

Library of My Hands
By Joseph Heithaus
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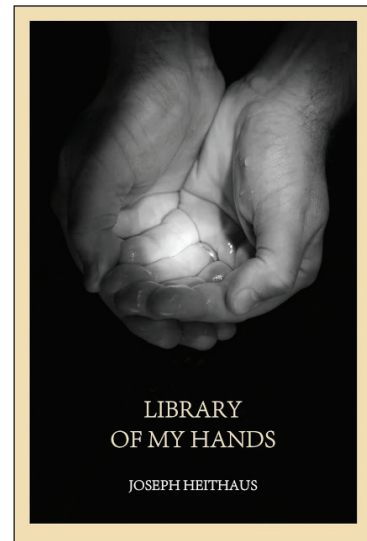
Review by Dennis Daly

Illuminated wonder. Musical sparkle. The transcendent light within everyone. These are the objects of Joseph Heithaus' collection of intimate and ecstatic poems entitled *Library of My Hands*. The book reads like a revelation of family, nature, birth, and death, but always through humanity's compassionate lens. It reminds one of Thomas Merton, or, more to the point, Merton's mystical side. Heithaus covers poetic territory not much dissimilar from Merton, a poet in his own right, who at the corner of Fourth and Walnut streets in Louisville, Kentucky, on a shopping mission for his monastery, observed his fellow passerbys, "shining like the sun." Merton believed he had seen the goodness and the beauty at man's core or, perhaps, he had espied the individual hearts of his fellow travelers. Heithaus runs with a kindred metaphor of light, using his own perspectives and experiences as an approach to metaphysical or, at least, visionary phenomena.

A drama of Genesis opens this collection in three of Heithaus' early poems, *Birth of Light*, *Memorize*, and *Mother's Blood*. Descriptive cosmological words turn to the mnemonic joy of family birth and then to deeper remembrances of that birth. Listen to these marvelous lines from *Mother's Blood*,

*Your mother gave you this blood
that's now become your prism
and mask, your passageway
to the sparkling places
inside yourself. Not tissue
and bone, but memory of memory,
your small fingers once over a flame
to feel the light, light
you first saw from inside
her, she's leaning over the basket
of wet clothes on a morning
before you were born,
that's when you opened your eyes
to amnion light, blood light,
the shadow of her spine, her body
your kaleidoscope...*

Heithaus' piece entitled *Poetry* thrills at the efficaciousness of said subject as well as the aesthetic miracles it surfaces. Poetry lures prizes from



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the unconscious depths and imbues them with unthinkable artistry. On the other hand, the poet, himself, exhibits flaws and claims no intellectual superiority. He is simply a fisherman. Heithaus explains,

*Poetry is how I open
the box with the earth inside
fill it with light
so you see the bait
I bought
to put on a hook
to catch something out
of that box of water
they call a lake,
which, if I'm lucky,
we'll launch out into
in a jon boat,
that keeled box
of air where we'll stand
rocking and looking
at something beautiful
and wet...*

Cemetery, Heithaus' poem on abundance amidst emptiness, contrasts the despair of dark umbrellas and rain at a February funeral with considerations of wasteful glut and sun-generated bounty and hope. In the background a soldier plays taps. The poet sees continuance and exultation in the seasonal panoply of future promise and concludes his piece this way,

*...faces sudden from
dark umbrellas
and rain*

*out
of the black branches
come buds, then blossoms
then leaves, come robin-chatter
and bee-light, tulip-light
coochee-coo-light, more life-light,
bury-the-dead-and-move-on-light.*

My favorite poem in this collection Heithaus titles Toll. In a way, the piece is a counter meditation to John Donne's famous poem, For Whom the Bell Tolls. Heithause puts his emphasis on a baby's coos, trimming the fingernails of an infant, humming a sweet tune to that infant, all things that commemorate especial moments of life. Afflictions are understood and accepted, but not lingered over. The poet tempers the bells' heavy insistence on doom with his own sense of grace. In Heithaus' world affliction is not to be obsessed on; any more than a reminder of death is to be obsessed on. The quiet intervals in-between, the celebrations of life—these are the real gems. The poet opines,

*... even
in this room with its lamplight
and pillows and coos there will be tolls*

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*to pay, unexpected taxes, like those scenarios
we watch from the windows
of our house: divorce next door,
murder across the street,
the slow death around the block
who limps past each day on the sidewalk.
But why dwell there?
There's no end to affliction's treasures
no end to the tolls that hammer
out each hour, nor is there an end
to grace, the bells between the evening's silences,
this moment here when I whisper back
to the woman I love.*

About halfway through his collection Heithaus sets a section of ekphrastic poems he calls Light Studies. All of them are well done, but one of them, *What's Lit*, a poetic commentary on Caravaggio's painting *The Conversion of Saul*, I think is especially spectacular. The painting itself shows Saul (about to become Paul) flat on his back, defenseless. The poet sees neither Saul nor the converted Paul but the moment in between, the becoming. Saul's horse seems to be divinity, the center of power, and he reaches toward it and the dangerous radiance it represents. The title of the poem directs our attention to light that reflects off the horses' flank. Heithaus describes the scene as the poem opens,

*muscle of the forearm, fetlock,
heel and the hand of another
soldier holding the reins,
the horse's barrel, flank, buttock,
and you, between names, splayed
like a baby born out of the night,
the oscuro, the obscure into
the chiaro, the clear and bright,
but your head's still in the shadow,
your left leg, the back
of your hand, your pinky obscured
by that blackness and your eyes
look closed. We know
what will happen when you
open them...*

A blinding light of poetic understanding emanates from this extraordinary collection. Like Merton before him, Heithaus sees and versifies a unique and dynamic vision beyond the pedestrian perceptions of most people. His words simply astonish.