

Bleakness or a Future with Unicorns?

Ryan Habermeyer. *The Science of Lost Futures*. Rochester, N.Y.: BOA Editions, 2018. 216 pp. Paperback: \$16.00. ISBN: 978-1-942683-60-5.

Reviewed by Ryan Shoemaker

As I savored Ryan Habermeyer's debut short-story collection *The Science of Lost Futures*, winner of the BOA Short Fiction Prize, I remembered a quote attributed to Dostoyevsky in which the prolific Russian author underscores the influence of Nikolai Gogol's acclaimed short story "Overcoat." "We all come out from Gogol's 'Overcoat,'" Dostoyevsky boldly asserts. The story—a mordant social satire of a pitiful government clerk vindicating his tragic death by haunting the very government bureaucrats who refused to help him find his stolen coat—has been anthologized, studied, and critically lauded as a classic of the Western canon in that it marks a turning point in the evolution of the short story, blending fantastical elements of the form's emergence from myth, legend, and folklore with realistic elements of what some scholars classify as the modern short story—stories in which the narrator or the protagonist is a complex subject possessing unique perspectives, feelings, beliefs, and desires. In the tradition of Gogol's "Overcoat," Habermeyer's masterful collection feels both primordial in how it draws from a mythical, shared consciousness and familiar in how these stories play out in a modern world where fantastical events unfold around and in the troubled psyches of Habermeyer's unique cast of characters.

So how to approach Habermeyer's collection? My mind kept mulling over that word "science" in the collection's title, imagining it as both an invitation and a key to understanding and interpreting the collection's rich and complex specimens as a scientist might: through a systematic

enterprise that builds and organizes knowledge to develop and achieve a clearer understanding of something.

And as a curious scientist might, my initial observations were at the level of language, how Habermeyer's prose is crystal clear and utilitarian, effectively building intricate characters, evocative settings, and dynamic narratives; however, Habermeyer's prose, at times, delightfully and brilliantly rises to the level of poetry, unafraid to linger on the often passed-over beauty of the quotidian. After the brutal slaughter of a dozen turkeys, Habermeyer provides a lyrical description in contrast to the butchery: "The blood made a handsome drizzle on the snow, cruel and jagged in some places and almost lovingly geometrical in others." In another story, Habermeyer beautifully describes the firing of a pistol at a window: "It made a terrible noise, like a halo being ripped in half. That's the sound when a gun goes off—like a church bell calling after you."

Entering deeper into *The Science of Lost Futures*, patterns of Habermeyer's motifs and preoccupations quickly emerged, so clearly, in fact, that I couldn't help sketching out a taxonomy of a few of them: stubborn, cantankerous, and imposing body parts (and sometimes entire bodies!); characters struggling with fertility or with the burdens of caregiving; humans shedding their civilization and de-evolving into animals.

In Habermeyer's body part stories, the appendages appear mysteriously and supernaturally, eliciting individual and communal existential crises as characters care for and ruminate on the origin and meaning of these displaced parts. In the first of these stories, "The Foot," the titular object, severed and enormous, washes to shore near a town, evoking in the local citizenry sentiments of both mystery and repulsion, some viewing the severed member as hazardous, while for others the foot is a talisman of metaphysical significance, both mystifying and demystifying existence. In "Visitation," a couple, adamant to remain childless, find themselves reluctant and ill-suited parents when the woman's uterus

inexplicably falls out, becoming a needy presence in their lives and ultimately straining their relationship. And in “Unfinished Man,” the young narrator and his father learn something about the inexorable pain of loss when an elderly neighbor, Brother Vance, in a forlorn effort to preserve his deceased wife’s memory, buries her kidneys in the garden to fertilize a crop of parsnips.

Many of these stories grapple with human reproduction, on the one hand as a mechanical biological process, yet one that can also be fraught with mystery and vexing elusiveness as Habermeyer’s characters struggle to conceive, at times going to ridiculous lengths to do so. In “A Cosmonaut’s Guide to Microgravistic Reproduction,” an unwavering and obedient cosmonaut finds himself a kind of Adam-like figure paired with an unwilling Eve as they’re tasked by the “Chief Designer” to circle the earth testing the possibility of zero-gravity reproduction. In “The Fertile Yellow,” a young husband acquiesces to his wife’s folk remedies and onerous coital schedule as they attempt to conceive, pushing the husband to the brink of insanity until everything around him appears as human genitalia. In “Ellie’s Blood,” an older man attempts to distract his much-younger wife from the emotional pain of her miscarriage by purchasing a dozen turkeys. The randy birds, however, become a bitter reminder to the woman of a creative power she doesn’t possess.

Finally, several of Habermeyer’s stories explore the shedding of civilization and its descent into a more primitive state. In “St. Abelard’s Zoo for Endangered Species,” a fastidious stay-at-home mom, on an outing to the zoo with her family, enters the snow leopard habitat to retrieve her fallen purse and is unable to leave when zoo staff mistake her for a feral cat. Her aloof husband, roused to action by her sudden change, eventually rescues her. In “Frustrations of a Coyote,” a down-on-his-luck vet finds existential purpose in guarding a rotting corpse from a pack of ravenous coyotes, but failing, he becomes like the ravenous animals.

But if I could find an even more expansive taxonomy for this collection, I would say that Habermeyer is interested in love in all its distinct varieties, platonic and romantic, repugnant and enticing—yet seemingly always problematic: love blooming within a strict and sterile bureaucratic system, though yearning to break free; love tested and tried in the crucible of the life couples imagine for themselves and the reality of the life they live; love embodied in the possessions (or the body parts) of a deceased loved one; and love that's a tyrant, the kind, one character asserts, that you can't live with or you can't live without.

Reaching the end of *The Science of Lost Futures*, I'm left to contemplate its beginning, that poetic, yet somber, epigraph from English chemist Peter Atkins. Atkins writes: "We are the children of chaos, and the deep structure of change is decay. At root, there is only corruption, and the unstemmable tide of chaos. Gone is purpose; all that is left is direction. This is the bleakness we have to accept as we peer deeply and dispassionately into the heart of the Universe" [[[page number needed]]]. Did Habermeyer insert this as a lens through which to interpret his collection? A world of decay, corruption, purposelessness, and bleakness? Or do the stories in this collection, while accepting life's entropic vicissitudes, offer up some hope, a pathway to another realm where chaos isn't the ultimate victor? I tend toward the latter. While love in Habermeyer's collection is a chaotic and maddening enterprise, it can rise beyond the world of testable explanations and predictions, a physical world subject to entropy, to an enduring realm where the human heart and spirit soar, despite life's insecurity and mutability. Perhaps the collection's dedication—*For Jenna, who believes in a future with unicorns*—is a more fitting lens through which to interpret these trenchant stories and their casts of determined, long-suffering characters. While much of life is bleakness, there's always the hope of a future with unicorns.