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BOOKS

The Necessary Beginning

Tomas Unger

Anyone
by Nate Klug.
University of Chicago Press, 2015,
\$18.00 paper.

THE EXCLAMATION mark: about as hard for a poet of our time to wield as, say, the word God. Yet there it is, a few poems into Nate Klug's collection *Anyone*. It seems an especially unlikely wonder here, the sign in question, because Klug's poetry is so resolutely composed, though as persistently unsettled, darting time and again beyond much that might have passed for conclusion. "In the whole that is unnecessary," the epigraph to this book has it, "every small thing becomes necessary." Through the work Klug has done with and to this one small mark, we can begin to see the uniqueness and even the necessity of his gift. Here is the poem in full. Original, spare, strange, and all too likely to be—see the second line, third word—unfashionable:

To stand sometime
outside my faith

to steady it
caught and squirming on a stick
up to mind's
inviting light

and name it!
for all its faults and facets

or keep waiting

to be claimed in it

The poem is called "The Choice," yet its resonance comes in the way it refuses to *make* any—or, put differently, the way it runs on to the redemptively indeterminate space of poetry, a space in which alternatives that would cancel each other in the rude light of prose can stand for once as coequal presences. "There has to be a kind of speech / beyond naming, or even praise," Klug will say in the closing poem of the collection: "a kind of speech," meaning a way of being. Yet as much as the poet seems to have found that here, in the lines that come down from exclamation, the almost errant thrill of that turned-from moment retains its hold. This is a language, a vision, that remains ruefully alert to its own limits (name *it* as *what?*) even while faithfully transmitting, in the same instant, an energy which only the dogmatic reader could fail to be jolted by. In it, just maybe, a truth is living latently.

Which isn't to say that Klug traffics, here or anywhere else, in those articles of faith whose proper medium might be prose. This poetry, grounded in a quick-moving, slow-working thought-

fulness, never foists some set idea on us. Gradually we learn not to take its lucid intensities for so much detachedness; they remind us how wrong we are to think of feeling as an art that can come about only through the quieting of mind. Leszek Kolakowski said memorably of Descartes's famous utterance that it began less as a logical proposition than as an expression of the enlivened intuition, of the mind longing itself toward glide: not *I think, therefore I am* so much as *I think, I am*. Some of Klug's most searching experiments in the embodiment of consciousness happen on just such a plane. Right on the heels of the above poem comes "Dusk in Jasper County," another that asks to be quoted in full, its great compression conveying untold depths:

Silos and the animals slowing
almost stumbling
among their shadows

hills fuzzed with a concentration of mist
so pale it cannot be darkness, then it is

as I-80 blinks
and unfolds
dumbly as a sea road

or certain sleeplessness
blank cracked ceiling staring back

at your desire
sick for several lives
and each at once

Someone once said that a true imagist poem can be, at its longest, three lines (that opening stanza). With the last three lines, meanwhile, imagism has been outseen by that rarest of things, a plainly affecting poetry of interiority.

Rarely has thinking seemed as fraught a thing as it is in this collection. Thought never fails to look on this world (the poems', that is, and ours) and call it—*anything*, possibly. As often as the mind brings clarity, we see it doing the honest work of obscuring, coming between us and the most thundering Meanings. An especially gorgeous reworking of Virgil makes vivid the lure of the mind's lived maneuverings while stressing how far we always must be, for all these, from self-knowing: "as if / to elaborate his fate from every angle / were to understand it." *As if*. Or take "Neighbors," a satiric poem whose close reveals too much of a general enough predicament not to be, well, taken to heart:

how helpless,
how easily betrayed to their true worth
are *the efforts of thought*,
fidgeting among illustrious books
whenever the strangers' familiar sighs rise
up.

"Efforts of thought" may be Emer-

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son, but those sighs are straight out of Thoreau. If such quiet resignation rises up, in the end, it rises up in the one with ears to hear (hence the familiarity of those sighs, which couldn't, anyplace anyone lives, sound through the floorboards). Still, resignation, whether comic or tragic, can't wholly capture the tone that is these lines' fine invention. In the now beautifully unusual "betrayed to," we find the poet's freedom to unfix settled language. The poem's claim on the memory finally comes from the sense of a knowledge betrayed—a word which has never stopped meaning *revealed*—and in turn the sense of a not ungratified recognition.

Klug impresses us even more poignantly with that almost lost resonance of the word betray, with that nearly forgotten form of feeling, in the title poem. Any one of a number of others, he watches fireflies:

Tonight, from a stranger's porch, we
watched
the tiny orbs form
from sifting dark,

flittings so regular
they felt elemental, one part
with the air, as though

it were our eyes that flickered,
eventually gave out.
Why, when light

in such compression chooses
to betray itself, does it seem
aimed not at particular

conditioned attentions,
but at anyone,
anyone it pleases?

A word has to be said for this "we," for its authority but also its unlikely intimacy. Poetry that manages to dispense with the self-limiting "I"—that "small talking thing," in the immense phrase of one of our poets, and in the unwitting example of quite a few more—need not come in for the charge of impersonality. The voice that reaches us in those closing lines remains unclassifiable, real, a contribution to the canon of intonation. For all its air of wondering assertion, its air of neither wanting nor needing an answer, why does this question still seem to wait for some corresponding form of response (whatever this might look like); why is it that it seems to open itself out on something between a listener and an absence, something in it inexplicably earnest, something in that earnestness just a little heartbroken? It is, let's simply say, human.

And the particular humanity of this voice comes from a seeming paradox in its stance. Here transcendence of the self in all its particularity begins with the work of patiently attending to that same particularity, only as it exists in the visible world. The elemental, if it comes at all, comes by way of the unmissed detail. It might serve to end with a poem that illustrates how such patient attentiveness can transcend itself, as well as the world on which it is focused. What begins in faithful observation ends in the no less necessary act of intuition. "How perilous is it to choose / not to love the life we're shown," Heaney wrote. His poem is called "Badgers"; Klug's, born of a

similarly unembarrassable identification, is called "Squirrels." Here is its close:

Needy and reticent
at once, these squirrels in charred
November
recall, in Virgil,
what it is to feel:

moods, half moods,
swarming, then darting loose; obscure
hunches that refuse
to speak, but still expect

in some flash of luck
to be revealed. The less you try
to notice them,
the more they will know of you.

This reviewer has no Latin, can recall no Virgil. And still, and still—something about the movement those two lines build strikes the ear as true. "In Virgil" marks out that precise distance

over which a lasting kind of feeling can sometimes find itself, some flash of luck permitting. The stateliness of that first quoted stanza gains force when we recall how relentlessly Klug works, in other poems and elsewhere in this one, at unsettling any such thing. The first poem in the collection holds up a concrete saw, that destroyer and preserver, as a vital and subversive emblem for many kinds of work, not least the work of poetry, finding shared unsettled ground in "the need to keep // breaking what we make / to keep making."

If Klug's lines break with special resonance, their chosen compression shouldn't fail to betray to us the full expansiveness of his gift. (This collection's numerous translations show his fluency in registers not touched on here, as well as his ease in anyone's company, with Kafka and Horace rendered especially memorably. And then

there is "Lullaby on Election Eve," a poem political to its soul, a haunting sort of a song which slantly answers William Carlos Williams.) Klug is an original in Eliot's sense of the word, turning into himself without neglecting to give his influences new life. The second stanza above, not slackening away from the voice that we have come to know as Klug's, nonetheless manages to assimilate the capaciousness of a Wordsworth, the Wordsworth of

...those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things,
Fallings from us, vanishings;
Blank misgivings of a creature
Moving about in worlds not realized.

Klug reminds us that the work of sense-making, one part with the work of feeling, is always beginning. And a genuine beginning—no small thing—is what he has made with this beautifully realized collection.□

The Carpenters

A small rain fled in the direction of the bay,
blowing and curtaining for seconds above a prominence
where three were posed, looking up from the ribs of a roof,
flannel shoulders and hair lightly damp, Christmas eve.

The ladders and rafters misted, the open walls, the tools, the cords.
Had the cords been rolled up then, the day for tomorrow called,
they'd have left the still-dry furrows of sawdust snaking on the floor.
But day's end was near enough.

And out on the swath of bay always in the corners of their eyes,
they could still make out the wavering wandering gray sheets, smudges
on a lens illuminated by revolving holes in clouds
where a long-lost sun threw shafts,

flinting fires down on the waters. One watched from a ladder,
one from the floor, one on the peak. The saw growling until the sky opened
again, threads of water falling like pencil streaks
with a drumming that couldn't last

that closeted the three, the tools, their place of prominence,
saturating not just where they stood, their clothes, their bags, their hair,
the seats of their trucks
but the evening that followed, all their years.

—Mark Turpin