

An Inventory of Losses

Judith Schalansky (tr. Jackie Smith), London: Quercus, 2021, ISBN-13:
9781529400786

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In the quirkily titled ‘Preamble’ to Judith Schalansky’s *An Inventory of Losses*, the reader is presented with a page-long list of objects, creatures, landforms and feats of human engineering lost or destroyed over the course of her writing the book. With unsentimental efficiency, the author dryly informs us of the disappearance of

the Bramble Cay mosaic-tailed rat, the Schiaparelli Mars lander and the Dharahara Tower. Overleaf, as if to remedy these unequivocal statements of loss, we find a mirror list of discoveries and recoveries that were made during the same period, the wasp species *Deuteragenia ossarium* for example, or a previously illegible page from Anne

Frank's Diary. The dramatic juxtaposition of these two short registries makes for a curious, metatextual preface, but when listed without ceremony, one after the other, the weight and consequences of each item is barely felt. What the cool, indexical indifference of the Preamble illustrates, is that the subject of loss requires an altogether more imaginative inventory, in a form worthy of its content.

Translated from the German by Jackie Smith, *An Inventory of Losses* has made waves in the steadily expanding pool of literature translated into English, winning a string of awards including the 2021 Warwick Prize for Women in Translation. Schalansky's book, designed by the author herself, is comprised of an innovatively collated, achronological selection of twelve genre-fluid chapters, each named for something erased from existence or lost to human knowledge. Fluctuating in form and narrative voice between memoir-like reflections, personal essays and fictional reimaginations, each self-contained entry in the inventory is introduced by a black page with a

scarcely visible image of the lost thing, followed by the date, location and circumstances of its disappearance. Thereafter, the author goes beyond the presentation of bare facts to offer a creative, sometimes completely tangential response to the loss or to whatever traces remain. 'Like a hollow mould,' Schalansky writes, 'the experience of loss renders visible the contours of the thing mourned' (Schalansky 2021 p.13), and we are encouraged to participate in her exploratory rummaging through the dark spaces left behind, perhaps with the objective of discovering something new.

Schalansky proves herself to be a practiced and enthusiastic navigator of these contours. The inventory begins with a chapter entitled 'Tuanaki', named after an atoll which disappeared from the South Pacific in around 1842, probably as the result of a marine earthquake. Here we encounter the author as investigator, sitting in an unspecified National Library. Poring over ancient maps and ship's logs, she daydreams the islands back into existence by enacting imaginative flights into the perspectives of their

inhabitants and their explorers, ‘I suddenly found myself all alone on deck, or rather on the shore of an island known to me only from a rough outline on a map,’ (p.39). That the first chapter should be structured around the records of an island feels appropriate, given the archipelagic nature of the book itself. Skipping casually between millennia and landing upon on far-flung continents in this archive-turned-ark, the cosmopolitan voyage which Schalansky charts seems as erratic as it is limited – with three of the chapters taking place in her native Greifswald, a region formally located in East Germany. With no clue as to the organising criteria for the inventory, the sometimes dramatic shifts in narrative style serve to heighten a sense of dislocation between each of these dispatches – whether it be in a strangely whimsical, indirect soliloquy from a middle-aged Greta Garbo in ‘The Boy in Blue’, or a meticulously researched chronology of a seventeenth-century Roman villa.

In the case of the latter, the chapter ‘Villa Sacchetti’ largely follows the plight of the artist Hubert Robert, whose etchings of the building in a state

of decay ensured that visual records of it, and many other contemporary works of architecture, remain to this day. Known as ‘Robert des Ruines’, for his fascination with the destroyed and the decomposing, he is a disciple of the archaeologist Piranesi, and equally as obsessed with relics as the rest of society at the time. Schalansky reports, through the immediacy of the present continuous, that in 18th-century Italy, ‘trade in spolia is flourishing. The ruins are pure capital: not treasures to be recovered, but semi-precious minerals to be extracted,’ (p.84). Where Schalansky’s presence as researcher and narrator create a certain objective distance to her musings on Tuanaki, here she allows the historical figure and the zeal with which he completes his pictures to take centre stage. As deftly as the crumbling ruins are painted and etched, Schalansky captures the decay that blights the feverish, malaria-ridden swamps of Rome, as well as the ‘purposeful and purposeless’ destruction of Paris during the French Revolution. In the chaotic, revolutionary atmosphere, Robert paints ‘with the stoical equanimity of a chronicler’, and we are informed that ‘it

is impossible to tell whether something is being destroyed or preserved' (p.95). Interestingly, Schalansky does not dwell on the more 'purposeful', potentially constructive functions of desecration, and any possible futures which might emerge from the rubble must be imagined by the reader. As the emotive descriptions of historical plunder and preservation blur the subjective boundaries between narrator and characters, we might wonder whether the author considers herself to be an altruistic treasure hunter, or a more calculating dealer in *spolia*. Whichever it might be, in exposing the potential for relics of the past to be exploited for personal gain, we can at least detect a twinkle of self-awareness in the multifarious nature of the urge to rescue and consecrate.

As we find in the chapter entitled 'The Love Songs of Sappho', the kind of salvage that Schalansky practices, the art of written commentary, can be an effective method of preservation in itself – she makes a point of remarking that some of the ancient poet's verses only survived due to the fact that they were recorded in the 1st-century work of

literary criticism *On the Sublime*. Of the few pieces from Sappho's oeuvre which are known to us now (estimated to be around only 7% of her entire body of work), a choice selection of the fragmented yet spellbinding lines are reproduced on the page, littered with ellipses and blank spaces. These textual lacunae in the surviving scripts 'like forms to be filled in' (p.126), are eloquently and ironically compared to that mysterious, 'unuttered and unutterable' gap in human knowledge: what exactly it is that 'women do with one another' (p.130). Like the historical erasure and denial of lesbian relationships, especially among otherwise celebrated literary figures, the scarce evidence of the life and sexual mores of 'The Poetess' is defined by these gaps and inconsistencies. Yet Schalansky is nevertheless keen to recognise the usefulness of the ellipse, the silent invitation to 'imagine what is missing, [...] the inexpressible and the hushed up,' (p.131) that transcends articulation. When faced with the choice between the boundless possibility of conjecture or the undeniability of the complete sentence, we are assured that omission does not always represent a

loss: ‘Wordless, blind understanding is as much a firm *topos* of love poetry as is the wordy evocation of unfathomable feeling.’ (p.128).

Elsewhere, the desire to pour words into the spaces created by the lost items at times has the feel of overcompensation, the verbosity of which translator Jackie Smith captures expertly in a loquacious, lilting English. On the trail of the Caspian Tiger, hunted to extinction in the mid-twentieth century, we observe the bloody spectacle of two big cats fighting to the death in front of the baying crowd of a Roman colosseum:

They are watching a cross between an execution and a theatrical performance. A crude throng with refined tastes, accustomed to the magnitude, the sheer numbers, the monstrosity. To everything the mind can imagine. Every boundary only there to be overstepped. Their delight is laced with disgust, and their disgust with delight born purely of curiosity, the urge to act on every thought. For they, though they pride themselves on having a choice, are similarly only following their instincts, like children who throw stones at frogs just for fun. (p.56)

Though *An Inventory of Losses* is replete with such maximalist descriptions, the surfeit of metaphor required to articulate this particular exploration of brutality in nature illustrates that the tendency to excess is a uniquely human one. Indeed, if we are to learn anything from the *Inventory*, it is that there is only so much storage space for all our worldly endeavours, and preserving that which we have accumulated is not always advisable. In the final chapter, ‘Kinau’s Selenographs’, written from the perspective of 19th-century botanist-turned-astronomer Gottfried Kinau, Schalansky imagines the scientist as an unhinged archivist, whose obsessive practice and expanding catalogue eventually necessitates his relocation to the moon. Kinau’s fantastical journey and subsequent attempt to create an archive on the satellite is reminiscent of Sun Ra’s 1974 Afrofuturist film *Space is the Place*. In the film, the musician attempts to transport the black population of Earth to a new planet named ‘the Arkestra’ via the medium of jazz. However, where Sun Ra would leave behind the injustices and heavy burden of Earth’s history, Kinau’s

attempt to preserve it in a sterile, apolitical collection is, tellingly, doomed to failure: ‘The moon, like every archive, was not a place of safekeeping but one of total destruction’ (p.241).

Unlike Kinau, Schalansky’s efforts to house these material losses in her textual inventory should not be read as an act of safekeeping, but as a method via which the past may be explored, reasoning in the introduction that a book is ‘an open time capsule [...] in which every edition of a text proves to be a utopian space not unlike a ruin in which the dead communicate,’ (p.25). And yet, at times the sensation that the text’s condition as a physical object which occupies space clashes somewhat with her more profound proclamations about the book’s capabilities. Schalansky warns us of Kinau’s doomed attempts to catalogue everything and has us recoil at the Roman spectators’ desire to experience ‘everything the mind can imagine’ but is not forthcoming about the selective criteria that she employed in the compilation of her own inventory.

Similarly, her assurance that ‘Writing cannot bring anything back, but it can enable everything to be experienced’ (p.25), does not account for limitations of volume, nor the author’s necessary selection of what is to be experienced in this particular text and what must be left behind. Perhaps in order to reconcile the book’s materiality with its content we should not look to Schalansky’s ‘wordy evocations’, but rather, in the spaces between chapters. The black pages which separate each item resemble the texture and appearance of the sort of dark carbon paper that a shopkeeper might use to create an analogue copy of a receipt, or an inventory. On closer inspection, we can just about make out the dimly lit trace of the lost thing about to be elaborated in text: a scrap of paper, the stripes of a tiger, the towering masts of sailing boats shimmering. Peering into the gloom, it becomes evident that despite the best efforts of preservation, there is only so much that the past and its chroniclers can hand back to the present, the rest must be dreamed up, to exist only for us.