

## BOOK NOTES



*Facts for Visitors*, by Srikanth Reddy  
University of California Press, 2004  
*Dwelling Song*, by Sally Keith  
University of Georgia Press, 2004  
reviewed by Dan Beachy-Quick

Srikanth Reddy's debut volume opens with a descent into the underworld. He does not, in the middle of his life, find himself in dark woods, but instead, and with an importance that echoes throughout *Facts for Visitors*, imagines the process of dying: "Exit Beauty // Then the page folded to mark her place. / Then the page on which nothing happens. / The page after this page." And the page that "Burial Practice" imagines as the next step into the afterlife complicates the issue of death and literature further. "Corruption" ends with a mutation of a chapter in W. G. Sebald's *Rings of Saturn*, in which the German author eulogizes the destruction of the herring, a fish with the strange capacity to grow phosphorescent days after its death. Reddy turns the historical moment into an imaginative one—tracing the history of ink to the cuttlefish and noting that the cuttlefish, too, glows a few days after death, and more: that "you can read by this light." Death is in the material of the book, and more frightening (and belied by the continual appropriation and corruption of Dante, Conrad, Weil, and Sebald), death illuminates. The decay of life—literary as much as biological—provides the light by which world and word are seen.

The delicate solemnity (and just as delicate, wit) that marks the beauty of what Reddy is doing is tied intimately into these spectral considerations. But Reddy, unlike Dante, has no Virgil to guide him, simply a guidebook—*Facts for Visitors*—which he himself has written. One can feel the moral angst of such a situation, one confounded by the intricacy of the book's title, for facts for visitors are often the very nuggets of "true" in-

formation that stand in the way of actual experience. (How often has one traveled to a strange land guided by books that tell us nothing of the actual experience of the Other?) Reddy quietly suggests that the cavernous depths of our own selves are such lands.

He is not without guide entirely in this search—he carries in his own hand Tradition. Reddy writes in Dante's *terza rima* a series entitled "Circles," also composes villanelles (think of the hellish pleasure of refrain), and, in a series in which Reddy investigates the dichotomy of his own cultural heritage, a series of eclogues taking place in rural India. Here a subtle politics and poetics combine, and the emotion of the work is borne out in the delicate introspection that recognizes the shifting disharmony of describing one's own cultural background in the poetic mode of a foreign culture. I can't stress enough the courage of what Reddy is attempting here: how we see damages what we see, but one cannot in good faith choose blindness.

And so, in "Scarecrow Eclogue," the speaker inserts a poem in the hand of scarecrow and steps back "to look at what I'd done." What he's done is insert the poem into the field, among the workers, to let it become part of the work being done, and his literary song to encounter the song the workers sing. Later, in "Aria," a stagehand watches as an opera set is dismantled. Not only is Reddy the writer of eclogues, of allegories, but he is also the participant—the aristocratic description of a lacquer box, nauseating in its detail, but also a thief dressed up in a bear suit. Such are the true beauties of this poet's work. He gives us allegory as his educational inheritance, but it's allegory without lesson. He gives us sorrow—but it is not the sorrow of observation so much as implication. He is this world of which he writes, and a resident of it. The next page is always quiet, because Reddy listens—but it also sings—and what home there is, he says, is in the singing.

