



ANNE BOYER
A HANDBOOK OF
DISAPPOINTED
FATE

NO, THANK YOU

Anne Boyer's thrilling
taxonomy of refusal

Anne Boyer, *A Handbook
of Disappointed Fate*,
2018. Courtesy:
Ugly Duckling Presse

BY NEGAR AZIMI

The cover of Anne Boyer's *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate* (2018) features a detail from Francisco de Goya's series of etchings 'Los caprichos' (The Caprices, 1797-99) depicting two women and one swarthy, nondescript man. The women each balance chairs, turned upside down, on their mantilla-covered heads. Their legs are bare, scandalously exposed. The man may or may not be laughing at them. The tableau bristles with ambiguity.

In spite of more than one gushing commendation, I hadn't read *Handbook*, Boyer's collection of essays, proposals, lists and provocations, until the very last day of 2018. When I did, it felt like the perfect antidote to a shitty year, one in which personal shittiness and global shittiness combined to produce a viscous haze in which the only thing left to do was to stumble and grope for signs of beauty and sanity. Boyer's prose offers both, even as she describes feeling anesthetized by contemporary life, its 'chemical banalities and wars [... its] wretched arrangements of history [... its] greed-laminated earth'. In a time of dysphoria, how should a person be?

She has some ideas. 'History is full of people who just didn't,' reads the first line of her riveting opening essay, which also serves as a sort of statement of intent. 'They said *no thank you*, turned away, escaped to the desert, lived in barrels, burned down their houses, killed their rapists, pushed away dinner. The zoo animals that fling their faeces at gawking voyeurs — also a 'no'. Naturally, this strenuous embrace of refusal is seductive in a craven 'yes' world in which the cult of self-help relentlessly communicates that *yes* you can look younger / feel better / get richer. (The depredations and degradations of capitalism are the target of Boyer's greatest contempt.) Opting out can be emancipatory, exhilarating even. Somewhere, Bartleby is nodding.

An eccentric scavenger, Boyer takes readers inside the Occupy movement in her native Kansas City where, she tells us, since 1967, six people can comprise a riot. In an essay titled 'Hey Bo Diddley!', she unpacks the character who gave birth to the expression 'diddly-squat', i.e. 'nothing at all'. Diddley, a blues musician whose propulsive guitar style heralded the birth of rock n'roll, was said to have gleaned his beat from the tambourines in church, which in turn derived from the rhythms made by enslaved Africans who, forbidden to

play the drums, used their own bodies as percussive instruments. 'Nothing at all,' suggests Boyer, isn't really nothing at all.

As a poet, Boyer is, of course, interested in poetry's revolutionary potential, its antinomies, compromises and — especially — its refusals: 'The pantheon of those who won't is the best church poetry has to offer. It's a temple perfumed with the incense of sacrificed literary reputation, littered with bankruptcy notices for cynical cultural capital [...] In it, you will find no poetry in the shape of a cowardly *maybe*, or fluorescent *yes*, or cloying, collaborating, reactionary, status-loving and desperately eager *whatever-they-say-I'll-do*.'

In 'Difficult Ways to Publish Poetry', Boyer argues that poetry has grown superfluous; to restore its value, one must publish differently, difficultly: craft poems out of animal hair or become a king or queen of a small country and lay down train tracks in the shape of words. In 'Toward a Provisional Avant-Garde', she decrees that all poems should begin with 'Hello'.

A few years ago, Boyer found herself in Los Angeles for a poetry reading at a church on one of the hottest days of the year, bedraggled after a series of fiascos on public transport, her scalp itchy due to cancer treatment. (Illness, like a broken heart, is a recurring trope.) Earlier in the day, she had come across Matthew Barney's six-hour film *River of Fundament* (2014), a work of such farcical excess as to seem meaningless, a depressing vision of art. In her impecunious poet's *purgatorio* she realizes that, thanks to a scheduling mishap, the people who had shown up at said church were expecting to roll burritos for the needy; they were not expecting poems at all. 'The poetry reading fed no one,' she laments.

But it is sustenance, of a sort. She lingers over Bertolt Brecht's poem about Los Angeles, 'Nachdenkend über die Hölle' (Thinking About Hell, 1941): 'Also in Hell, / I do not doubt it, / there exist these opulent gardens'. Which brings me back to Goya. The Spaniard understood the 'wretched arrangements of history'. And while he was a gloomy satirist of human folly, I'd like to think that the women in his enigmatic etching aren't being tortured by jeering misogynists as much as having a fine old time in their own opulent garden. Perhaps they're tipsy. They're wearing chairs as hats after all! They've said 'no'. And therein lies a hope. Boyer's curious little handbook, even if riven with uncertainties, is ultimately hopeful. It turns the world upside down ●

NEGAR AZIMI is senior editor of Bidoun.