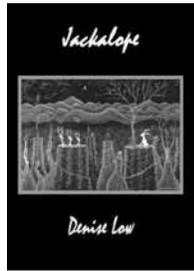


# Jackalope Walks into a Bar

By Carolyne Wright

Book Review

*Jackalope*, by Denise Low,  
Red Mountain Press, 2016.



In my car-free student days, I rode Greyhound busses throughout the West, and back and forth between my hometown, Seattle, and the graduate creative writing program at Syracuse University in central New York State. During rest stops, I always jumped off the bus and made my way to the perennially dilapidated terminal's creaky postcard racks, where I was sure to find images of that mythical hybrid creature, the Jackalope—part antelope, part jackrabbit—with its proclaimed fondness for whiskey and its tendency to yodel, in cries almost human, on full-moon nights. I would buy several of these cards—usually depicting a stuffed jackrabbit, sporting deer or pronghorn antlers, propped up among cactus or sagebrush in a high prairie landscape—and I would mail these cards to friends with handwritten messages intended to disseminate and perpetuate the myth. This was one form of self-deprecating, tongue-in-cheek irony by which I intended to subvert the casual disregard for Westerners and Western culture that I sensed to be afflicting some of my East Coast classmates and associates. Most likely, my attempts at oblique subaltern pushback were lost on such folks, but I amused myself with these assays into low-budget mythopoesis.

A couple of decades later, on my and my husband's pre-marital honeymoon visit to Santa Fe, New Mexico, we were accosted in an aisle of the Plaza Five and Dime by a gravel-toned growl from one of the shelves of tourist knickknacks. The growl emanated from a gray-brown plush keychain bauble in the misshapen guise of a Jackalope: stubby arms and fuzzy pronghorns; voluminous, plush thunder thighs; unevenly set, beady glass eyes, from which shot a cock-eyed

glare. This creature was demanding that we spring her from that hell-hole of a shelf and whisk her away from all the despicable, Not-Made-in-U.S.A. coyote and roadrunner keychain baubles around her. Such indignities she was suffering—such deplorable company imposed upon her!

We acquiesced to this ungainly being's demand, acquired her for the queenly sum of \$2.95 . . . and on the next day's visit to Abiquiu, she revealed herself to be "Mabel Dodge Jack-a-Lujan," Patroness of the Arts and Supreme Tathagata of All Realms Visible and Invisible. . . . We have been in Mabel's imperious and silly thrall ever since. She presides over the Buddhist niche in our living room, attended by her consort—the portly, plush, and ever-solicitous "Jacques Antoine Loupe" (aka Jacques A. Loupe), resplendent in his tri-color sash made from birthday gift-wrap ribbons—and two smaller 'lopes who claim pop culture celebrity, and who may or may not be Mabel and Jacques' progeny: "J. Lope" and "T. Lope" (short for Jennifer Lopez and Trini Lopez). The escapades of these whimsical plush trinkets are legendary within the world-encompassing confines of our burrow, er . . . condo unit.

With all this Jacka-lore in my life, you can imagine my delight with Denise Low's collection of related stories, *Jackalope*: part myth, part tall tale, part Western and Native American cultural commentary. Low—poet, storyteller, professor, and 2007–2009 Kansas Poet Laureate, who is of British Isles, German, and indigenous Delaware and Cherokee heritage—maintains an affection for the protean, ever-shifting nature of her protagonist and the fluid cultural, historical, and tribal scenarios in which each tale plays out. In each of these stories, this 21st-century/going-on-timeless trickster-cryptid, Jackalope (Jack; or in her female aspect, Jaq) has leapt off the shelf (as it were) and out of the two-dimensional straits of postcard rackdom. S/he proceeds to stroll into a bar—in ten-gallon hat, cowboy boots, cell phone and charger in his fringed leather (or her rhinestone-studded denim) jacket pocket, mirror shades, red bandana or sacred dream-catcher medallion around her/his neck. Or those are a few of the possible outfits, or states of *deshabille*, in which Jack/Jaq walks into a bar.

There, in every type of public house imaginable and diverse sorts of dive bars never conceptualized before, the fantastic,

phantasmagoric, post-modern, irony-imbued, subversive and subaltern, gender-bending fun begins. The opening bar-motif, or premise, is a theme with infinite, Blakean/Whitmanesque potential for variations. In "Jackalope Walks into a Twitter Bar," Jack is a mild-mannered telemarketer accidentally moonlighting as a Twitter-stream soft-porn star who—when he glimpses his own X-rated antics multiplied like rabbits on fifteen gigantic screens—abandons his one allotted juniper-berry (aka gin) cocktail and hightails it outta there, abashed and frantic, pursued by rabid fans, back to his lair in his grandmother's basement. In "Jackalope Walks into a Roswell Bar," Jaq eases herself past inflated bobble-head figures of space aliens into a liminal realm where time seems to have halted at July 8, 1947. Sensing hostility in the tornado-tinged air, and with wolf-like dogs lounging at the feet of rancher barflies and eyeing her hungrily, Jaq switches genders to Jack and commences a palaver about flying saucer sightings with a local poetess, while green-tinted aliens loiter in the shadows, and images of Walter Cronkite, Dwight Eisenhower (playing golf) and Nikita Krushchev flash across the static-filled black-and-white screen of the TV behind the bar . . . and does Jack glimpse, lurking several barstools away, a real-life deceased poet, Rane Arroyo—who passed on soon after his book *The Roswell Poems* was published?

In "Jackalope Walks into a Minneapolis Art Gallery," Jack visits an exhibit by Jim Denomie (whose evocative painting "Dream Rabbit II" also happens to grace the cover of the book) and hears a reading by Anishinaabe author Gerald Vizenor, who is introduced by Ojibwa writer Louise Erdrich, owner of Birchbark Books next door. As word dancers Erdrich and then Vizenor perform with their voices the "transformations and intuitive connections between our bodies and the earth, animals, birds . . .," Jack finds himself distracted, as scenes in the paintings begin to shift and change color, and owls hoot from one canvas; then a grackle flies out, lands on Jack's chair and commences to cackle a pseudo-scholarly interpretation of the reading in academic baffle-gab, dive-bomb the audience and the author at the podium, and then flap back into the same canvas it emerged from. Reading concluded and the gallery almost empty of visitors, Jack presents the elder word-warrior with a packet

of ceremonial tobacco . . . and notices that Vizenor has quietly transformed into Bear—pointed ears, shaggy fur, “unexpectedly fetid” breath. Bear and his human wife disappear out the door into the night, and Jack observes their paw and boot prints in the snow, where (the gallery owner assures him), “They know the north winds well. They know the roads and the stories.”

In these interstices between fantasy and creatively tweaked fact, Low keeps her tone both lyrical and light; but shining through the humor—literary and Indian inside jokes, bawdy anecdotes, and gentle fun-poking at contemporary and historical indigenous and Anglo cultural figures—are glimpses of the very real oppression to which such oblique humor is one survival response. In “Jackalope Walks into Custer’s Last Bar,” Jaq is offered the fanciest drink (“Custer’s Custard”) and is regaled with bitter anecdotes and jokes targeting this last-in-his-West-Point-class Civil War hero, who turned genocidal criminal against the plains tribes until his final demise at the Battle of Greasy Grass (aka Little Bighorn).

Stories are interspersed with poems and flash prose paragraphs packed with tongue-in-cheek information and a few alternative facts: “Jackalope Songs,” “Cryptid Jackalope,” “Jackalope Hunting Permit” (where “open season” in Waupoose County is restricted to the dates of “June 31st to July 1, and between the times of 12:01 to 12:02 a.m.”).

Among my favorite stories are “Jackalope Walks into a Sherman Alexie Narrative”—an extended and affectionate roast of Alexie (“cousin Sherman”)—in which Jack meets Lyman, a Spokane or Coeur d’Alene man, on a corner in downtown Seattle. While they wait interminably in heavy traffic for the light to change, they size each other up with raunchy sign language, crack Indian jokes, act out scenes from the Alexie film *Smoke Signals*, and watch a rusted Ford full of laughing women drive by again and again in reverse. Also set in Seattle, “Jackalope Walks into a Writers’ Conference Bar,” features cameo appearances by David Fenza, the “Association of Alpha Writers’” Eminent Director and his trusty sidekick, Christian Teresi, Conference Director. These two hard-working and diligent figures from the so-called real life of “po-biz” have ambled through the fourth wall and into the semiotic frame of fiction, where Jack’s Anadarko,

Oklahoma, party-animal cousins have been among the throngs trashing a late-night writer's Bash Bar and now require bail money.

Over the course of these stories, the reader's understanding of Jackalope evolves far beyond the flat, one-joke-wonder postcard portrayals into a nuanced figure of legend who moves between worlds and serves to illuminate deeper insights into the fluid intersections of human, animal, and spirit realms: a locus of wisdom and survival lore that we all need in this era of overlapping and often clashing realities, whether we are indigenous or hold some degree of post-1492 resident-visitor status. Denise Low has clearly enjoyed sharing this Jacka-lore with us, and her pleasure is infectious. (Now if I can just lure these dream rabbits back inside the painting on the cover . . . ).