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Poetry

The Devotion Field
Claudia Keelan
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In a 1998 article in *UNLV Magazine*, the author claimed, “This is unusual, I know, but I never revise. If I write a poem and it’s not there, I don’t go back and try to refine the experience because that wouldn’t be true to time. You can’t go backwards.” This disinterest in revising, and perhaps clarifying and cohering, makes Keelan’s new book a mixed blessing for readers of more traditional poetry and a treasure trove for readers of the avant-garde.

The book contains classic Keelan touches: social criticism, an attention to language and its programmatic ambiguities, references to literary, historical and cultural allusions. Here, she pays particular attention to the pronoun and its slippery associations. Reminiscent of the teenage years, when the word “it,” if emphasized correctly, could have a world of meanings, Keelan suggests that pronouns are their own form of synecdoche, a mere part for an ever-changing whole. In this case, the whole is the complex network of people, things, and activities the pronoun might represent. For example, in “Hello Beloved” she writes, “Both of it and it / There were pilgrims there misnaming / Something caved in.” The “it” is a mystery never fully explained, but that locates the charm in these poems, as Keelan writes: “No one misses the point // But the stars above her head / Pointed everywhere.” The poems cause meaning to create wakes that spread, suggesting new ways of envisioning the world and the language that tries to harness it.

Author of four other volumes of poetry and winner of both the Silver Pen Award and the Beatrice Hawley Award, Keelan also turns her keen eye to various parts of history, commenting archly about anthologies and canonical literature in poems like “Southern Anthology” where the notion of what constitutes Southern literature suddenly comes into question. Can it only be linked to civil rights and scrub pine or is there more to it? She takes the road of Anne Waldman in some poems, writing about feminist issues in history and literature and her own life. Her lines and structures are often seemingly disjointed. She breaks words in myriad ways to suggest not

only the word as it might initially be read but also for the words that it might contain, as in "Daybook":

Looked inside—An American soul An Amer
I can soul inside
I found—An art museum
—Where millions died

Clearly, the play here is with "American," and the poet uses the national myth of American ingenuity and self-entitlement to indict the rich. This kind of re-mixing and remaking words stamps much of the volume.

This book is no leisurely read. Readers need to expend extra effort, but for those who enjoy piecing and puzzling, the poems offer their own reward.