

The discovery of heaven. 2006

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The
Discovery_{of}
Heaven

Poems by Richard Hedderman

A P A R A L L E L P R E S S C H A P B O O K



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The Discovery of Heaven

Poems by
Richard Hedderman



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FIRST EDITION

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For Robin

*I should have begun with this: the sky.
The sky binds me tight
and sweeps me off my feet.*

- Wislawa Szymborska

Steelhead

When it rips the surface,
the thick tail shudders,
with a brazen slash
salutes the greensward
and the roll of the hills
and smacks the untried air.

The fish, armed now with the gun-metal
tang of blood in the mouth, charged
with the hook's voltage,
arcs into the day's blue tropic,
oxygen scorching its gills.

The fisherman foam-flecked and agog,
takes in the marvelous heft and shine,
the unknowable flare of the jaw,
the flint of the eye.

The river poised now to collect the fish
and grow quiet again.
The air standing around it in fathoms

as it staves off the sky's clutch,
the pull of the world,
and descends.

Ophelia

Under spring stars,
he touched my face and breasts
and the innumerable moons of my body.

For months, I listened for him
everywhere, hearing his laugh now and again
down stone corridors or across the hushed drifts
that chilled Elsinore.

And once only did I find him,
that shadow darkening his strange brow
talking to the players in whispers
in a cold chamber.

My refuge, then, was the childhood willow
where I climbed and sang clear
above the brook.

And when I descended into the arms
of the water, I turned slowly
listening with eyelashes, fingertips,
one arm thrown out to the current
that swallowed me like snow.

Avocado

An avocado rests
on the kitchen windowsill;

luxurious carriage of green light,
globe and oblong moon of spring.

Indecipherable runes ripple the dark skin
as though it had passed through fire.

And set in the jade of its pale flesh,
the dark brown nut like rubbed mahogany.

Take a long knife and cut the avocado
in two. Cradle it in your two hands. The odor

is slightly musty, like an old well
where the five senses come to drink and drowse.

Beowulf Approaching the Danish Coast

At first light, land emerged.
A shade deeper than the sea
and aching with the silence
of a plundered church.

When the crew hailed land
I came to the rail and saw him,
one of Hrothgar's men,
posted on the shore and forgotten.
Straddling a shaggy horse, he waited

on the immaculate neck of beach.
He was like any sentry. Nervous,
swathed in hides, grimed fingers on the reins.
A ghost the wind had changed to stone.

He knew nothing of us,
nothing of cordage or tides
or navigating the ice-mists
of the whale-road.

My men, their lashes snowed with salt,
were suddenly hushed in the off-shore smell
of wood smoke and bogs.

I waited for him to speak.
I stood alone
in the listening prow
too brave for weapons
and my eyes blue as a hurricane.

Bliss

The tomatoes cool themselves
in the long breezes,
hoarding in their flesh
fabulous waters.

In the dry season, they are red cups
drinking summer light.

Late August, they grow lustrous,
dense in wild, scarlet clusters.

I have come for them
with a basket and a knife,
my thirst ripened.

Picked, they shine in my hand
like wet stones, their skin like ours
burnished after love.

Horse Lessons

for M.B. and Bastion

In late afternoon light,
I'd watched him round the paddock,
sweeping closer with each pass—
a river of prairie wind.
Dust was everywhere.
green dust of alfalfa, ancient dust
of horses, floating in spears
of sunlight just beyond the cool dark
of the barn. I'd learned
the lesson of the cross-ties—
not to cross behind—and never again
to lean on the electric fence.
I'd learned to groom him,
to work slowly from head to tail,
keeping the curry comb moving
in tight, vigorous circles. That day,
as I worked the comb,
his coat flowed and rippled under my hand,
as the roots of my own muscles
began to ache and shudder.
He grew still. The great, brown muzzle
dipped toward earth,
eyes bright with power
as I brushed clouds
from his astonished coat.

All at once I seemed aware
of everything: the infinite strokes
of the comb, smell of hide and hay,
the weight of horses, long evening skies,
the bliss of summer grasses,
and imagined he would ascend
and ride the perfect air. I spoke
as I brushed, though I knew
I didn't have to, repeating his name
like a spell into an ear
that twitched with recognition:
Bastion, Bastion, Bastion.

Choosing A Stone

Go out and gather stones
when it's raining,
on a day when a single gesture

anchors the world, and a stone
reflects the deeper contemplation
of whoever cradles it,

shining and wet in his palm.
Its silence is of men
who have fished too long,

of hunters who return home
through bare trees.
Lover of animals, namer of stars,

choose a stone, dense with the weight
of an unanswered question.
Plunge it into a lake

where the dark surface
has been smoothed by cold.
The world shudders in its absence

which the widening rings
quietly confirm.

Clouds

Sometime, just watch the sky-map
of clouds drift over the trees
or down the length of a pond.
How easily the sky gathers its terrain
crossed by valleys and roads.

Watch carefully for the countries:
A map of Japan or a Norse land,
its chilly borders shaded with firs,
its earth churned by a flying horse.

Yesterday, I lay back
against the forest floor
and watched as they billowed past,
those water-colored galleons
of the east, their sails dragging.

They made the aspens rattle,
the quaking leaves remembered
their passing,
and I knew then what it was
to stretch out in silk, in umber.

Birches

Why does the mind travel back
to those bone-
white limbs? Locked
in memory—the sound
of white trunks
swaying at night.

I saw birches
loosen in the fog.
Old silk
Chinese drawings
unfolded.

On a cold morning,
birches awoken.
Around them were built
strong houses of daylight.

Cold winter morning.
The forest so crisp
I could hear it. Birches
around a deep lake
throwing shadows.

I would choose: drown
in that whiteness,
or take hold of a living branch
and for a while,
be pulled back
into the quiet roots of my life.

Fisherman

for Joe Kilgallen

Your lake is quiet now.
Not even the geese darken its plain
as the pike, the old ones,
wait for you in their deep shoals.

I remember nights we fished there together,
drifting and casting under trees
that blossomed heavily in the dark
in the hope that a lunker might rise.

And I want to tell you, Joe
that the branch of the dogwood
still flowers,
that the nets of the fishermen
still glisten.

And I remember once, I watched you,
where the blueberry thickets bent deep,
wading the shallows and gathering berries
and the shadows of berries.

Praise for My Oyster Knife

Horn and tooth, weapon and tool,
the stainless knife blazes with a crow's smile,
twists round to north,
toward the mouth
of the nearest oyster;
its thirst assuaged solely
by the unholy blood of a stone.

Steel against bone,
the knife finds its place
at the stubborn hinge—
the notch behind the ear
—and plunges forth.

The edges of the shell
fly apart
revealing a secret world
that accepts the knife,

accepts the smile.

*For a Shell Found on the Shore,
Ogunquit Beach, Maine*

Half stone, half heart,
heart-sore in the unfathomed depths.
Your distance was the night,
the sea-plain
among whose ghosts and weeds
you finally abandoned the strange, battered
muscle of your heart.

As darkness was salting
the heavy tides,
you were summoned
from your long exile at sea,
lulled by our low breathing
and the hush of our slumber,
drawn, like us
down the sea-roads full of ink
to this landscape illumined by sleepers.

The Discovery of Heaven

for Robin

Even beforehand the questions started:
How many angels? How many reincarnations?

Only the one God? Where
is the afterlife? How about potatoes?

Coffee? Are there green vales and good pasture?
Boogie-woogie piano?

Was it somewhere to go, like smoke,
when you drifted up through sleep?

One day, martins darted on high winds
in the blue void between two sudden worlds,

incomprehensible, without measure.
Then heaven became a place

to lie down in for an hour,
with the long summer sun on our faces,

amid the drone of bees in a tended garden,
and above us the vitreous savannas of cloud.

Television

Late at night, when the channels finally go off the air, bogwater fills the circuits and the angered technicians are out on country roads checking the lines for trouble. In your living room, the panicked cables have stopped coming in and the screen is clogged once again with the dust of the sea. Once more, the television is just a stone blinking into heavy rain. Suddenly the whole room flares in the drizzle. The television snares whatever animals haven't yet climbed trees, apologizes to whoever is still hiding under the bed, and calmly nails your nightmares like a coin to the mast of a ship in an electrical storm. The Arctic and sub-Arctic continents are ablaze. I could go on but it's raining on the TV now, the static raining like a plague. Try now to switch off the tube and jump into bed before the snow starts falling.

The First Player's Monologue

We will use all gently, my lord,
even the darkness that englobes
the fluttering soul of each candle.
We will wait for your signal—
standing on a coffin lid,
sawing the air with both your hands
—and begin at the raven's first,
querulous cry, long after twilight
has cleared the ramparts. Soon,
we will find ourselves once again
in the garden, where sooner or later
we all come to ruin, and will orchestrate
your disharmony: this play about poison
and torches, the malevolence of power
and the evil of gardens.
We will show how he died, your ghost:
where the sunflower nodded in perpetuity,
where a root slept, and a tree
burnt in the sunlight; where a heart stopped.
I, too, will be nervous
as I approach the sleeper
and the ear, that cauldron of suspicion,
fluting inward and mirroring the labyrinth
of the soul. We will do it so the king
will recognize himself,
even in the smoky light
of the tapers, and shudder. Observe!
If he twitches like a fly, or leaps up
in a flurry of gestures!
The torches will dim, if only for a moment,
silks will rustle and tapestries whisper
in the sudden, incandescent quiet.

Hair will bristle at the touch of horror.
We will remain still and let death
take its stance among the groundlings
of this rotten state.
Your father will hear
the oboes stop as the cries
of the guilty unearth him,
the last note lingering
on the liquid porches of the ear.
And the next time you see the ghost,
have him breathe on a mirror
and prove his shape; death
is just the absence of time.
The rest is silence.

Hrothgar to Beowulf

In my time, I saw crops rise
warrior-thick and maidens,
their ropes of hair shining;
stallions set off in blue mist.

Now there is only sadness in the depth
of the harp. In its throbbing,
the wail of a thousand warriors
dead under my command whose flames
the candle no longer sustains.

The stamp of a hoof in the courtyard—
sharp memory.
I am old now, I sense it
in the odor of smoke at dusk.
Why do the grasses
grow so long in summer?

I will die, Beowulf, and so will you
in your turn. They will find me
one morning on a bench by the hearth,
a bowl of milk in my lap,
women sweeping around me.

But you, let your blood spill
when it is time, that its flowing
like the blast of a battle-horn
may sustain the pride that drives you.

For know this, Beowulf:
Age gathers together fragments of time;
the grasses that grow so long
are finally whitened by snow.

Threading a Needle

Forget about the rich man and the camel.
Forget blunt fingers, failing eyesight,

the dim November light. The needle's eye
is forbidden to anyone poised with thread

at its impossible aperture. Splitting an atom,
I suspect, is easier. Luck is easier.

Behold then the concentration of a sewer
sitting under a lamp, her entire being bent

to the threading, thumb and forefinger flourishing
the hopeful *perfect* sign. She holds the needle aloft,

eyes narrowed, peering toward fabulous distances,
the thread a lifeline through eternity's keyhole,

inscrutable noose that will never be snugged.

A Cup of Tea

for Robin

When I stand at the stove
and pour you a cup of tea,

I am a tree bending low
over swampy ground.

Around me, leaves steep
in a cold mist.

Steam swirls quickly up
into the air,

unravels its first sentence.
Rising, it turns into light,

and the light becomes chill air
leading me

into black night
and the vault of stars beyond.

This is the first lesson
of true living.

Prayer to a Future Daughter

Already, I count those snowbound nights
when I will be awake with you,
your lights coming on so slowly,
as we embrace and console each other
numbering together the dusty constellations.

I believe in you, voyager
of the shadowy fathoms
that veil us from each other.

And I wonder what will bring you forth
to that place where I will divide
my flesh with you. When I have passed
great forests in silence or passed
through the fire of the end of another day?

But I would tell you now, if I could,
not to be afraid, that the moon
is just a lost tooth, a childless gypsy
astray in the blue.

That one day your flesh will whiten
and grow dense as this dawn
that I hold now in my arms.

The Insomniac's Monologue

I can't sleep.
But you know that already.
Instead, I lie awake
on a bed of nails, one ear swaddled
in the pillow's cauldron,
tossing in razor grass.
The world has stopped.
It listens to my heartbeat
in the impenetrable, hangman's quiet.
The clock nails down the hatch
on another minute, the gate slammed
shut on another opportunity
now consigned to someone
more deserving. The digits are bright splinters
of time, green as lichen on night's mute
wall. Mice scratch in the puzzle of night.
How fragile the world, how tiny.
How flat sleep's tundra,
and without landmarks.
Nothing near or far,
but somewhere a grave is being prepared.
Somewhere, there is a fork in the night,
a place where the path divides
and a choice must be made.
I have never reached that place.
Instead, I am trying to sleep
as night erodes, leaving only another dawn
and the light that will once again illumine
an inexplicable city.

Why I Don't Write Down My Dreams

It's more than just the fish on a bicycle,
or any of the classic strophes of lunacy,
the inexplicable and simply alarming:

It's always some confusion
like the thing just wont flume on the prawn
no matter how hard you force it,

or your wife's head appears on the basketball
with which you were about to make love.
It's always a Grand Central Station

of complications, chaos, entanglements,
missed opportunities and just plain foolishness
with which you have almost nothing

to do: your father whipping
around the corner with the laundress's notebook
as you stand in the dark street yelling,

"Thief! *Voleur!* Somebody stop that man!"
But he doesn't hear you, and keeps right on
going. In fact, no one hears you. That's the way

it is in dreams. You're mute, and they're deaf,
and it usually doesn't improve. Or you're running
against overpowering wind, your mouth wadded,

and there's no one to stop you
as you tumble into the void
you so desperately need to cross.

Or it's another fashion show featuring
Sigmund Freud in his first slip,
a lacy, black whisperweight affair, deeply-scalloped

and flame-stitched with high side slit and deep scoop
neckline, his face mirroring your own: a stunned mask
of enduring surprise and pain.

The Invaders

Their crest is a raven
perched on a dead branch.
Smoke from a besieged city
their tattered flag.

Drained by pillage and ambushades,
all invaders finally are the same:
exhausted, bloodied, far from the sea.

Navigating by stars already burned out,
and following the branches of snow
into evening.

Plundered villages burn
under the north star.

And as the wind sweeps their tracks,
a wounded captain stands in the snow,
a broken compass held to his ear
like a shell.

Dove

Toward dusk,
set it near
an open window.

It will take flight,
scanning fens
and flooded crossroads—

all the landmarks
of sleep.

It has sung
from the cupped hands
of a saint,
it was held aloft

in a lightning storm
by a fevered prophet,
and brandished like a torch—

bruised with rain.

The Prodigy's Monologue

In countless gambits, I sacrificed
legions of pawns on the bitter geometry
of the chessboard. My blind uncle taught me.
He was a Prussian, an officer in the Great War
who'd learned chess in the trenches.

By age two, the kitchen floor
was my field where I played war
with tiny lead soldiers, each square—
obsidian, zones of startling pearl—
a country poised for capture.

I loved the purity, the severity,
and insoluble arithmetic of the crossroads.

I loved the rigors of the board, its severity
and disappointments. Upon its broad plains,
I learned the sacred disciplines:
cartography and astronomy,
cosmology and metaphysics,
learned wisdom from my opponents
and humility from those I routed.

By age six, I had commanded armies,
seen the burning rooks of Ilium.

By age seven, nothing frightened me.

As a young man, I studied military history,
sprawled with the board on a scarlet rug.

The ebony pieces glowered in firelight,
the alabaster flared like phosphorus.

I came to know the terror of the game clock.

I plotted ambushes and flanking tactics,
learned to yield, sacrifice and to perish.

From the turrets of a rook,

I listened to withering silences,
across a landscape where pawns
were extinguished in anonymity.

I saw the dead swept to the end
of the immaculate and perfect board.
One day, I will retire
and live in the tall, fierce tower,
climb its cool, dark stairs
and survey the lands I have conquered:
Gaul and Persia, Phoenicia, Germania
and Troy. The bishop will pronounce us
Master and Queen, and I will take you
up the white rook's ivory stairs
to see, at last, the edge of a ruined world.

Coat of Arms

Choose from among them,
that would be my way,
for there are as many as dead in a cemetery.

a full moon, it's flags burning;
a regiment of defeated crusaders
retreating across a dark field,

or naked lovers, their fists in each other's hair;
a naturalist with sheepdog and scythe;
some armaments and a drum,

and a wide, shallow bowl of red fruit.
A querulous maiden, her hair
about to catch fire.

Then there's the tall window of thick glass,
stained by crushed hawthorns
and the end of the day.

A few pale stars wink out
over the horizon where a dream
uncoils and awaits. Revenge
sweetens the sky.

In my favorite, there's no fountain or orchard
in sight, no sheaf of barley,
just a clutch of fiery roses and a scarlet wound
where the family name was torn away
to make a headstone.

The Wolves

The wolves howl because the rivers
have frozen, because under moonlight
the plains are endless,
and the silk roads and caravan routes

are no longer traveled
by those boreal marauders in thick furs
whose mounts once churned the snow
of moon-bound steppes.

The animals have learned to avoid us
and we live now in the dark,
all directions the same: Elsewhere.
No longer served by weapons,

we listen to wolves at night
as another squall lengthens our vigil
and stars fail.

The Last Day of the World

Already, on isolated farms, men
dazed by a sudden frost
are herding their ghost cattle.

A fisherman, sitting by a brook,
inspects the scar from a childhood wound
as the deep ear of the water unfurls.

The farrier, too, sits alone
the bellows held loosely in his hands
like a divining rod.

The owl's deep questions patrol the marsh
as they always have. The hawthorn
and the ash, under all that cloud,
are still inscrutable.

There is no prophet,
no oracle to herald with silence
the cool rim of the world breeding thunder,
or rain flickering on the last rose.

Sleep

My face is always the first part to leave my body
and wander off into the heavy darkness.

All of its bones folding up, growing thin as needles
and leaving the rest of the body behind.

Perhaps I go about with no head,
leaving footprints as if it were snowing.

Then I understand what the violin strings
have been telling me, why the grasses grow
so long in summer.

How the grasses have been teaching the sky
to move in little steps.



RICHARD HEDDERMAN is a poet, freelance writer, and museum educator. He is a graduate of the University of San Francisco's English and theatre programs and earned a master's in creative writing at the University of New Hampshire. A three-time Poetry Fellow at the New York State Writers' Institute under the directorship of Irish poet John Montague, his poems have appeared in numerous national and international publications including *Chautauqua Literary Journal*, *South Dakota Review*, *CutBank*, *Stolen Island Review*, *Puckerbrush Review* and the Welsh language literary journal *Skald*. He has read his poems for the "Poetry at Noon" series at the Library of Congress and his work has been collected in the anthology *In a Fine Frenzy: Poets Respond to Shakespeare* (University of Iowa Press, 2005). In addition to writing, Richard is a lecturer at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and a member of the Society of American Fight Directors, teaching and choreographing stage combat for professional theaters and universities nationwide. He plies his craft with pen and sword from his home base of Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

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