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Remains of Clever Animals

Sarah V. Schweig

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textes designed by different creators often for each book’s purpose, and starting from the text that was being published) and the artistic intervention of literature were one and the same thing. The choice of kraft paper for the jackets of the many volumes in the main collection, of the “ugly, dirty, and bad butter-seller” (in the publisher’s words) for the *contramargem* [counter-marginal] collection, or of cartridge paper (sold and used in grocery stores for wrapping both soap and slated codfish) which, for example, served for the July 1975 edition of Paulo da Costa Domingos’s *Gogh Uma Orelha Sem Mestre* [*Gogh A Masterless Ear*] — were all marks of an aesthetic differentiation from the (larger) literary publishers (who fundamentally used white paper), as well as of the preference for typographies where the covers (in folding system) were made by hand, with the pages of each book machine-stitched — a bookbinding craft traditionally carried out by women. All this allows us to account for the breadth of significance, also social, that the editorial practice had for Silva Tavares, someone not cast among Michel Wieviorka’s empirical observation that “the dominant tendency in contemporary societies is to seek much more personal autonomy than responsibility or solidarity.” But still with regard to the bookmaking business, the publisher had an added awareness: not paying copyright to the authors avoided that the charge of what &etc had to pay them fell on the buyers. Roughly speaking, the strategy was to restrict the company’s expenses, limiting them to facility (rent, telephone, electricity)

and printing costs, postal delivery, minimal production taxes, expenses which automatically reflected on the selling price. Considering that the typographical costs were substantially higher in the first decades of the publisher’s activity than now (the price reduction resulting mainly from technological advancement), we can understand that producing bound volumes such as &etc did, with high-quality finishing (e.g., including a dust

&etc was an adventure not treated from the prism of economy.

jacket or a *hors-texte*) was only possible due to the non-obligation to pay duties. Once the rights were graciously given, Silva Tavares engaged in the execution of the work (assuming the writing to be edited as his own), so that the author was absolutely comfortable with the final object (relatively cheap, or the book would not sell), and the material form that conveyed its message.

Vitor Silva Tavares formed part of a galaxy of people with a particular representation of what life is, of being free. With practical effect, one may proclaim — one is responsible for one’s own values and freedom is defined by the choices one makes — without pretending to organize it into any system, a non-system. People of rupture, therefore, infused with a different idea of themselves (and even of

work, in the noble aspect of the term, since those were people working on what they wanted, who expressed themselves, and built their personalities in the process) and who produced a sort of passionate critique of the bourgeois type of existence, of the bourgeois order as an ethical order.

Not by chance, Silva Tavares used to say that &etc was a poetic and non-literary (not exclusive to literature) adventure. I would like to extend the scope of this statement. For many of those involved in the activity of the publishing house, it ended up making some sense of their lives. &etc was more than a mere producer of books and of author’s reputations. What animated it went beyond that. It was an adventure not treated from the prism of economy, with the people involved in deciding its course feeling honored to carry out, and to maintain such a project.

Emanuel Cameira holds a Degree in Sociology from ISCTE-IUL (University Institute of Lisbon), Postgraduation in Curatorial Studies from the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Lisbon, and PhD in Sociology from ICS-UL (University of Lisbon). He is a Guest Assistant Professor at ISCTE-IUL. In the last two years he was co-responsible for the organization of Lisbon Graphic Fair — independent editions and artist books, supported by the Lisbon City Council. In 2018 he was awarded the Victor De Sá Contemporary History Prize by Minho University (Portugal).

REMAINS OF CLEVER ANIMALS

Sarah V. Schweig

FOSSILS IN THE MAKING

Kristin George Bagdanov
Black Ocean
www.blackocean.org/catalog1
112 Pages; Print, \$14.95

The most urgent story to tell in our time is the story of climate change — but no one knows the best way to tell it.

The barriers lie broadly in the problems of totality and time. It is conceptually difficult to grasp that climate change will impact every single person on Earth: that total number is beyond our grasp because it lies beyond our capacity to see, hear, and feel. That thought escapes us also because time changes it: the people who will most suffer from climate change do not yet exist. The thought of debts to nonexistent people doesn’t tend to sway most of us to give up comforts and conveniences now. The inert words “climate change” don’t help its case, and images of starving polar bears can actually make people believe the problem is only a remote and distant one. Even when people experience extreme weather first-hand, one study by Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences found, there is a tendency to rapidly normalize abnormal weather patterns in how we think about them, further complicating the endeavor of telling an believable and impactful story. They see no story arc, even as it’s happening all around them. Even if we all realize that the worst is occurring, we still tend to delude ourselves on the level of feeling.

Fossils in the Making, Kristin George Bagdanov’s first book, tries to operate in the space where such an understanding can take place. She is not alone in trying to operate here: Others (e.g. Forrest Gander, who just won the Pulitzer, and the late W. S. Merwin) try to lend to poetic imagination toward environmental threats. But among early career poets, Bagdanov’s project is relatively rare. Dominant subjects among early career poets tend to deal explicitly with personal narratives, selfhood, and identity — what distinguishes human beings from each other rather than what they share. The

Fossils often operates between poetic truth and post-Enlightenment scientific truth, between intuition and logic, between ideal and brute fact.

environmental stakes are extremely high: they are both universal and personal in the formal sense of the term (reading this collection will tell you nothing about the vicissitudes of Bagdanov’s own life).

“The poem I am / writing,” Bagdanov writes, “is not a field / in which I find / or do not find my / self.” Here, the self is a subject for poetry only insofar as selves are contained in actual bodies taking up increasingly limited resources and space. These selves are both effect — with respect to the ancestral past — and cause — with respect to the unprecedented global danger of the future: “each of our bodies is source and citation etching a future through the past / as when one person makes history by killing the others.”

Nature reflects patterns of cruelty we can see (if we allow) in ourselves: “Cf: how the female

wasp replaces another’s eggs with her own: / labor can be exploited even in nature.” But nature is blameless. And because we are free (at least, free enough to inflict so much damage on the Earth) we are essentially responsible. In freedom, there’s always the possibility of acting — and of having acted — differently.

Fossils is split into three sections, lending the lyrics a larger narrative arc:

“Proofs” takes up the issue of arguing for a new state of affairs, proving by measurements the scarcity and inequalities the future will bring: “This one measures those two knocking against each other / crest against breast as one person least brown calls for help.”

“Wagers” sees the body, the material existence of a person, as a kind of wager posited by existence: “sentience is the wager / we all bet / we forget.” This posited thing buys into a game or gamble being played by the world: “I asked for another body once / Once I was given a stone // and asked / to hallow : // I asked / to follow : // I asked / for another.”

“Remains” becomes increasingly fragmentary, as if enacting degradation, finally ending on a move derived from Paul Celan, erasing the parts of a word until we’re left with the cry of a single vowel. (I would have preferred the book to end on another move, one more its own, but I can appreciate the decision nonetheless.)

Throughout, there are nods to canonic predecessors like Celan, as well as W. B. Yeats, John Donne, and William Wordsworth. Woven with these influences and with graceful lyrics is the presumed language of rationality: the scientific lexicon. For example, the heart is rendered as both poetic and

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plasma. This interweaving implies the question: if both descriptors are correct, which is more true?

Fossils often operates in this friction — between poetic truth and post-Enlightenment scientific truth, between intuition and logic, between ideal and brute fact — sparking images, statements, and questions:

After our skin sheds
after the sea recedes
after moss turns gray and tongues of birch
peel into silence after
analogy breaks its logic
of a is to b as b is to c
who will wake to a world unmade in our
image

A sense of being simultaneously aware of various truths runs through the book. At times, even the poetic line forks in two directions, allowing the reader to read two possible words in the blank space, enacting doubt, making the reader weigh both:

world
This is the that ends in inches
self
that regards the and cringes
body

In writing poetry on such a high-stakes subject, some interesting risks surface.

For one thing, apocalyptic narratives can become romanticized to the point of fetish, which would compromise this work's conviction. The antidote to this tendency, it seems to me, is the awareness of a great irony: that the natural world we have attempted to master and possess becomes, because of our efforts to master it, newly beyond our control. This is tacitly understood throughout *Fossils*.

Another risk comes from undertaking a newsworthy or trending topic in a book of poetry: It can seem like a project of merely poeticizing received content. If we accept certain dominant presuppositions about the worth of poetry, such

as the indivisibility of form and content, it should follow that the search for content be as complex and interpenetrating as the search for form. *Fossils* weathers this risk through its refusal to discuss itself in overly self-conscious terms: it doesn't attempt to market itself as a climate change narrative, nor does it take itself as a metaphor for something else. Form and content gesture toward the total, the universal. The eternal human topics are discussed — death, birth, love — in novel ways *because* of our unprecedented circumstances. The eschewing of the particular self behind these poems is one way this book is different from its contemporaries, which tend to be dominated by a confessional

Vrajitoru Andreassen keeps ideas present and real after the spectacle of reading and debating is over.

inheritance; unlike Bagdanov's work, these try to make urgent political statements by expounding on the particularities of one or other type of self.

Another risk for poetry on newsworthy content is that it risks instrumentalizing art as part of an agenda, blurring the line between artwork and propaganda. Not an antidote to this, but a reality is that it seems unlikely that climate change deniers will find themselves perusing the pages of *Fossils*. The audience for poetry, especially small press poetry, is largely uniform when it comes to political opinions (a topic for another time). But the non-deniers, those who know that climate change is happening but ignore it in thought or action, may find themselves altered by this book if they allow themselves to enter its space.

But there's a complication here. What happens if we start to dispatch art as a strategic narrative for sociopolitical change? Do we end up demanding real-world impact as an attribute of meaningful art? Do we marginalize art all over again from a utilitarian perspective? To demand that art have a purpose is to kill art-making before it even begins. Perhaps there is an exception to be

made for a subject that is the necessary basis for all others, a subject that lends itself to existential, metaphysical, and political concerns all at once, a subject that takes on the very continuation of human life on Earth.

Not a weakness but perhaps a missed opportunity lies in the book's overall tone, which strikes a narrow register. Perhaps this helps us appreciate the fragmentations and elisions we increasingly hear toward the end, but given the multiple voices who could be speaking about the Earth right now, this could be explored, especially for a writer who doesn't shy away from experimentation — perhaps for future work.

If many of us are not producing work that helps us imaginatively understand the most pressing existential and political issue of our time, at the very least it is worth asking what is preventing us from trying. There is a nascent area of social scientific inquiry that has popped up in recent years which studies climate change narratives. It seeks to understand why some narratives have failed to create the public buy-in necessary to literally save human (and animal) life on Earth. It is striking — given the long friction between science and the humanities, philosophy and poetry — that portions of the scientific community are turning toward studying narrative at this crucial moment. Perhaps poetic truth will inform this urgent new narrative. Hopefully something will. If nothing succeeds, our failed narratives may be among the last we clever animals in our corner of the universe ever tell.

Sarah V. Schweig is the author of Take Nothing with You (2016). Her poetry and criticism has appeared in BOMB, Boston Review, Granta, The Iowa Review, The Literary Review, Public Seminar, Slice, Tin House, The Volta, West Branch and elsewhere. She lives in New York City, where she works as an editor and studies philosophy at the New School for Social Research.

OPEN YOUR EARS

Elizabeth Cohen

CHILD WITH A SWAN'S WINGS

Daniel Shapiro

Dos Madres Press

www.dosmadres.com/shop/child-with-a-swans-
wings-by-daniel-shapiro/
108 Pages; Print, \$17.00

accolades for his translations of Chilean poet Tomás Harris, and Mexican short story author, Roberto Ransom, traverses a cataclysmic range of material here. Everything from a poem about a fart (“They’ve been with us / since the first Tyrannosaurus / blasted a mastodon with gas”) to a farcical poem about a

*To read through the five sections of
this book is to time travel, bounce
between seen and unseen worlds, and
slip into other dimensions.*

murder ("When they stuffed him in the hamper, / his
oily fingers slid against hers / but she quickly broke
each one. // It was over.").

As you might deduce from these examples, these are poems spiced up with a strong sense of levity and folly, yet do not think for a second Shapiro is not serious. For even when he rhapsodizes about a little Dutch girl who “laughs at a puddle” in the poem “Rhymes,” there is another layer of meaning that emerges, one of longing and sheer beauty: “She’s the child I’ll never have, / emerald flicker through a screen of leaves.” And the seriousness is not merely a patina; the poem, like many in the

book, is formal, a collection of rhymed couplets so artful the rhymes can sneak right past you at first, even with that title. It manages to accomplish the mammoth task of being slight and heavy, amusing and sad, formal without drawing attention to form.

While I enjoy a good fart joke or artful rhyme as much as the next person, it is this deeper longing and sparkle that moves me most in Shapiro's poems. Even in "Tinklestein Lullaby," perhaps the silliest poem in the collection, about an imagined town where mice chortle, pig's whistle, and a woman "sings between burps," longing and sparkle make a breathtaking appearance, complete with braided and clever internal rhymes:

The moon rounds the Tinklestein
sun in a wild goose chase.
And at midnight, crosses its face, they
become one.

Shapiro, while wildly original and phantasmagorical, also travels through familiar poetic pastures. A number of these poems are *ekphrastic*, and a good amount, including the first poem in the collection and the title poem, are *ars*

————— *Cohen continued on next page*