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Facing The Change: Personal Encounters With Global Warming edited by Steven Pavlos Holmes

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Facing the Change: Personal Encounters with Global Warming edited by **STEVEN PAVLOS HOLMES**

Torrey House, 2013 \$16.95

Reviewed by **GEOFF MARTIN**

My review copy of *Facing The Change* arrived the same week that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published their Fifth Assessment Report (AR5). Though entirely different in tone and authority and mode of analysis, the two collections make for timely companion reads. AR5's "Summary for Policy Makers" filters an extensive meta-analysis of climate science research into statements of confidence about this planet and our future, using, repeatedly, adjectives like "unequivocal," "extremely likely," and "unprecedented." The voices gathered in *Facing the Change*, however, are not nearly so confident, but they are no less convincing for their hesitance, their fear, their confusion. These are not climate scientists reporting a litany of facts and cautious-prophecy; these are simply people (writers, teachers, poets, students) looking out their back windows and noticing small changes, harbingers of more to come, and recording their own perspectives and attendant feelings. In his introduction, Steven Pavlos Holmes calls these writers "our emotional and cultural first responders to climate change" (2).

Holmes structures this collection of writings from 42 authors into three sections: "Observations," "Generations," "Revolutions"—each with two or more sub-chapters composed of poetry, short stories, and personal essays. Befitting a collection that aims to capture not a particular theory or exact prediction but "something more amorphous, individual, and emotional, even

spiritual" (1) from the emerging experience of a changing climate, the works range over an array of objects and phenomena that *mark* these changes, that seem to make an aggregate climate visible and material in the present moment. In this respect, *Facing the Change* proceeds as an exploration of things, and our feelings about those things, that seem to evidence a changing climate.

Part One, "Observations," starts out in unease, hoping that "another spell of normalcy sets in. / Even five inches of ice on the lakes / would let us pretend that everything is right" (Smith 7). But the proceeding pieces push against that hope, with climate change lingering in the background of the invasion of Iraq (Davis 11), Superstorm Sandy (Sohar 21), and Hurricane Katrina (Davis 23). Chapter Two, "Species Out of Joint," charts human-animal interactions: a snowshoe hare in a Maine without snow; the rusted pines of a beetle-chewed Oregon; spinster turtles and insomniac bears. The chapter also includes one of the collection's strongest pieces—"To Wit, to Woo," wherein Kathryn Miles tracks North American owls through their Linnean taxonomy, their literary and mythological history, and their contemporary status as a species out of place, irrupting in daylight, haunting the limits of knowability, and signaling "the very real boundaries of modern scientific knowledge, the limitations of our standard ways of talking about avian behavior" (33). Chapter Three takes up, explicitly, the plight of the polar bears, those now-viral symbols of climate change.

Part Two, "Generations," explores the weight and unease of intergenerational responsibility associated with parenting in the Anthropocene. Children's books become laced with irony as the poet watches the "toothy simplicity" of Walrus "becoming

less than paper and ink" (Berger 75). Dane Cervine's evocative poem, "The Last Days," plumbs a father's "secret misgivings" concerning his own longevity, his childhood fear of biblical apocalypse, and his daughter's emergent future along "this thin, ephemeral line between Eden and Armageddon" (86). Cervine's poem notwithstanding, this second section suffers from a loose sentimentality. The thought of iceless ponds in rural Pennsylvania, for example, renders a wintery nostalgia for a place "where championships were won, where time stood still, and where love existed solely" (Brandstadter 78). The second chapter, "Future Imperfect," projects forward this nostalgic mourning through several pieces that work to conjure the atmosphere, both fictional and gaseous, of a hot and dying planet; these pieces are hard to pull off, with the moving force they seek, without falling into earnest exaggeration or too-easy despair.

The final section, "Revolutions," offers a wider scope of writings that engage with the challenges of thinking through to action on climate change. Holmes aims for the first chapter, "Twistings," to explore the "dark night" of "negative emotional responses" (105) that need expression en route to healing. From Chicago, Jill Riddell admits that she'd "like to be in a position to write an essay about climate change filled with rage and despair" but must do, instead, with a contentedness in making "unheroic, everyday changes" (116). Helen Sanchez marshals her cynical wit as a coping mechanism ("In all seriousness, I'm seriously depressed," she writes,) for her endlessly compromised attempts at mitigating climate change: "even my vegan diet contributes to global warming with all the methane gas it produces from my body" (116).

The second chapter, "Turnings," contains works that mark certain writers' emotional and spiritual shifts in the face of climate change (105). Willow Fagan, for example, links his early life experience of queer denial and his current struggle to come to grips with climate change by finding himself, as he says, "drawing on the skills and courage and wisdom I drew on then, as I rebuilt my understanding of the world in relative isolation, as I now face unpredictable changes that once again threaten the order of the world" (134). In "Glooscap Makes America Known to the Europeans," Sydney Landon Plum recounts several stories of the Abenaki hero-creator figure, Glooscap, that describe the struggle between the lifeways of the giant North American beaver, *Castoroides ohioensis*, and the lifeways of human culture—a fight over the shape of the environment that played out in an earlier era of non-anthropogenic climate change. This long historical view allows Plum to take up the question of human meddling and of storytelling in a way that moves beyond a cynical apocalypticism (which he calls a "slacker mentality") and into diverse, eclectic, and compelling storytelling of human life and engagement with the natural world (143). The collection's call to action comes, perhaps a little too obviously, in the final essay, "How to Be a Climate Hero," where Audrey Schulman explores the social phenomenon of the bystander effect and the challenges and pleasures of breaking group cohesion.

Two short poems bring the Coda together. "The Lucky Ones" begins with the asteroid impact on the Yucutan Penninusla and ends with waves of annihilation. The second poem, "The Angels are Rebellng," sees Gaia sounding the alarm, "hammering on her golden bells" (161).

Despite the urgent and impending tone of the Coda or the sincerity of its final call to action, *Facing the Change* comes off as quietly melancholic; it suggests a kind of American Romanticism subdued by the age of the Anthropocene. The collection finds, I think, its greatest strength and resonance where its writers are uncertain and reflective, where they navigate the extended spaces between sense and understanding. To my mind, the book should simply declare itself a collection of writings from the continental United States; its concerns and domains are largely American (each writer's state is listed in the table of contents), and the single non-US inclusion, "A Jungle for My Backyard," is also a clear outlier, a didactic short story about the impact of palm oil extraction on

indigenous lands in Borneo, Malaysia. This global extension is welcome but feels tokenary in its singularity. Despite this quibble, *Facing the Change* is an earnest and straightforward attempt to capture the range of nervousness, concern, and fury that is shaping American nature writing in our present moment.

GEOFF MARTIN teaches English at Truman College (City Colleges of Chicago) where his courses take up climate literacy, urban environmentalism, and food politics in the city. His essay, "From the Banks of the Grand," was shortlisted for the 2011 Edna Staebler personal essay contest and is available from *The New Quarterly*. He holds an MA from McMaster University.