

The Poet Brushes Multiple Canvasses

The Skin of Light

by Larry D. Thomas

Austin: Dalton Publishing, 2010.
64 pp. \$12.95 paper.

Reviewed by
Ken Hada

Readers familiar with the poetry of Larry Thomas have come to expect his economic, laconic language depicting the treacherous, sparse beauty of landscapes, particularly of West Texas with its accompanying violent weather, peculiar wildlife, and rugged surviving characters.

In *The Skin of Light*, Thomas retains his economic style of composition, but in this collection he expands his subject matter in several directions, and it is refreshing to see his powers of observation connecting in new, intricate ways. Careful readers, however, will recognize Thomas' ability to evoke the heart of the human involved in his portraits. The motif of light is his unifying principle in this collection. The book is divided into three sections: "Staggering to Daybreak," "Lustering the Shadows," and "With Fields of Pure Color." The final section is mostly ekphrastic material responding to various media. As always, Thomas captures the terse agony of life, the pain wrapped up in the beauty that attracts us to the figures in the first place. For example, in "As Picasso Died," the poet imagines the artist's "brain swelling aneurysm of light," yet "struggling to fashion a god/from the drawn and quartered face of a lady."

One of my favorites is "Cathedral Builders." The implied relief is staggering when the reader reflects on the overwhelming project that building such a structure involves—a mammoth rock edifice emerging from the sanctified, albeit austere, design of authorities (gothic no doubt) raised to the glory of the almighty, world-creating God! Here, simple men, stone upon stone, respond to the creator of the world with their own elementary

holiness linking earth with heaven. Despite the obvious drama of eternity, Thomas asks his readers to consider the unknown humans who build the celestial castle, the unnamed "blessed few who didn't fall/or get crushed to their deaths." One wonders whether the workers were forced or chosen, willing participants, these men who "toiled their entire lives/on edifices they knew/they'd never live to see finished." The poem is remarkable for its ability to merge the building with the higher purpose of the Church:



the builders "sustained" by a "vision," which they perceived to be as holy as "the raised voices of choirboys." The worship of their labor is slow, a true example of faith that will not see their efforts completed. Centuries later, tourists would look upon these magnificent churches and marvel at the grandeur they inspire. Thomas shows us, however, that grandeur is built one touch at a time. Such is the glory of the unknown laborer whose vital strokes contribute to the culture of Western civilization as the storied structures themselves. The muscled effort of an otherwise crude laborer, given the panorama of time, is not unlike a brush

stroke or the chisel blow of a famous painter or sculptor. The holy is bound up in the task of a moment.

I like "Gibbous Moon" for other reasons—the repetition of the word "almost" as a theme that simultaneously captures longing and loss, anticipation, and disappointment. The moon is "almost full" just as the speaker's "marriages/almost lasted." The word "almost" is subtle in its tragedy because it suggests that the fullness is clearly within knowing, but the inability to have that desired fullness means the loser is all the more pained in the losing. The potential fullness of desire teases and is cruel when the realization does not occur leaving the speaker to "almost/get.../through the night," temporarily distracted from the pain by "music,/art museums/and poems," the absolutely necessary "skin/of light."

Finally I refer to "Apache Child," where a young girl sits on the lap of her great-grandmother to learn a few "sacred words." The poem shows her, later, at home at night "mouth[ing] the words/over and over/till she owns them,/each a priceless glass bead/added to the bracelet/of her soul."

The tenderness of this poem is worth the price of the book. Whereas at least a third of the poems in the book are (finely conceived and structured) ekphrastic responses to museum pieces, this poem portrays a living museum, a girl on the lap of her tribal matriarch connecting intimately to the mysterious heritage she intuitively knows but also to a foreignness that must be negotiated. The poem speaks beyond itself to issues of ethnography concerning the passing of Native peoples and their languages. The poem's tenderness counters the assumed pagan violence associated with the Apache in our stereotypical lore. The poet's description of her elder's words as a "glass bead" on a "bracelet" confronts our superficial notions of enjoying Native artifacts while ignoring the soul

CONTINUED ON PAGE 24

of those who produced them. This elegant poem pays tribute to these individuals, especially the girl, who holds on dearly to something so simple, so precious but so profound. Thomas' poem comments on the human need to memorialize that which has formed us into our current selves.

The Skin of Light looks like a museum piece. The cover art by Chloe Evans, which was inspired by Franz Marc's "Tower of Blue Horses," establishes this feeling and much of the book reads as such. Readers tour a variety of subjects on multiple canvasses with light enough for understanding and for empathy. ★

Ken Hada, an associate professor at East Central University, has recently published two poetry collections: *The Way of the Wind* (Village Books Press, 2008) and *Spare Parts* (Mongrel Empire Press, 2010).