

THE *SRPR* REVIEW ESSAY:
LIKE ANIMALS, LIKE LOVE

ANDREW OSBORN

The Lions

Peter Campion

University of Chicago Press, 2009

80 pages; paperback, \$18.00

Never-Ending Birds

David Baker

Norton, 2009

112 pages; hardcover, \$23.95

Horse and Rider

Melissa Range

Texas Tech University Press, 2010

88 pages; hardcover, \$21.95

Reality is not as we behold it. We perceive only what and as our senses can—a colorful sliver of the electromagnetic spectrum, a range of pitches, the aromas and tastes of certain molecular shapes. And the phenomena that fit our finicky receptors are further modified, no doubt, by our expectations. The concepts by which we classify what we take in largely determine what we take in. By holding in mind ideas that must otherwise be transient, insubstantial, vague, or elusive, language partitions the noumenal continuum and consigns us to a certain finitude, acquaints us with death and delimits us. In the opening lines of his eighth *Duino* elegy (here quoted in Stephen Mitchell's superb translation), Rainer Maria Rilke suggests that looking at animals may help us recognize what we have given up to be human:

We know what is really out there only from
the animal's gaze; for we take the very young
child and force it around, so that it sees
objects—not the Open, which is so
deep in animals' faces. Free from death.

Never, not for a single day, do *we* have
before us that pure space into which flowers
endlessly open. Always there is World
and never Nowhere without the No: that pure
unseparated element which one breathes
without desire and endlessly *knows*.

Rilke writes here of language acquisition and acculturation. When we teach an infant language and help it to distinguish what phenomenal nuances matter from those that don't, we rationalize the real. It is like pressing a plenum through a Cartesian grid, or like replacing the plenum with the grid and saying that whatever slips through the gaps is so removed from our concern that we need not even know about it. Endangered thereby is the conceptual freedom many poets value most and all poets have a vocational duty to marshal. As makers, they must not remain content with the world as represented in others' words. And they must not allow the rest of us to think of any given vocabulary or grammar or perspective—the Screen—as natural. Being a poet entails relaxing the boundaries of the familiar until they ripple or blur before, perhaps, securing new definitions, new boundaries.

At least Peter Champion seems to think so. And in his subtly astonishing second book of poems, *The Lions*, he adds to Rilke's line of insight that if language acquaints us with our animal urges and helps us to contain their sometime violence, such denomination and containment is itself a kind of violence. This he illustrates efficiently in the collection's shortest poem, "Simile":

The way on green alluvial islands where the Zambezi meets the
Cuando
the lions (cubs scanning smudged horizons as the father drops his
snout in gore)
shake out a clump of vertebra and sinews in their teeth to extract the
sweetest meat
so we might call it "merciless":
like that we rip reality from all the
surfaces that flow
around us. And live in the amnesia of our doing it (I do) and so no end.

The verb “rip” is his physically violent figure for figuration itself. As the big cats glut on the flesh of a fresh kill, taking it into their bodies, we humans incorporate their actions into our conceptual systems with irrelevant moral censure. As they metabolically transform antelopes and zebras into nutrients with little regard for their prey’s former integrity, we linguistically transform Heraclitean flux into so-called reality, perpetually eroding uniqueness with our likenings because we can’t just see but are always seeing *as*.

What makes us most leonine, most regal and beastly, is our ability to commit such violence then think nothing of it. How do we live with ourselves? By forgetting. This anti-memory, apparently the very opposite of the mnemonic virtue of poetic patterning, is crucial to our survival. As the lions live on alluvial islands, we live in amnesia and can therefore go on doing what we do. In America especially, as Champion writes elsewhere, “everything is large / and clear / but also smothered: honeyed over / with a too languorous forgetfulness.” Even the highly self-aware poet must admit that he cannot always be so, that indeed he could not survive day to day were he always critiquing his tropes instead of just using them. And if his closing confession—“I do”—introduces an ethical dimension by accepting individual responsibility for his part in the broadly human, the earlier parenthesis more importantly signals a way forward. Champion’s images are brave and unrelenting, precise. What they are precise about, however, is often a visual obscurity. Perhaps most characteristic in these atypically long lines is the scanning of “smudged horizons,” which suggest the hot, mirage-given air over the African savanna but also figure a poetic disposition not to accept predefined boundaries of classification, not to allow established concepts to foreclose the possibilities of perception. The cubs see smudge as Rilke’s animals and infants see the Open. We know this is a recommendation even to the adult, verbally deft reader because Champion offers us similar images time and time again. His favorite word may be “mist,” but “blur,” “shimmer,” “sprawl,” “gush,” and “smudge” all appear repeatedly as well, as does this poem’s sense of the “surface” as a frail tissue. Fearful that life’s splendor and zest is perennially in danger of escaping our notice—or, rather, that *we* are in danger of missing it—he encourages us to hold open the port of opportunity, to see smudge as such, and thus, possibly, to witness unanticipated otherness in its salient particulars.

In a poem of the mid-1960s, the Objectivist George Oppen cites Rilke's animals and infants "staring at the open" and may also have been thinking of the eighth elegy when he concluded *This in Which's* "Psalm" with "The small nouns / Crying faith / In this in which the wild deer / Startle, and stare out." Telegraphing his alliance with Oppen, whose wariness of prominence and sinewy argument-making syntax he also shares, Campion introduces both the first and second of *The Lions'* three parts with seasonally titled poems about deer. They walk the urban canyons and culverts of Southern California, where "The skyline is a wash / of barcode and microchip" as in a cyberpunk novel. "In Early March" also parallels one of the two title poems of Campion's first book, *Other People*, whose speaker recalls a dream in which his dead grandfather "With kindness, and no need of me, [...] stared / from the edge of an element so complete"—like Rilke's "pure / unseparated element"—"that sunrise [...] // was catastrophe." Other people have ceded much of the new collection's textual territory to untamed mammals and birds and fish and insects. But the feeling carries over; the deer are similarly peripheral, similarly self-sufficient. Their alertness is a "circuitry" superior to water conduits or transistors. What matters most—the impulse behind the poem—is how their persistence in the interstices of our artifice alerts us to our utter difference and their indifference: "our estrangement from / nature means nothing to them."

Campion repeatedly depicts such slippage of one world through or into another. He is himself alert to the glimmer of imminent action, be it that of deer "liveliest / just before they vanish" or of "beautiful people / bound by the bright clothes // the animal of them / seems about to break from." Elsewhere orphic lyricism rises from secular civic diction like immiscible gas, sublimely escaping the realm of ownership. His relationship to Romanticisms old and new especially interest me. Like Keats, he would love to escape what assails him from within—"Ambition. Jealousy. Adrenaline. / The fear that loneliness is punishment"—by taking refuge in an inner bower or fragrant stupor. "What delicious leisure not / to feel it," he moans in "Magnolias," the lovely, densely foliated short poem from which this "corrosive" shortlist comes. But while his allegiances are to the local—to the self's reservoirs of memory, its "fluming" river of desire—his scope is global and, as we are repeatedly reminded, he writes in an age of late capitalism and