

SEAN PEARS

Equipment for the Apocalypse: Rebecca Gayle Howell's Agricultural Ontology

Render / An Apocalypse, by Rebecca Gayle Howell. Cleveland, Ohio:
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The word "apocalypse" has both a material and an ontological meaning. It can mean—in its more familiar sense—the disastrous events surrounding the Second Coming of Christ (or a similar, total disaster). It can also mean the revelation of those events: either the horrible events themselves, or their prophecy. So too the word "render." In its material sense, it is to melt down animal fat, just as the farmer (or more likely, as the farmer's absent wife) in Rebecca Gayle Howell's poem "How to Kill a Hog," may do after the slaughter described. But "to render" can also mean to represent or perform something. Or to cause something or someone to become.

These multiple senses, material and immaterial, resonate in the title of Howell's debut collection *Render / An Apocalypse*. The apocalypse here—in both senses of the word—is the one proposed by progressive environmental agricultural thinkers like Wendell Berry, the men and women who have argued for decades about the disastrous outcomes of the industrial agriculture complex in the United States. Her poems boil down decades of innovative thinking about agriculture to a set of wonderfully dense, bracingly clear instructions for living on a small farm, which ultimately become instructions for living in the twenty-first century: "How to be Civilized," "How to Plant by the Signs," "How to Be a Man," and "How to Be a Pig."

Eighty years ago, in his essay "Literature as Equipment for Living," Kenneth Burke lampooned the schlocky How-To book of his day, what he refers to as, "How to Buy Friends and Bamboozle Oneself and Other People." He argues that people satisfy their urge for self-improvement through the mere reading of the book, which makes success seem simple and immediate. "To attempt applying

such stuff in real life," Burke argues, "would be very difficult, full of many disillusioning problems." This brand of advice that Burke critiques in the 1930s of course has perennial appeal, and proliferates today across the internet in lists of the "Top Twenty Ways to Detox Your Soul," etc.

It is in the face of these complacent How-To's that Howell charges her instructions with the messiness and the urgency of physical labor, human and familial intimacy, and the mysteries of animal lives. Howell's short lines careen through these poems like a blunt blade through soil. Scenes from Kentucky are propelled by an irony, equal parts smiling and wincing. A mess of animal parts piled up in the kitchen in "A Catalog of What You Have" ("The offal // the slop, swill—pitiless / river—the beak the bone" etc.) is followed by the stark single line as one turns overleaf to:

A Catalog of What You Don't Have

Enough.

The drama of this moment is earned, at least in part by the clarity of the voice. Howell's "rendering" frequently recalls Lorine Niedecker's "condensery": not a word is here in excess.

Perhaps most refreshing about this collection is Howell's ability to side step the noise of contemporary bourgeoisie internet culture while still remaining alive and relevant. A line from Adrienne Rich provides the book's epigraph: "Without tenderness, we are in hell." Like Howell, Rich is led to this conclusion by an animal—her lover's dog dozing on the floor of her apartment. But while Rich's sequence congeals from the thick detritus of Manhattan in the 1970s, Howell speaks to us from her grandparent's farm, off the grid, if under threat. Just as the brilliant epigraph orbits the world of this collection, the city and its money economy seem to orbit, ominously, this rural landscape.

As Rich's line both does and does not fit the collection, Howell's poems would have troubled the recent anthology that re-shaped the debate around so called "eco-poetics," *The Arcadia Project: North American Postmodern Pastoral*, edited by Joshua Corey and G. C. Waldrep. In his introduction to the anthology, Corey makes the point that "with the advent of global climate change, weather becomes historical: that most simple and immediate refuge from uncomfortable topics, the tentative ambient glue between persons otherwise unlike, talking about the weather has become thoroughly humanized, politicized, totalized." He might have said, talking about the weather

has become apocalyptic. So too have conversations about an equally quotidian and immediate topic—what we like to eat—in this age of Monsanto.

Howell's song is not the postmodernist's plaintive (even if ironic) lament, but rather that of the proactive realist: the writer of the *How-To* guide. If these instructions can save us, it will be via an intimacy—physical, bodily—that we share with animals. In "How to Kill a Hog," the speaker asks the farmer, as he prepares to dress the animal, to remember the care he took in assisting her birth:

how you washed her vulva, soft

warm water over your own
hands how you scrubbed

even your fingernails
under your fingernails

before you came to the pen and the sun-
flower oil you coated yourself in

so she would not chafe

It is unclear if the postmodernist could muster the genuine devotion that husbandry requires. But if the poems offer a redemptive possibility, it is no easy success. The hope for an unflinching physical awareness—an ethical responsibility to attend to the realities of other bodies, including those of animals—is more often absent than it is present for Howell's characters, more often sought than achieved. In "A Brief Atlas for Leave-Taking," loneliness is figured as black snakes dropping from a tree, and then in the next stanza brilliantly recast, "like roads / dropping from every limb." The images here are at once surreal and elemental, deadly precise in emotion and narrative; the objective correlative hits you where it hurts.

Our current moment of near-total disassociation from the sources of the food we eat requires equipment for re-engagement: to shatter the pastoral fantasy being marketed by industrial agriculture multinationals that bears so little resemblance to actual production methods. The apocalypse, in at least one sense, is upon us. Howell's poems render our awareness with humor, urgency, and courage. "Watch yourself," her speaker tells us, as though standing over our shoulder as we fumble with the udders, "You'll get shit on."