liverpool. (Utah State Historical Society)*

idealistic backpackers, the Hispanics, who, like elves, labor for the rest of us while we sleep, and the polygamists with their fractal relationships. It's really myself I'm fleeing, my fear that I've been possessed by the earnest life in which I've swaddled myself. My son believes I'm on the bipolar spectrum and that it's during my manic phase that I can't abide staying home. Whatever the cause, when my suburban neighborhood seems claustrophobic as a mall, and the valley I live in as conservative, patriarchal, and paranoid as a John Birch convention, I talk my wife and kids into taking off. During our thirty-plus years of marriage we've left Utah for five years in Houston, a year teaching on Oahu, and seven study abroad stints in England.

This "getting away" from home is, of course, the flip side of "getting to" someplace else. I leave a state of felt repression and move

toward a state of imagined freedom. This is the oldest human story: hunters wandered the earth, Adam and Eve made choices that led to their moving on, Cain took to wandering, the people at the time of the Tower of Babel tried to rise to heaven and ended up being scattered, Noah loaded his family onto a boat, and so on. Abraham wrote, "In the land of the Chaldeans, at the residence of my fathers, I, Abraham, saw that it was needful for me to obtain another place of residence." According to Leo Tolstoy, this is one of only two narratives humans tell about themselves—"the hero goes on a journey," the other being "a stranger comes to town." My friend Bruce Jorgensen adds that we are always either the guest or the host; it all depends on how the storyteller looks at it. Turning his back on the class system that made him a criminal for taking a wild animal, John turned his face toward Liverpool, one of the cities where Mormonism was beginning to grow in the British Isles.

I wonder whether he was relieved to be caught, to have created an excuse for leaving his father's farm.

### *Turning the Hearts of the Children to Their Fathers*

In the summer of 2009, I drove down Moor Lane, where the Bennion ancestral home, long since torn down, had stood. The fields surrounding the lane were green and tall, a dramatic contrast to the Utah desert where John ended up after, as he said, leaving "home and employ to go I knew not where."

Although Virginia Woolf was not talking about leaving home permanently, but rather walking for pleasure, she describes in "Street Haunting" the feeling of wanting to leave, at least temporarily, an old life for a new one: "As we step out of the house on a fine evening between four and six, we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreeable after the solitude of one's own room." Being indistinguishable frees her, because "The shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left of all these wrinkles and roughnesses a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye."

Like Woolf, I want to believe that escape from the self is possible. When I leave home, I feel exhilarant but also transient, unsettled, as if my identity or at least my credit cards have been misplaced. I want clear sight, unimpeded by my past—a snake slipping its old skin. However, as she left her flat behind, Woolf was still depressive, and, even when I'm five thousand miles from home, I'm still a conflicted desert boy. Like hermit crabs, we bear our houses on our backs.

### *Throwing Dust in the Eyes of the Establishment*

In Liverpool, John apprenticed himself to one boilermaker, where he worked for only three weeks. Before long, he left the second employer and hired himself to a third, where he worked for three years. At the end of that time, the foreman wanted to hire him for three more years of what John described as servitude. "I answered him hastily that he had not done as well as he might to me in times past, referring to his not teaching me the business." The foreman complained that he had done well by him and that, in leaving, John was "throwing dust" in his eyes. Despite this accusation, John continued to search for opportunity to advance. His employers wanted day labor from him and he refused to give anyone license to his future.

While living in Liverpool in 1840, he heard the preaching of John Taylor and Joseph Fielding and joined the Mormon Church. His foreman at his new job and his landlord both warned him against this religion, but eventually the former "gave up all hope of reclaiming" him and the latter accused him of breaking the commandment to honor his father and mother, because they had brought him up religiously. John rejected their warnings, but it's not likely he converted to his religion out of mere rebelliousness. Allen and Thorpe, in their essay, "The Mission of the Twelve to England, 1840-41: Mormon Apostles and the Working Classes," wrote that the working class, with their "fundamentalist and democratic inclinations," were attracted by what the Mormon preachers said about direct access to God and infinite possibility for growth. Others who rose out of the same ground and class as my ancestor were dissatisfied with economic conditions and with organized religion. John wanted to control his destiny, not trust it to the hands of either ecclesiastical or economic stewards.



### *Satisfaction: Can't Get No*

I grew up during the Sixties, when every young person seemed determined to take his departure another way and leave the binding traditions of establishment society. During that decade there was the feeling that the whole land was ours to wander across—hitchhiking, jumping a train, backpacking. As with John, any excuse would do to head up the country. I felt the revolutionary songs in my blood. Whether it was a man on the radio, my parents, or my church leaders telling me this and telling me that, I dreamed of leaving, like a rolling stone. Even Dylan's song—written about a woman who has recently fallen from riches and high-class society—seems ambivalent about being invisible, with no secrets and with nothing to lose. Join the revolution because it may feel all right being on the outside:

How does it feel  
To be on your own  
With no direction home  
Like a complete unknown. . . .

It might feel as if she lost her place or  
it might feel liberating, probably both.

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*The author at the age of sixteen.*

Whether or not they were based on Romantic or egalitarian ideals, the songs were all about getting out of Dodge, or getting to Kansas City. The song named after that town still runs through my head and was recorded by dozens of performers through the Fifties and Sixties:

I'm gonna pack my clothes  
 Leave at the break of dawn  
 Everybody will be sleeping  
 Nobody will know where I've gone  
 Cause if I stay in town  
 I know I'm gonna die.  
 Gotta find a friendly city  
 And that's the reason why,  
 I'm going to Kansas City  
 Kansas City here I come  
 They got a crazy way of loving there  
 And I'm gonna get me some.

I had no desire to get to Kansas City, but like every adolescent boy I certainly wanted to get me some, possibly in Tooele, where I went to junior high and high school or in the big dances in Orem where my city cousins lived. Holding a girl on a dark floor far from my tiny hometown in the desert, moving to music so loud not even God could follow my thoughts, I was invisible, with nothing to lose.

I had limited imagination and even more limited opportunity, but I wanted to leave—an ache I hardly realized and certainly couldn't articulate back then. I did get to California, on an epic road trip with my cousins and their art teacher. We drove all night to get to the Laguna Beach art fair, slept next to our car on a patch of lawn bordering the road, swam in the ocean and showered on the beach, ate food out of a box. It is the most exotic memory of my teenage years. We were going to someplace where we'd never been before—as Canned Heat put it:

I'm going, I'm going where the water tastes like wine,  
 We can jump in the water, stay drunk all the time.

Mormons don't want to stay drunk all the time, except on life (or maybe sugar), but I knew I needed room to move.

### *Taking a Wife*

In February of 1842, John took his departure again. He hoped to sail from Liverpool on the *Hope*, a ship that would carry a load of Mormons to America. But he didn't board, instead waiting for the *John Cummins*, sailing two weeks later. He wrote, "This was in order to take a wife with me who was not then ready." Not ready for marriage or for the voyage? He doesn't say. Family lore is that the ship captain wouldn't let him board as a single man so he turned from the first ship, quickly found a woman who would marry him, and prepared to sail on the second. However it happened, he married Esther Wainwright, who was also born in Hawarden. They sailed to Zion, at that time Nauvoo, Illinois. Esther didn't keep a journal, didn't write many letters, so I don't know what she felt leaving her homeland behind. She packed her clothes, woke at the break of dawn, and followed John to a place where she was a complete unknown.

### *Gender Studies*

Looking over the Canned Heat lyrics for "Going up the Country," I'm struck by something I never noticed as a teenager—the singer assumes that his woman won't want to go with him:

Now Baby, pack your leaving trunk,  
 You know we've got to leave today....  
 No use of you running  
 Or screaming and crying  
 Cause you've got a home  
 As long as I've got mine.

Cold comfort. She would also have no direction home. Thinking about this verse, I'm caught between two contradictory ideas, both of which I believe: women don't want to leave their homes and women and men mostly want the same things. Our culture has made their strategies different, I think, but we are at root much the same. For

example, my sister Janet has wandered the earth as much as I have. When she graduated, she took off to the Midwest to work on a cattle ranch, then traveled to France to work on another huge ranch. As a newly married woman in Rochester, New York, she left her home for a while to work in D.C., for the journalist Michael Novak. In Portland, and with her first baby not able to walk yet, she uprooted and talked her way into a polygamist community for a month, doing research for her master's thesis in social anthropology. Her career has taken her to Mexico, Africa, and Vermont; her second husband has taken her to Wyoming and Montana. Wanderlust. She has it. But I also know that my female ancestors didn't have much say in where they moved.

So what do women want? Probably not merely staying put. Men and women both want volition, control, room to move. Chaucer has the Wife of Bath tell a story and in that story the answer to this question is:

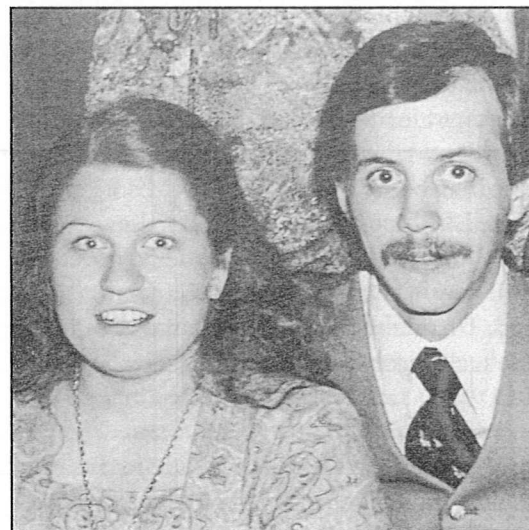
Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee  
As wel over hir housbond as hir love,  
And for to been in maistrie hym above.

Sovereignty over their husbands as over their love. I like it that "hir love" might mean the man's or the woman's love, or the love between them. Whichever he meant, Chaucer recognized this female desire seven hundred years ago. But even today, men often tell themselves that women don't want independence as much as they want security, and that that they need to be directed, protected, swaddled, that they are more naturally conservative than men.

I wonder at the pervasiveness of this social construction.

### *The West, the Nest, and You, Dear*

When Karla and I were first married, we moved to Mount Pleasant to a small white house on the edge of town. The owner of the house, a carpenter, had just built himself and his wife a new house, but he still loved his old one. We soon saw why. He had put in big southern and eastern windows, which filled the house with light and from which we watched deer eat in our yard.



*The author and his wife Karla, early in their marriage.*

We should have been happy.

Karla had left her father's home the day after graduation. Her present from him was twenty dollars and a suitcase. She worked the summer at Pipe Springs in the north-

ern Arizona desert, living with one of her relatives in nearby Moccasin. After work she wandered the hills with her second cousins and after dark made out with an itinerant potter, probably the only non-relative in town. Her first semester at college, she was dated by a bevy of young men, me included.

Winter we were engaged and spring we were married. She says that as soon as we were engaged my behavior changed: I had got what I wanted, her, even if satisfaction would come later. We had both applied to the University of Chicago, because the name of that school gave me romantic quivers. She got a scholarship, but I wasn't even admitted as a master's student. So rather than stay in town while she finished her degree, I took the only job I could get, teaching art, English, and journalism at Sanpete Junior High School. What would have happened if she'd refused to pack her leaving trunk?

But she didn't, and in Sanpete she had nothing to do. It seemed too far to drive an hour and a half to a university where she could finish her degree, and we believed we couldn't afford the tuition. She finally got a job snipping off turkey gizzards at the processing plant across the valley—not the work she had imagined for herself.

She had read Colette, Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*, but there she was, stuck as wife, a complete unknown in that town, with no sovereignty, except that she had said yes to my

relentless importuning—to be my wife and to leave school for my job. She lived with me not even as a farmer's partner, as every one of her female ancestors and mine had done, back for generations. She was only wife. Nothing to do except clean our small house and cook.

I taught school but the students ripped me apart. Soft spoken, I was no disciplinarian, and worse than being vulnerable, I was disorganized. Softness and confusion were like blood in the water for those turkey farmers' children. It's hardly an exaggeration to say they chewed out my gizzard, or some similar organ, the beastly land sharks.

So we were both stopped. Unable to do. Not in charge of our own destiny, except that I had taken the job. More than we knew depended on that decision:

I started on the road to depression.

We started a child.

I became obsessed with busy-ness.

Karla eventually stopped writing poetry.

Karla gained weight.

We wrangled in talk, setting boundaries and breaking them.

We started the tradition of having bad cars.

We shared office, bedroom, kitchen, living room—which meant I thought they were all mine.

We started a habit of economic self-sufficiency, although we broke it many times to get money from both our parents.

We established a pattern of spending more than we earned, and spending it on travel, education, and experience instead of on things.

We set the tenor of our lives, its career or inclination. For good and evil, we re-created ourselves.

### *The New Eden*

John did his share of importuning, deciding what was best for his family and bulling ahead. When he left England, Zion, the wilderness, virgin land, was ahead of him, as well as a new religion in a new country. He built a house on an acre lot in Nauvoo and then plowed the ground for a garden. He found things confusing when he first arrived in Nauvoo, especially since on the frontier men and women by necessity did all kinds of work, not simply doing what they had learned

as apprentices. In an 1842 letter to his father, he described the new culture: "at present it is not as in England for everyone to keep to his own trade but a man who comes here must turn to any work and get along as well as he can." This confusion of societal roles, I believe, amplified his conviction that in America men could work unhampered by habit, tradition, or suppression.

He was proud of the simplicity of his life in Nauvoo: "people here have a cow or two and live on plain food." He thinks of this style of life as a return to the hospitality and simplicity of the time of Abraham. When a stranger arrived, Abraham "bid Serah get some Meal and bake Cakes upon the hearth, while he went and killed a good Calf and they dined." He claimed that many in England avoided sacrifice rather than embrace this simple life. "Sooner will they stop in thare comfortable houses pretteyly furnished whare they can have almost endless veriety to gratify thare palate and make of god of thare belly and after all be Damned becau of tradition and priestcraft." While he seems hungry for growth, he sees that it is through restricting his desires that he might find more relative freedom. But like everyone else, John had to scramble to survive in these new circumstances. "I have not found as I expected thare is no going out shooting turkeys and rabbits." He had probably thought he was going to a place where wild game was free and where people took advantage of the surplus of the earth. He planted a garden and bought hens. They sold the eggs and he worked part of the week as a laborer. "From what I have said you may know we can live for little here. Now we have ground for a good garden, with it we boath can live Comfortable for a doller per week." The next year he wrote to his wife's parents: "When we first came here things appeared new and strange to me in this new country but now I feel myself at home and can get plenty of work... the people here are generally free and independent."

In 1845, his father and brother gave in and joined him in the burgeoning city on the Mississippi River. They established themselves in Nauvoo, with their farmsteads outside the city to the east. The brothers may have liked being on the edge, in an area where ambition would not be hindered.

## *Houston Is Not the Desert*

In 1984, when we knew we were moving to Houston for my PHD in the fall, I decided that we should leave our trailer in Logan in mid-summer and live in the old part of my parents' house in Vernon. I thought we could save money and I could try once more working with my father on the farm for a couple of months. Karla was almost nine months pregnant with Amy. A few weeks before her due date, I moved the rest of the family to Vernon, proposing that after the delivery and a short rest, mother and child would join us. So for a few weeks, we lived as a divided family. Karla and Betsy, our first daughter, had a bond so powerful that it was like they were one flesh. When those two were separated, Betsy lost some trust in her mother, who seemed to have abandoned her. Also, Amy, a newborn, had to move at two weeks of age, to an old house in the desert, and again when she was two months old, traveling in a four-day trip to Houston. Amy was needy and sometimes in pain, and she screamed every night for six months. Even if we had stayed put in Logan, Amy might have been sick, and even if my plan hadn't separated Betsy and her mother, Betsy might have felt estranged when her mother turned most of her attention to a new baby.

Still, looking back, I can't fathom why I dragged us into this detour. I was on my way to a writing and literature PHD program in Texas, but I had convinced myself that I still might want to take over the farm after I finished. I certainly loved the work, or some of it. I didn't love building fences or worrying always about the weather. But the ranch was a resource and I lusted in my blood to have control over it.

All that happened that summer was I proved my inability to work with my father. During those two months and before I was often bitter about my father's sloppy farming methods—not keeping records on his cows, hauling hay by hand, leaving the sprinkler pipes on too long, never fixing fences permanently but just patching them over and over again, sometimes even using sprinkler pipes as part of the fence. My father said once, while I was pressuring him to let me make decisions, "You are going away again, I will be the one left here." He was right. I would go away again and again and again.

Mid August we headed for a city ten times bigger than any we had ever seen, pulling a trailer loaded with our earthly possessions—dressers, bed, washing machine and dryer, clothing, kitchen equipment, toys. Our journey went smoothly, until, just south of Page, we had to drive down a two-mile hill. Partway down our brakes overheated and stopped working. I shifted to the lowest gear and stood on the brakes as we went faster and faster, pushed by our half ton of belongings. Finally we came to the bottom and I was able to get the car stopped. We sat shaking for a while. When the brakes cooled, they worked again, and without trying to find a mechanic, we drove south, crossing through land I had inhabited as a Mormon missionary—Moenkopi, Gonado, Window Rock, Gallup—and on to new territory—Albuquerque, Clovis, Muleshoe, Lubbock, Abilene, and finally Houston.

At first we crowded in with my cousin in her already-packed house. Amy screamed all night, keeping both families awake. Soon we moved to an apartment. Our first night there, we ate dinner using a cardboard box for a table. Later, when I switched on the light to go to the bathroom, cockroaches fled to the walls like water draining away. After a month in that apartment, we moved back into my cousin's house. They had bought a larger place and would rent their old home to us. It was so hot and humid that it seemed that the Spanish moss dripped from the live oaks. I thought I would die every time I climbed into our sun-heated car.

My salary as a teaching assistant at the University of Houston was not enough to support a family. We couldn't pay for health insurance, dentist bills, gasoline, and we spent less than a hundred dollars a month on food. Karla daily had to carry Robert on a bike to kindergarten. He balanced on the back as she pedaled. If it rained, she just put a garbage bag over him and rode anyway, while the girls played at home. When Karla found work, we put them in a day-care school, where Betsy engaged in power struggles with the head teacher. Both girls hated it. We had hard, hard times in Houston.

But we lived in an exotic land—semi-tropical Texas. Behind our house was a cement bayou, much bigger than any canal I'd ever seen. At first I thought it a useless structure. On the first rain we ran outside, letting the water stream down our faces. The children had never seen such warm, bountiful rain. It came down in a deluge for hours and hours. Before long that huge bayou was full to the brim with water,

running toward Buffalo Bayou and eventually the Gulf. Behind our place was a garden space we could use. My cousin and her husband had kept a garden there a "couple of years" earlier. There were trees growing in that plot that were twenty feet tall.

*What kind of country have we come to?* I thought, where water falls from the sky like a warm river and where plants grow so rapidly that they seem anxious to strangle humanity?

As often as we could we left the strange city and traveled back to what Wallace Stegner and others since have called the proper edge of the sky. Where vegetation didn't seem a verdant and malevolent force and where the air was thin and cool.

### *Cast Out of the Garden*

After just a few years, John prepared to follow Brigham Young west. In 1845 he complained to his wife's parents about the troops sent by the governor of Illinois, supposedly to bring offenders and aggressors to justice. These soldiers instead, he wrote, "are gauling and vexing the Latter day saints who have suffered oppression of every kind until they are determined to suffer it no longer." Once again he expressed his desire to have freedom to work and progress. He wrote, "As a people they have not been protected in their rights but have suffered injustice and oppression of every kind and under what is called a free government." He and others are

among the thousands who intend to leave this government and emigrate to some good place between the rocky mountains and the pacific Ocean where we will be clear from partial and corrupt government. Liberty in a Solitary place is far more preferable than always being harrassed and mobbed in these states and that on account of our religion.

Reading this, I am reminded again of his feeling of injustice when he was caught poaching on the estate in Hawarden. It's clear that liberty had both religious and economic implications for him. Solitary wilderness in itself had no appeal, but he saw the West as a place where the Mormons would be left alone to grow.

John and his brother Samuel first settled inside the Salt Lake City limits, in a corner lot northeast of what is now Pioneer Square. That year, in a letter to his sister-in-law, John described the resources of his new home—free land, water, pasturage, and timber. He wrote, this is a "pleasant valley, where we can build and inhabit, plant and eat the fruit thereof far away from mobocrats." He was pleased that they were hundreds of miles from the coast, writing,

We have now got far away from other nations and people, separated by a long desert and high mountains. If we have any trouble it must begin at home which is at present all quiet. This people have known the contrary and I have said years ago that I would like to see the people away by themselves. . . . I would say there is less crime or immorality than I have ever known among any people and I trust this people will be established here on a permanent footing."

But for a few more years he would wander inside the valley. Early in the spring of 1848 he built a cabin on Five Acre Survey, Parley's Canyon Creek. Ironically, given John's belief that under Mormonism he wouldn't have his opportunity stifled, the land settled by the two brothers in the city was absorbed by Brigham Young for a church farm. They moved their cabin, log by log, westward across the Jordan River, an act that violated the Mormon's treaty with the Utes. That January (1849) they crossed on the ice and settled north of current day Fourteenth South, where Joseph Harker, who would become a close friend, had moved already to find grass for his animals. Whether John and Samuel went happily or resented Young's use of authority is unclear. Across Jordan they were free to increase their holdings of animals and property. John wrote, "Every man has as much land set off to him as he wants or can cultivate. There is no land bought or sold. I have ten acres of farming land where I now live, four miles from the city on the banks of the river, called Western Jordan." Even the building materials were available without any other cost but labor. "We mostly build of brick dried in the sun." He writes about other resources, free for the taking,

When our stock is out, we take it Indian fashion, live on flesh, meat, roots and herbs and such things as the country affords. . . . Esther used to go fishing and in two or three hourse get 20 or 30 fish, and



after I got my crops in I went a hunting amongst the mountains and on the 3 day, I returned home with about 75 lbs of mutton or mountain sheep. We gladly share in the hardships of settling this new country. It is a good country. . . . We enjoy health, peace and can worship God according to the dictates of our conscience without being molested, and enjoy the labors of our hands. . . .

Happy not to be a servant or lease a farm as did his grandfather and father, he saw the West as a place where the open land and free water provided a refuge from the evil of an unjust and unequal society. He once wrote that like a cat, no matter which way they are thrown, Mormons would land on their feet.

In all these letters he echoes his own chosen leader Brigham Young, who saw wilderness as raw material provided by God for human use and believed that God would facilitate the transformation of the wilderness into a garden, redeeming the landscape from its status as useless desert. He preached that if his people can "establish the Zion of God in our hearts, in our own houses, in our cities, and throughout our country, we shall ultimately overcome the earth, for we are the lords of the earth, and, instead of thorns and thistles, every useful plant that is good for the food of man and to beautify and adorn will spring from its bosom."



John Bennion, after he became a Lord of the Earth. (Utah State Historical Society)

Still unsatisfied, in the summer of 1849 John moved again, this time to Field Bottom just north of present-day Taylorsville. With his friend Joseph Harker, he settled on Field Spring. Still unsatisfied with his situation, in the fall of 1850, he settled farther south at a bend in the Jordan River.

Finally settled, a well-established land and livestock owner, surrounded by his polygamous family, he never moved his primary domicile again.

### *I Go to and fro upon This Earth*

John moved and moved until he found a place to settle. But I have danced in a circle, with one foot planted and the other foot roving. A list of my residences (towns where I have lived or lands where I have wandered) looks like a villanelle of repeated place names (Utah towns are italicized):

Vernon  
 Provo  
 Arizona  
 New Mexico  
 Arizona  
 Vernon  
 Logan  
 Mt. Pleasant  
 Nephi  
 Logan  
 Vernon  
 Houston  
 Nephi  
 Springville  
 Oahu  
 Springville  
 London  
 Springville  
 London  
 Springville  
 Provo

England

*Provo*

England

*Provo*

England

*Provo*

England

*Provo*

London

*Provo*

I participate in the cultural male tradition of leaving and the cultural female tradition of staying put.

### *Having My Way*

The last half of my log of moves shows us trading our home in Springville, Utah, for one in Provo, Utah, ten years ago. For a couple of years before that I had become restless. Living in our house in Springville became unbearable to me. I disliked wasting time driving eleven miles to Provo for work at Brigham Young University, where I had a job teaching creative writing and British literature. Seeing myself as a man of society, I also wanted a larger area for entertaining guests. Despite there being plenty of bedrooms, a huge family room, and ample storage space, I felt that another house would be better. Our basement had flooded and the floor in the kitchen was uneven, so the house felt imperfect. None of this was logical, all was rationalization. I wanted to move because I felt like moving. I believed my life would be better in a different place. Then there was my mother, who lived in Vernon in the old house we children had grown up in. My sister, who with her husband was taking over responsibility for the family ranch, had moved in, so my mother for a while didn't have her own space. I told myself and Karla that I wanted to move so that we could provide a basement apartment for my mother.

Karla was much more rational and thought it crazy to change a spacious, inexpensive house for one in Provo, where housing costs were higher. We had whittled our mortgage down and she didn't want to start another thirty-year loan.

We had the worst arguments of our marriage. Finally we agreed that what happened with my mother would sway the decision. My mother decided she didn't want to stay in Vernon, her traditional home; she couldn't find a condo she liked, so we started house hunting. Nothing we saw suited, so we found a lot and built a house on it. Building a house was a stressful, anxious enterprise, made more so because I had something to prove.

Lucky for me, Karla isn't one to brood over the past. A psychologist, she is much more rational about decisions and relationships than I am. She decided that this decision of mine wouldn't be a relationship breaker for her, so she gave in. Also, she is not one to hold grudges, and she has loved our new house without bias, choosing to forgive my behavior as I made her agree to build this home. Still, as one of my scientist friends often says, Shoddy methodology, positive outcome.

### *Trouble in Zion*

Although she may not have been happy moving, Esther Wainwright followed John seven times from house to house in the New World. For her the relationship breaker was polygamy. She stayed married to him after he took as wife two younger women who had each been brought into the home as servants, but she was angry and bitter. Her reaction mystified John, who probably thought that polygamy would give him more women who would produce more children, building a kingdom, helping him become a lord of the earth. But Esther resisted the loss of her volition in this matter. In July of 1856, he married Esther Birch, who was renamed Esther Ann by Brigham Young so the two wives wouldn't be confused for each other. I imagine having her husband possess a younger woman was difficult for the older Esther, who looks a little like a bulldog in her pictures, but accepting as an equal this woman who had been a servant was probably just as difficult.

John writes that Esther was behind in this thing, meaning that he was more interested in polygamy than she was. On September 12, 1856, he wrote in his journal, "When I left home, Esther felt bad and said hard words against me and Esther A." He wrote:

I thought of her words and one night while sleeping, I dreamed

of all my children being with me on a small boat floating rapidly down a crooked river. I steered the boat and landed it with great exertion where I wanted to land. I then had to wade across, and told Esther and the children where to cross to be safe. The children did so and got safe over. Esther would have her own way and went to cross in another place. It was deep water. She went over head, her youngest child in her arms. I went in swimming after her. She was glad to catch hold of me, and I dragged her out to the children. I felt very glad to see them all safe on shore.

Clearly, his sense of entitlement didn't allow him to see Esther's position. Instead he wrote, "28 Dec 1856 Esther by giving way to an evil Spirit caused a wrong feeling in the family. I fasted & prayed to my God about it."

He tried to herd his family toward heaven: "I held a meeting at home with my Family, instructed them in their duties, each one spoke their feelings. It was satisfactory." But soon the first Esther's dissatisfaction and anger manifested itself again. He wrote, "In the evening went over to Saml to see if E. A. could live there a short time until I got her a house apart from Esther who was disposed to oppress her & disregard my council." It confused him that his wives, whom he loved, were so intractable. This was in March of



Esther Ann Birch  
Bennion, later in  
life. (Utah State  
Historical Society)

1847, and despite Esther's unhappiness over polygamy, the next month he took a third wife—Mary Turpin, who had joined his household as a servant.

Years later he moved both plural wives away from the central home in the Salt Lake Valley: "Mary T and her children live at Mountain Home in Rush Valley." To preserve peace (and to establish a homestead where there was better grazing) he sent his two younger wives seventy miles away to an unsettled valley, where there was danger from roving Utes and bad weather. Esther Wainwright, it seems, did get something out of her running, screaming, and crying. She didn't have to pack her leaving trunk, but the other wives did. They traveled to where they were complete unknowns. My uncle believes that the first year, a year during which they each had a baby, they lived in three foot by eight foot trenches, not even in a proper dugout. Without the help of local Goshutes, who took them in, they would have died of starvation and cold.

### *Playing with Words*

Lord, lordly, lording it over.

The OED gives these:

OE hláfwearð, hláford, hláferd, (hlábard, hláfard)

ME laford, laferde, hlouerd, leverd, lhoaverd, lourde, lowerd, laferd, laverd, loved, lovuerde, lord, lorde, lard.

A master, ruler.

A master of servants; the male head of a household. *Obs.*

One who has dominion over others as his subjects, or to whom service and obedience are due; a master, chief, prince, sovereign.

*fig.* One who or something which has the mastery or preeminence. *Lords of (the) creation:* mankind; now jocularly, men as opposed to women.

*spec.* A feudal superior; the proprietor of a fee, manor, etc. So *lord of the manor*, the person or corporation having the seigniorial rights of a manor.

A husband. Now only *poet.* And *humorous.*

Poetical and humorous. I am an androgynous patriarch, a pater ark full of strange inclinations, lost between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries.

Isolated in the dark behind my own eyes, I yearn to touch the soul of the earth, to wander through a gate of stars into the depth of the universe. In my meditation, I am outside culture and experience, singular, a non-hierarchical being. There is me and there is another intelligence that I sense. Ours is hardly a relationship between lord and underling. Both of us dust of the galaxy, particles of light, waves of matter, atoms and energy. A feeling of sight, light and eye. This other, twin to my soul, is everpresent, close as touch, like something at the corner of my eye, always there, but who I can't turn to see.

### *This Is Not the End, Beautiful Friend*

Karla and I live in what is, we hope, our final home, though we may still wander in short stints. She is in her mid-fifties and I'm almost sixty—both of us grayed, heavier, settling lower into our bones. Like John at the end of his life, we are centering on house and garden. Jim Morrison and Brigham Young had at least one thing right: the west is the best. We sit at dinner, the two of us, now that our children are gone. Both of us have weary eyes, hazel and blue, skin no longer supple. Survivors of a stillborn child, cancer of the uterus, depression. For more than three decades we've pushed against each other in anger and love. Weekly moving toward new territory. Our faces are our own, marked by thought and breath, every yearning and ambition registered on our flesh.

Here we are: who we are. What we've done to each other.



## Prayers of an American Wife

This is a Navy town at five in the morning: the sun rising up over the ocean, bulbous and blazing, and the first of the jets overhead and some teenagers in the lifeguard stand with their arms around each other. The boardwalk is lined with early runners, strapped with knee bands and water belts, and women who run with wide strollers, the babies flapping their tiny, sagging socks. At the inlet, the photographers who set their tripods in the surf can't decide which is more beautiful, the sparkling water that God made or the sleek, grey-winged airplanes built by men.

In the North End, while their fathers shave for work, the children are curled in their beds under white summer comforters, because the buses for camp run at eight and their dreams are still precious, still full of colored horses and parachutes and storms that wash over the beach like small baptisms. Farther inland, on the air base, the mechanics perform safety checks while the pilots brief upstairs in front of whiteboards and tabletops crowded with plastic jets on wooden dowels. Nothing else is open yet this early except the golf course and the front gate and Tim Hortons. Even the Officers' Club is still dark. The veteran who mops the floors in the morning likes to work with the lights off, because in the dark he can imagine the scenes of the night before, the loud pilots with their wives on their arms and the shining glass mugs being pulled from their hooks and Phyllis moving back and forth behind the bar, Phyllis who knows everyone by name, knows their drink orders and the ages of their children. In a glass case by the door is a framed nametag from Goose's flight suit, and only those few who've seen it know that "Goose" was actually the call sign of a real pilot, who died in Miramar while *Top Gun* was being filmed.

And this is a Navy town, too, in the pink-washed morning—past the beaches and the wide white houses, past the arcades and the hotels with striped towels drying on the railings—this is the sun coming up over the airfield, and three miles south of base, where land is cheaper