South Dakota State University

From the SelectedWorks of Michael Keller

1984

Reviews of March Light by Ralph Mills, Jr. and Sarah Bernhardt's Leg by David Kirby

Michael Keller, South Dakota State University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/michael-keller/15/
Including:
  Jack Anderson
  Susan Bright
  Robert Dana
  Gene Frumkin
  J. B. Goodenough
  Linda Hogan
  Maggie Jaffe
  William Matthews
  Nance Van Winkel
  Ray A. Young Bear

$3.50
MARCH LIGHT by Ralph J. Mills Jr. (Sparrow Press, 103 Waldron St., West Lafayette, Indiana 47906; 1983; 66pp.) $5.95. Once again Ralph Mills demonstrates that the poet needn’t posture as a blustery omnipresence to write compelling poems. Mills’s unassuming voice speaks with a quiet assuredness about the natural images which engage him. And the language—spare, capable of registering the most faintly perceptible changes in landscape or mood—suits the poet’s purposes precisely: “This yard’s one/plum tree/flowers in red/the spear-tipped leaves/of deepest green—or so they seem in falling/dusk/clarity of sky/a wood fence/dense warming air/close around” (“Porch Steps”). Shifts in light, in wind, in the aura surrounding a moment—these are details Mills brings from the periphery of consciousness into clear focus. Consider, for example, how deftly he preserves a shadow’s flickering: “Above the grass/a shadow-mime/at first light—leaves of red maple/playing/before a white-washed wall” (“On A Wind”). Few poets possess so unerring a sense of where to break a line, or the knowledge of how much can be achieved thereby. Such victories of craft might not satisfy one’s more Whitmanesque moods, but when one desires a less unwieldy terrain precisely rendered, Mills is a poet worth returning to. Also noteworthy is the book’s handsome design by Michael Tarachow. Mike Keller

SARAH BERNHARDT’S LEG by David Kirby (Cleveland State University Poetry Center, Dept. of English, Cleveland State
Univ., Cleveland OH 44115, 1983; 56pp.) $5. If the self-conscious cleverness evident in the work of some of the more celebrated younger poets represents the going fashion in contemporary poetry, then David Kirby has written a decidedly unfashionable book—much to his credit. In fact, one measure of the book's achievement is its ability to show us how patently facile and misguided this fashion is. Set beside the incisive yet compassionate wit of Kirby's poems, the tidy, contrived ironies of, say, Brad Leithauer's *Hundreds of Fireflies* (1982) reveal themselves for what they are: occasions for the author's coy self-flattery which ultimately belittle the integrity of his subjects. Kirby, on the other hand, never permits cleverness to undermine his emotional engagement; rather, wit intensifies his—and subsequently our—commitment to his subjects. In "Lowell Wustiel," for example, the speaker of the poem recalls Lowell, who "At sixteen . . . was the only sixth-grader/ who could drive." An enigmatic, brutish figure in the eyes of his classmates, Lowell naturally enough frightens them—especially after he casually breaks one boy's nose during a boxing match. Yet the poem is far more than a nostalgic remembrance of a local tough, for Lowell himself becomes a kind of beneficent though inexorable physical law personified: "Often I wonder if I'll see Lowell Wustiel/ in the years to come. Sometimes I believe I'd like Lowell to hit me so soft/ that I would never do anything crazy or insincere again./ and every once in a while I imagine him/ out there in the darkness, winding up." Understanding that beneath the derision we publicly direct toward such figures lies an uneasy respect for their disregard of, and exemption from, behavioral norms, Kirby transforms a schoolyard pariah into the stuff of folklore. In the title poem, the author examines one of the less than comforting but necessary bargains life requires of us. Through the speaker's obsessed pursuit of Bernhardt's amputated leg—conferring upon it the status of a sacred relic—Kirby gives voice to the courageous if generally ineffectual resolve we adopt to counter the sheer arbitrariness of the universe: "Leibniz said,/ Why is there anything at all rather than nothing?// I say, 'Why is there Sarah Bernhardt's leg?'/ Love is an act of the will,/ according to Augustine—/ things count because we say so." Here, and throughout, Kirby brings his poems to a sobering, though never somber, conclusion. The tone and diction—casual yet direct—convinces. Master of a variety of subjects and voices, Kirby moves with an attentive eye among the disparate particulars of our lives, never losing sight of the material of our common experience: "the saving sameness of things, the world's grace." Mike Keller