ForeWord Reviews

Sparks from a Nine-Pound Hammer
Steve Scifidi
Louisiana State University Press
978-0-8071-2693-6
(March 2001)

Not short on words for even the smallest of things, the sparks in this collection are the many bits of language that flare out from the subject, ranging from the death of a father, to loves and intimacies, to figures from history. In “Ode to Rosa Parks” Scifidi writes: “and you did not move when the driver cussed // and it was always dangerous to have any courage in the south.” Other personalities that captivate Scifidi’s pen are St. Cecilia, Robert Johnson, and Jesse Washington, lynched at the age of eighteen in Waco Texas, 1916.

These poems could be essays, though they are quite good at being poems as Scifidi has learned the logic of lines and how a stanza can ratchet the tension of tales told on half a page. While brevity of thought may not be Scifidi’s aim, his diction is disciplined and escapes seeming overabundant. This poet, whose poems have appeared in American Poetry Review, New Virginia Review, and Southern Poetry Review, is most skilled when working with subjects that bring him away from one’s specific concerns, and into the body and mind of another.

The poet’s eye dignifies split seconds, minute details: “the yellow tuxedo pants on a drowned man, the image of an American buffalo that was not shot from a train in a photograph.” Meanwhile, this narrative poet does not abandon the lyric.

The poet’s ear catches the way an infatuated woman pronounces the name “Jimmy Nuse, Jimmy Nuse / for an hour going on about your // private business and I thought there is no finer / thing ever to happen in a man’s life but to have // a woman fall in love with you / and for her to sweetly // tell her friend your name over and over / in a public place.” A good reason, among many others, that Scifidi writes poems.

Holly Wren Spaulding