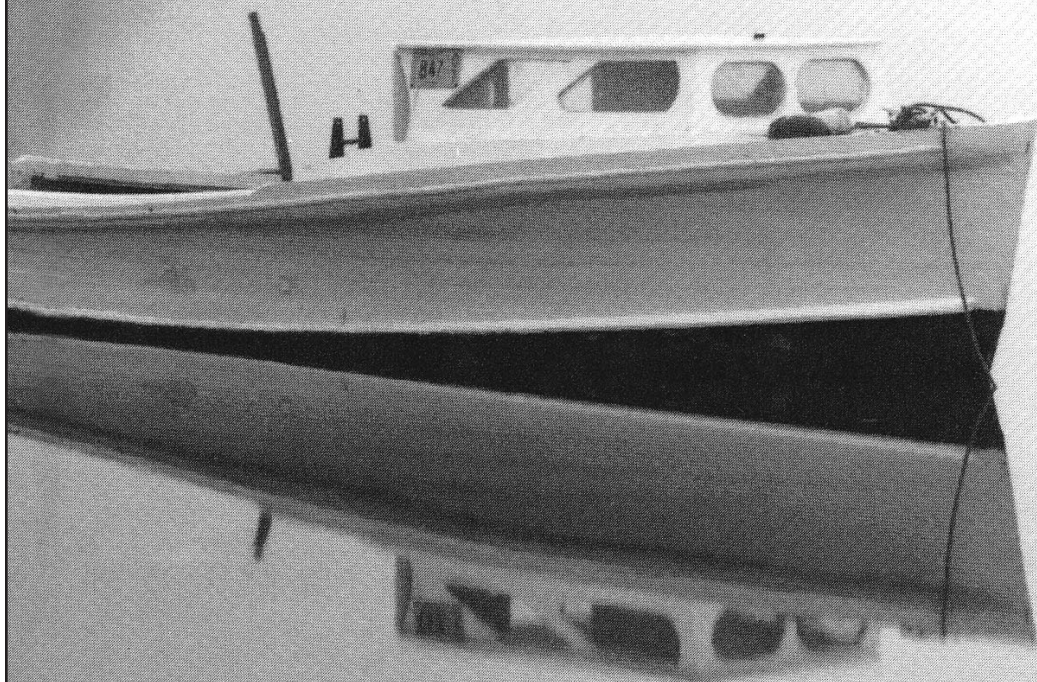


FISHING SECRETS *of the* DEAD



POEMS BY
MEREDITH DAVIES HADAWAY

TYLER CAMPBELL PHOTOGRAPH/ THE EDNA

The poet's first volume of poetry is a First Book Selection by the Word Press publishing house.



A VOICE OF THE CHESTER RIVER AND THE DEAD

Meredith Davies Hadaway's debut volume of poetry - a Word Press First Book Selection - plumbs the depths of grief and in taut language allows unbearable pain to resolve itself.

BY CAM TERWILLIGER

As a poet, Meredith Davies Hadaway cannot separate her work from the fog-filled rivers and creeks of Maryland's Eastern Shore. A world composed of yellow perch, salty fishermen, herons and long, shimmering bights and reaches, Hadaway uses the eastern Chesapeake's rich natural world like a painter uses his palette, drawing on it for the raw material to render her remarkable debut book, *Fishing Secrets of the Dead*.

Published by Word Press as a finalist in its 2005 first book contest, *Fishing Secrets of the Dead* is a searching confrontation with the recent death of her husband, Cawood Hadaway, who died a few years ago of cancer. As a result, the book's descriptions of the Eastern Shore fuse with a sense of loss so poignant the ghost of her husband seems to emerge from every observed detail.

On a humid morning in July, Hadaway agreed to meet on the front porch of her friends' Rehoboth Beach, Del. cottage for a cup of coffee and a brief chat about her new work. Taking a sip from her mug and running a hand through her silvered, shoulder-length hair, Hadaway explained that she wasn't always a devotee of the Eastern Shore.

"I was actually born to the Navy," she said. "My father was stationed at a base in Naples when I was born and ever since then I've been pretty much rootless."

Hadaway spent much of her life traveling between countries and regions in the U.S. before she came to Chestertown, Md., where she currently lives and works at Washington College as the vice president of college relations.

"I first came to the Eastern Shore in 1976 with every intention of just staying

there for the summer," she said. "But that's when my interest in nature first started to take hold. I got sucked in mostly because of my husband, who was a native."

RUPTURE

Together, in our small boat, we troll the waters beneath Fossil Rock - a carved-out ledge that hangs above the Chester's western bank and teems with prehistoric sea-life frozen in the cliff. Downriver, on the eastern edge, geologists have discovered that a matching cliff preserves the other half of creatures interrupted in their journey into stone. A perfect

fit, if only these two halves could ever reunite. We troll beneath the one and then continue down the other side. Fish are drawn to rocks as if they sense their history and their future, both. We drag our baited line through water, stop, rebait and start again. How much farther, we wonder, in our lifetime, will these two shorelines drift apart?

Hadaway's husband was an artist and teacher who had fished the shore since the early days of his boyhood. His elegant illustrations of Eastern Shore birds appear throughout *Fishing Secrets of the Dead*.

"He was more than just an artist, he was a naturalist. He knew every gut and bight of the river and that changed my world," she said.

Hadaway admits it may seem strange that a nonnative would champion the Eastern Shore so whole-heartedly in her art, but she also feels her position on the outside of its culture helped her in some ways. It allowed her to be more scrutinizing of its details, more receptive to its poetic moments. It gave her perspective.

"We can never really see ourselves like just looking in a mirror. It takes a little different angle," she said. "Though the Eastern

Shore was foreign to me, that actually helped me to see it better. People who've lived here all their lives miss all the little things just because they're so used to seeing it every day."

Though she'd been an accomplished harpist for some time and had dabbled in poetry since a young age, Hadaway only began to take herself seriously as a poet later in life. After her husband's death, she returned to school to pursue a Masters in Fine Arts in Poetry from Vermont. As she began to compile her thesis, she found that her husband's death colored everything she created.

"I just couldn't stay away from it. It demanded to be written. I wanted to write about anything else, anything else, but it was everywhere. I would start to write about something totally unrelated and suddenly there it would appear," she said. "One of my professors told me I could write a poem about a dessert trolley and it would be about it."

By depicting the Eastern Shore in her work, Hadaway simultaneously depicts the man who introduced it to her. Yes, every fish is a fish—so cleanly and precisely detailed in its verisimilitude it would be impossible to argue that point. But more than that, each fish, each bird, each painstakingly rendered cliff is also invested with a vision into the death that so haunts her. In "Grave" she addresses her husband:

You will always be a body of water. Glittering with morning, you wrap your arms around the dock where my boat stirs with a slight starboard list.

The tenuous keynote of the book emerges from Hadaway's struggle to accept her husband's passing. She must reconcile the pain of her loss, which she would do

anything to avoid, with the fact that she must confront it in order to move on. As Hadaway reveals in the title poem, "The dead become the secret we cannot tell." However, Hadaway must find a way to tell that secret if she is to survive her grief. It's this tension that gives birth to her stunning collection.

"In retrospect I think the fact that I wrote about it so much was part of my instinct toward healing that wound," she said.

In light of this, the epigram of her book, a line borrowed from Ghalib, seems to sum up Hadaway's approach to healing quite well. It reads: "For the raindrop, joy is in entering the river—Unbearable pain becomes its own cure."

In its form, Hadaway's verse could easily be compared to the marsh birds flitting in and out of her poetry. Her word choice is so compact and precise it seems effortlessly airy. Hadaway's a writer that knows how to craft clean sentences and make every word count, which is vital in poems as short as hers — only one in the entire book running over a single page.

Still, if any animal could truly embody her work, that animal would have to be a fish — the sleek, ever-moving creature that patrols the secretive depths of the Chester River, which ebbs and flows near her home. Everything about *Fishing Secrets of the Dead* seems inspired by that river. Even the



structure of the book is designed to mirror the movement of its tides — surge, recession and resurgence. But rather than the tides of the river, each of the three sections marks the tides of the poet's mourning.

"The first section is the most intense, while the second is bit of a recession," she said. "The third returns to the idea with a more harmonious, reflective tone."

Given the finely tuned structure of the book, it's surprising when Hadaway admits she had no idea what shape her book

would take when she began. She said she just felt the need to start writing and as long as she kept doing so, the structure of the book revealed itself.

"That's all part of the magic in poetry," she said. "The meaning assembles itself. In the manuscript, the poems started to relate to one another in ways I never could have imagined. In my experience, you just can't impose an agenda on a poem," she said. "They almost always tell you what they're about, not the other way around."

Because she needs to enter and explore the possibilities of all her poems in this way, Hadaway says it's an absolute necessity for her to make time each morning to write. She says if she isn't ready to receive her poems as they come to her every day, they won't come at all.

This flexible, persistent philosophy is why Hadaway embraces fishing as her ultimate, personal metaphor — the reason why she'll never stop using her verse to trawl for the secrets of the dead.

"You throw the line out there and you have no idea what you're going to reel in. Like with art, you really have to enjoy the process of it, because there's no guarantees about the result," she said. "God knows I've reeled in some rubber boots with my poems in the past, but you have to keep trying. You do it because you just love to do it, and that's enough." **DQ**

TUXEDO

Black sleeves and empty
pockets. It was my father's, then
my husband's. The pants

let out. Later taken
in. Onyx studs and cufflinks
snapped shut in a satin

box. Cummerbund, bow tie, all pieced
together in a garment bag that hangs
like a secret. Emptied

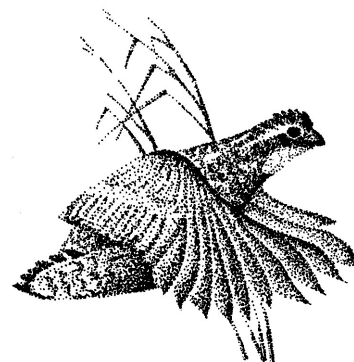
pockets. Sleeves
that once held me steady
on blue high heels.

FRUITWOOD

My mother had our piano refinished.
It used to be mahogany. I found a photograph
of my grandmother, young, at the keyboard.
She always told me her hands had been too small,
but in the photo, they easily spread an octave.

My mother changed mahogany to fruitwood
to match her furniture. More than thirty
years ago, but it still looks wrong. Like
my husband's hunting dog, locked
in a kennel, across the yard, behind

a thicket. When I play the piano,
he howls a long high note.



Fishing Secrets of the Dead is available to individuals
via Amazon or to booksellers from Ingram distributors.