Litany of Flights by Laura Reece Hogan (review)

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It is their glory,
the Japanese autumn maples,
to look so gory . . .
enacting the martyrs’ burning,
depicting the Savior’s blooding. (188)

And more pointedly, in “First Blood”:

Hours before the souls
of the first sinners were washed
with the sacred blood,
the roots of the olive trees
were bathed in Gethsemane. (201)

Throughout these poems, covering many years of close observation and careful craft, Lansdown delights to know God through His goodness and glory, available on every hand. He seeks to know the light from God, shining out of the darkness of ignorance and radiating throughout his soul, that it might “give me the light /of the knowledge / of his great glory / in the face of Christ!” (“Radiance,” 214).

The poems gathered in Abundance demonstrate that God has honored Andrew Lansdown’s aspiration and art. His poems will bring light and delight, insight and second sight to all who read and contemplate them.

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In a web-exclusive interview with Mary Kenagy Mitchell in issue 56 of Image, Paul Mariani describes the poem as “an incarnational experience: the weaving together of the ineluctable cry of the soul with the physical aspects of the human voice.” Laura Reece Hogan’s Litany of Flights communicates just such a cry, that of a soul in love with God.

Though the poem “Absent Warning” appears toward the end of the book, it serves as an ideal starting point from which to enter the collection because it crystallizes the urgent problem that makes such poetry necessary: we have shuttered ourselves to the sacred. The poem’s speaker asks, “Have you seen the invisibility, the thinning / of the wings? The widening gaps, the mornings / quieter by thirty billion beaks?” (70). What could cause the loss of so much song and life? The answer comes with a forceful imperative:

. . . Wake up
to dawn without the chorus, melodies muted.
Open your eyes to blank boughs, badlands

swelling between us, how we vanish feathers
by the terrible power of our unseeing. (70)
Our unseeing is not a passive inevitability but a “terrible power” that we choose to wield. When we treat the mundane as if it were not shimmering with the sacred, we snuff our souls’ flight and fire. Hogan’s poetry helps reintroduce life to the spiritual badlands left by our unseeing. Through metaphors of the natural world—birds, trees, fire—she reveals the numinous. To appreciate what the collection accomplishes, we will first examine the poem “On the Efficacy of a Prophet,” in which the moon serves as a metaphorical prophet. The moon “glides and foreshadows” the sun, which Hogan employs in its traditional role as a symbol for God. The moon “is royal messenger, gentle / ray, and what she speaks bends the burn, what she beams / flickers plunder, the little words of the sun I can bear” (4). Like the prophet and the moon, Litany of Flight reflects glimmers of the divine in language we can process because the raw power of God shines too brightly to encounter directly.

The book contains three sections. “I. Emerged Winged” celebrates the contemplative habits that open us to God’s work within. “II. Loft the Bones” emphasizes surrender of the will and conversion. “III. Scale this Light” highlights the results of spiritual transformation: the devout life and ecstatic vision. Though each section has a general focus, the stages of spiritual development intermingle throughout the book. As with our spiritual lives, the path is not linear. In the chain of grace, each link connects to all others. The book’s organization thereby reflects our endeavors to glorify God, which manifest in turns as longing, suffering, renewal, trust, work, rest, and joy.

The title poem provides something of a roadmap for the collection and touches on the main thematic threads. Litany—a catalog of supplications—manifests in this poem as a list of different manners of flight. With allusions to Eden, airplane travel, Exodus, Jonah in the belly of the whale, and Icarus, the poem depicts flight from, toward, and through, until the speaker finally soars free, swept up by “the Beloved, the one making all things work together.” This ecstatic flight results from surrender of the will and dying to the self: “the painful paring of your hollow bones has made you light.” This eruption of wisdom, care, and contrast suggests that such freewheeling flight is unexpected, unearned, and unimaginable until the soul alights in ecstasy “beyond aeronautical wisdom, transported in joy” (3). Together with the three section headings, the opening poem hints at the book’s narrative arc, which generally moves from a state of longing through a dark night of the soul to surrender of the will, resulting in the devotion and ecstatic vision.

The poet often uses nature to convey the first state, longing for God. In “The Deer,” the speaker communicates spiritual yearning in the emphatic proclamation, “I want / out of the shadow, into the blinding / care of light” (71). “Torchlight” uses red-leafed maple trees to speak of desire for the hand that “kindles, stokes fire, / brings to life again” (75). In the persona poem “Penelope at Her Unweaving,” the Odyssey’s Penelope feels a change coming “like a welting bruise” (41). Penelope seems to refer to this impending occur-
rence when she imagines “a turn / of tide between us, a windswept beach, a clean / start. A fevered hope to awaken the dream, / carried home by the very thing that can save us” (42). If we read the clean start as Odysseus’s homecoming, keeping in mind that Odysseus is neither perfect nor divine, the passage can provide a fresh reflection on humankind, bruised by sin, awaiting the Incarnation.

In one particularly striking passage, Penelope reflects on a bowl that Odysseus commissioned a traveling potter to fashion for her. “I could never take a spoon / to the pretty vessel you left behind / to feed me,” she says. “It gleams its distant glints / and starves me” (41). This concrete and evocative moment parallels the soul’s yearning for God: the body unnourished by the food of this world, longing for spiritual sustenance.

Yearning calls the soul to the next mystery examined in Litany of Flights: conversion, especially mystical communion with God like that of St. John of the Cross in Dark Night of the Soul. The poem “Over the Falls” illustrates conversion using natural imagery, evoking the abandon of plunging over the edge of a waterfall. “In the/ crashing centrifuge/ thoughts fracture, sink,” and in this moment of brokenness, “Once-graceful shapes/ Shatter into jagged/ shards of self.” In our brokenness, we are torn apart to be formed anew, for in the final stanza,

\[
\ldots \text{Love casts a}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{fearless choice of} \\
\text{abandon, overcoming} \\
\text{we plunge into riverhead of} \\
\text{joy. (12)}
\end{align*}
\]

We end up “home” (12). A total leap of faith, the complete dissolution of self, involves all the terror of tumbling over the edge of the waterfall but leads to a glorious home in Christ.

Another dark night of the soul leading the faithful home occurs in the persona poem “His Emblem Over Me.” The speaker, St. Teresa of Calcutta, cries from out of her spiritual desert, “Am I not your cherished bride? / Yet I am abandoned, lost. / Your neglect I hide; I smile, / wear the poverty of your cross.” Through the pain, she relies on “nothing save imprint of [God] / on yielded heart, our home” (13).

A third meditation on being re-formed by divine love unfolds in “St. John of the Cross Addresses the Dark Ray.” This poem is visceral, with “The peeling of the petaled persona, shedding/ of the skins, the luminous sheath sloughed,/ a blistered shell hissing in/ the blaze of [God’s] furnace.” Though the poem opens with the single-word line “Dark,” the furnace fire burns nonetheless, just as God radiates “there / in the not-there” when divine heat reforges the self. The poem ends with “resplendent light” and “dark flame burning,” paradoxical and awe-inspiring (40).

The soul afire with God’s transformative grace opens to the experience of surrender. We find a compelling juxtaposition in “Evidence of a Burning Bush,” which contrasts the unconsumed burning bush in Exodus with the
carcass of a present-day bush that did burn, suffer, and die—perhaps a result of the California wildfires that inspire other poems in the collection. The power of this poem lies in the beauty the speaker finds in the charred sugarbush that has experienced “unknown agony of inferno, brokenness, a death,” but whose “firedeath [births] firelife, ashes for seed burst into being” (69).

In contrast to the motifs of flame and the forge, Hogan uses celestial imagery and forceful verbs in “Morning Star” to portray the soul following God’s will. Steering a boat by the stars, the speaker says, “We surrender the night-bound lamps, / clutch his shimmering words.” Once the soul allows God’s starry light to guide the boat, “Breath and breeze gather / against the heavy warp / shoving, shifting until the boom / judders a new bearing” (56). There’s a jarring sense here, as if we might be knocked off balance by changing course, which we so often are when we must re-orient ourselves to God.

The collection does not rest on the current of mystical contemplation; it also ventures into the world, portraying the devout life of the soul reformed in Christ. “The Prison Angel” studies Mother Antonio of La Mesa prison of Tijuana, who leaves a broken life to “stitch a veil, find / liberty in the cell of a Tijuana prison.” Because of her compassion toward the prisoners and bold care in the face of violence and danger, what she holds “flies free” (33). Other persona poems examine the devout life from the perspective of figures such as Dorothy Day and St. Paul.

In many pieces, like “There is One Splendor of the Sun,” nature imagery reveals the fruits of the devout life, reminding us that, like the moon reflecting the sun, we carry within us “celestial / half-lidded brilliance” because “His star fell down and dimmed for us, // to spark our candles awake, to flame alive molecules, shoots / from the shimmering vine.” (63) Once this divine flame lights the soul, the individual shares in the ecstatic divine vision, capable of perceiving what Gerard Manley Hopkins called the inscape of created things—the essence that radiates with “thisness” and bears the fingerprint of the loving creator.

Through kaleidoscope images, the speaker of “The Eyes I Have Desired” raises a cry of gratitude for abundance in the created world. This poem, like others in the collection, offers eternal perspective rooted firmly in the palpable stuff of the mundane. Vibrant sensory details give dramatic force to “Fusion,” an ekphrastic piece inspired by Salvador Dali’s Christ of St. John of the Cross. Hogan is attentive to Dali’s bold choice of angle and bright color to portray Christ’s desire to save the world, this “wick of a man longing / for his lightning strike,” portrayed by pigments that “flare, / suffuse gold fire,” for “he cannot be dimmed” (61).

We find perhaps the most unexpected study of eternal perspective in “The Filling Tree,” an arresting bloom of a poem set outside of a grimy gas station where a tree arches in fiery splendor. The tree serves as a well-wrought symbol for the Christ:


... it is fire,  
in even flares of bloom over dark boughs,  
improbably reaching over the air and water station,  
confident in its living florets of blood, spilled  
extravagantly, for all. (66)

Wisdom lies in the speaker’s insight that the tree “chooses as its companions / the empty tanks, the change-oil lights, the flat tires, / the ones who notice, and the ones who do not.” The poem reminds us that Christ died for all but invites us to be “the ones who notice” in this “unseeing” world. The entire collection is “a call to the soaring beyond,” to “doorways of egg and gold // and open eyes” (“Nocturne,” 51). Litany of Flights allows us to sense the wings, touch the fire, and glimpse the sacramental vision of saints and mystics.

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Christopher N. Phillips’s research into the reading history of the hymn provides unique insights into hymns separate from their use in congregational singing. Phillips, associate professor of English at Lafayette College, examines the use of hymns and hymn books specifically in the private lives of Americans throughout the nineteenth century. Through his research, Phillips identifies a distinctive role that the hymn played in American society. He argues that the hymnbook was instrumental in the reading culture of eighteenth and nineteenth century America and shows the impact of the hymnbook on sacred and secular learning.

Phillips organizes his book in three sections and examines the hymn in church, school, and the home. He situates his narrative predominantly on Protestant hymns and hymnals, although he includes a brief dialogue on those of the Latter-Day Saints, and a lengthier description of Unitarian contributions in the third section. In contrast to most other hymnological studies, Phillips centers his research on the read history of the genre and its impact upon literary society, instead of the sung history and its impact upon the church.

Before jumping into his first section, Phillips provides important historical background for the reader to contextualize his argument. Phillips connects the reader emotionally to his case by describing many antique hymnbooks in detail. He mentions personal inscriptions and markings throughout the hymnbooks, allowing the reader to imagine themselves in an earlier time and place. As Phillips continues to establish his argument, he notes that a key aspect of his book is conveying “the hymn’s fundamental role in teaching people across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries how to read poetry, an overlooked but crucial element in understanding the