

Summer 2008

***Never Night* by Derick Burleson**

Lauren Leslie

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Recommended Citation

Leslie, Lauren (2008) "*Never Night* by Derick Burleson," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 69 , Article 28.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss69/28>

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DERICK BURLESON

Never Night (Marick Press, 2008)

We know it's wrong to judge a book by its cover. Especially a book of poetry—a genre notorious for the varied quality of its cover art. When a cover, however, is truly representative of the content and quality inside, it's hard not to read it as a corollary to the poems. Such is the case with Derick Burleson's second poetry collection, *Never Night*.

Never Night's cover is a gorgeous painting of white birches and dark shadows by Kes Woodward, an artist well-known in Alaska. The image—and its prominent use of contrasts—fits the landscapes in the text, as the book illustrates a journey from a childhood in “thick red Oklahoma mud” near “the raging / river that used to be Main Street” through a Montana full of “third-growth Ponderosa forests and stands / of slim larch, steakhouses, pulp mills, glossy pamphlets” with a final destination “here where / it's never night”—the wildness of rural Alaska, informed by classical mythology and the observation of yet another childhood. Formally alert, yet uneasy with both memory and present events, Burleson's poems offer a glimpse into a personal passage, an expedition not only from south to north, but from the “why” to the “how” of a life.

Three sections, each subtitled with a line from Elizabeth Bishop's “Questions of Travel,” set the stage for the book's continental scope. In the first, “American Boys,” the speaker of “In Our Field” recalls, “I didn't know what to wish for.” The Oklahoma in these first poems is a land of fields haunted by memory and family, caves filled with “a night / so night it feels like drowning.” It's an Oklahoma full of the entrenched ghosts of memory, informed by the sure knowledge of what happens next and the realization that love and pain exist in the same places, for the same things, at the same time. Like the Montana verses that follow, these poems don't avert their gaze. They stare and stare, like Bishop, at event and setting, almost imprinting them in flesh. In Montana, there is love—love of place, of companionship, of individuality: “the fierce pleasure / of knowing that soul is the particular // song we learn to sing.” But it is not unsullied; just as it contains “third-growth Ponderosa forests,” it has loggers to empty those forests.

Just as it holds “anglers cradling rainbow trout,” there are “derailed tank-cars” belching chlorine.

“North,” the book’s second section, contains the same “strange juxtapositions,” concerned with the disconnect between personal comfort and environmental health, filled with a consciousness of endings and the irreversibility of the moment. At the same time, another strange juxtaposition is occurring. Despite the unease of a two-headed moose fetus and the crisis of near-death under a diesel fuel tank, there is a comfort in this new home—new memories can be made. And they are made in “Late Valentines,” the book’s aptly named third section. Here Burleson writes not only love poems—to a lover, for and from a daughter—but poems realizing that love and joy can correspond in the same way as love and pain, and at the same time. While it seems hokey to acknowledge the function of joy in a love poem, or to call any love poem “bittersweet,” Burleson’s poems escape stereotypes of overdone emotion with a consciousness of truth, a disarming honesty, and a light-handed humor. In these poems, love is always accompanied by death, to the extent that Persephone and Hades are transported into the twenty-first century, complete with “tea and cigarettes for breakfast” and accompanied by “death metal music.” “Mirabel” recalls the oppositions in life with its deep focus on the insides of animals and a child’s understanding that we kill to eat, that we will die, and that without care, she could die—that we are or are not because others are or are not. The book’s final words illustrate this inherent desperation: “the only reason I exist is / because you love me,” says the speaker, who stands on a receding glacier, knowing that vanishing can happen imperceptibly or all at once.

Alert to form, meter, and the individual line, Burleson’s poems demonstrate a deep knowledge of place and motivation, gained through the examination of longing and the component pieces of contentment. Far from being content with their own scope, however, these poems constantly reach for a new understanding of not just character, but also relations to place and event. The journey chronicled in *Never Night* ends, for now, in Alaska and in acceptance of a found peace, but Burleson’s project never really concludes—it continues with each reading in directions unexpected and nonetheless true.

Reviewed by Lauren Leslie