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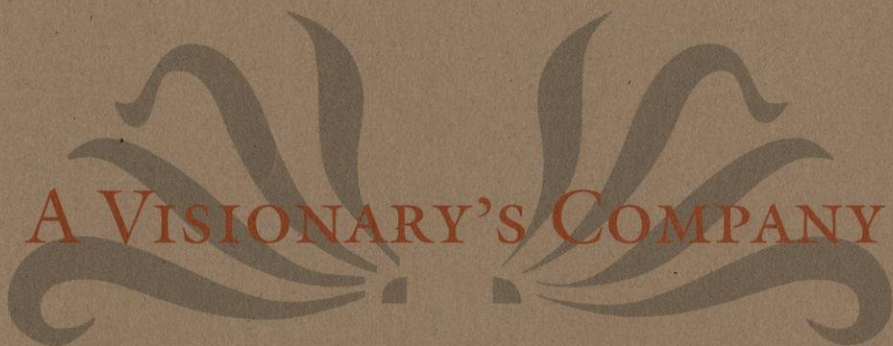
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A VISIONARY'S COMPANY

POEMS BY RICK HILLES

RICK HILLES is the 1999–2000 Halls Poetry Fellow at the University of Wisconsin's Institute for Creative Writing. His poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, and *The Paris Review*. His poetry has earned him *The Missouri Review*'s Larry Levis Editors' Prize, as well as fellowships from the MacDowell, Djerassi, and Vermont Studio Center colonies. Rick was a Wallace Stegner Fellow in poetry at Stanford University from 1995–1997, received a B.A./L.S.M. from Kent State and an MFA in Writing from Columbia University. He lives in Madison, Wisconsin.

Parallel Press is an imprint of the General Library System, University of Wisconsin–Madison.

ISBN 1-893311-09-0



RICK HILLES



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PARALLEL PRESS

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ISBN 1-893311-09-0

I want to thank the editors who published these poems, sometimes in earlier versions, in the following journals: “Song for an Empty Hand” and “The Dangerous Light” appeared in *The Nation*. “Visions of Captivity: Neulengbach, 1912” and “Novalis” and “The Four-Legged Man” appeared in *The Paris Review*. “Insleave for *A Hieroglyphic Key to Spiritual Mysteries: Published Posthumously in Stockholm, 1784*” appeared in *Salmagundi*. “Fessing Up” appeared in *The New Republic*. “A Brief Folklore of Typography” appeared in *Columbia: A Magazine of Poetry & Prose*. “A Visionary’s Company” appeared in *Poetry*.

I also want to thank the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the Wallace Stegner Fellowship Program at Stanford University, the Djerassi Foundation and The MacDowell Colony, Inc. for the great gifts of time, support, and refuge.

Published by
Parallel Press
General Library System
University of Wisconsin – Madison

FIRST EDITION



Contents

<i>Song for an Empty Hand</i>	7
<i>Visions of Captivity: Neulengbach, 1912</i>	8
<i>Insleave for A Hieroglyphic Key to Spiritual Mysteries: Published Posthumously in Stockholm, 1784</i>	11
<i>The Dangerous Light</i>	13
<i>Fessing Up</i>	14
<i>The Four-Legged Man</i>	15
<i>Novalis</i>	18
<i>A Brief Folklore of Typography</i>	20
<i>A Visionary's Company</i>	21



Song for an Empty Hand

This is my bit of bottled moonlight, my lightning bolt.
This, my What have you done for me lately?
My place where each might be held separate
and then reintroduced, more susceptible to beauty

and to love. In the long night of the body, the mind
climbs out its snail shell ear. Like an owl
its head turns, impossibly around, before it flies
across whole continents of feeling. Snow squalls

raging in the rust-belt do not deter it, nor do
the Himalayas, the Mojave, or Beijing;
skinheads in Vienna, the bones of Mogadishu.
May even the horrors of the earth lengthen its wings.

And the body is beautifully there, like hoarfrost.
Tears on its face now glimmering like dimes
caught by a vagrant's hands; or a stream, thought lost,
that breaks through fresh snow at wintertime.

Visions of Captivity: Neulengbach, 1912

after Egon Schiele's Prison Diary

1. *Crude Hours Which Pass Over Me Like Animals*

Even now I do not understand
the spat and hissed and murmured words
strangled out of throats in distant cells;
harangue of murderers

and petty thieves washes over me
each night, until it is too wet to sleep,
and I paint these prison walls to dry.
Only later do I fathom

the content of their noise: the story –
Why have I been bured here?
By morning my chronicle disappears,
pulled into masonry

by some animal of unknown origin,
without name. Dust, webs, bile, sediment
from sweat and soot cover the plaster
of this cage. Stains darkest

where my bed touches the wall and white-
washed lime rubs offs and comes unsheathed.
*It's frightening. Now, even a fire
in my cell would be*

beautiful. Tomorrow, the guard
will let my friend bring watercolors.
Thoughts diffuse after dusk. I hear
Trieste, the sea, and open.

2. *The Room In Which An Orange Is The Only Light*

I paint the cot in my cell,
the corridor, and rubbish of inmates.
Draw the organic movement

of the water-pour, the unsightly chair.
Smudging color to give them shape.
Last night: hoarfrost; the trembling.

Moans – distant, soft; desperate.
At last the minor angels of apathy
stretched out their numb and fragile limbs

upon the frightened dying, dressing them
in sleep. The eye of every other god
now far from here or gazing elsewhere.

Not even their dander falls to us.
Herewith the stink of sweat and lye,
the rot of wool and linen, an orange.

V. brought it yesterday. Last night, it was
my only light, that small indefatigable.
It did me unspeakable good.

3. *The Trial: Lord, Open Your Jeweled Eyes*

The irretrievable hours have sifted.
A courtroom near Vienna. A gavel
slams. Order. Uncharged and held
without bail, here I learn my crime:

Impropriety. That young vagrant
haunts me still. She came to my room
one night, disrobed, insisting she work
for rent; and though underage, unlovely,

I obliged. Now the judge manhandles
my designs, intrudes the parchment
of her, the study confiscated when
they pulled me from my bed. Lifted

to his lamp, he thumbs the parted legs,
the darker creases of her sex, where it
did not reach light. He adjusts the wick,
beholds her from within. *Pornography.*

This unfinished nude, not my best,
unnerves me. I could show them things—
they would bury me alive. Above,
the paper seal glows amber over

flames and air looms, fragrant. I've
known whores whose hair smelled like
this, burning in bedside lamps.
What the judge does now is willful,

sleight of hand. The darkening parchment
gains circumference like a black hole
he threads the fire through. His moon
enlarges rapidly – a monk's hairline

instantly receding at the crown, taking
in its flame, her skin. Embers sprawl
to the baliff's box, wind scattering
her crushed bones like mice in white scrawl.

Insleave for *A Hieroglyphic Key*
to Spiritual Mysteries:
Published Posthumously in Stockholm, 1784

for Emannuel Swedenborg

What *cannot* be said of the scientist
who blamed his toothaches on demons
lost his teeth as an old man,
and grew others? When he discovered

there was no Hebrew word for ecstasy
he grew a labyrinth in his garden.
And when he found it lacking
he built a pyramid of glass

and opened all its mirrored doors.
Once he turned a prism for hours
until it made a view of a garden
and its inner door. Then he turned it

inward, focusing on the blood as nexus
for the soul. The gardeners saw him
calling out to nothing, mouthing words
to shadows and vacant chairs.

Then they remembered the prophet
Ezra, how he heard the voice
and drank from the floating cup,
growing wise and drunk on what-

ever passed through him. They knew
visions were more than *tardemah*,
more than madness or deep sleep,
for when he woke, he remembered

everything. Like Ezra, their master
woke prepared to advise them in matters
of the soul, to explain correspondences
between invisible worlds and words,

but held his tongue, having reached
deeply into the foggy problem of silence,
the horizon uniting the seven waters
and sky, to be lifted, carried far

and returned, if only to bring back
the dense colors rising there, scarlet
spreading over his eyes like a field
of flowers in the distance, blossoming.

The Dangerous Light

You pay a price for this—for all this nosiness.
In rooms where you are not wanted, a light
goes out. Venetian blinds blink once and close.
The heat that comforts you speckles your sight.
That black man, he with the white cane, he knows:
You pay a price. He told me he knows the night
we know, but all the time. Sometimes it glows
around the edges like a blind made bright
from behind.

But often it does not.

He sleeps, and the darkness darkens more.
It covers his face like strands of lover's hair.
He takes them in his hands, rubs the cornstalk
silk and scent across his skin. The paramour
unlocks the room now opening on air.

Fessing Up

I went to Chicago once, but I didn't inhale.
Once I was writing a song with a friend
in a dormitory, when a gardener walked up
to an open window and said, What you boys
need there is a minor chord. Of course
I breathed in Illinois, I watched my breath
materialize and disappear like little tempests
that consider themselves out of existence,
but I didn't really take it in. Sure
there was the man whose car stopped
in front of us on the snowy onramp.
A Schlitz can fell out the door, rolled half a foot
onto the highway, then breezed beneath his car.
"Poquita gas, poquita gas?" he pleaded,
banging on the frosted glass with a crumpled twenty.
How could I tell him I was from out of town,
that I have no sense of direction
and couldn't return to this exact spot
even if the survival of the species depended on it.
We didn't even share a language. Not really.
I only know enough Spanish to go to the bathroom.
My Greek is good enough to get me slapped.
In English, like you, I know too much.
When the gardener walked up to the window
his tanned skin broke into a smile
and he told us he wrote music.
Do you ever wonder how many others
like him are out there making music
that no one ever hears? I could go on like this
for days if friends weren't so kindly interrupting me
with letters and phone calls. Sometimes I walk
for miles to hear the Slavic woman play the accordion.
I stand beneath her open window where she practices
and swoon to myself. I wonder if she knows
how many of us come here each day by ourselves
just to listen?

The Four-Legged Man

I

I was conceived in an ordinary bed
inside the family house, my uncle Lester
listening, perhaps finding himself
beneath the new box springs. I heard

my mother's mother was a witch,
or so father said. At any rate, she liked
to make them tea, the brew steeped
in a vat that glimmered whale-blood orange,

what settled in them uneasily stained
their mouths cornflower blue. The same tea
the doctor sipped before he had me breathe,
and found another heart that hammered

in a sunken hull of bone. I've never been
alone. I am *all* Gemini. Among the Hall
of Curiosities, we're home. The swallower
of snakes shared us lodgings for a season

and I paid him back tenfold when his constrictor
vanished in its cage. I heard the blind-girl scream,
the ringmaster's only daughter, on whom
it set to strangling, undid the yard-long thigh of it,

wiped snake-spit from her face pampered
her, and still performed. That night, I found
the twin rope walkers, red costumes pulled soundlessly
in silhouette and spilled about our lamp.

Word got around of our proclivities.
The dwarves, the barker's girls, the loveliest
– the fallacies of how we freaks make love
were put to bed. I have four normal daughters,

twins, with former acrobats; three sons
fathered by my brother's legs. They visit
when we're in town. At carnival, our city
blinks like fireflies, and no one eyes us twice.

Throughout, the children see things strange
or stranger than their dads: muskmellons
from Ottawa shaped like a sheriff's mistress
coupling with a squid.

Sights to make Jesus
weep—the pickled two-headed fetus, the aquarium
hell, where horrors wander under glass.

The grinder says a freak is either born
 or made. But he is paid to lie. The congress
 I have known is complicated: that pickled
 fetus with two heads is something else,
 a blown anomaly; a shrug perfected.
 Life murdered by the marvel that it made.
 Among the sideshow's armory, I've seen

the wonders taken from tribal villages:
 Nairobi kinds, their gueens, and pygmies
 shackled in their sleep. I've wakened to their cries:
 uncomprehended squalls that weathercock
 their points; nightmares of ordinary men,
 made palpable, in ear-locked cells. I need
 these other lives to speak about myself.

Do you know the story of the royal Yoruba
 who made himself the Mudfish King?—he was
 about to give a speech and could not move.
 He slapped his cold, hard legs like lifeless fish,
 said "I'm of *both* worlds!" The crowd went wild.
 There, cripples are put to death. I've lived the terror
 of that life, and more, and this.

They say

I will awake one—no feeling below
 my neck, feverish with the plot of my last dream:
 Therein, I carry a crippled boy like matchwood
 from a blackened building, undersides of tongues
 and smoke wreathing our heads. Before I make it
 out the door, I lose my grip. He falls,
 orange-robed, a Buddhist hallowed in flame.

Novalis

Moravia, 1801

The fever kept him working, waking, writing
warded off the other realm, even as it distilled
the room made fragrant by larkspur and woodsmoke.
He stoked the fire, ink plumed in his moving –

the heat from him warmed the night he wanted
to expose. At twenty-five, he nearly did, died
ploughing the hours. He watched them burn
in daybreak's furnace. Not enough, he had to learn

the afterlife. His first Virgil was a dream,
it dreamed *to* him – he died and *came* back
to life climbing a rocky gorge, scree crumbling
at his feet. He tumbled down a shaft

and found an unmined passageway. Steam
hissed off the walls. Sparks on alluvium
and groundwater played about the cavern
and his feet. The light hove cold and blue,

and higher cliffs arose with brighter veins. There
he saw it, the blue flower, though it altered
as he approached to take it. The corolla dissolved.
His coughing woke him, wrecked him (or his father's

hammer did) and broke the spell like molten iron
that flares red till it is beaten sideburn white,
yearning melted to a silver ounce of meteor,
star-chipped light, now fallen through a crater

in the firmament. A piece translated from the sky
like crystals formed where lightning strikes.
Inverted celestial. What might have flowered
from *Heinrich* and his apprenticeship mining

the grotto, snaps synapse, flashes out of vision.
Consumption darkened his Eurydice, ink-line broken,
(he wrote) *Each is the midpoint of an emanation* –
the certain flourish of a stallion now hemmed in.

A Brief Folklore of Typography

An orange turns black
on a column
to make a letter I.

A servant lights a match,
holds it to a burner on a god's stove
and turns the dial. To give fire
more of its element
makes an exclamation.

The twig that holds the apple
coils into a serpent.
The first question appears
before the eyes.

A Salem woman set free
from the stockade;
or sperm moments before
reaching the egg.
Each makes “;” a totem
to momentary finality.
The sign something is coming
and the end is near.

A remote star
blackens by spraypaint
above the arthritic
finger in the I. . . .

And the ellipses following
like mouths of children
waiting to find out
how the story ends.

A Visionary's Company

Felpham, 1831

Fact is, I *was* illiterate & sign'd
 our wedding papers with an X.
But my Brilliant William knew, more than
Myself, the treasure lurking there,
 beneath the batter'd fallen cross
Of anonymity. He felt
 an affinity

For my straining hand, & taught me to use
 a brush, a pen. In Time, I learn'd
Meter, too. I lov'd to make up nonce verses
To Songs I sang to cheer him as I rubb'd
 his back & neck. It's true:
Often my William was
 in Paradise.

But when he return'd, he brought back
 all those images to me. I always believ'd
His Work would live beyond us, & really
Could not say, How or Why
 or When – but often I dreamt the Angels of
Transport were tapping out new Songs in our room:
 Catherine Blake!

I'd hear, & come around to see him
 caught within another dream, his small hand
Moving to thoughts it never held
Before. My mind would empty a moment
 all that it knew; our house in Lambeth
Would expand, & I'd feel short of breath, near faint.
 My eyes beheld

The Spirits ascending from those words,
 clapping their hands in joy, as I
Imagine William was upon their making.
Daily, hourly, he held his counsel there
 & then with me. We were interrupted once,
By his patron—a certain Mr. Butts! –
 while reciting passages from

Paradise Lost. In our garden, utterly
 nude, with our ridiculous friend
Stammering apologies, tipping his
Bowler hat repeatedly. Of course,
 we asked him in. What did we care?
We were unashamed. Indeed we were too
 much for him. He fled.

We laughed for quite some Time about it, & then
 My Husband got that look again,
& wanted us to try our hands at prophecy.
He ask'd that I look to the book at hand
 to divine my fortune, Bysse's *Art of Poetry*,
Upon whose hand-worn cover I wrote a poem
 regarding the joys

Of sexual experience. William was so well pleas'd
 with my fortune, he tried his hand at it.
He lighted on a verse from Dryden's
Virgil. The one that says a tree
 "withstands the wrath of the elements"
Due to its "fixed foundations."
 He liked that phrase;

It reminded him of his first vision as a child;
 walking the London countryside,
He saw among the ditches & blacken'd kilns
A tree swarming with Angels, & all kinds of
 lumina speckling the boughs
Like stars. He ran home to tell his father
 who nearly beat him for lying;

Will said: "A fool does not see the same tree
a wise man sees." Regrettably, it was
No easier for me. He always boasted of what he called
Our visitations. I should have had them! He show'd me
Where to look for them! But only since
His Death, when his assistant,
Mr. Richmond

Kiss'd his cheek, & clos'd His Eyes
"to keep the visions in" have I enjoy'd
Unearthly company – two & three hours a day
Or more. As though he were still here! Though
mostly we speak of how best to market
His engravings; only seldom do we revel
in Eternity.



A Visionary's Company is the sixth publication of Parallel Press,
an imprint of the General Library System,
University of Wisconsin – Madison.

Published with the assistance of the Silver Buckle Press.

Series design by Tracy L. Honn

Book design by Greg Britton

Typeset in Galliard

PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOKS

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Andrea Potos

Hosannas

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