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BOOK REVIEW

Tess Taylor. *Work and Days.* Pasadena, CA: Red Hen P, 2016. Print.

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Tess Taylor situates her exquisite second poetry collection, *Work and Days,* within the slender, if storied, pastoral and farming poetry traditions, opening with Hesiod's *Theogony* and frequently referencing Houseman's *Shropshire Lad* and the works of Virgil and John Clare. Taylor is the only female farmer poet I know of, besides the nineteenth-century Galilean Rahel Bluwstein. The nineteenth- and eighteenth-century English writers with whom Taylor's work keeps company are, of course, responding to a natural world under the duress of the industrial revolution. Their works contemplate the cruel transience of life and the need to savor life's abundant beauty.

Taylor collection updates the tradition for today's realities. *Work and Days* follows an agricultural cycle, beginning with the fallow winter, as farmers read seed catalogs and order seed packages, and the narrator recovers from a miscarriage, listening to the news, acknowledging the hurts and injustices that the United States has committed and is currently committing on its own people and on strangers across the globe. The news reports the damaging effects of pesticides on pregnant women and describes the drones with which "our country murders somebody's children." The enormous scale of events and the remote location of their enactment cause this speaker to become a "watcher" or recorder in the greater human drama, as she explains in "Disquisitive":

> You read field guides, welcome few visitors.
> Prepare to work one farm for a season.
> Your economy is your life as a watcher (21).

Farming, for Taylor, becomes an act of intense watching and recording—as it did for Rahel Bluwstein, who left behind an art career in order to learn and teach agriculture for the survival of her community. Beginning with the gorgeous "Peck Small Tracks," one of Taylor's first poems creates an implicit analogy between the field and the page that will echo throughout the entire collection:

> Now the night is ink, the field is wide:
> you look to peck small tracks across it (19).

Through farming and writing, small scale though they both are, the earth and the word are texts in which the human being lives like a character of the alphabet—they are our only home and our only history. The earth and the text read one

another, so that nothing is ever truly lost; and even the seemingly lost can be recovered to make a space for what is.

This idea that the earth's archives are legible, generous, and available to us is most powerfully presented in the poem, "Stockbridge," which I will give in full here:

From Wisconsin before it was Wisconsin
a glacier hauled these stones you stand on.

They traveled on its rubble.

They are the glacier's spit, its fissured teeth,
the path it garbled on its travel.

In 1880, the Stockbridge, last of the Mohicans,
were removed to Wisconsin: white edict

impassive as a glacier.
This town and farm and gabled houses

all are built upon that absence.
Now you bend into this field to clear it.

You think of a frozen fist,
of ice-sheets melting. Glaciers lost

in too-warm early weather.
The west wind blows in from Wisconsin.

Each stone you touch is cold as bone.
As if it holds some trace of spirit (20).

Taylor's skill at blending landscape and historical texts is wonderful, as in "Apocalyto/w Birds," which joins and parts from the medieval English Rota "Summer Is Icumen," an elegy to the gradual extinction of the cuckoo in England. Taylor's version questions how the summer will come without cuckoos, and, with sonic puns, suggests the owl's lament—again, a praise of absence (25). This is a kind of remembering—if not a making whole, then making a wholeness out of the tapestry of loss and regeneration that informs and creates every present moment—a mindful holding. The theme reoccurs in very next poem, "Time on Earth," with the forgetful mind whose throat is filled, nevertheless, with " hymns,/some ancestral body's holdfast tunes/to which your words are also blurred or blurring" (26).

Taylor's particular time on earth is a time in which farmhands learn to raise ox by video ("Equinox"), and the speaker studies the constellations in books and the vegetation through the medium of Audubons; she is engaged in "shoving root hairs down, transplanting—/like copying notes out from a notebook" ("Elsewhere Flood," 36). And these activities actually make the art of writing—of documenting—that much more urgent, as modern farm laborers are no longer ensconced in communities that remember the old ways. In engaging with the earth, in recording our time on earth, its spiritual longings as well as material harms, we are participating in an activity much larger than our individual endeavors, and most basic to us as humans. It is the least we can do; it is also the most we can do.

Indeed, the farm and the speaker struggle against feelings of irrelevance, given the world's large-scale problems, and against the weather: the crops have frozen and

must be replanted. The organic crops of exquisite heirloom delicacies are going to fancy restaurants, definitely not going to feed the masses, but this is how the farm sustains itself. Writing with the news—global warming, U.S. drone strikes, destruction of crops across the world, pesticides, the speaker considers the intimate problem of her inability to conceive a viable fetus. Her self-doubts are beautifully addressed in "Apocalypto for a Small Planet iv":

...I remember in the film on gleaning
when the priest in his compassion says:
those who glean now out of spiritual hunger
also should be fed (49).

On an aesthetic level, the music of this collection is exquisite and hearty fare. One would do well to read the entire book aloud, especially the third movement of "Three Gleanings." The internal rhymes, the waxing and waning (lengthening and shortening of) vowels dance as if elements of a shifting earth:

Dusk & moon out—we unlatch
potato cages. Furred tubers clutch
their six-months perch.

Annus mirabilis—odd alchemy.
Mulch and time
made these blind sprouts potatoes.

Hoisted in our hands they are chill comets.
We marvel at their oblong bounty.

Inside we scrub and slice, prepare
a pan with oil.
On the counter, old roots eye us whitely (62).

My only quibble with the entire book is the speaker's reference to the poet Amy Clampitt's home as "an old lady's cottage" where she, the speaker, sits reading John Clare's poetry. But it is a minor irritation: Clampitt's reputation as a poet is secure enough to weather it. This is a stunning collection; technically gorgeous. Tess Taylor is poised to enrich our meager time on this earth with her nourishing, beautiful book.