

*Jack Sleeping*

Alan Berecka, *Remembering the Body* (Norman, OK: Mongrel Empire Press, 2011), 94 pp., \$15.00. Reviewed by Barbara Crooker.

In Alan Berecka's second full-length book, the title may suggest that he's remembering the body, which he is, but he's also remembering the dust the body was created from as he stumbles toward a dark theology. Some of the titles of the poems suggest where he's heading: "The Evolving Case for De-evolution," "McDemption," "The Theology of Dodge Ball," "Making Sense of Dogma," "The Gospel According to Berecka," "Why Theology and Economics Don't Mix," and my favorite, "Zen and the Art of Metaphysical Maintenance—." Berecka is also a poet of place; although he hails from the cold reaches of upper New York state and is of Polish heritage, his years in Corpus Christi, where he works as a reference librarian at Delmar College, have made him into a quintessential Texas poet as well.

All of the poems in this collection are leavened by humor, albeit a wee bit black at times. Sometimes he achieves this through exaggeration, as when we see Les Palmer morph into "a living Thanksgiving / Parade balloon, tethered by editors / and booksellers, until he grew too large / for them to hold." "The Assimilation of Vitas Perkunas" could be retitled, "Ode to a Fart": "When he bellied up his small / frame, preloaded with beans and cabbage, / to the bar, the crowd would grow silent." It was like "a foghorn mated to a machine gun." Sometimes, he uses wacky combinations, such as re-imagining King Kong as a porn star conversant with economics and Adam Smith. Sometimes the humor depends on the reversal of expectations: In New Orleans, "in a loud / foul cloud of diesel exhaust, / the bus named Desire rolls off." Sometimes, it comes from recognizing absurdities, like playing one-man tackle football, the epigraph from "Voila!," or teeing up at "The Eden Golf and Country Club."

Sometimes, the humor is gentle, as when the speaker, who goes against the "doctor-ordered, low-fat / low-sodium diet" to eat

at a fast food joint, observes a bag lady returning her fries for a second time. Instead of saying, "Look, lady this ain't the Ritz," the manager says, "Let me see / what I can do," which leads to this epiphany: "And maybe it was all the salt I had ingested, / but I swear the whole place got a little brighter."

Then there are the puns, such as "The Texas Poet's Lariat" (substituting for the Texas Poet Laureate) or "Vollard Fails Caliban" (talking about the OED): "but the gap between his dreams / and pen remains unabridged." (All together now, groan.)

Berecka's poems are always embodied, grounded in the human body, perhaps echoing the incarnation, but also because they are down-to-earth, unpretentious, and fully alive. "My Bone of Contention with Roethke" exemplifies this; Berecka is arguing for loveliness in the flesh, not the bones. It's flesh that

...hangs on her deep, like snow
on a January pine. In places she
seems more liquid than solid.
Think axle-deep mud, and, Lord,
how I love to sink in those ruts.

It carries him "somewhere better than fine," where he'll

be listening for the melody
of corduroy stretched tightly
across my love's thick thighs.

Too often, in our exercise-and-diet-obsessed culture, we forget about the beauty of the body as it is, but Berecka is reminding us to remember the body, warts and farts and all. And how that makes us linked to the body of Christ, "molded / in the image of the Creator, as are we."

Berecka's own body may have been born and raised in New York state, but he has turned into a very Texas writer during his years spent living and working in Corpus Christi. "Well ma'am

here's the news: / this time of year I miss it, too [Texas]." It's summer, and the moon "has blistered red / in the white heat / of August noons. // Buzzards bake / in tortured oaks . . . the earth / cracks wide, opens to eat / small pets and skinny kids." He goes on to say after the Winnebagos head north, "we remain, infected / by a mad bullheadedness, / the kind that draws lines / in sand, hunkers down / in lost causes and Alamos." He's been reshaped, annealed, by the land and the landscape, and knows how to sport the garb of the natives: "Next winter, when flocks / of birders migrate through / the Trans-Pecos . . . // I'll polish my Justins, tie / my bolo, and tilt my Stetson, / to welcome back cool days, / star-filled nights and . . . one bright oriole."

The brightness of the stars and bird is set against the dark theology mentioned in the opening paragraph. "The Value of Salt" shows us the twists and turns of Berecka's mind, as he explores the various takes on salt shaken throughout this poem: "My father covered his t-bones and fries / in blizzards of salt." He forced his son to "shake / a dusting" onto his food, claiming that "the seasoning brought out hidden flavors," but all Berecka "could ever taste was salt." The father carried rock salt all winter. "He drove us / into the city on a bed of salted sand." The poem then takes a deeper turn, when the family goes to "early mass at Saint George's" where "a stern friar" "warned his flock / not to become salt that lost its flavor." Many of the poems in this collection give us another take on familiar stories, approach the spiritual while staying firmly footed on this earth, in this body. We remember the body, and we will never forget these highly original poems.