

Not Everything Remotely

Selected Poems 1978–2005

ALAN HALSEY was born in London in 1949. He ran The Poetry Bookshop in Hay-on-Wye from 1979 until 1996 and moved to Sheffield in 1997, continuing to work as a specialist bookseller and as editor of West House Books. His major publications include *Five Years Out* (1989), *The Text of Shelley's Death* (1995), *Wittgenstein's Devil* (2000) and *Marginalien* (2005). He has written several short studies of Thomas Lovell Beddoes and re-edited his *Death's Jest-Book* in 2003.

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Selected Poems 1978–2005

ALAN HALSEY



CAMBRIDGE

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Ahadada Reader 1, with Geraldine Monk & John Byrum (Ahadada 2004)
Marginalien (Five Seasons 2005)
A Looking-Glass for Logoclasts (Free Poetry 2005)

I have made slight revisions and emendations to a few poems and some from *Fit To Print* are set in variant alignment.

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At the Front

In the thirty-seventh year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon

On the 1st of Nisan the new moon became visible behind the
Hyades

Duration of visibility 64 minutes

Saturn was over against the Southern Fish

On the morning of the 2nd a rainbow appeared in the west

At the beginning of the night of the 8th

the moon was one ell before the star at the hind foot of the Lion

On the 9th the sun in the west was surrounded by a halo

On the 12th Jupiter rose at dusk

On the 14th the god was visible with the god

16 minutes passed between sunrise and moonset the next day

On the 15th it was overcast

On the 16th Venus appeared

From the 8th of Second Adar till the 29th of Nisan

the water rose 3 ells 8 fingers

This month a fox came into the city

On the 9th Sivan summer solstice

On the 10th the moon passed $3\frac{1}{2}$ ells above Antares

This month's prices were

1 gur would fetch 12 ka of barley or 60 ka of dates

On the night of the 6th the moon was surrounded by a halo
and within it were the Pleiades and Hyades and Beta and Zeta

Tauri

On the night of the 29th reddish clouds were seen in the west

There was an earthquake on the 22nd

Mercury being $3\frac{1}{2}$ ells behind the fish-tail of Capricorn



On the 27th day the moon was still visible
On the 28th 29th and 30th days
we kept watch for an eclipse of the sun
but he went on his way
and did not have an eclipse.
The moon was visible on the first day
which is the day expected for the month in question.
Regarding Marduk about whom I reported earlier
'He is shining in the path of Anu in the region of Sibzianna;
when the sickle disappeared he stood low on the horizon
and could not be perceived
but we can say that he is in the path of Anu
and such is his interpretation'
now I report he is retarded and therefore was not perceived
but he is in the path of Bel
below the constellation of the Chariot
he has really gone down as low as the Chariot.
His interpretation was accordingly erroneous
but the interpretation of Marduk in the path of Anu
is as I earlier reported
and would not be wrong.

55 Texts for the Journey

1. They forget gods are mortals. As if the daughter could be her own mother! Then they forget about the goddess.
2. You can't talk to their gods like reasonable men, magician to magician.
3. You think one's like another but there are gods you take with you and some you leave behind. Also goddesses.
4. But you say you saw her, it was her, sifting the debris in Oldtown. It's that muddled, Troy-talk. Mostly pots without the handles, or broken lids.
5. The search was for a world more than home, a people, 'the sign'.
6. For a thousand years, was the legend, formed of two continents. It dates from the time of our 'about to take off'.
7. *The oldest element in Crete*, her nose. 'Looks nothing like her.' The carver: 'Of course.'
8. The bound of Europe, and it bound us, but now we go forward. The land is fields like ladders you can't lift. The map shows nothing but roads and where they end.
9. It was the same before, it was leading somewhere. Northwest into Europe. We had the choice of the land- or the sea-route.
10. To go back to to live where the food is.
11. Our toys the missionaries called idols and complained about the boxes we gave them being empty.
12. The wonder is we see the face at all, and see it everywhere, in lie of the land as well as tree-bark, as well as what he does with his paintpot.

13. Getting out of the museum. We were watched all day, doors bolted at night. We dressed like ghosts, the porter was afraid of, slipped the law in the park.
14. I found cathedrals and flags.
15. Eye sees, sun shines, you want more? Footslog, you want arguments too?
16. Or you could make them stand stony, fixing the eye on them. We broke up the carnival, snatched women, dodged the crusades.
17. *The girl's apple cheeks, bruised windfalls.* We learnt the uses of the razor, hardened our heads against brickwork.
18. The bravest was Manymothers.
19. They had lungs they could sing day and night, the women, they got fat, wore necklaces. They were worn out with children, already.
20. The men spent nights turning roadsigns round.
21. Taking the city was making ourselves prisoners. The mazemaker built it. We played idiots, got free.
22. Man there traded in ostrich eggs. We offered metal. Healing was still other kinds of magic.
23. We sailed the great ocean and came back, without proof.
24. Our Lady, and the ants'.
25. The scare was in May. We were counted, blindfold, loaded in wagons, taken north. 'Contained and delivered.'
26. Convicts, shaved on the chin, but we could walk in the streets, learnt the way of it. Some were made captains. There was mutiny. We escaped on the north road.

27. Sweet ghost, clown spirit, voice like a bird!
28. Or the machine noise of gates, the guards staring out, and they were crying like babies.
29. We have gods you see their evidence, answering a question. It was in our favour.
30. We did not return.
31. 'Dead men's eyes', maps carved on the stones show the passageways through. We came out the far side of 'the blessed', got drunk and played dice all night. This was like spinning the compass, taking bearings.
32. It would be ritual if you coming after did the same.
33. You could call it names, like *stretching her out* for going through the tunnel, *curling her hair* getting drunk. The dream was *she speaks*.
34. You put it all down to the moonplants and call him the devils and the angels but it was a man she spoke of.
35. Or a bird. You wouldn't know him. This is all in the future.
36. The islands were confused. Stonework sank behind us, the road like a slipway.
37. Few trees.
38. Our calendar was wrong. We had heard about this, were warned about the night.
39. It is fixing the eye, you keep watch or need watching, not worship or petition. We had seen it with the maps.
40. You see the way through, to go inside you.
41. So that anguish breaks out as anger and knives and I'll make you understand. We buried their dead, let the rest turn back.

42. Three months north. Strange fish we gave names to to eat.
43. Also missionaries surrounding the camp. They could not be converted.
44. We used their boats for sledges when the sea froze.
45. Four months we came to great rifts like alleys through the ice. Could any phantom have prophesied? You think it was some treasure, graves full of gold we uncovered.
46. The last of the logs, and no trees.
47. Forks and deadends but the way was the same as through the tunnels, as the maps.
48. My mate killed the dragon. We left him, he went mad I tell you, in the icehouse.
49. White crows.
50. Plains beyond the cliffs. We asked the dice for direction.
51. The city was clear through the ice. Rooves broken in but good mortar in the walls and the flesh like wax on the bodies. Men clinging to the women like priests to their 'suns'.
52. Further north than men ever journeyed.
53. We were possessed and dispossessed, poor fish, freely caught.
54. Our dreams are simple.
55. Without blame.

Six Letters on Change & Exchange, Hay-on-Wye, 1979

I

24th May-4th June

The town's relieved by the market
drying off antique with the rain.
The way it changes it drives ruin into sheepfolds,
this bleating all day where a lamb is held captive
—louder seems more near,
and imagine if all beasts went wild,
took the streets as cattle took the graveyard
last Tuesday. Today we hear how women rape the men,
which the newspaper omits.
You get to know by the face and the posture
what will be bought and what sold,
as if that were the purpose
or justified division into classes:
it is 'a growing reality'
bearding the apparent as expansion of business.
I attribute the strangeness to myself as to others.
It is neither temper nor 'the Celtic' nor a flag:
habit is confused with tradition
and the living dragon's reared unseen before their eyes.
We change but the river stays the same
and the bridge is as ugly as the last time you saw it.
I am shot through with film, bagged by tourists.
There are fewer Gods than churches;
new teashops, more antiques, fewer pubs.
The town's without myth except bargains,
several burnings of the castle and the hanging of Armstrong
the poisoner. The house now possessed by police.
It is waiting seeing what will turn up,
even sunshine or good air, as every day Vacancies
unfilled. The mountains deal clouds

and the clouds deal with mountains:
the border, if anything, contracts with the seen.
Local power is dominance of names
claiming kin, exchanging confidence with land,
'small business'. The smart woman's briefcase seemed a warning
but 'with you it's all edge', distinguishing the Vandal from the
Gothic
tearing flowers. It's equally Saxon and the Celt
forcing language: 'you are not being
showing off in the streets' says a mother,
so denying our 'thinking alike': not being
showing off the streets
but breaking the world in the syntax.

II: *A Change of Ground*

June

Strong points were set up which petrified the grove:
it was instantly law and the urban, 'the limited',
with good tin baths in the cellars causing
jokes about the Welsh. The Church became landlord,
not acknowledging secular distinctions:
only later was excluded from the walls,
and thoroughbreds let loose on the motte
before auction. Cash pays for annual revenge
as for fishponds and otters; twists in the friendship,
in the rural, thus uniting the enemy. Period of
raids on the parish every Sunday, of any man's right
to a seat and a name in the kingdom.
Eventually capital and godhead fall as one
but the zodiacal change is as yet unnoticed
—the church is rebuilt
and the Bullring, Bear Street and the Old Black Lion
still offer consolation. If I heard it right
it was 'the hub of the universe
or what you've been used to': young rock,
red sandstone with new evidence of fireworks.
The memory's the trial and execution after murder,
and a bitch on prosperity, so shopkeepers stand in their doors
in late spring, hope the thunder will break. You soon
see yourself in that light, and listen to old men
—'was in haulage
bringing down sticks from the mountains',
meaning whole trees chained to the wagon.
And how rats ran hell roads in the carcasses of pigs
in the glebe in those days, this is
local detail, in little, in separate confidings.

III

6th July

Interruptions act as a tax on the day.
The urban restricts. If the town was built on a resonance
it is now hard to hear, but you always feel
what you haven't yet understood
is what matters. Search small events,
the old stones, bits of wall still standing,
for a possible idea which goes rank in the rural,
in comfortable green. There was the rush,
morning push through Hightown,
horse-and-cart jangling,
expensive ecology of tweed, thin cotton and homemade jam.
This has nothing to do with birth or destruction,
is no revolution: midday slumps,
1 o'clock voids in the shopfronts. If the afternoon goes easy,
if you dream of an eclogue
heat browbeats the evening,
you forget where you are and
what you are to do. July is that
hard a drug. Eyes struggle with phantoms,
the mind with the trade in opinions,
newly coined anger which won't balance out the anguish of
'the nymphs are still girls'—against the settling upriver,
settling up of sky, in first dark.