

When Good is Better than Great—Susan Elizabeth Howe’s *Salt*

Susan Elizabeth Howe. *Salt: Poems*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2013. 122 pp. Paperback: \$19.95. ISBN: 978-1-56085-222-3.

Reviewed by Douglas L. Talley

What Beatrice said of Dante might well apply to Susan Elizabeth Howe’s latest collection of poetry, titled *Salt*. The observation was fictional, served up in an obscure but brilliant nineteenth-century book, *Classical Conversations* by Walter Landor, in which, during an imagined last conversation, Beatrice tells Dante, “You will be great, and, what is above all greatness, good.”¹ Now whether Howe’s collection will ever be deemed “great” is at present unknown, but it is most certainly a good book, a very good book, and in a number of particulars that goodness certainly exceeds what is great. Howe has learned to strip her work of pretension and self-consciousness, creating a pure and thorough modesty of tone, a plain speech, which nevertheless is marked throughout by compelling flashes of thought and language. In her manner she is like the Psalmist, who wrote:

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up,
 my eyes are not raised too high;
 I do not occupy myself with things
 too great and marvelous for me.
 But I have calmed and quieted my soul. . . .
 (Psalm 131:1–2 RSV)

A calm detachment shapes the tone of Howe’s entire collection, even in those poems where deep passion moves her most. By focusing primarily on daily concerns close to home—on concerns, nonetheless, that matter to the common reader—she has quietly resisted the vainglory that traps so many talented poets into pretentious postures. Instead, she offers a view of what is plain and simple and good. And this, to be sure, is above greatness.

What, then, is simple and good about this collection? There are at least three general elements worth addressing: (1) Howe's allegiance and connection to place, specifically the Great Salt Lake Basin; (2) the subtle but direct affirmation of her religious beliefs; and (3) her development as a writer.

With regard to Howe's connection to place, we might open with a digression. An ultimate curse laid upon Lucifer was his banishment, which condemned him to utter homelessness. He has no place in heaven, and his place upon the earth is only temporary at best. From the moment he was cast from his first and only habitation, he has strayed toward greater and greater isolation, which is outer darkness, and his eternal punishment is to never again find a place he can claim as home—no house for his spirit and otherwise no land, no village, not even a nutshell, for his habitation. Thus, central to Latter-day Saint doctrine is the prospect of our coming to earth to find a mortal homestead and there establish the beginnings of an eternal home. Howe, in her attachment to and appreciation for the Great Salt Lake Basin, informs us deeply about the privilege of having a place to call home, a land and a country we claim as our own. While a number of the poems find her abroad, she returns again and again to the Basin, her "true country." It is "in the red desert" she belongs, and she speaks of it convincingly. She makes the Utah landscape with its spare, arid beauty the potential seedbed of a distinct, cultured poetry, as memorable in its way as the Attic poetry that grew from an ancient Greek coastline of granite outcrop and olive groves.

As to the affirmation of her religious beliefs, Howe rarely addresses her faith explicitly in the poems, but it is everywhere present and felt throughout, often in modest, isolated lines. In the poem "Letter to My Husband, Sent from Ireland" she quietly observes, "I believe in our prayers." In the one poem in which she depicts a church ordinance, "Blessing the Baby," she acknowledges, "We are low church" and notes, knowingly and sympathetically, that we sometimes succumb to casual religious observance—the neighbor who "reads a novel hidden in his Bible" and the two teens who "thumb wrestle, eyes closed" during the ordinance. Nevertheless, her Mormon faith fully pervades the

volume, particularly in the expansiveness of its title, *Salt*, suggesting not only the place where the great Mormon migration finally found its rest but also something of that unique Mormon savor—those peculiar people who call themselves “saints” and believe they belong among those called “the salt of the earth.” The saints she writes about—her extended family, neighbors, and friends, herself and her husband included—belong to a “soiled Earth,” but it is an earth that is, nevertheless, “sometimes washed, renewed, sweet-scented.”

As to her development as a writer, this is one of the most intriguing features of any poet’s work. As in so many other instances, Shakespeare is the great example: what a distance is cleared in his mastery of both language and drama between *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Twelfth Night* and, later still, *The Tempest*. A great deal of commentary is offered about the elusiveness of his personality, but his development as a writer from first to last remains beyond controversy. Howe’s debut collection, *Stone Spirits*, was published in 1997. *Salt* is her second collection and was accepted by Signature Books in 2009, twelve years later, but for various reasons the volume was not published until 2013. She has acknowledged that during this time she “spent a lot of time revising” and continued to “refine the poems until they actually went into galleys.”²

Such revision has not created overwrought poems. On the contrary, in the words of Yeats, all her “stitching and unstitching” have led to lines that “seem a moment’s thought.”³ Howe’s technical development during this period is evident in reduction and conciseness—a lyrical line pared down to direct, vivid clarity of statement, reminiscent of the classical Greek ideal, as, for example, in the following fragment of Sappho:

Love rifles my heart,
like wind rushing through a mountain oak.⁴

Reduction to a clear, vivid image allows the poet, in the words of Donald Justice, quoted in the preface, “to keep memorable what deserves to be remembered.” Vivid simplicity can leave an indelible impression. I would cite a few lines to let this unshakable vividness speak for itself:

From “I Practice Managing My Stress”:
Because it’s time for breakfast,
I like to think of my heart
as warm whole wheat bread
fresh from the oven, not yet sliced.

From “Family Trees”:
A growing tree is a miracle
in a valley named for salt

From “A Cold May Morning”:
Mountains coming this way, a snow
wall already baffling the far fields.
As if spring had been mistaken
in its kindness. As if kindness
sifted a warning into fiery
tulips, yellow daffodils—*worry
about your death.*

From “Dull Blue Crows”:
The ten, then thirty, then seventy
pinyon jays that appeared
at our feeder were sky-blue travelers
in gray cloaks, a little like the Amish,
smart enough to lift the lid
and generous to their fellows,
each filling its craw and flying
to the trees so others could seize
a winter stash.

The growth brewing in Howe until the publication of this second collection was not, however, merely a growth in technical skill. Vividness and earned simplicity also bespeak wisdom, a clarity of perspective that can only come with the passage of time, traveling great distances, and all the while paying close attention.

No doubt some of this perspective is attributable to marriage and a maturing relationship with her husband, Cless. The distances

we travel in life are always magnified by relationships; a trek of certain miles can often be doubled by the second viewpoint of a traveling companion and perhaps tripled by the shared viewpoint that forms with a growing unity in the trek. It is particularly in her expressed affection for her husband and her belief in the goodness of marriage that Howe offers her best work.

The most compelling example is the poem “Letter to My Husband, Sent from Ireland.” This title has the virtue of clarity that poet Billy Collins commends in titles offered by Chinese poets of the Sung dynasty: “how easy [s]he has made it for me to enter here”—“no confusingly inscribed welcome mat to puzzle over.”⁵ As the poem begins, the author is sitting in the kitchen of a cottage that “tilts toward Coulagh Bay.” She is abroad but thinking of home and is assailed by thoughts of distance from her husband—

until a wasp strafes me, then caroms off
the peaches and into my mug. She scalds,
dying quickly, her thin abdomen with its stinger
curling to touch her head. I spoon her out
of my lemon and ginger tea. On the saucer,
wings spread, she looks like an Irish faery,
caught. Could she be an omen
from this magic-haunted land?

If there is a more vivid, carefully-rendered image found in contemporary poetry, I do not know what it is. Not only is the image haunting in its own right, but the poet utilizes it to deeply moving effect in continuing to the final lines of the poem:

Yes, life has its trajectories—who would believe
our single paths could intersect
with such force? Now, after this happy year,
the world has bounced you to your work,
me to mine, the boiling Atlantic between.

The final six lines of the poem are so powerful that I would not wish to divulge them here for fear of ruining what will prove for any thinking reader an unforgettable aesthetic experience, full of pathos and beauty. You will simply have to buy the book.

The cost of the paperback is a bit stiff—\$19.95. But with fifty poems to the volume, the average cost is a mere 40 cents per poem. And this particular poem is so compelling, it is by itself worth the price of the entire book. Yes, it is that good, and in its own modest way, better than great.

Notes

1. Walter Landor, *Classical Conversations* (Wash.: Dunne Publishing, 1901), 324.
2. Susan Howe, e-mail message to author, April 23, 2013.
3. William Butler Yeats, *Selected Poems and Two Plays* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 28.
4. English translation here by the author. Original in David A. Campbell, *Greek Lyric Poetry* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967), 46.
5. Billy Collins, *Sailing Alone Around the Room* (New York: Random House, 2001), 138.



Empowerment at the Local Level

Neylan McBaine. *Women at Church: Magnifying LDS Women's Local Impact*. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014. 218 pp. Paperback: \$20.43. ISBN: 1589586883.

Reviewed by Lisa Torcasso Downing

Tension isn't new to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. From its foundation, the Church has drawn fire for its religious, social, and political stands. However, these historical tensions seem, in large measure, to have been externally crafted by outsiders who may or may not have desired the downfall of the Mormons. Today, however, the LDS Church faces a new tension, one that originates from among the ranks of our faithful,