

The Future Feels Like This: Lance Olsen's *Skin Elegies*

Lance Olsen. *Skin Elegies*. Dzanc Books, 2021. Pp. 248. \$16.95. Softcover.

An excerpt from Lance Olsen's novel My Red Heaven was published in SCR 50.2.

I read this book on an airplane. Just before takeoff, I fished it out of a bag stuffed with crayons, cloth dolls, Cajun peanuts spilled from their plastic pouch, a small pair of socks, tangle of neon earbud wires, pages and pages of loose, dog-eared paper, another book, another book, an inexplicable spoon. My seven-year old was sitting beside me reading the laminated safety pamphlet and acting out the dramas therein in the sotto voce tone she reserves for reveries she doesn't want to have to explain. "Wheee," she whispered, "after the airplane crashes, we all get to float on a raft!" As the plane idled on the runway, I read the book's blurbs and back pages. As the plane swung toward the horizon, I flipped to the beginning and read the epigraphs from Merwin, Mark Strand, McCarthy, Hughie Charles. I paused to tighten my daughter's seatbelt and offer her some scattered peanuts from the bottom of my bag. The plane roared down the runway and tilted its nose to the sky. As we tugged reluctantly free of gravity, I read the first stuttering pages. In a tube where the hollow air popped in my sinuses, hurtling upward at impossible speeds, my daughter beside me who had once been inside me, the book in my hands pretending to be a sound in my ears which, soon, it became.

I know this is not how reviews start. It doesn't, and shouldn't, matter to the reader where I was when I read this book or who was next to me. But it does matter to me. Even if my experience isn't likely to be replicated—the reader may read this book in a bathtub, or at a bus station, in a clearing in the forest, or in bed late at night—the physical act of my engagement with this book was specific and precise and linked intimately with the project of *Skin Elegies*, which is to both take us out of ourselves and to make us more

ourselves. So much ourselves that perhaps we just can't stand it. So much ourselves we may not survive.

The conceit behind *Skin Elegies* is scantily delineated. Rather, Olsen dives right into the meat of the matter, the synapses of the matter, the sparking neurons firing unraveling patterns of the matter. The year is 2072. An American couple—Josiah and Elisha Richardson, a neuroscientist and climatologist respectively who were reeducated to work in the Evangelical Bank in New Jerusalem under the Reformation Government—have been evacuated by the American Resistance in an attempt to avoid their public crucifixion. They have made their way to the Mind Emulation Studies Department at Cairo University where, motivated by a desire to thwart global totalitarian efforts to erase all cultural memories that don't support regime ideology, they have volunteered to become the first human subjects to have their consciousness fully digitized in the Refugee Mind Upload Project. “Three, two, one, and...,” says Dr. Arafa, the chair of the program, as she flips the switch that will zap them into binary code. But all this happens at the end of the book. At the beginning, page one, two, three, four, five as the plane pierced the cloud bank and my daughter kicked the seat back in front of her, all the reader sees are the disassociated pixels of Josiah and Elisha's thoughts. “I—I—I—I—I—I—,” says page four. “Don't do that,” I said to my daughter.

From these pixilated beginnings, we flash immediately into spasms of narrative. Each section, some no longer than a sentence, features a different narrative figure and context carefully delineated by time stamp. Each is situationally unlike the one that has come before but empathetically similar. Humans are speaking. Humans are in extremum and are relating their distress. Humans are remembering things that should never have had to be said or envisioning the act of changing the future in its totality for everyone who came after. I penciled in the dates on the back pages of the book. “I thought you said not to write in books,” said my daughter, who was using my phone to take pictures of the airplane's shadow stenciled across the clouds below. “It's ok to write in this book,” I told her. “It's a hard book. You have to figure it out.” But that wasn't quite right. The book isn't hard so much as it is heedless. Of the reader's expectations. Of the way books are supposed to be written. In 2011, we meet a young woman who survived the Fukushima tsunami by standing on the kitchen table in her parents' house as they drowned. She writes her story on her cell phone, the lines strictly controlled by the vertical linearity of her screen. In 1945, we look in on the deathbed interrogation of an SS officer fleeing the advancing Russian line in the final moments before he puts a bullet in his brain. In 1986, we are part of the meticulous science of the Challenger disaster as it ascends, falters, explodes, dives flaming into the sea. “What's below us right now, Mom?” my daughter asked. “The ocean, I think,” I said. “Cool,” she said. “Maybe we'll see a shark.”

There are other stories interrupting each other here: David Sanders bleeds to death at Columbine in 1999; Mark David Chapman stalks John Lennon outside The Dakota in 1980; a young Syrian refugee is put on a raft by his father to cross the Mediterranean in 2015. Some of these are first person and some are framed narratives bounded by technologies we have not yet acquired here in 2021. In 1969, for example, on the day the internet is first switched on, the switch-flippers in question, Charley Kline and Bill Duvall, are interviewed from the future by Ry Himari, the host of Random Access Memory pod cast, who is as incredulous as everyone else that for Kline and Duvall it was just another day. Some of the sections are more or less anonymous: a daughter under the sway of her father's god complex enables his abuse of her mother in 1974; on September 11, 2001 a doctor in Switzerland assists an elderly woman in her medical suicide as in the background on a morning news show the Twin Towers fall. What these sections have in common is our sense of trespass. We are inside the moments where the self disassociates, the body scrambles, the great "I Am" becomes a particulate we, untethered from the fragile nexus of human identity, scattered into space between binaries—cyber space, atomic space.... it hardly matters. What does matter is that it is retrieved from the past by the means of a digitization that is both the conceit of the book and the fact of the book itself. That we can witness both the word and the space between the word. That we, like Josiah and Elisha, are somehow both the ghost in the machine and the machine itself. "That we are the machine," I write in the back of the book as my daughter, asleep beside me, rests her head on the crook of my elbow. Her hair is very long and blonde. It frays at the ends where she needs a haircut and I have to move carefully so as not to tug her hair where it catches between my arm and my body, tangles in the buttons of my shirt, nooses around one finger raised to turn the page.

In Lance Olsen's *Skin Elegies* what cannot be replicated is touch. In each section, a character reaches out a hand and finds emptiness at the other end. In each section, when touch comes again—the father enveloping his son in a hug in 2015, the doctor stroking his patient's forehead as she opens the IV valve to admit the poison in 2001—it reminds the reader of how completely we fill our bodies, no space left over, and makes us wonder when we leave our bodies behind at last what shape will suffice to contain us. "There is nothing, nothing whatsoever, that brings you into the present quite like letting go of someone's hand," says the SS officer as he recalls the seconds before he pulled the trigger on the gun he had pressed below his chin. "*Here it comes,*" the burning children whisper into Christa McAuliffe's burning mouth. "*Here it comes, the future, and it will always look exactly like this.*"

The plane began to descend, breaking again through the clouds. My daughter woke up and looked out the window. I finished the book and closed it, shoving it back into my

bag. Into all the different worlds we had briefly left as we hurtled through the air (the ground obscured, the ground erased, the ground forgotten) my daughter and I returned just exactly the same as we were before in spite of our travels. A book doesn't change you, I thought, so much as it reminds you of the ways in which you are always changing. "Hold my hand," my daughter said as the wheels bumped down. "This is the scary part."