

Spring 1979

## Robert Hedin, *At the Home-Altar*

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### Recommended Citation

Rea, Tom (1979) "Robert Hedin, *At the Home-Altar*," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 12 , Article 46.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss12/46>

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woman who knows what it means to be constantly inhabiting some other body, some other skin, furred or feathered.

*Madeline DeFrees*

*At The Home-Altar*

Robert Hedin

Copper Canyon Press

Port Townsend, Washington

\$16, cloth

Since Homer and Dante Western writers have steadily used the metaphor of descent, a move downward as a way to knowledge of the self, before that self can rise again into light and air. Readers familiar with *Snow Country*, Robert Hedin's first book, will remember how the speaker in those poems was always rooted firm in the landscape around him. Landscape and poem were nearly indivisible, supporting each other. The Alaskan cold was pervasive. In this new collection we have moved away from Alaska, to Minnesota, France, and North Africa. Places and things are more foreign. Again and again we find the speaker isolated from his surroundings, separate in a way that forces him to descend down and in, to the wilderness of himself or to a watery land of the dead, in order to find what he is looking for. Thus in "At Betharram," deep in a cave the poet finds

There's a calm here at Betharram  
Deeper than I've ever known.  
And down this far,  
The heart slows and beats  
As calmly as the water  
That I hear  
Far down in the caves,  
Dripping for miles through stone.

But such calm is hard to come by up above, on the surface of the world. Time and again Hedin manages it only by a persistent refusal to let things mean more than they do, by insisting that facts have their greatest value when left as they are. At the end of "1959," after talking about the lights "Looking like gulls/ Or geese/ Heading out over a flyway of dead elms," he writes

Brother, I am writing to say  
There were never  
Any geese,  
The lights were only lights,  
And no one comes North any more.

It is a calm that approaches despair, but is never that exactly. Call it instead a necessary acceptance of the painful world, the kind that comes often in pale dawn light, as it does at the end of "Waiting for Trains at Col d'Aubisque:"

Finding the world no better or worse  
And ourselves still wanting  
To be filled with its presence,  
The words we've waited all night to say  
We will have to turn into breath  
And use to warm our hands.

I find this an appealing stance for a poet to take, to admit that there can be more important, practical things to do with breath than speak, that warmth is a stronger need than expression. Hedin is telling us things are things. When we try to make them more than that, to layer over them lustres of distorting "meaning," we let them hurt us more than they do already. As it is, "no one comes North any more."

The persona in the poem "Houdini" is similarly forced to deal with his separateness. When the poem opens, "Tricky Harry holds his breath" at the bottom of the river, his descent already made. The poem moves with him rising up out of his past, his puberty, his body, the river, until finally

Rising he bursts the surface of this poem.  
He listens for shouts.  
He hears only the night  
And a buoy sloshing in the blue.

No applause, no acclaim, just the fact of him there in the night, confronting himself and the bare world around him. These poems are smooth and round, self-contained like an egg. Hedin's control is masterful. But the solitude in them is not always so chilling. At times it is rich and glorious, as in the sensual poem "Sloughing" where the words are so plain they fall away, and we are left with smells and flesh vivid on the memory:

Back here in the bottomlands  
The sloughs lie flat  
As hides, breathing quietly  
Among dead trees  
And reeds. It is June  
And almost fifteen years  
Since we stripped  
And waded into those warm  
Lungs, drifting among turtles  
And sunfish, in what was dying  
Or dead, or having to grow  
Simple to survive. And  
What I remember most  
Was how you stood there  
Knee-deep in the smoke  
Off the water, naked and wet  
With algae, that old rotted  
Shell you'd found  
Lifted up into the cold light  
Like a horn, that white strand  
Of fish-eggs strung down  
Dripping from your neck like seeds.

One further note. Copper Canyon has been forced by certain sad economic facts to issue this book at \$16 in a limited letterpress edition of a hundred copies. Lovers of fine printing will want to own one; they will love it as much as any book they've held. But not everyone can pay so much. Those of you who can't afford it, ask your local library to buy a copy. The poems are excellent and deserve to be read. It is a sturdy little book and will last well on public shelves. That way you can read it and all your friends can too.

*Tom Rea*