

## HERE IS ONE HAND AND HERE IS ANOTHER

Richard Berengarten. *Manual*. Shearsman Books, 2014.

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*Manual* is the sixth volume of Richard Berengarten's *Selected Writings*. It consists of one hundred small poems each with two stanzas and each stanza with five lines. In this way, the poetic form reflects two hands and five fingers. We are reminded of the British philosopher G. E. Moore holding up his hands and stating, "Here is one hand and here is another; therefore at least two external objects exist; therefore an external world exists." Similarly, in *Manual*, Berengarten begins with bedrock certainties and uses them as leaping off points for a poetic and everyday imagination.

There is little doubt that Berengarten is a master of form. The first five volumes of his *Selected Writings* include stunning long poems such as "Do vidjenja Danitse," which is a farewell to the former Yugoslavia, as well as short lyrics, book-length sequences, and everything in between. What is remarkable, however, about this collection is that Berengarten uses a simple ten-line form to balance and bring together varied and seemingly divergent topics. In *Manual*, he describes imaginary worlds, childhood games, mountain climbing, aging and death, playdough and the Paleolithic Venus of Dolní Věstonice, all with an eye towards collage. Despite its highly structured framework—the *one hundred poems are even further divided up into five sequences of twenty*—the numerological patterning of the collection is largely imperceptible to the reader. This does not, however, diminish its importance. Berengarten has discovered that it is second nature for us to count out things on our fingers, regardless of whether they are items on a grocery list or the lines of a poem.

It is this impressive variety of subject matter all held together by the ineffable pleasure of counting that makes *Manual* one of Berengarten's best collections to date. Take for example the second sequence, "Holding the Darkness," which was originally published as a chapbook in 2007. The second poem in this sequence begins:

The sun took the boy by the throat  
The sun put his hands on the boy and throttled him  
and out of the sun climbed a man  
down the sun's own red and purple threads  
because it was evening



Anscombe, is approaching an epistemological limit that flickers in and out of consciousness and establishes certainty.

The final poem in *Manual* is a frame-piece that parallels a similar piece at the start of book. So the collection contains two extra poems, reminding us that this project unfolded over the last thirty-five years and is still ongoing. The final poem is an elegy for Berengarten's mother, Rosalind Burns, to whom the book is dedicated. Like the shadows on the walls we make with our hands, this poem calls our attention to the gestures we unconsciously inherit from our parents and how those gestures are a form of memory. The elegy echoes Beckett's *Worstward Ho*, where he writes, "The child hand raised to reach the holding hand. Hold the old holding hand. Hold and be held." Berengarten's *Manual* urges us to recognize the human element in the things that we do, which in Berengarten's case is writing poetry:

Curious how suddenly, Rosalind,  
out of a buried remembering,  
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 roots,  
had grown grains of your own  
ways of doing and achieving things,  
deviously, through and into mine.