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Fishing Secrets of the Dead
By Meredith Davies Hadaway. Cincinnati, OH: Word Press, 2005.
Reviewed by ***Reed Wilson***

Dickinson reminds us that "after great pain a formal feeling comes," and I know of few recent books that realize this as subtly and powerfully as Meredith Davies Hadaway's *Fishing Secrets of the Dead*. I say "subtly" because these are not "formal" poems as we generally and too narrowly use that term. The formality here is, I believe, what Dickinson truly had in mind—a careful elegance that transcends the grief from which it arises.

The book is dedicated to Cawood, Hadaway's husband who died of cancer in 2000 and whose drawings of birds appear throughout the book. The last drawing, of a pointing setter, follows a note where we learn that he was also an "artist, teacher, and outdoorsman." The poems, of course, tell us much more, because they tell of a relationship between husband and wife greater than the sum of its parts. In "Rupture," the poet remembers trolling with her husband on the Chester River "beneath Fossil Rock," a Cliffside reminder of nearly unimaginable geological time. She tells us that downriver, "a matching cliff preserves / the other half of creatures interrupted / on their journey into stone," and asks, "How much farther . . . / will these two shorelines drift apart?" The poem's two eight-line stanzas, one descriptive, one reflective, mirror the two cliff sides—the two sides of a moment's awareness, the two sides (recollection, composition) of a poem's making. "Drifting" happens, but the record of a "perfect / fit" survives.

While these poems relentlessly document loss and grief, they also celebrate its other face: the fluid world's persistence. Our survival ultimately depends on our ability to "drift" with the shifting tides and currents of experience. While "Rehoboth Beach, July 17, 1999," tells of the day the poet realizes she will never bear children, it also shows us, in a small drama between a woman and child, that our lives are always a series of losses great and small:

> The woman, leaving, it seems. The child,
> receiving instruction, holds a wisp of blonde hair
> from her eyes, nodding yes, yes.
>
> And then it is over.
> A dutiful hug, the woman turning
> to shake out her towel, the little girl calling
> behind her, Grandma, bye!
> and back to the game.

And, in another poem, one that seems to have been instructed if not inspired by the first, this same realization and reflection takes the form of a game:

> Clare, Morgan, Thomas, Rees: I was
> a good mother to the children I never had.
>
> I read them books at bedtime,
> their small fingers pointing and turning
>
> the pages, over and over again—they never
> tired of the moon, the mouse, the spider.

Now though, "they are quiet. They've learned to sleep / through the night."

The book's title poem tells us that the dead "know the river inside out," and "become the secret we cannot tell." They rise in us "like a rapid pulse, a sudden notion to go / fishing." The penultimate poem here, "Catch and Release," may just reveal that hitherto untold secret: "everything / comes back. Even the darkness, / caught in a net / of stars, will be released into daylight." The last spare lines of the book promise that

> Rivers grow larger, rivers grow
> small. Here, where the dead like pebbles rise
>
> among the weeds, I'll build my house
> on water.