



Riding the Language

The Horse Fair

by Robin Becker

Pitt Poetry Series, 2000

94 pp., paperback, \$12.95

[J.C. Todd](#)

Despite its evocative imagery, exciting use of received and nonce forms, and multi-voiced range of dictions drawn from many sources — the histories of art and social justice, observations of nature, conversations, rural customs, journal notes, equestrian lore, the Old Testament and Hebrew prayer — there is remarkable economy and balance in the shape of *The Horse Fair*, Robin Becker's most recent collection of poetry. Weaving through its diversity of form, voice, and place is a sense of non-digressive progression and procession. The progression flows through a series of defining moments, both her own and those of other artists, toward and finally into an aesthetic of the particular. This aesthetic's attention to details of sadness and neglected beauty refuses partiality, "the taxonomies (that) enclose and divide." The procession, however, is a pilgrimage like that of pig-bearing initiates to the Eleusinian cave, its undisclosed but inevitable purpose the education of the mind to see and accept what gods and ancestors have made manifest. The poems wend through Bordeaux, Loch Leven, Alaska, the Kumins' farm, Santa Fe, central Pennsylvania's Happy Valley, the condos of affluent retirees, Berlin, and the Cote d'Azur into New York's pocket gardens and the Lower East Side. Becker does not bear a pig, though were this *Peer Gynt* she would be riding one; instead she rides the language into poems of dangerous compassion as surely as Rosa Bonheur, the subject of the title poem, rode the horses she championed into paintings that show ". . .the intelligence of [their] dished faces resisting."

Resistance is a problematic subject for one determined to refuse enclosure and division. How to imagine a world in which resistance leads to capacious inclusion but not homogeneity, in which the field is reconfigured to include and affirm the outsider's inner experience? This seems to be the project of the collection, which moves in seven sections, laying out the imaginative field in "The Horse Fair," the title poem that opens the book. In the associative field of the word "fair," in the transactions of its multiple meanings — marketplace, competitive exhibition, beautiful, pure, clear, conforming with rules — in the blur and friction of these reverberations is the sense of what it is to live, from the inside, an outsider's life, following the necessity of one's own desire yet understanding though not conforming to the dominant culture. Not only in layers of linguistics and etymology but also in layers of identification with the poems' subjects, often artists or animals, the poet finds a way to visit her own life as an artist, a survivor, a Jew, and visit it not as autobiography but as *exemplum*, story from the ordinary world that directs attention to a larger moral or spiritual realm which manifests both as a place and a tone. In section One, the vantage point and the implicit tone of the collection are given in the conversationally-paced quatrains of "Solstice Bay:"

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX...

looking out from the vast, unknowable field

XXX of middle age to the upper reaches of the sky,

still in a body. Grateful for a body that could feel

XXX this simple balance, some might call *indifference*,

a form of moderation unfamiliar to the angry and ambitious.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX...

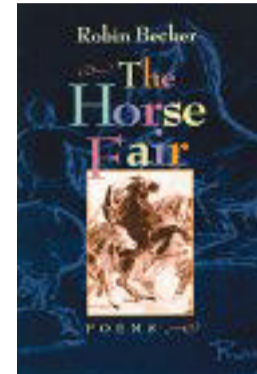
The source of "this simple balance" is revealed in the enigma at poem's end:

XXXXXXXXXXXXX . . . At Solstice Bay,
 XXX the longest day includes in perfect equilibrium

a remembering and a forgetting, no need
 XXX to make a fuss of time finding the leaves
 in the form of light, though we do, we make
 XXX something of it — anything — again and again.

And so, the poems are narratives of memory and forgetting, of how time finds the particular, how the human makes something of it, makes history of it and, as the poems of section Six suggest, at the same time finds redemption witnessing what light reveals.

Just as each segment of a pilgrimage prepares the seeker for the next, so, too, each section prepares the reader (and the speaker) for the revelations of the following sections. For example, in section Two, the interpenetration of past and present, of animal and human touched on in section One is illuminated, especially in a pair of dog poems, "In Praise of the Basset Hound" and "Dog-God." A tribute to a beloved, ancient hound, the former leaps into an appreciation of ". . .the magnificence of mute/creatures in their abundant, dying skin," thus introducing the subset of time — dying — that recurs in subsequent sections. The latter poem takes its title from the language play of an eight-to-ten-year-old, the anagramic reversal of dog and god. In the chance meeting of girl and collie, it renders the initiation of the artist-child by an animal-guide. As the dog drinks, ". . .the sound of her lapping excited a new desire/to master what is beautiful and guileless and mute." A surprising variation from the Hassidic and Germanic legend of the young man who gains magical knowledge of the world by understanding birdsong, the language of the overworld, here the young girl understands streamsong, how what is mute underlies all language, all art. Consideration of the mute and the dying becomes a motif of the collection which concludes by bringing their wisdom not only to light but into voice to stand "against the finished music of genocide." This is the stand of the Amidah, a prayer offered by a Jewish congregation to describe the truth on which the worshippers stand.



At the heart of *The Horse Fair* is a brilliant passage through prayer into the illuminations of the High Holidays, Becker's poem "The Days of Awe." It may be read as a template for the structure of the collection, as well as a spiritual passage that begins with a call to community and continues through a ritual of atonement, then a prayer to make holy (revisiting the lesson of "Dog-God"), then a mourners' Kaddish to end with an Amidah where the speaker takes a stand through prayer, "Sanctify difference and refusal." The community called forth in "The Days of Awe" is seen in the full light of the final section. It is a redemptive community, a community of outriders, a community laced with death where those who might have been kept outside are acknowledged as belonging. In the final poem, "Angels of the Lower East Side," Lilal, an addict who took his own life, speaks through the portrait Chico has painted of him and claims for the dead their rightful place, a place of presence to the living, that is to say, the place of the present moment:

XXXXXXXXXXXXX . . . *The dead will always be with us —
 in the Jews who inhabited these streets, in those who perished
 from typhus, in the violence of the father, in the violence of the tenement,
 in the removal of the Star from the round window, in the violence of crack,
 in the florid graffiti, in the faces painted on these walls.*

Is this not the vision of the Shekhinah, whose mercy infuses the Kaddish in which the dead are mourned but death is refused? And so in the elegant poems of the final section, many of them meditations on urban gardens, those contemporary Edens of mixed blessings, Robin Becker, like the artist she memorializes in "The Triumph of Charlotte Salomon," has ". . .painted what memory could not retrieve:/a theater of comprehension. . ." that coexists with an unflinching realization of human paradox. Balanced and merciful, the tone of "The Liz-Christy Bowery Houston Garden" is that of the Shekhinah who does not judge nor turn away from the

. . .heart's refusal to acknowledge

the many forms of neglected beauty
 with which we might identify, from which we run.

ALSO OF INTEREST

Robin Becker, poetry editor for the *Women's Review of Books*, is an associate professor of English and Women's Studies at the Pennsylvania State University. She is the author of four previous collections of poetry.

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