

## Wilderness House Literary Review 17/1

**Good Harbor by Max Heinegg,  
Lily Review Books,  
Whitman, MA, 2022, 55 pages, \$1800.**

*Review by Ed Meek*



Just as art is not necessarily beautiful, poetry is not necessarily eloquent. To write poetry that's eloquent, the poet must first have an ear for what sounds good. Many of our favorite poets have a great ear for sound. Seamus Heaney, Robert Frost, W.B.

Yeats. But poetry that is eloquent is rare. That's Roethke territory: "I knew a woman, lovely in her bones." Or Dylan Thomas: "I sang in my chains like the sea." Or Emily Dickinson: "Hope is the thing with feathers/that perches in the soul." Max Heinegg writes poetry that is a pleasure to read, in the same way that it is a pleasure to view an Impressionist painting or movie made by Terrence Malick or Jane Campion. In *Good Harbor*, Heinegg writes about his family, love, school, the places he has been.

The writer William Kittredge once said that in good writing, the writer juggles a number of balls at the same time. In "Cassiopeia," Heinegg draws from astronomy, myth, and his relationship with his daughters.

*Over a dock in Islamorada, winter shows us  
the Hunter's badge of stars,  
his shield & cudgel raised, but not needed  
against the mortal Scorpius, whose tail  
sleeps in summer skies.*

Heinegg goes on to recount the story of Cassiopeia who "only boasted once that her girl/outclassed the holy spirits of the sea/rousing their father to revenge."

Here is the last stanza where he refers to his daughters:

*The night sky should be the end of hubris  
& the jealous possession that rules us,  
but this is one of the last times  
their inseparable youth and beauty are ours entirely,  
before they quit their rooms & cleave to others.  
Now I know silence is a safer vanity, & why  
she had forgotten what the world is  
ready to take away. Yet  
a ruinous secret, I too  
love my daughters more than I fear the gods.*

In this and other poems in the book, Heinegg captures that fierce love we feel for our children. The musicality is of course due to the choice of words, the richness of the language and the song-like quality of the poem.

"Triptych After Golding" describes his love of teaching in the diverse environment our urban schools have become pointing out the irony of

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the Americanized names of his students when their family names are so beautiful.

*In the public high school diaspora  
the Sarahs walk, Egyptian, Haitian, Brazilian;  
their mother tongues still sing in their middle names:  
Esmael, Nehemie, Pinhierio*

The title poem "Good Harbor" is about a trip to the beach of that name in Gloucester. The title also doubles as a metaphor for family and safety. The poet is there with his family. "Sandbar to sandbar on the last day of August/we walk Good Harbor—" They get a text that a niece is in the ER having eaten poison berries. "The waves rock and collapse/with the weight of our worry...Eventually all of us/see that shame is pointless and self-inflicted."

Although the poems in Good Harbor range from Maine to Florida, their scope remains within the boundaries of home, family and school. In the last poem of the book, the poet is picking blueberries in Acadia.

*We take no pictures. Leave joy  
unlocked  
for others to discover  
summer's pride  
in the ephemeral.*

*While hikers above  
talk of the good salt  
air resting in panorama,  
we offer each other  
all we have in our hands.*

Notice how the last line slows the reader to take in the importance of what he is saying. Lucky for us that Max Heinegg deigns to unlock his verse to provide us with joy and appreciation.