BOOK REVIEWS

Render / An Apocalypse
by Rebecca Gayle Howell
Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 2013
88 pages
$15.95 (paper)

Reviewed by Rebecca Dundon

To render means to melt down (as in fat), give (as in retribution), administer (as in punishment), and of course to depict (as in art). An apocalypse is violent, maybe all-encompassing, destruction. The images on the cover of Rebecca Gayle Howell's first book *Render / An Apocalypse*—spare, black drawings by Arwen Donahue—show scenes from important poems: someone whose back is turned to us, a pig carcass hung up and split, an anguished woman surrounded by broken jars. Brace yourself, reader.

Howell has chosen a perfect epigraph in the Adrienne Rich line "without tenderness, we are in hell." Howell has stripped tenderness out of the world here, and she shows us the stark hell. I stepped into the poems full of fear, and my fear was not unfounded. The first poem tells us that we are alone, and we must mete out violence at the start of day. By the second poem we are killing, unflinching: "Let him ask / if you are to kill him today / / then tell him yes" ("How to Kill a Rooster"). There is no room for hesitancy: if you hesitate to kill you will suffer more, you will feel more shame than you do at doling out a quick death, and you will not survive. Always, unspoken, is the lesson "them or me"—even a hen, even the plants: "O Harvest / Hard won / / and terrible" ("How to Preserve"). But we do earn our harvests, and we make and name ourselves with these processes.

We are like the animals we slaughter to survive, and violence is inescapable if we are to live. But this violence—painful, and harsh, and terrible—causes us anguish and grief, and in killing, in choosing to live, we are making ourselves terrible. We must never forget that life is wrenched from death and that nobody dies willingly. And these poems are urgent, breaking us with their insistence. We learn that we cannot look away from our lives, we have to DO without knowing answers.

This life is hard, sour, and shameful, but we are powerful nonetheless: "This is your hour / These are the beasts of the field / and you have called them" ("A Calendar of Blazing Days").

Like the world they describe, the poems are stripped of all that is unnecessary—extra words, extra punctuation. Their lines are short. The poems mimic a world of grating insistence, grunts alternating with expanses of silence, short bursts of activity followed by a space in which we catch our breaths. In the blank spaces and silences we meditate, ruminate on what we have done and are going to do.

To pick out just one poem in this book as indicative of a whole is impossible. They are all lessons. They are all important. "How to Preserve" begins with boiling water, a first step in preserving or canning, but beyond scalding the jars we learn nothing about preserving food. Almost immediately we are told to "drop memory / like glass," and we realize this is not only about, say, peach jam, but about the preservation of memory. Other poems are more about practical instruction: in "How to Time the Kill" we learn how large a hog should be and how cold the weather should be, in addition to how difficult it will be to kill, when the time comes. Still other poems—"How to Be Civilized," "How to Build Trust," and "How to Be a Man," for instance—are more general. From these poems we learn how a hog must be put and kept in a pen, how we must make the hog feel cared for though "this is not about love," and then how to kill that hog. This is a brutal, practical world, with painful repercussions. We are like the hogs we pen; we come to love them though we are not supposed to, and we must kill them regardless of what we feel. Howell's poems are less about giving practical instruction and more about preparing us for this psychic reality.

Render, then, is a book that explains how to live—not in the ways we want, but in the ways that must be: if we are to survive we have to inflict misery, dole out care, be duplicitous, and we have to be able to withstand the emotional turmoil that comes with doing so. Why should you read this book? Because it is necessary, so necessary that you should keep it in your toolbox along with the hammer and the box of nails.

The Tide King
by Jen Michalski
Black Lawrence Books, 2013
361 pages
$19.95 (paper)

Reviewed by Andrea Youngman

Jen Michalski admits in the *Baltimore Review* that she began as a poet, and a bad one at that. She moved on to success with several short story collections before tackling her debut novel, *The Tide King*, which actually began as short stories that eventually "outgrew their britches." She has woven them together seamlessly, creating a novel about human mortality and the tension between the desire to live and the desire to die.

The flowering herb central to Michalski's plot is Burnette Saxifrage, a name derived from the burnet saxifrage plant, used for medicinal purposes through history. It is known for its power to heal burns, numb tooth pain, treat fever and shock, improve weak eyesight, function as a diuretic, break up bladder stones and increase milk-flow in cattle. The plant normally grows in dry, chalky pastures and tosses its seeds out onto snow upon maturity. The Saxifrage in the novel is struck by lightning, altering and enhancing its power, moving this novel into the realm of Fantasy.

Unlike the typical Fantasy novel with supernatural or unnatural settings and characters, *The Tide King* focuses on an unnatural phenomena. Michalski uses herbal folklore to move her story forward, and her choice gives this work an earthy, realistic feel.

The novel toggles back and forth through time, following Burnette Saxifrage from the Napoleonic Wars to Vietnam. In 1944, Mary Snow hands her son Jeffrey the herb as he heads into World War II:

> *"Burnette Saxifrage." She put the crumbly mound in his palm. "Most powerful herb. I save it until now."*

> *He glanced at the leaves and roots spread over his palm, dried like a fossilized bird. His lips tightened. His whole life to that point a stew of herbs—chalky and bitter and syrupy in his teas, his soups, rubbed onto his knees and elbows after school. Safine had brought them from the homeland, Reszel, Poland—stories of baba yagas and herbs and the magic of her youth. He may have believed once, been scared as a child. He put it back in the envelope, more fragile than the herb.*

Michalski's own family background is Polish, and not surprisingly Poland figures prominently in *The Tide King.* Michalski depicts her ancestral homeland in the context of the Napoleonic Wars. Outcasts living in Poland center on a house of bones:

> *In their new home at the top of the hill, Ela's mother had collected branches, thick as wrists, and the bones of boars and bears to build the skeleton of a shelter and packed it with mud from the forest. At one end, she tunneled out a chimney, which she lined with river rocks and the bones of bats and rabbits and birds.*

The home represents the natural world, the bones a symbol of normal life and death. By juxtaposing this natural world against war and immortality, Michalski amplifies the dysfunctional result of ignoring natural order.

As the story moves through time, from Napoleonic to Vietnam wars, death weighs heavily. A daughter's loss of mother, and mother's loss of son due to battle creates the desire for immortality, yet this "gift" of life causes more pain. The two women who offer this gift of life suffer, at the same time, the pain of loss. Living forever means everyone you love will die. Immortal survivors are left to feel pain over and over again.

A novel that jumps from character to character, leaping back and forth in time, can be cumbersome and confusing, but *The Tide King* is not. Michalski may claim to have been a bad poet, but her prose clearly holds the rhythm and beauty of poetry, and her novel is a joy to read.

Once I started reading it, I couldn't put it down. She has touched the world of Fantasy gently, creating a story anchored in reality, with a hint of mystery. I began wishing for my own nibble of saxifrage, but I readily admit I had changed my mind before I reached the last page. Immortality I will leave to vampires and ghosts, neither of which make an appearance in this book.

The Execution of Noa P. Singleton
by Elizabeth L. Silver
Crown Publishers, 2013
310 pages
$25.00

Reviewed by Mechele Williams

The first impression I had when I finished Elizabeth L. Silver's novel, *The Execution of Noa P. Singleton*, was *decent book–horrible ending*. Then I dug a little deeper to see if perhaps Silver had accomplished what she set out to do with the novel after all. I think she has.

Elizabeth Silver is not just another lawyer who writes about the legal system. She is at heart a writer who just happens to have a law degree. *The Execution of Noa P. Singleton* originated with her research on capital punishment while in her third year of law school. Although none of the characters or subject matter in the book derive from actual cases or persons, Silver credits her work on a clemency petition, which allowed her a glimpse into death row, for helping her find her story.

Noa P. Singleton is a woman who has spent ten years on death row for a murder she admits to committing. What is interesting is she is a likeable character, whereas Marlene, the mother of the woman she murdered, who appears to have had a change of heart about the death penalty and is willing to petition the court for Noa's clemency, is not.

Marlene isn't the only person in Noa's life with less-than-desirable characteristics. As the story progresses, the mystery surrounding "why" Noa committed the crime is as prevalent as the lingering question of "Did she really do it?" Only Noa can answer that question, and the

answers that unfold within her prison memoir expose an absentee father, self-centered mother, guilty conscience, and wounds left unhealed:

> *I first met Marlene Dixon approximately one month after the Bar Dive incident. She called my cell just as I was walking across the Market Street Bridge on my way home from an eighth-grade science fair.*
>
> *"Is this Noa Singleton?" she asked.*
>
> *Instantly I could tell she was a lawyer. That confident tone bordered on aggression, and it didn't take long for me to realize that the tone veered closer to the arrogant slant of the scale than mere confidence. I cleared my throat.*
>
> *"This is she."*
>
> *"I think you and I have something in common that I'd like to discuss with you."*

Noa's memoir also takes a deeper look at Sarah, a victim on many levels in addition to that of the crime committed against her, who is also not without her own character flaws. Sarah, an only child, is constantly being undermined and told what decisions to make by her mom. Marlene tells her what to wear, what to study, where to work, where to live and whom to date. This not only damages their relationship, but it is the reason Sarah enters an unhealthy relationship with the first person who treats her as an adult—someone Noa knows she shouldn't trust. Sarah is quick to judge others—without knowing the facts, and is naive, and unreceptive when presented with the truth. It is these grievous character flaws within the people living outside the prison walls that call into question the justification and morality of Noa's execution.

Is a death for a death truly reasonable justice in all cases? Noa refuses to participate in any of her appeals, thereby accepting her fate and closing the door on what is supposed to be a fair and just legal system. Her silence serves as atonement for a mistake in her past, and protects the lives of others who harbored their own secrets.

So why should we care? Because Silver accomplishes what she set out to do with this novel by successfully muddying the waters separating good and bad; right and wrong; guilty and not guilty. She makes us question the justifiability of the death penalty.

In an interview with UK National Bookseller, Foyles, Silver said, "It's not that these characters are not empathetic or even sympathetic, but that they do not make those emotions easily accessible for readers. They have experienced a tragic shade of life, and for that, they are both endearing and frustrating at the same time. We all make decisions based on raw emotion, be it revenge, love, or insecurity. Sometimes those decisions are simply misguided and sometimes they appear to be unsympathetic, but ultimately they reflect characters who are fallible and imperfect and mortal. I hoped to blur the lines of what is right and what is wrong, and challenge readers to step back and think about capital punishment by virtue of this unclear divide."

The story opens with the sentence, "In this world, you are either good or evil." It ends with us asking, "Is there no middle ground?" and reevaluating our views on the death penalty.

Vampires in the Lemon Grove
by Karen Russell
Alfred A. Knopf, 2013
246 pages
$24.95

Reviewed by Ford Ebling

In *Vampires in the Lemon Grove,* Karen Russell delivers a delirious world of weird creatures, blackly comical supernatural phenomenon, and, beneath it all, characters desperate for connection. As with her previous collection of stories, she demonstrates that a writer doesn't need to hold fast to the old adage "write what you know." Her subjects include women in Japan being transformed into giant silkworms, a family in nineteenth-century Nebraska, and a massage therapist whose

main job is to give massages to soldiers returning from Iraq. Yet, these stories taking place in strange and unfamiliar places never feel anything less than real, nothing less than true.

The title story takes place in a lemon grove in Italy. The main character, a centuries-old vampire named Clyde, had spent hundreds of years alone before meeting another vampire, a woman who calls herself Magreb. She is the only other vampire Clyde is aware of, and—as do similar characters in "The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979," "The Barn at the End of Our Term," and "The New Veterans"—Clyde tries to reach out to a sympathetic presence. Clyde is desperate for a connection, be it romantic or platonic—a connection he has been denied for most of his unnatural life. He feels that losing this connection will come at the cost of his last bit of humanity.

"Reeling for the Empire" takes place in Japan during an unspecified time period, but the setting seems unimportant once it's revealed that women are being collected and transformed into human-silkworm hybrids to produce the finest silk in all the kingdom. The narrator takes us from the moment she is sold and transformed into a silkworm, to her metamorphosis into a powerful butterfly, creating an incredibly original and powerful metaphor for a woman's transition into adulthood and the triumph of her blossoming.

Transformation plays an important role in several stories, though the transformations are not always positive. The blackly comical "The Barn at the End of Our Term" features the souls of past American presidents transplanted into the bodies of horses, leaving them to conjecture if they are in hell, or somewhere worse. Nevertheless, like "Reeling for the Empire," this story, through its incredible circumstances, strikes a powerful chord with the human experience.

As with any collection, some stories are better than others. In particular, "Proving Up," a combination western/horror story set in nineteenth-century Nebraska, seems like it's trying to do too much. At one point during a flashback, the narrator's older brother returns to the farm with blood on his hands, and the readers are left wondering what happened and why. Also, a mysterious "Inspector" who is

supposed to validate the family's claim on the land never actually shows up, causing that segment of the plot to peter out. Technically a horror story is supposed to leave some nagging questions to preserve the mystery and fear, but "Proving Up" finishes with holes rather than questions. To top it all off, the perspective jumps from first-person to third-person in the last passage, jarring the reader, and taking away some of the punch at the end. "Proving Up" is not a bad story, but it is one of the lesser ones in the collection.

Karen Russell's stories fluctuate among the fantastical, the real, and the ridiculous. It is difficult to shelve her work in any one category. Stories like "Vampires in the Lemon Grove" and "Reeling for the Empire" work in a science fiction/fantasy vein carved out by authors such as Octavia Butler, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Angela Carter, while "The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979" bears similarities to the magical realism of Gabriel García Márquez or Haruki Murakami.

The title story is the one that drew me to Karen Russell's work. Amidst the all the vampire fever in contemporary fiction, it gives a more literary take on these archetypal monsters. Instead of bowing to popular views for the vampire, Russell turns the main character's existence into a metaphor for the human experience. This is the real strength of her writing. Karen Russell. She takes recognizable symbols and situations and turns them inside out, bringing a truly fresh voice to the literary world.

The People in the Trees
by Hanya Yanagihara
Doubleday, 2013
364 pages
$26.95

Reviewed by Brandi Stout

In a recent interview with Nando Pelusi in *Psychology Today*, Hanya Yanagihara states, "Part of becoming an adult is finding a way to truly, intensely admire people . . . while at the same time acknowledging their mistakes and, concurrently, their humanity." Yanagihara's debut novel *The People in the Trees* resounds with this conviction. Based loosely on the life of Nobel Prize winner Dr. D. Carleton Gajdusek, the novel opens with two newspaper articles—one reporting that a renowned scientist has been accused of sexual abuse and another announcing that he has been sentenced to prison. There is no way to know the truth of these allegations (a truth which is only found at the very end of the novel), and thus Yanagihara instantly prejudices you against her protagonist.

The novel masks as a memoir of the scientist A. Norton Perina, prefaced, edited, and annotated by Ronald Kubodera, a colleague of Perina's. Kubodera opens with the implication that he himself is well-renowned in the scientific community and indicates in his annotations that he holds a prestigious position at the Stanford University School of Medicine. He thus sets himself up as a reliable narrator, and his preface to Perina's memoir has the exact opposite effect of the article clippings. What follows is a lauding of Perina and his accomplishments in the field of medicine, including his Nobel Prize. Kubodera posits throughout that Perina was treated unjustly—judged by inferiors, abandoned and betrayed by those he cared for, and convicted long before a conviction was actually handed down. His characterization of Perina leaves you wondering if this allegedly detestable man is actually a creature deserving of empathy.

The memoir begins just as a memoir should, with Perina's childhood, the aunt who encouraged him to be a scientist, and his progression through medical school. In his final year of medical school, shortly before graduation, Perina finds himself presented with the opportunity to travel with an anthropologist, Paul Tallent, to the small island nation of U'ivu to study a "lost tribe." The memoir primarily comprises the search for, and eventual study of, this tribe. Perina's future trips to U'ivu detail the changes on the island and the changes in the U'ivuan people, and the subsequent publication of Perina's research and invasion of U'ivu by pharmaceutical companies and other scientists demonstrate the effects of Westernization upon non-modern societies. Yanagihara's descriptions bring to mind the effects of colonization in Hawaii and even the long-term effects colonization had in North America. Perina eventually begins adopting orphaned U'ivuan children, who are no longer cared for by the indigenous people as a result of the societal effects of Westernization, and bringing them to the United States.

Perina's reactions to events are relayed to you in his own words (with clarification and minor edits by Kubodera). You see Perina's ambition, his stoicism, his wonder, his deliberate decisions to lie, his regret, and his affection, among other things. You see him accept and even attempt to justify a tribal ritual that makes others react in horror. You see him perform actions both appalling and kind, and you see these actions as he sees them—with his justifications and motivations laid out on the page before you. He is a villain, he is a saint, but, as Yanagihara demonstrates, above all else, he is human.

Yanagihara approaches all of the events of the novel, good and bad, with unobtrusive lyricism. You will find yourself fully immersed in the world of A. Norton Perina and U'ivu. However, this simplicity of word can (and does) deliver a sucker punch to your gut:

> *A breeze licked its way between the trees, and as the opa'ivu'eke stretched his neck forward to partake in it, I flicked open the blade and brought it down on his neck. I thought it would be an easy cut, like slicing through warm butter, but his skin was much tougher and*

> *more webbed than I expected, and in the end I had to saw away at it, so that his head separated from his throat by degrees, first nodding to one side, then dangling to the other, until only a last flap of particularly stubborn skin united the two and I had to work the blade between the grooves, flicking it upward until the skin separated with a series of wet, elastic slaps. Except for a sort of soft, slow sigh, like a tire deflating, he made no sound, but his eyes remained open, their pupils shrinking into the irises like splashes of ink in water.*

Needless to say, Kubodera and Perina turn out to be most unreliable narrators. Their unreliability, in fact, is at the crux of the novel, and Hanya Yanagihara's decision to couch her novel in the form of a memoir is the pivot around which this unreliability revolves. It draws you in, it connects you to the characters, and it makes you comfortable in this world. In the end, however, that same familiarity and comfort leaves you wide open for the knockout blow Yanagihara delivers.