

JOHANNES GÖRANSSON IN CONVERSATION WITH SARAH VAP



Vap is the author of six collections of poetry. Her book, Viability, was selected by Mary Jo Bang for the National Poetry Series, and was released by Penguin in 2016. Her first book, Dummy Fire, was selected by Forrest Gander to receive the Saturnalia Poetry Prize. Her second, American Spikenard, was selected by Ira Sadoff to receive the Iowa Poetry Prize. Faulkner's Rosary and Arco Iris were released by Saturnalia Books, and Arco Iris was named a Library Journal Best Book of 2012. End of the Sentimental Journey was released in 2013 from Noemi Books, initiating their Infidel Poetics Series. She is recipient of an NEA Literature Fellowship for Poetry, and a Research Enhancement Fellowship from the University of Southern California for a year of writing and research in West Africa.

NDR: Your new manuscript *The Gospel of the Lots of Lucy* is a long series of discussions between “Questioner” and “Lucy.” For those who have not read the manuscript, who is Lucy? How did you make connection with her? For that matter: Who is the Questioner?

SV: *Lucy is the australopithecine hominid whose skeleton was dug up in Ethiopia, one of the oldest hominid mothers ever found. I don't remember exactly how I started hearing her. It was about a decade ago that I/we started writing this. She was a clear voice that became clearer, and we wrote together for a long time. Maybe she's more than one voice that I heard across that time, or else she changed or I changed across those years so that I could hear her better and differently. Maybe all of that. The Questioner is what she calls what we might call the "reader." She's an elder and an oracle, and she assumes we've come to her with a question. That we need help.*

NDR: What's the role of grief in this book? What is the relationship between grief and temporality? What might grief do to our sense of time?

SV: *I spent awhile thinking about your questions; Lucy has been grieving for three million years. She knows we are grieving, too. In the book, she's—as our protomother—grieving that we will each die soon. She's also grieving that our entire species will die. Like hers did.*

The best way to approach this book is to be grieving on any scale. To be sad, or hurting, or tired, or in agony, or baffled. To approach this book hurting may automatically transform us into the Questioner she's speaking to.

For Lucy, time and grief might be the same thing. For me, too. Like, time is the bladder we each throw into the river and as it fills, it holds everything we love and lose and remember in our lives. But it's also the river, filled with things to love and lose. Lucy's bladder is 3 million years full. She can't let go of it.

Grief might both flatten the scales of time and exaggerate them. Time might flatten the scales of grief, and exaggerate them. I don't know if I can pull apart time and grief.

NDR: Time has already come up several times. You have, as you noted, spent a lot of time writing this book. How has your relationship with Lucy changed over that time? How have you changed? How has Lucy changed?

SV: *I love this. I think I could say poetry's become time for me. When I was young I would fall in love with particular words. I must've been two—I say that because of the house I was living in at the time—I loved the word yellow. And I loved the words red and blue. And that continued across time and many thousands of words. Then when I started to write poems, I loved gathering both fascinating and flat words together into interesting lines, which I could say are maybe just more time than a word. Then time accumulated in lines and became stanzas and then poems. For the last few books of mine I've said that I wasn't*

sure if I was writing a book of very short poems or if I was writing one book-length poem in small parts. And now that books have accumulated, and I'm older, I've started thinking in chunks of books. Or even a career. What did I end up writing? What did that time become?

So how would I connect that to Lucy in particular...something like this... the reason I worked for so long on the book was because I couldn't write it. I didn't have the brain to write it. Nor the nervous system. Nor the personality. It was too hard for me. It required me to work at several scales of time/language/ audience simultaneously—even those that, as a human being in my finite 90-year (fingers crossed) lifespan, I'm not going to have encountered. However, I like to do things that are too hard for me to do. So as I worked on the book, I came to understand that, for example, the audience scale included exactly one person I'd never met with their exact question to ask Lucy that day, and also the audience included anyone else across all of human time who needed that same question answered, and also the audience was anyone who eventually read the whole shebang as a book, and also (because of Lucy's 3-million year old beyond human-life scale) all of Humanity, meaning not just homo sapiens but, let's say, all hominids or sentient beings. I'm still not sure. As I wrote the book and rewrote it and re-scaled and un-scaled it for a decade, my brain changed. My personality shifted. My nervous system became different. Of course that kind of thing happens to all humans all the time, with every large learning and loss. For me, in the case of writing this book, it was quietly and personally dramatic, and it allowed me to write (with her) what I/we ended up writing.

Lucy did change across time, too. But maybe that was me getting out of the way. I inserted myself more. Initially, in the writing, I'd hear something from her, and I'd embellish or fix or tweak it, as I'd been doing to my own writing all along. As time went on with the collaboration, I went back and removed some of that when I could. Other times, she definitely enjoyed a tweak of mine and wanted it kept in. By the last few years we were more collaboratively simultaneous and less push and pull. But we did both change. I think she was sharper at first, and more annoyed with humanity. But, oh, halfway through, I kept being given images of and language around the Pieta—either that's how she really felt about us, or aspired to feel about us. Or that's what we needed from her to hold us while we die, individually or collectively. That image of the Pieta became a kind of tuning fork for the book as I shaped it.

NDR: Returning again to time—we usually think of “length” as the mark of “the long poem.” From Pound's *The Cantos* to Berryman's *The Dream Songs*, we tend to think of page numbers. But here we are discussing your poems in terms of time instead. Do you see this poem as a “long poem?”

SV: *Yes, I do see this as a long poem. I see my whole career now, by which I mean everything I've tried to write in my life, as a long poem. I hope it gets a lot longer.... I've made some peace with time, which takes away everything.*

NDR: Who are some writers who have inspired you lately, or whose work you feel close to?

SV: *Hmmm. I read so much during the years I was writing Lucy, hundreds and hundreds of books, so now that the manuscript's done my reading's gotten weird. A hodge-podge. I've been reading through Elizabeth Strout's and Claire Keegan's work. Re-reading Marilynne Robinson and Jon Fosse's works. I just picked up One Hundred years of Solitude again. Strout and Keegan and Robinson and Fosse and García Márquez make me think I'm searching for a tone. And I've lived basically for decades on a steady diet of murder mysteries... nothing realistic—too scary—just villagers primarily in Europe murdering each other over rose-growing contests, art forgeries, etc. I'm re-reading a lot of my favorite books from childhood for a different project I'm working on. A lot of ancient poetry, but I always read and re-read those. Right now Norman Fischer's translation of the psalms. Job, always with Blake's illustrations. There's never a time I'm not reading Tao Te Ching. Honestly, my nervous system has been pretty hijacked by another part of my life, so I'm avoiding all contemporary works and language that make me think of any specific problems in my own time and place. For the moment.*