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Epiphany at Goofy's Gas

Greg Keeler

Livingston, Montana: Clark City Press, 1991.

\$9.95; paper.

Reviewed by Ryan J. Benedetti

What is it about this guy? It's not that I'm not hypnotized. Punch drunk is a better description. A literary handbook I have says an epiphany accomplishes "a quick flash of recognition in which something simple and commonplace, is seen in a new light." Well, there you go: Keeler is a master of epiphany. He keeps all his promises.

Keeler goes so far as to give us a new definition of epiphany. His poems show quick flashes of insight but not just from the simple and commonplace. Keeler's lightning insights come from the goofy, the absurd. The whole book fools you with its off-kilter sense, offering such titles as "Pocatello Paranoia," "Swiss Army Sermon," and "A Vast, Dark Winnebago." This goofiness is not the typical cross-eyed-finger-up-the-nose tongue wagging. Instead, it pulls you into Keeler's vision of the absurd in ordinary life. The strength of his poetry: the endings that send you to the mat.

Take, for instance, "Telling Grandma to Shut Up":

She just sat on the hen house stoop
and cried and I tried to explain
how with Mom and Dad it was
well sort of a joke . . .

The poem is about mistakes and attempts to correct them. Each time the speaker tries to correct his blunder, he gets deeper in. He tries to make up for his off-handedness:

. . . but by then all
I could see was her bonnet above
her shaking shoulders and I even
offered to get the strap because
I knew I deserved it even though
I didn't mean it . . .

He picks his grandmother a rose since she won't stop crying:
and when she saw it she cried
even louder because she had wanted
her friends to see it there on
the bush . . .

The speaker becomes tangled in his attempts to alleviate his guilt. Just as soon as we feel trapped in his frustration, the ending snaps back and leaves us with a resonant surprise:

. . . so she stopped crying and
said o.k. go get the strap.

How about something downright cartoon-like that opens wide in the end and swallows us: "Turkey," told in the turkey's voice. (I forced my in-laws to read it over Thanksgiving. Absurdity and the ordinary, what better place for it?) Let's hear this turkey out:

If Ben Franklin had had his way,
I'd be your national bird.
Screw your bald eagle
just another pretty vulture.
Didn't I feed your founding fathers?

Indignation, Keeler shows us, is the turkey's dark legacy. It's the bird's self-reflection that makes the poem. Or maybe it's his inferiority complex:

Perhaps I didn't spend
enough time in the bushes.
Perhaps my head looks too much like a penis.

In the last line, that jerk of insight we get from the turkey's predicament really makes the poem:

and I can't get rid
of this drawl
no matter how far north
Fish and Game tries
to "introduce" me.

The poem doesn't turn out to be an easy, goofy monologue from the turkey. It opens up in this puzzling ending. The turkey becomes a specific turkey, a political turkey aware of his own predicament. This turkey starts as a candidate for the national bird. He is almost a universal bird, an abstraction for the plentitude of America. In the end, he is a specific, concrete bird, a bird who is being removed from his roots. Complex problems for a bird who began as a caricature.

Keeler's endings are not Sunday punches or cheap shots. On the other hand, the one weakness of the book is that some of the endings are not pulled off as well as others. "Homage to Louis L'amour" is a good example. I like what the poem is trying to do—make the world of the traditional Western open up and get crazy. But the poem seems forced and doesn't seem to go anywhere, really. The ending is not as satisfying and competent as I know Keeler to be.

Overall, Keeler's language will wake you, head swimming, into his particular vision of reality. You find yourself wanting to strip down and crawl among Keeler's creatures: the humans are as animal as you or I. You find yourself shaking hooves with existentialist cattle. Keeler's poetry strolls into your house like an ordinary appliance repair man. Pretty soon, you'll find yourself considering Winnebagos and their mythic beastliness. You'll find yourself chuckling on the floor. The repair man will flash his eyes at you. He'll wave his rubber wrench. Later, you'll smash your lawn mower just to get him to show up again. You'll buy a Swiss Army knife and wear it like a St. Christopher medal. Strangely enough, you'll stretch your jaw and beg for just one more.