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Manual

By Richard Berengarten
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Review by Dennis Daly

A psalter of sorts, Richard Berengarten's *Manual* reaches out to the tangible barriers of tangled brush and creosoted borders and reaches in to the foam-tossed mysteries which underlie human consciousness. He prays for connection. Holding the book spine down, ready to open, the front and back covers constitute a subtly shaded set of praying hands a la Albrecht Durer. Receptive palms then appear as one accesses the book's internals. The hands are the hands of an artisan and suggest a metaphoric expression of a poet's fusion with his muse.

Divided into five sections of twenty poems, each poem made up of two five line stanzas, with two additional framing pieces in front and back, the book flows with variations of perceptive images, a wonderful lyricism, and a joyful, if anxious, cohesion.

One continuous theme that tugs with angst through these luminous lines is an artistic critique of mortality and its bedeviling and absurd reality that man must confront. Berengarten sets up the proposition three poems into the first section,

*...how caringly
he tucked and folded chisel into marble
to free those moulded fingers from the rock
that would have locked them still and undiscovered
in solid dark like prehistoric bones*

*had not his own hands risen and in patience
spoken to stone by touch and by their probing
subtle persuasion coaxed those perfect fingers
out of their sheaths and for surrounding stone
substituted charged air and vision and history.*

Then the poet completes the argument at the end of the very next piece,

*... cuffed on either side
by death's invisible officers*

*They would like to thread a needle
But can't pick up anything
They can't even pluck a string
Trembling at the edges of empty pockets
They fumble for non-existent keys.*

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Not that a canny and vigorous humanity doesn't have to answer for the evil doings of these very same hands that are the tools of divine creation. Berengarten ticks off a list of shame in poem 15 of the first section,

*Respected fellows and allies of these hands
have coolly signed death warrants then dined
inspected slaves in quarries mines foundries
designed gaols torture rooms extermination chambers
issued instructions to builders and surveyors*

*pulled first triggers on victims over ditches
personally slit throats and kicked the dying in.*

But even evil can generate transformative moments of valor. Consider these lines from the first section, poem 20,

*Hands of heroes dug tunnels under electric
Perimeter fences surrounding floodlit camps
And before the margin of the treeline tugged
Fellows out free to get away at least some
Distance a little distance through the snows*

The poet as medium opens channels of contact between the dead and the living. This very book crackles with the electricity of potential life. Future readers, not presently alive, may share its stresses and beats. Even the dead are drawn to the beat. They have secrets and want to return. Poem 10 of the second section intimates as much,

*... my bare hands
on the stretched skin membrane the thundering
of the massed dead pursues me everywhere
from the cavern they are holed up in and I know
each one of them is trying to clutch and crawl*

*along the endless tunnel through the unopenable
gate back up into this world and the closest
any of them can come to that impermeable threshold
is in the hollow echo of my hands drumming*

One of my favorite images Berengarten sets in his book's third section, poem 3. The poet depicts old sailors playing a game of backgammon. It has infinity stamped all over it. It also strikes a defiant pose against the imperativeness of death, clothing the protagonists in the colorless garb of nondescriptness and routine, playing life's game—presumably over and over. Here's part of the description of these extraordinary knights of civilization,

*Little they know or care about pasts or futures
who once chugged out past overhanging islands
and caught shoalfuls of fish in their long nets*

*Islands reached stony fingers out to grab them
Hidden rocks and reefs sharpened their nails
Waves grew claws to slash at them and snatch them*

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*Darkness itself unleashed invisible talons
and now they sit outside the café like ordinary men*

Although individual humans queue up to cross over the great divide between life and death, their dreams continue on through the centuries. Imagination, derived from the lower regions of self, has its way by directing the creative instincts and inhabiting the hands that hold a chisel or brush. This resulting art or totem stores the societal energy that feeds the continuity of love's cipher in an alternative, but no less real, existence. Berengarten puts it this way,

*With hands prepared to see, I reach, therefore
past all that intervenes, so find the mark.
Hands fill all space between us with their labor.*

*However minuscule the gap between,
However close, however intimate—
Her face, though known too well, remains unseen,
And that space, never less than infinite,
Means my search, knowing-by-touch, must last forever*

Inexorably the book twists and turns toward a Homeric vision of "loved ones" clamoring for the attention due them. The substance of these apparitions seems suspect. The poet speaks to one ghost with not a little regret. Holding a pair of welcoming hands in the fifth section's poem 11, he laments,

*Betrayals, blames, shames, and many contrived lies
textured our time together. Since we shan't meet
again in the flesh, are these apparitions
reminders of garnered loss, or compensations
for wished-for states we carelessly tossed away?*

Dedicated to Berengarten's mother, the book ends in the mirrored second frame piece with remembrances of that same mother gleaned from his own hand movements. The poet says,

*I find you in those gestures
I used to see you making, which
now, without my reckoning,*

*Bloom again out of my own hands,
as though yours, tenacious
had grown grains of your own
ways of doing and achieving things.*

He sees her within himself and, by sleight-of-hand, she lives again. They connect. And we connect. Thus the dexterous Berengarten manipulates destiny into his magical poetry.