

# THE PROSE POEM: AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

Volume 8 | 1999

## Book Review: Killarney Clary's *By Common Salt* and Laynie Browne's *Rebecca Letters*

Elizabeth Willis

© Providence College

The author(s) permits users to copy, distribute, display, and perform this work under the following conditions: (1) the original author(s) must be given proper attribution; (2) this work may not be used for commercial purposes; (3) the users may not alter, transform, or build upon this work; (4) users must make the license terms of this work clearly known for any reuse or distribution of this work. Upon request, as holder of this work's copyright, the author(s) may waive any or all of these conditions.

*The Prose Poem: An International Journal* is produced by  
The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress)  
for the Providence College Digital Commons.  
<http://digitalcommons.providence.edu/prosepoems/>

Killarney Clary. *By Common Salt*. Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College Press, 1996.  
61 pp. \$12.95  
Laynie Browne. *Rebecca Letters*. Berkeley: Kelsey Street Press, 1997.

Laynie Browne's first full collection and Killarney Clary's long-awaited second collection are, in one sense, perfect negatives of each other, as they embody contrary and complementary ways of seeing. Browne exploits the prose poem's availability to open discursive forms; Clary, its intertwining of personal and philosophical ramble. But what these collections share is more intriguing: a certain drive for authenticity and direct experience, mining an inner space that gives these books the immediacy of stream-of-consciousness, while making use of the prose poem's propensity for shaped semi-narratives. They pitch forward, seemingly discovering what they have to say as they say it, giving the reader the impression of simultaneity and nearness: the intimacy of letters, the commonness of salt.

Browne's *Rebecca Letters* tracks the ground between thought and action, language and experience. In their ambling, sometimes hypnagogic pacing, three serial poems of this collection wander into revelation and query. Here, insights lead not into resolution but into more delicate fields of inquiry. The book takes its epigraph from Mary Webb, a modern British dialect writer whose novels of rural life and folk wisdom bear comparison to Browne's *Rebecca Letters*, with its herbal know-how and its sense of the interconnectedness of human and natural worlds. The voice in these poems announces itself through and beyond the physical world, as "luminary" and "sub reverie." It hears "the sound of skin." In the manner of H.D.'s *Trilogy*, it keeps its ambiguities—the mysteries of interconnectedness—intact: "The late afternoon becomes a medieval forest. . . . The shell is also a palm, also a frond. Her neck is also a universe."

Throughout, the collection plays back and forth between surface and depth, conscious intention and automatic writing. Celebrating an oral (and perhaps even alchemical) tradition at the same time that it announces its own difference, it conjures and records a lost world where "there is no spelling, or inscriptions to create a secret language." The thinking within this work is consciously written and spelled—rather than voiced—language. It is diaristic and transformative, bending itself around a slippage in spelling: "Walking is perhaps the most dangerous occupation. Either that or waking."

These poems celebrate both ancient knowledge and modern ambiguities. In them, one is left to intuition, to finding the path and walking it. Beginning with the volume's enigmatic title (there is only brief reference to Rebecca within the book, which is dedicated to the author's grandmother Eva), the book's thinking culminates in the kind of cognitive puzzles and contradictions with which language inevitably confounds us: "thoughts manifest everything made of thoughts ... which means thought comes from matter and the opposite." Or, "winter discerns the rules of winter." In the process we may perceive a cycle—say, of nature or of language—of which we seem to be only

circumstantially a part. And yet, such knowledge retains a human face: "Every word was a child." Or, reflecting on the book's own status as a literary debut, we might read the title as a sentence about the genesis of individual literacy. "Rebecca letters." Delighting in open-endedness and the possibility of endless beginnings, the final poem ends in parenthesis.

For all their contemporary anxiety and displacement, Clary's poems are more languorous and introspective—at times verging on a retrograde collapse of movement into thought. Within the course of a poem, a day's activities may be reported in the past tense, working their way toward the kind of resignation and closure that lets you sleep at night, but only lightly, half-listening for news of disaster.

Clary's poems are laced with lovely generalizations: "Heroes are busy. Teachers are busy." Their tone is philosophical, knowing, wry. Emotional states are often encoded into urban landscapes or in flashes of sensory description ("burning ears, palms that itch, a brief flash beyond the hills"), though they often lead to an extrapolation of emotional content into more rational terms ("what I've learned has been added to me"). The poem is not a means of other-worldly investigation but an expression of the poet's knowledge through the interlacing of image systems and rhetorical structures.

The book's descriptive passages are general enough for one to fill in the blank with one's own fears, wounds, and kitchen-window perspectives: "Stretched out, I'm a carrier, open and empty. Storms move quickly in this air. Round, blinking shadows darken anything they pass for an instant, and people change their minds and go away." This "open and empty" vocabulary creates an aptly fleeting ode to mutability. Does the "stretched out" messenger carry documents or viruses? What is fear but a kind of passing weather? In fact this very emptiness gives the book an Everyperson quality that keeps its emotional declarations (of loneliness, for instance) from seeming self-indulgent. The few references to repeated desk work (accounting, typing, the "space bar") at times give the poems a *Bartleby*-esque poignancy within the surreal environment of the office job. In fact, the apparent interchangeability of experience—represented by trips to the mall, being in one's car, wiping the sink, and the general references to unnamed wounds—could be the book's central trope. Perhaps it is the fear of anonymity that drives these poems inward, in search of difference, individuality, and originality. As a result, they have a static quality that can be suffocating but is often breathtaking in the clarity with which it represents this basic human conundrum: the desire for connectedness and the love of specialness.

Hence the apparent positivism and folk wisdom of Clary's title is in retrospect overlaid with irony and sadness. We are all linked "by common salt." Whatever one's station, one's physical and emotional content is practically undistinguished & indistinguishable. Perhaps the terror whispering beneath Clary's poems is that this sameness does not ensure connection but is, as it turns out, just another aspect of one's isolation.

Within this charged introspection, stock phrases become loaded with wry writerly double entendres, like "wrap it up"—a moment of closure within a commodity culture that rings with the writerly fear of having gone on too long, with perceiving one's own work as a commodity. Though the poems sometimes take place within the public arena of malls and street fairs, they retain a melancholy, almost soundproof quality, filled with unspokenness, referencing the vast realm of overlooked things around us: the yellow sponge wiping down the sink, the lost inward life, the fear attending bereft public spaces, even advertising's strange mix of toxicity and super-ebullience: "poisons breaking into sugar." In this perceptual arena, pronouns become both vibrantly political and hollowly part of the "show": "I have thought I should learn to arrange what comes to me in this parade or should stand unjudging as it washes about, but I am easily a part of it. My flag. My drum."

At their best, these poems strike just the right balance between conscious introspection, objectivity and empathy, as in the book's second poem:

An old woman alone in a white car on Fletcher peers into a pink bakery box as she waits at the signal in twilight. I'm anxious to be home, talking. I'm afraid of the smell of damp metal, a chill that rises into my scalp, a thud against the wall at three a.m.; the phone keeps ringing. When you only have one thing, you're bound to hate it.

For those familiar with Clary's work, this collection may be less even than her first, but it also takes more risks. Plaintively pursuing the light and air one imagines just beyond life's various bureaucracies, the writer is never wholly removed from the disappointments and impoverishments of the made world: "I wasn't innocent. I wanted to be there."

**Elizabeth Willis**