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Rebecca Gayle Howell's apocalyptic poetry collection, 'Render'

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On the back cover of Rebecca Gayle Howell's debut book of poetry "Render: An Apocalypse" (Cleveland State University Poetry Center: unpagged, \$15.95 paper), there's a definition I've never seen. In it, we learn that "apocalypse" can mean "a literary genre informed by hallucination, grief, and a long view of history (primary concerns: the past, the present, and consequence)."

Is this for real? A quick look at Webster's leaves me with my doubts. And yet, either way, it manages to encapsulate all that's vivid and moving about Howell's remarkable collection, winner of the 2012 Cleveland State University Poetry Center First Book Prize, which uses the filaments of farm life (growing, tending, slaughtering) as a lens, a metaphor for ... well, everything.

"Drop memory / like glass // down into the bath / Bring up the heat // slow so none notice / nothing shatters," Howell writes in "How to Preserve," one of the 23 numbered poems that make up the book. Here, we see her method: to illuminate through the most mundane activities of daily existence, something of the struggle and nobility of living.

Howell makes such a point explicit in the paired poems "A Catalog of What You Have" and "A Catalog of What You Do Not Have" the first of which offers a litany of residue ("the offal // the slop, swill — pitiless / river — the beak the bone"), while the second reads, in its entirety: "Enough."

What makes this work so powerful is its precision. It may seem a gimmick to write a one-word poem, but, following on the heels of "A Catalog of What You Have," it provides a perfect punctuation point.

So, too, the sequence of poems in the second half of the book in which Howell likens slaughtering a pig to a kind of lovemaking; "Don't miss / shoot her square," she writes in "How to Be a Man," before concluding, "The black-dawn air / cold and mean // The wet fog your breath / Or is it hers."

There's an unexpected intimacy to such an image, a sense of the physicality of life, of death and of endurance, which in the end is all we have. Howell gets at all of this with precision, pitiless but not unfeeling, knee-deep, waist-deep in the world.

In his foreword, [Nick Flynn](#) — who selected Howell's manuscript for the First Book Prize — puts it this way: "To enter into these poems one must be fully committed, as the poet is, to seeing this world as it is, to staying with it, moment by moment, day by day. Yet these poems hold a dark promise: this is how you can do it, but you must be fully engaged, which means you must be fully awake."

“Do you remember how close / you were to her,” Howell writes in “How to Kill a Hog,” tracing the complex lines that connect us, human and livestock, the interplay of love and sacrifice, “when she was farrowing / and she needed you // her bawling drawing / you out of bed.” The poem then goes on to describe the birthing of piglets before returning to the slaughter of their mother, which is (has always been?) the matter at hand.

Here we see the signal tension that embodies “Render,” between soul and body, between our desire and our need. “[C]lose your eyes just once,” Howell admonishes, “just once // do not turn away.”