

BOOK REVIEWS

The White Calf Kicks

Deborah Slicer

Autum House Press, 2003

67 pages

\$14.95

The White Calf Kicks, winner of the 2003 Autumn House Press Prize, has only one small note about its author: “Deborah Slicer lives near Missoula, Montana.” As you read the poems this geographical note takes on additional meaning, for it is the light and dark of Slicer’s experiences in Montana’s large and intricately gorgeous landscape that shape the book. Her poems embody the genuine slightness and the surprising power of the individual who both pits herself against and totally surrenders to rocky heights and large mountain meadows. Such a landscape provides a worthy backdrop for poems on such hi-falutin’ subjects as death, loneliness, cruelty and our incredible ability to maintain hope while “dog-paddling/ through a kettle of Quaker’s/cooked oats.”

Although her poems are peopled with the likes of Mayakovsky, Kierkegaard, Freud and Dickinson, Slicer puzzles out these big questions while standing in the shady corner of a barn, or releasing cattle from a truck, or camped out “. . . Twenty Miles up the Teton River outside the Bob Marshall Wilderness on the Night Before A Wedding.” The writing is filled with the joy and the grit of moving through a geography that never lets you forget the consequences of how you live your life. Here’s part of “Skiing Slough Creek, Yellowstone, February 9”:

Done a dumb thing,
trying to cross the drifted meadow down the middle,
break trail through a bowl of sugar, butt-deep.

Now forward takes the exertion of a glacier,
turning back, a wish
blowing out candles at thirty-six.

And the white-out moving up the valley like the underwing of
some deranged angel.

Do I take it standing?
Kneel?

This is a poet who, knowing her earthly limits, remains obsessively preoccupied with both the difficult and the joyous mysteries of life. Her experience is so direct, so without interpretive interlude that she moves from Montana landscape to metaphysical moment in a heartbeat. She leaps, and you, reader, must leap with her lest you be left breathless and stunned on the flat white page. Her poetry reminds us that there's something going on in this life that cannot be got at without exposure. And that risk is not something you take, but something that overtakes you.

In "Cancer: Two Lyrics" Slicer opens with weather that looks sufficiently extreme to be her central subject, only to let us know the real threat is more human than we want to think:

Hail
falls thought the cosmic cracks
at three in the afternoon
spaaaps
at the windows, *pffsts*
at the sun, all the grape hyacinths
break down.

(a-nurse-calls-says-you-fell-through-the-cracks-last-year. so. sorry.)

Slicer's concern with what is just beyond the everyday results in a series of questions in her poems: "*Why have I done this?/ Oh what do these two hands want?*"; "*Have I been this reckless with my life?*"; "*Someone bends over the hemisphere to see that we're all right,/blocking the light,/who could it be?*". In a lesser poet's hands this questioning could turn adolescent and tedious, but Slicer knows full-well these questions can't be answered. What they do is shed light on what's "nearly dark . . ." Indeed the half-light hours are everywhere in Slicer's poetry where "The east sky's pink tongue laps up darkness."

When Slicer isn't camping out, she's an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Montana. Her philosophical background is hinted at in poems like "Ars Poetica":

A cherry tomato on a white plate
 language chases after
 but can't skewer. Philosopher's headache.
 Poet's itch.

All thoughts are words—necessary and sufficient
 conditions for each other
 or nothing.
Such beautiful nonsense, the tomato taunts the fork.

But most of these poems are deeply and indelibly linked to the physical world—its majesty, its mystery and its dirt. Slicer's human companions are easily matched by those in the animal world and even plants have a beingness in Slicer's writing that magnifies their presence. In "This Is about Darkness":

The forsythia eats sunlight
 near the open barn door
 where Bill Perry stands in his overalls watching
 his dapple-gray Percheron, Pike.

Slicer even has a poem entitled "I Loved the Black Cat" in which she tries to puzzle out why she does not love the man she misses so much as she loves "that cat", and in "Mousey and Me" she identifies so entirely with a cow called Mousey who is beaten by "the bony man in thick glasses" that she can say with convincing clarity:

That man?
 Mousey and me knew him about the same.

But Deborah Slicer has many songs to sing. "After Metaphysics, or When the Fly Leaves the Flybottle" is as enticing a poem about sex as you will read this year. Filled with longing that "leavens one thousand wedding cakes" so that even the mockingbird "plays with his musical zipper" Slicer says at last:

. . . you wag, you
wag in the little fingerbowl of me.

Your verbstem assumes declensions of mythic proportions.

My vowel sounds open on the south-most *hallelujah* side of the mountain.

And when in enviable harmony with her landscape Slicer gives us:

Last night a single goose flew over the house,
throwing her voice out ahead of herself:
a stone
skipping out across still water.

A joy ride.

Then she followed the beautiful sound
across a meadow of moonlight and snow,
a clean bowl
waiting to be filled with the most beautiful thing.

Naomi Shihab Nye who chose this manuscript for Autumn House calls these poems “brilliant and breathtaking, original and haunting, riveted with meaning and music.” I would add that they have a deceptively down-home flavor that sets off a satisfying complexity. This poet is happy, and not happy, elegant, and raucous, pissed off and wildly at home in a world that does not really conform to normative religious ideas and glorified versions of human power and potential. Slicer sees the person and the poet as small in the scheme of things and blessed or cursed with an awareness of the always-approaching white out.

Reviewed by Deborah Bogen