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Killarney Clary's Who Whispered Near Me and Edward Barrett's Common Preludes

Elizabeth Willis

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Killarney Clary, *Who Whispered Near Me*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1993. First published in the United States by Farrar Straus Giroux in 1989. 68 pp. £5.95.
Edward Barrett. *Common Preludes*. Hudson, NY: Groundwater Press, 1994. 71 pp.

For those familiar with Killarney Clary's first collection of prose poems in its American edition, the book's new British cover—a reproduction of one of Mike & Doug Starn's oversized double-images—may seem startlingly appropriate. The recent Bloodaxe edition bears the face of the Starn twins' "Large Double Eye," two identical images placed not side by side (normal eye position) but one above the other. These eyes, covered by a layer of plastic or cellophane which has been partially peeled back, stare at oblique angles below and beside the reader. The Starn's image is disconcerting not only because of its monstrous size and position but because it evokes both horror and identification in the viewer. Perhaps partially inspired by the famous eye of Bunuel's *Chien Andalou*, these eyes are visually impaled by the two metal rods of the frame behind them. Creating an empathic spell, the image both receives and inflicts pain. Who can bear to look at an eye that can't close, that seems mechanically or surgically held open? Who can bear to look away?

The image is uncannily well chosen. Clary's poems, which take the form of quietly lyrical prose blocks, are laced with the emotional pain entailed by adult life *per se*: the distress of separation, emotional alienation, death, and irreparable, unavoidable compromise. As rhetorical constructions, the poems insist that we *look*, and their success depends upon an almost absolute trust between author and reader.

In the course of the book, we commute, run into old friends, feel estranged from our dance partner, experience the loss of a sister, cope with the absence of lovers, acknowledge the frailty of parents while seeing that acknowledgement itself as a form of entrapment. We give advice, try to go to sleep, attribute value to abstract qualities, and struggle to adopt those qualities.

These are poems about the operations of life upon one. As readers we are let into the intimacies of the workplace and, likewise, into the difficult aftermath of employment upon the human mind and heart.

I drive a long way home from work and each time I start out feeling one way and arrive feeling the opposite. Resolutions are worthless in this swamp.

Early in the book, the frustration of this condition is all the more moving for the ambiguities of Clary's pronouns, where the central construction is not I/thou but an already defeated I/they:

Because the ones I work for do not love me, because I have said too much and I haven't been sure of what is right and I've hated the people I've trusted, because I work in an office and we are lost and when I come home and I say their lives are theirs and they don't know what they apologize for and none of it mended, because I let them beat me and I remember something of mine which not everyone has, and because I lie to keep my self and my hands my voice on the phone what I swallow what hurts me, because I hurt them—

I give them the hours I spend away from them and carry them, even in my sleep, at least as the nag of a misplaced shoe, for years after I have quit and gone on to another job where I hesitate in telling and I remember and I resent having had to spend more time with them than with the ones I love.

Reading *Who Whispered Near Me*, one has the sense of having lived through much without being able to define exactly what or with whom. Part of what makes the collection work is precisely this effaced content beneath the refinement of its delivery.

In the midst of so much happening, however, the book is unnervingly still. Its pulse is resigned and suburban; it reveals and retreats. At times this stillness can be so great that one wrestles to get beneath its polish, or wonders what has been surrendered in order to achieve such calm—the way the silence in a suburb suggests the loss of the wilderness that preceded it. As a result, the book sustains an enormous, intimate sadness in spite of the fact that its precise references remain obscured as textual "secrets."

At other times, this intimacy is broken by the text's own assertion of unassailable difference. One may find it hard to sympathize with the speaker's dilemma when a friend (who spends

her entire weekend trying to rescue a niece who is "in trouble") asks "What's it like to be rich?" and "I" replies:

"Only my parents have money," but she waits. "I don't worry. I have nothing to prove." It seems a lie; I want so much to convince her we are alike.

Regardless of whether or not it is a lie, the poem betrays its own empathic failure since having "nothing to prove" is after all another kind of luxury and can only fail to console under the circumstances. If the poem is critiquing its own reliance on emotional content here, its lesson is twofold: 1) that regardless of one's "feeling" of friendly identification, one ultimately confronts the reality of one's own history and class, not another's; 2) that when readerly trust is lost, style can rarely save the day entirely on its own.

The moment is also telling as it marks the limits of the book's emotional register of woundedness and passivity since the figure with whom we as readers have identified ourselves is unable to provide the space for an emotional content outside its own. Given the text's evident poise, one has a hard time accepting *all* its moments of self-doubt.

To its credit, the book's offhand revelations enable it to get away with a lot, particularly when it displays its own limits without trying to get credit for them at the same time: "I fear my last excuse will be that I didn't know what to do." And, even when its sadness is knowingly self-indulgent: "I know I will die but won't leave anyone."

Beneath Clary's doubting yet plaintive appeal, individual and universal histories alike recede from view, and we find ourselves watching from a posthumous distance: "It's such a tiny life, I can hardly see it anymore." One of the beauties of Clary's address is that the statement implies a kind of freedom.

Edward Barrett's first full-length collection is not comprised solely of prose poems, but they make up the most accomplished work in this volume. The form suits Barrett's penchant for both a "poetic" suspension of disbelief and a self-consciously critical narrative eye. The result is hardly common.

The "I" in these poems wanders laterally through streets and conversations while maintaining a highly literate inner discourse; the

effect is both immediate and abstracted. While the distress of Clary's poems rarely blurs its polished surface, here the disruptions and disturbances of daily life generate a kind of heightened bar talk. These poems work not by the consistency of their voice but by constantly hopping between the parallel worlds of speech and thought.

Although these poems declare themselves as "common," their commonness is deceptive, counteracted immediately by the startling—sometimes consciously brash—intervention of artistry. The book begins: "The graffiti should read *sweep my hair back gently, leaving the cornice its question of light.*" Such graffiti is of course unimaginable in a realist's world planted as it is so precisely between the sublime and the everyday. One immediately discovers that these poems also swell with the heady "preludes" of higher learning, mixing elements of high and low culture in a way that occasionally makes both appear as provocatively absurd as those "urinals, like Roman steles, big as showers."

The poet's lines, in fact, maintain the tavern sense of a line one "falls for," often taking the form of a disarming admission: "Someone probably says something like this all the time." But they also counter their own melancholy—the possibility of the "line" failing—with a quick maneuvering to shake it off as a systemic difficulty rather than a personal one: "You can't really make someone feel everything although you think about them all the time."

The mix of high culture and conversational speech patterns leads to the unexpected pleasure of finding James Clerk Maxwell just down the street from "toxic side effects" and CD boxes that have to be pried apart like the jaws of life. The overall effect of these poems is to bind reader and speaker with comic agreement; next time the party wanes, turn to "Nine Acts That Would Have Killed Vaudeville."

Barrett's work is only partly sunny, though. His particular way of looking on the bright side of disaster often breaks through to an underside that is all the darker for its optimistic surface:

...your father who loved to fish but always threw his
catch back in. Too bad he didn't treat his family with the
same detached amusement.

In fact many of these poems reveal a sustained longing within their persistence to go forward. "Sonnets" and "Theory of Transportation" are must-reads.

The balance achieved in *Common Preludes* is engaged and instructive, as in the title poem where we find ourselves immersed in what might be read as an articulation of one of Barrett's own models of composition. Near the end of the poem, Science magically appears on the scene and, unimpressed with itself at last, decides to play hookie in favor of an afternoon snack: "First comes this, then that, rising like particles of light in the water table until it became a city with truth rolling out in front of me on the counter-top with the satisfying feel of oranges rolling out of a paper bag."

Occasionally, a line falls short of its "common" mark, as when a reverie slips into "my second year at Harvard." But just turn the page and you're restored to another shared wonder of practical knowledge, smack between the philosophy of the university and that of the barbershop: "Anything you understand is fatal."

Elizabeth Willis