

Philip Dacey

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS MEETS WALT WHITMAN IN  
HEAVEN

An Entertainment

Scene: A swimming hole duplicating Thomas Eakins'. Six swimmers are posed accordingly. As Whitman and Hopkins enter, the swimmers go into motion. The effect is that of a painting come to life by the entrance of the two poets.

HOPKINS: For us, Walt, Heaven is a swimming hole.  
God has decreed it so. We are  
To spend eternity here, beside  
And in these waters, flanked by the  
flanks  
Of naked young men.

WHITMAN: But you're  
A priest. I can understand why I  
Should be here, my heaven on earth,  
In the arms of a well-formed and loving  
Boy, become my earth in heaven,  
But unless your order has replaced its  
Prayer books with my Leaves of Grass  
I could sooner count the drops  
In that pool than say why you're here.

HOPKINS: Many reasons, I suppose, but none  
For me to know absolutely. Who  
Put me here explains nothing  
Fully. I once wrote to Bridges--  
That's Robert, the poet, who acted as  
conductor  
Between your work and me, the fire  
Leaped--that I thought no one could  
admire  
The beauty of the human body more  
Than I. Still or in action. Did you  
see

That dive? Fairfall? And a poem of mine,  
Alas, like many others, most  
Of my gestures, unfinished, called  
"Epithalamion,"  
Celebrated my brother Everard's  
marriage  
By drawing a scene much like the one  
We've entered. "Boys from the town"  
with  
"Bellbright bodies" frolic  
In a river, the "kindcold" Hodder,  
while a  
Spying stranger undoes piece  
By piece his wear until, Adam  
Again, he tries a pool close-by,  
Splash, and swims, laughs, is lavish  
In his gay grasp and waterloss,  
His float and wet kiss intimate.

WHITMAN: You're the first pagan Jesuit  
I've ever met. My pleasure.  
No wonder that poem never saw  
Completion. To turn material like that  
Into a wedding gift would require  
A miracle. You're not St. Hopkins,  
Are you, yet? Unless a couple  
Of the swimming boys wed.

HOPKINS: The dean  
Or dell was to be wedlock, the water  
Spousal love, and the flora  
Relatives and friends "ranked round."

WHITMAN: And your brother and his wife? Two  
weeds?  
Or rocks? Or would they enter and the  
bride  
Startle the boys into hiding?

HOPKINS: I admit  
To ill-conceiving. I was distracted  
By God's plenty in the form of flashing  
Backs, and hair that, whipped, gave  
Worlds to space, balled graced.

WHITMAN: I like the pure version of your poem.  
Stripped. The Sacred sense in the skin.  
But better I like that red-haired one  
Who did the flip. Look out! He means  
To soak us till we might as well  
Get in.

HOPKINS: "They do not think whom they  
souse  
With spray."

WHITMAN: You quote me before  
I could quote myself. You know my work  
Well. I wish I had known yours.

HOPKINS: My knowledge was scattered, partialpoor.  
But I picked up much from hints. I  
derived  
Whole meals from scraps. One leaf  
Or few lines of a leaf. So it was  
With your twenty-eight bathers.  
One glance and they grew. Into me.  
And now my poem, your poem, and this  
scene  
Grow into each other. They  
Marry. Marry! Even to a watcher  
In each poem who "unseen sees." And we  
The watchers here.

WHITMAN: I watch, I watch.  
And more. Let the voyeurs consume  
themselves  
In frets.

HOPKINS: That's my music.

WHITMAN: Did you  
Die from such discordance? Men have.  
Age won me, but you're too young.

HOPKINS: The immediate cause was Irish culture  
In the form of Dublin's corrupted  
water  
System. Unheavenly. Only bacilli

Swam it. I contracted typhoid. The  
Irish,  
Whose ambition, I noted, has always  
been  
To say a thing as everybody says it  
Only louder, were no doubt glad  
To be rid of me. If a sneer drives  
An Irishman to madness, and it does  
I so drove many. My five years  
In Dublin, dreary city, were my last,  
And sufficient payment for this holiday--  
And another drenching! Into what faith  
Have I just been baptized? Do I  
Offend any Irish blood in you?

WHITMAN: I had a good friend. Name of Doyle.  
Peter. But I'll not let him, or me,  
Get caught in cross-channel firing.

HOPKINS: And cross-Atlantic firing?

WHITMAN: If this  
Pool proves salty, I'll know two states  
Meet here, to contend, and sign a pact.  
Hello, England.

HOPKINS: Hello, America.  
And hello, Mr. Hyde.

WHITMAN: Who? I  
Am no Hide. I am Mr. Show. Mr.  
Peel off the heavy layers. Mr.  
Bare the heart, and loins. These  
clothes  
Will have to go.

HOPKINS: Button up, Walt.  
You'll have all eternity to parade  
Unmediated by art. The water will wait.  
Hyde is our Stevenson's new creation.  
One man's secret self. You  
Are mine. I told Bridges so:  
"I always knew in my heart Walt

Whitman's mind to be more like my own  
Than any other man's living."

WHITMAN: Why not? The mother country watches  
From a distance her son. Or daughter?  
I always thought I would have made a  
great  
Mother myself.

HOPKINS: I agree. Your hair  
Is mother-hair. Womb-white.  
Long as moonlight trailing earth's  
Shoulder. But I went further, said  
(Heaven seems to perfect the memory!):  
"As he is a very great scoundrel,  
This is not a pleasant confession.  
And this also makes me the more  
Desirous to read him and the more  
Determined I will not."

WHITMAN: "Scoundrel"?  
Do I have to put up with an eternity  
Of insults? I'd rather be ignored in  
hell.  
I never liked priests, except a few  
I met in the Civil War. When they saw  
Me at bedside, the sick and dying  
Pressed against my bosom, they forgot  
What they'd heard about my book. That  
is  
To say, my life. But they weren't  
Jesuits,  
And they weren't English. My work had  
friends  
In England, some as true or truer  
Than any at home, and I admire  
Your queen (America needs a queen  
To lead her, we've had enough of  
Fathers, Father), but fresh and open  
Spaces let my book breathe,  
And that means it doesn't survive  
Tight collars well. See this neck?  
Sunburnt. Airbathed.

HOPKINS:                   If I did not  
Embrace you, it was from too much love,  
Not lack of it.

WHITMAN:                   Don't get Jesuitical  
With me. I'll drop you in the pool,  
Robe and all. Roughhouse is American.  
You're half my age but thin and from  
The looks of you bird-light. Does  
          every  
Body here shrink so? I bet  
You gave up eating the earth one Lent  
And forgot to resume.

Chorus (of six  
swimmers):                   Throw him in,  
          Throw him in!

HOPKINS:                   Don't do so  
Before hearing more. Looking at you,  
At your poems, at the idea of you  
I constructed, I felt I was looking  
Into a mirror, one fogged no doubt  
By passage across the sea, but there  
I was. I thought I looked good  
In American garb, American gab.  
The Society's secret: Gerard Manley  
Whitman.

WHITMAN:                   I'll admit to envy  
Of your middle name. Walter Manley,  
Drop an "e" or not, would suit  
My design. The brotherly curl of leaves.

HOPKINS: I know it suits. Gentlemanley.  
You give new meaning to that term so  
Important to me and my countrymen,  
          there  
On your American frontier.

WHITMAN:                   Brooklyn  
Isn't in California, but I'll accept  
The compliment. Maybe. If your black  
Folds aren't hiding an edge to your  
          words.

HOPKINS: My sympathies, though crossed with  
          fear's fine  
Hatches, are deep. "Long live the weeds  
And the wilderness yet."

WHITMAN:                   Has that no edge?  
My book's Leaves of Grass, not Leaves  
Of Weeds.

HOPKINS:                   I mean refinement soon  
And dangerous to its own achieve marks  
No longer where it walks. Wallows.  
Sinks. Will disappear the sooner  
For facing away. To rare air.  
As these lads, raw, throw themselves  
In, and down, they rise. To take  
The rarest air, because it hugs  
Gravely--gulp--home. I mean  
A lost commandment is, Thou  
Shalt not murder Adam.

WHITMAN:                   But?

HOPKINS: But what?

WHITMAN:                   You said you once vowed not  
To read me. That murders Adam. I  
Fall. Would you murder out of love?  
You haven't told me all.

HOPKINS:                   I would  
Only dress him, to address him,  
In distance, or the light wear of  
          measure,  
Or even great fronds from his own  
Garden, great comfortable cloaks  
Of green in which he could be seen  
Anywhere, and be welcome, for to look  
On him as he is, cloudclear and hot-  
ly handsome, is to try to stare  
Down the sun. Or say: too close  
And we die. I keep him away  
Just so far, to keep him by.



WHITMAN: Enough.

HOPKINS: Wait, Walt, what  
Are you doing?

WHITMAN: Going for a swim.  
I've had enough of your ungenerous  
And squeamish, slippery, simply bad-  
Mannered ways. You're the barbaric  
One here. My yawp was a love-call,  
Amatory, adhesive, on wing for a new  
Order, a new man, unafraid  
Of the universe, parts and whole.  
Including  
My parts. But you preach distrust  
Of brother for brother. I'll shed these  
Constricting cloths, loose as they are,  
Right now. And when I drop my pants  
We'll just see if you go blind  
Or burn up like a piece of swinefat.

HOPKINS: Of course I was speaking metaphorically.

WHITMAN: Go dunk your metaphors, then. Here  
I am. Head, shoulders, brawn  
Of chest, rose-nipples I can feed  
The world by, belly--slap it,  
The sound is sound--electric fur,  
Cock and balls swinging to a rhythm  
Beyond numbers, the free verse  
Of sex, thighs and knees, they take me  
Over roads, and feet feel  
The earth roll, the grass grow.  
Now what do you say to that?

HOPKINS: "Glory be to God for dappled things!"

WHITMAN: A poem of yours?

HOPKINS: Yes, one  
Of the finished ones.

WHITMAN: I present you  
With my naked self, you give in return

A line from a poem. The difference  
between us  
Couldn't be clearer.

HOPKINS: But I praise,  
Celebrate.

WHITMAN: From a distance.

HOPKINS: How else  
Can it be? Those "placid, self-contained"  
Animals you've written about so lovingly  
Are too sunk in themselves to rise up  
Far enough to praise anything. Unless  
You say they praise by being. Then  
who's  
The Jesuitical one now? That rock, too,  
Would so praise. Would you welcome life,  
Or death, as an igneous hunk? I can't  
Imagine you so static, hard.

WHITMAN: It's true I won't revise my title to  
Hunks of Igneous: Fragments Fallen  
From a Man Mountain, but intimate praise  
Is praise by doing. I loose my body  
From hiding--

HOPKINS: "My heart in hiding stirred  
For a bard."

WHITMAN: What?

HOPKINS: A bad joke.  
We Victorians loved them.

WHITMAN: --and jump in!

Chorus: Welcome to water. There's always room  
For one more.

WHITMAN: Glad to be here.  
To roll and thrash, float, flash  
And like a white whale blow spume.

This is better than returning as grass  
Under a bootsole. I was right:  
Dying is luckier than anyone supposes.  
Father, you look lonely out there.  
And don't tell me your great love  
Of swimming keeps you out. I'm on  
To your tricks.

HOPKINS: I admit the water  
Invites. And I'll enter. But understand  
You are the poet of good health, of  
the robust  
Physique, the soul to match, I  
Never claimed to filter and fibre  
Anyone's blood. How could I?  
I couldn't filter and fibre my own.  
This cassock hides my third wreck.

WHITMAN: There are no wrecks in these waters.  
Only the sleek hulls of young men,  
And one slightly battered, though  
bouyant,  
Barge.

HOPKINS: The Deutschland and the Eurydice  
were ships  
That sank. My poems about them sank  
Faster. But my body began shipping  
Water from the start. I was always  
Frail. Or made myself so. Once water  
Was what I didn't have: drank  
None for a week. To win a bet.  
To prove my will (if not my wit).  
To teach my body to submit. It  
Presented me with a black tongue.

WHITMAN: That's abuse of the body, not discipline.  
I vowed in the middle of my life, forty  
Years young, when I could see where  
I'd been  
And where I was getting, to inaugurate  
A pure, perfect, sweet, clean-blooded  
Body. No fat meats. No late suppers.  
The purest milk. Light meals. That

Was my religious act. You wished  
To whip yourself to heaven. You whipped  
Yourself to an early grave. Dublin's  
Waters were just an excuse.

HOPKINS: Viae  
Negativae à la Whitman, à la Hopkins.  
Nine led to fainting in the confessional,  
A wasting of the little I began with.  
And my body bears witness. As yours  
Displays your history of health. I dare not  
Be so quick as you to show it.  
I love the human body, in general  
And particular. As figure of the world's,  
As matter to tire in the fitting dress,  
Appropriate and close, it becomes,  
of a theology,  
And as object, where the creation collects  
Moving, and moving, winded to mind,  
In-spiritus. I love his, and his,  
His, his, his, his,  
And yours. But not mine. Mine  
Was no friend. We fought. To the end.

WHITMAN: Tom Eakins should be here. He'd  
Patch up your quarrel in a hurry. I've  
Been thinking of Eakins since I got here. Can't  
Figure out why. He did my portrait.  
A good one. Better than Alexander's. His  
Made me look like a saint. That's your  
Business. Tom painted a man.  
I don't mean a sinner, I mean a mortal.  
I was dressed, of course, but we joked  
About his doing me in the buff:  
Maybe sitting stiffly upright, formal,  
Hands on knees, my beard my only  
cover. How fine that would have been!  
America's new poet, smiling in his skin.  
We both knew we weren't joking, too,  
But didn't admit it to each other. So.  
America's deprived of that vision. The Good  
Grey Poet keeps his shirt on. But  
Eakins pulled the loincloth off his

Male model and lost his job. The  
young  
Philadelphia girls in Tom's class, who  
thought  
That art was High Polite, screamed  
And ran to the authorities. Then to  
their mamas.  
Eakins remained steady through it all.  
Didn't  
Blink. The artist's eye. My words--  
You're right, heaven does perfect  
The memory--could easily have been his:  
"It is a sickly prudishness that bars  
All appreciation of the divine beauty  
Evidenced in Nature's cunningest work--  
The human frame, form and face."

HOPKINS: Dear Harry Ploughman.

WHITMAN: Who?

HOPKINS: A man in a poem of mine. So named.  
"Harry Ploughman's Body" would have  
been more  
Accurate. Your words are like an  
abstract  
Of the poem. I studied him--muscle  
And shank, ribs, curls, and cheeks.  
Went as far as his "liquid waist"  
But not as far as Eakins. I had  
My Philadelphia in my Jesuit superiors.

WHITMAN: Recite it, recite it.

HOPKINS: I will, I will,  
But later. We have all eternity to  
Exchange poems. Right now I mean  
To test the waters.

WHITMAN: Then I converted you?  
You'll join my religion of brotherhood?  
Of  
Love, unchecked by the false god  
Guilt and his consort Fear, for the whole

Body of creation as kin to man  
And woman? I knew some. Winsome.

HOPKINS: Know I also have a Philadelphia  
Within. And my collar, if removed,  
clings.  
It's just that the sun here, though  
never  
Not at midday height, and therefore  
Not sun, is hot. I sweat, like my  
Harry at his plough. I need a swim.

WHITMAN: Well, whatever the reason, it's time  
You got in. Maybe your doing so  
Will drown the distance between us. Who  
Knows? We might yet go arm-in-arm  
Through this paradise.

HOPKINS: We might. But not  
By denying our differences. Together  
we form  
Our own pied beauty. All things  
counter  
Cost only praise of them. I hereby  
Shed robe, the rest, but not like a  
skin,  
An earlier life outgrown and discarded,  
More like wear, a way, gone  
Interior, deeper than show.

WHITMAN: However  
You spell it, it's Hopkins in the raw.

WHITMAN & CHORUS: Hurray!

HOPKINS: If you're cheering for the singularity  
of my single  
Private, as my hero Scotus,

SWIMMER #1: --Did he say  
"Scrotum"?--

HOPKINS: who loved Aquinas enough  
To veer from him cheered, charmed by,



each  
Univocal thing, any this  
Distinct from the grand, omnivorous  
That,  
There's a chance for us. Union  
Makes no sense unless those to be  
One are no such thing at all,  
Nor likely to be, either.

WHITMAN: Union?  
Is that a proposal?

HOPKINS: No, merely the prevailing  
Myth of this place.

WHITMAN: Sounds restrictive  
To me. I work best without check  
With original energy. Your Society  
Taught you well the habit of being  
Prevailed upon, but my Society  
Was Myself. I like room, not rooms.  
Nor a myth I have to conform to.

HOPKINS: Consider it, if not just rumor,  
A kind of gravity. Which is honored  
most  
By failing to observe it. By, say,  
Dancing. Each step defies the Law  
Without which steps would be impossible.  
Or by, say, this:

WHITMAN: Look, he  
Dives, daring, into all this wet!  
Not practiced, but like an amateur, amat,  
He loves. There's hope for him yet.

HOPKINS: Help!

WHITMAN: What is it?

HOPKINS: This cold. It shocks. If  
Sweetly. You didn't warn me. But this  
Wreck still floats. For which I give  
Praise.

SWIMMER #1: Did he say "race"?

CHORUS : A race!

WHITMAN & HOPKINS: Who, us?

SWIMMER #2: First one across  
And back's the ace of this swimming  
hole.

WHITMAN: Do you think that means Laureate,  
Father?

HOPKINS: Why not? Let the water be words and we  
Pull ourselves through to the last line.  
Except I couldn't keep up. You said  
Yourself you trained your body for years.  
I only wished mine would disappear. Soul  
Can't stroke. Still, if I can shake  
Off this chill by a contest, I'm for it.

WHITMAN: Considering my age and your premature  
Decline, we're evenly matched. Though  
We won't set any records, even for here.  
Who's to give us the signal?

Chorus: Ready,  
Set, go!

SWIMMER #3: Oh, no, the small one  
Seems to have swallowed his weight in  
in water  
Getting off. The old man's a natural.  
Look at them have at it, each in his  
Own way. One hugs the water, and it  
Hugs him back. The other measures it  
Out, portion by portion, his arms  
Moving to a rhythm that cuts across  
The water's moves. Syncopated swimmer!  
Now at the turn he's recovered and  
challenges  
The old man. Call them The Weather  
And The Clock. They're neck and neck.  
Now



They look at each other and grin. In  
mid-swim.  
What's up? An agreement? A thrown  
race?  
No, just a momentary nod. A sleep  
Or tribute to the other. But once  
again  
Concentration's back. The water flies.  
Weather's beard whips, but The Clock  
Has a trick and holds his breath. Here  
They come! It's hard to see. They're  
churning  
Up a screen. In a rush, they arrive.  
It's  
A tie!

SWIMMER #4: No, it's Weather.

SWIMMER #5: No, The Clock.

SWIMMER #6: Ask  
Them.

WHITMAN: I think the water won. I'm tired.

HOPKINS: I'm sure I lost. I don't feel like  
The winner of anything. And I saw your  
hand,  
Walt, touch shore before mine.  
Not much, but enough.

WHITMAN: Manly honesty  
Requires I agree. But it also requires  
I confess I had an unfair advantage.

HOPKINS: The water's a member of your brother-  
hood and carried  
You partway?

WHITMAN: It is, and may have, but that's  
Not what I meant. I figured out  
Why Tom Eakins was on my mind. This  
scene

These swimmers are his. We walked  
right into  
His painting, "The Swimming Hole."  
I saw it  
Once--not in Philadelphia--and knew  
I was home. I've been at home  
Since I got here. Even in your sheltered  
Jesus's world you must have learned  
About the help to a team playing  
On its own ground.

HOPKINS: I loudly cheered  
Many a Balliol rowing crew at Oxford  
To victory.

WHITMAN: Then you know. And know  
We'd have to meet once more, on English  
Ground, to be fair. These are American  
Waters.

HOPKINS: You are a sportsmanlike winner.  
And I can't argue about a painting  
I've never  
Seen. But granting these are American  
Waters, I'll also claim they aren't.

WHITMAN: Do you mean to say Tom Eakins has  
An English counterpart? I don't  
believe it.

HOPKINS: I mean this scene, though earthly,  
is not  
Earth. Did you forget, Walt, you died?  
Welcome to heaven, like it or not.  
Unless I've misread this place--my  
studies  
In theology at St. Beuno's, Wales,  
Could hardly have prepared me for such  
An afterlife--your body, its apparent  
Extension through time and space, is but  
A single, eternal point broken  
By some prism beyond our science  
Into an insubstantial, spread fan

Of present, past and future. As is  
Everything you see here.

WHITMAN: Impossible.  
There, when I pinch him--

SWIMMER #1: Hey, old man!--

WHITMAN: He jumps. Ow! And pinches back.  
And what I feel for these rude youth  
Around us is substantial. Even for you,  
If you'd only relax. The swim didn't  
Warm you up much. Or is that because,  
According to you, the water's not water?

HOPKINS: I know Digby couldn't drown in it.

WHITMAN: Digby? Unless he had gills, he could.

HOPKINS: Digby Mackworth Dolben. My,  
Let me guess, Peter Doyle. The River  
Welland took him. At nineteen. I had  
Known him two years. Four years my  
younger,  
But that provided just enough distance  
To show how close we were. A convert,  
Like myself. Tenuous health. Sang  
No song of himself. In fact, once  
burned  
His hair off. Lit it with a candle.  
You wouldn't have approved of him. And  
He was the most beautiful young man  
I've ever seen.

WHITMAN: I would have approved.

HOPKINS: See that one wading out? I thought  
When I first saw him he was Digby.  
I had hoped it was he. Forever.  
But Digby had less flesh. As if  
The spirit crowded it off his bones.

WHITMAN: There you go again, setting the two  
Against each other like enemies. If these

Are spiritual waters, they're also  
physical  
Ones, no illusion, and could drown your  
Friend again, or you for the first time.

HOPKINS: You're so enamored of your bulk--what  
Was it you wrote, "There is that lot  
Of me and all so luscious"--you can't  
Admit your prized flesh has become  
A shadow.

WHITMAN: I can't, can't I? I'm  
Not a violent man, but if a dunking  
Can teach you this water's real, then  
A dunking it'll be. Boys, it's time  
For a little innocent American fun.

HOPKINS: In the name of . . .

CHORUS : Whoopee! We've got him.

WHITMAN: This is called, Holding Down Hopkins.

CHORUS : How long?

WHITMAN: Long enough for him to learn  
The dangers of this swimming hole. He  
thinks  
There's no harm can come to him here.  
He has to be taught, for his own good  
health,  
To respect water no matter where  
It is.

SWIMMER #3: I think maybe he's learned  
Enough respect. He's kicking pretty  
hard.

WHITMAN: Let him up then. We'll see if he wants  
To quote poetry now.

SWIMMER #3: You taught him  
Too well. You won't even get him  
To say his name for awhile.

WHITMAN: Quick!  
Lift him out onto that flat rock.  
Thank Eakins for an emergency bed,  
Whether he intended one or not.  
I'll just sit here next to him  
Till he comes round. I've done this  
Too much. I'm once again at Fredericks-  
burg  
And this young priest who loves me  
But not well is my brother George  
And many others.

HOPKINS: Then two times,  
And one timeless, merge here. I  
heard you.  
Barely. Your voice comes through a mist.  
You didn't quite flood me though you  
taught me  
How to choke in heaven. I don't know  
If I choked on water or it  
On me. If it was in my throat,  
I was in its. But I do know  
That if I'm a soldier in your Civil War,  
And thus American, you're also English,  
A Jesuit, in fact, who sits beside me  
On my deathbed. I said, "I am so  
Happy," then nothing else. Bridges  
Told me what your friend O'Conner  
Called you, in his book. A good grey  
Christ. Who is, of course, my lover.

WHITMAN: Bill went too far in praising me.  
Christ never nearly drowned a man.  
Though he did tempt some to walk on  
water.  
But if his words for me can help you  
Live with one who likes best  
The dress of the old Adam--though  
I do promise from time to time  
To put my clothes back on--I'm glad  
He said it.

HOPKINS: I close my eyes and that's  
My death. I open them, stand up,  
And that's my resurrection. You're the  
first  
Person my new eyes look on. Let  
My arm around your shoulder, draped  
In my Manley way, signify that.

WHITMAN: And let the two of us now formally  
Add ourselves to Tom Eakins' composition,  
His version of Eden. Shall we stand  
Like two blades, bucks, a certain  
Tilt to our heads and jut to our hips  
To show our pride in sex?

HOPKINS: Let's.

(All pose, the six young men as they did at the  
start, Hopkins and Whitman in such a way as  
not to fault Eakins' design.)