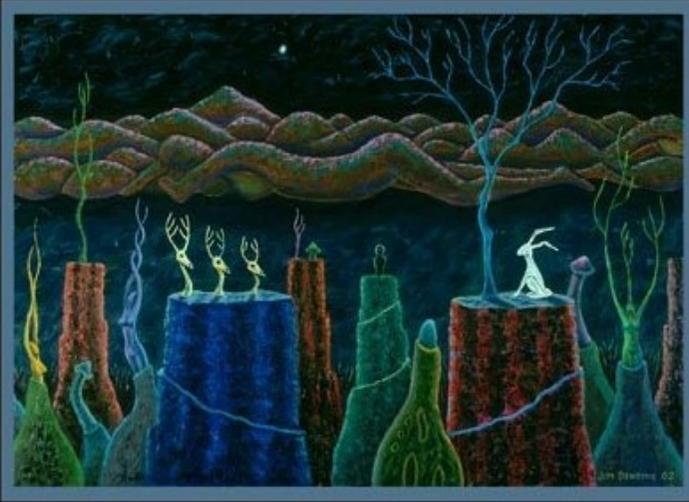


Jackalope



Denise Low

Jackalope Walks into a Colorado Billboard

Jaq leans up against the “Ride a Jackalope to Trinidad” billboard and basks in the sun. Wind whistles under the frame, but she is warm in this sheltered spot. She settles into the grass and dozes.

When she rouses, no telling how long she has slept. She looks across scrubby junipers toward Raton Pass. This highway is the Santa Fe Trail, and before that it was a trade route for early Americans.

What rough country. Old volcano pyramids dot the horizon like chess pieces on a jumbled checkerboard. Distant ridges flow rhythmically into tilted mountain edges. A few stone walls of an old pueblo remain and the arch of an abandoned Spanish church.

Overhead, a raven circles and cries into the wind.

In the distant valley Jaq notices movement, then sees smooth leaps of two antelopes, their ebony-black pronghorns well defined against pale grass. Good to know 'lopes still roam the homeland.

Back by the highway, a white cross rises above an informal shrine of plastic roses. Here someone died in a car accident, reminder of time passing as much as the extinct volcanoes. A fading photograph of a young man's face, framed in white wood, stares west into eternity. This is a portal among several worlds.

Jaq turns and reads the garish billboard poster behind her. "We Never Sleep!" says a grinning cartoon wolf. "Stay the Night." The jackalope next to the wolf wears a saddle. It poses mid-hop, one foot raised. Its blank eyes look north.

Jaq looks back at the panorama of foothills. The raven tilts and starts a new spiral around clouds. In a blink, this timeless scene could return to primal void. Volcanoes could erupt.

Jaqueline inhales the pine mountain scent slowly. When she stands up against the saddled jackalope image, it is exactly her size. She stretches to fit the silhouette. She raises her foot to mirror the poster and tweaks her left ear to fit.

It is the moment when she matches the two-dimensional jackalope's grin exactly that she loses consciousness.

~ Denise Low

from *Jackalope* (Red Mountain Press, 2016)

Denise Low, Kansas Poet Laureate 2007-09, is a nationally known author whose recent books are *Mélange Block: Poems* (Red Mt. Press), *Jackalope* (short fiction, Red Mt. Press), and *Kansas Poems of William Stafford* (Woodley). Low has an MFA (W.S.U.) and Ph.D. (K.U.). *The Turtle's Beating Heart*, about her grandfather's Lenape heritage, is forthcoming from the Univ. of Nebraska Press in 2017. She blogs, reviews, and co-publishes Mammoth Publications. www.deniselow.net