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Clarion Review ★★☆☆☆ POETRY

Situations Before Heaven

Carl L. Johnson II
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A young man embarks on a journey to re-invent himself as a Christian man and pens a series of poetic prayers that document the joys and challenges he experiences along the way.

As with any collection of poetry, *Situations Before Heaven* is not a book to be consumed in one sitting. If these one- to two-page verse-like prayers are to be appreciated at all, one should approach them slowly and with an uncritical eye, for the quality of the writing detracts from the overall package. Though with a decidedly contemporary point of view, Johnson's recurring themes of praise for God and curses for his enemies may occasionally remind one of similar verses scattered throughout Psalms of the Old Testament. One will never, however, equate the baseness of Johnson's language with the literary majesty found in those ancient prayers. There is no doubt that the hardships Johnson seeks to overcome are real, or that his dependence on God's help is authentic. But he is not, unfortunately, a Christian convert with a great facility for the English language. Even when one grants wide allowances for the street level vernacular that derives from Johnson's presumed environment, this is still a breed of poetry that is sometimes alarmingly crude and immature. Sensing the sincerity from which Johnson writes, it becomes painful to stumble across lines like "Thank you for a female in my life that wasn't a tramp." Most readers will not be willing to overlook Johnson's use of "have sleeked" when he clearly meant "have sought," or "bosom" instead of "blossom."

There are some moments in this book, however, where the simplicity of Johnson's expression serves him well. If not polished, the poetry is at least honest, and one hesitates to utterly discard a book that can, despite its obvious weaknesses, express in plain language just how difficult it can be to change one's life. These are the words, after all, of a young man trying to rise up above a troubled past where some friends and family members still try to hold him down. The obstacles that confront him are not insignificant, and it is solidly in the realm of possibility that other young people in similar situations could find both strength and comfort in Johnson's prayers.

Not a devotional book that will appeal to a general Christian audience, *Situations Before Heaven* may yet find a home among readers who recognize themselves in the author's struggles and are searching for spiritual support rather than a refined literary experience.

DIANE TAYLOR (June 3, 2011)

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