

MYTHIC PASSAGES
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Heather Dale — *The Road to Santiago*

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Amphisbaena Music, 2005

www.heatherdale.com

Reviewed by Brenda Sutton, Event Coordinator for Mythic Imagination Institute and award-winning singer/songwriter who performs with the internationally acclaimed band [Three Weird Sisters](#) and the Weird Family.

Canadian singer/songwriter Heather Dale's skill and artistry has grown at a steady pace though her four previous CDs, *May Queen*, *This Endris Night*, *Call the Names*, and *The Trial of Lancelot*. Strong Celtic influences, especially concerning the Arthurian myths and legends, figured heavily in those fine works. With her newest release, *The Road to Santiago*, Dale takes a tremendous leap in depth, quality, subject matter, and technique. Veteran producer Paul Mills' (*Stan Rogers*, *Tanglefoot*) deft touch and influence, along with a fine ensemble of talented backup musicians, succeeds with this memorable collection of songs. There's not a rough ride on any of the twelve cuts. No, just the opposite — Heather carries you along like a daisy tucked in her hair while she sets out on a musical pilgrimage.

The Road to Santiago



(2005)



Folk and country music are the last refuge for the ballad, the story set to tune, the play told with a few verses and a chorus. It's in these halls where one can still hear songs on topics other than the modern age's pop/rock version of Love/Lust. I'm going to quote extensively from Dale's well-crafted lyrics throughout this review. You'll have to take my word on her able performances, but her words — ah, her words shine as lyric or poetry, story or song. I believe that, as lovers of myth, metaphor and story, you'll enjoy them and want to hear them in their best format.

One definition of courage is 'a value of spirit that enables one to face danger or pain without showing fear'. Dale's opening salvo, **Hero**, nobly expresses the quality of strength that underlies the ability of sacrifice. She shares with us the last thoughts of those who challenge tyranny with one of the few threats that despots fear:

You think that if you set the price, they'll turn me in.
You think that when I'm on the pike, you'll win.
They'll say that I was fighting for the spirit of the law.
What will they say about *you* when I'm gone?

You murdered and you stole, you mocked the hope I gave.
Though I'd prefer a happy end, no man can cheat the grave.
I know what they'll remember in the words of every song.
What will they say about *you* when I'm gone?

They'll say:

"We stared into the wind that tore our away our breath;
We left behind a message that could not be claimed by death!"
A hero lives forever for the ones who carry on.
What will they say about *you* when you're gone?

Anne Lindsay's plaintive fiddle cries out in the next song, a sea shanty about the wreck of **The Greyhound** [mp3](#). Dale places you on the lifeboat's bench, pulling for all you're worth, alongside other desperate sailors too young to die. It's not hard to imagine this chorus sung in cadence; taught in times of safety, but used in times of peril:

Curse the Reaper cowed in black
He's laughing at your failing.
Pull that oar until it cracks!
We're bound for better sailing.

The Greyhound's sinking in the waves, and fast the sea receives her.
Curse the Reaper, bend your back and cheat your sorry grave!
And Captain Bryce is on her deck so we, her hands, may leave her.
Curse the Reaper, bend your back and cheat your sorry grave!

The Greyhound fought to stay aright as, cruel, the wild waves tossed her.
Curse the Reaper, bend your back and cheat your sorry grave!
But when the mast began to crack we knew that we had lost her.
Curse the Reaper, bend your back and cheat your sorry grave!

So put your back into it lads, and haul against the thunder.
Curse the Reaper, bend your back and cheat your sorry grave!
And cry a prayer into the winds the ship won't pull us under.
Curse the Reaper, bend your back and cheat your sorry grave!

Heather recently found herself on a modern-day pilgrimage of sorts, in of all places, Toronto, Canada. She joined thousands of young people to celebrate the human spirit, and so came to a greater understanding of the inspiration that has lead so many millions throughout the ages to undertake spiritual journeys. What makes a person set aside their normal livelihood, strip off their sandals, and walk difficult roads? Dale explains passion greater than mere curiosity in *The Road to Santiago*. [mp3](#) Doubling her own voice, Dale's ensemble uses simple 6/8 Gallic handclapping that builds steadily into a percussion band of tambourine, snare, and mountain rhythm cajon (a wooden box bongo). That's all. No other instruments. And it's all that's needed to carry you down this pilgrim's path:

A townsman's life is even, like the dust upon the road;
Not changing with the seasons — just fortune's fickle load.
But sitting on my step and bending hide and thread to task,
I saw the first man walking,
I saw the first man walking,
I saw the first of many walking past.

In ones and twos they traveled; the first hints of the wave.
With hat and stick and scallop* they would go to see the grave
Of the Saint who'd lived among us, a town he'd come to save
As he walked along the road to Santiago.

With pennies in their pockets and blisters on their feet,
They'd come within their weariness, the humble and the meek,
For while a day could bring them wages, these months would bring release
From the road that they were walking,
This road that they were walking,
This road that led them forth in their belief.

Soon the trickle was a torrent; then the torrent was a flood.
And like Noah, how they laughed amid the gadflies and the mud.
Oh, I wondered what they shared that made such disparate men beloved
As they walked along the road to Santiago?

One had come from Germany, and one from here in Spain,
And one from near the Bosphorus where Constantine had reigned.
From every land they ventured forth, then ventured home again,
And found a road worth walking,
They found this road worth walking,
For all agreed their roads were much the same.

And so I laid my work aside — the day's long toils would keep,
For, what was said "A man must sow if he intends to reap"?
So with a laugh I set to putting blisters on my feet
As I joined them on the road to Santiago.

* It took some hunting to figure out this reference to scallops. The symbol of St. James the Elder, scallop shells covered the beach where traditionally the boat bearing his decapitated remains is said to have run aground in Galicia, at the very tip of Spanish Finisterre. Since the Middle Ages, pilgrims have stepped their way along routes of varying degrees of difficulty to cross the Pyrenees. This route through France is the one that pilgrims took to reach the sacred cathedral called St. James' "campo stellae" or Field of Stars.

As mentioned, Arthurian legend dominated much of Dale's previous recordings. She has a talent for retelling the tales, allowing us to peek into the intimate and everyday lives of those well-known characters. In her ballad *Holly, Ivy & Yew*, Dale sings here with a simple arrangement of voice accompanied by wise and sultry solo bass. Queen Guinevere dispenses justice in the Court of Love. Keeping her good conscience, law, and grace, she allows Fate to step up to the bar, deciding fairly in a battle of seasons, youth versus age, and love versus lust.

Guinevere would sit amid the holly and the ivy,
And there enthroned she'd hear the pleas of lovers vain and true.
And there she'd sit serenely 'neath the thorns upon the holly,
And the creepers of the ivy, and the bending of the yew.

One day there came before her, 'neath the holly and the ivy,
An uncle and a nephew and the woman both did woo.
Betrothed to the elder, but beloved of the younger,
And bitter thorns of holly grew between the two.

The Queen with rooted wisdom, like the holly and the ivy,
Said, "Lovers' hearts will cling like vines no matter what they do.
But blessed is the woman who accepts her wedded duty
Like the strong and supple branches of the bending yew."

And so she asked the uncle, 'neath the holly and the ivy,
Were he to have a choice, what day of wedding would he choose?
To have a wife in summer, when all goodly things are growing,
Or wait to take his lover 'til the trees stood nude?

So, the uncle cast his gaze amid the holly and the ivy
And greedily appraised the woman said to be his due.
"My Lady Queen, I'll take her when the trees have bared their branches,
And the nights are at their longest, and diversions few."

Guinevere sat smiling 'neath the holly and the ivy,
As maid and lover clung at what they thought was dreadful news.
"My dear, you have your answer — you are free to wed your lover,
For this man has loosed the bonds that you could not undo.

"For here where we are sitting 'neath the holly and the ivy
Is much the same in winter when the holly berries bloom.

So go, and have my blessing 'til the holly goes unclothed,
And the creepers of the ivy and the bending boughs of yew...
The greenest boughs of holly and of ivy and of yew.

Dale paints on many canvases. In *Hunter* [mp3](#) she expresses the desire for unfettered love by likening it to the relationship of hunting hawk to falconer, and she does it from the unusual perspective of the raptor. To 'slip the jesses' means to release the hawk after the quarry knowing that, once the hunter stoops and strikes, she will return to the gloved hand. This is a fine use of allegory.

I promise you nothing, I take only that which is free.
I'd give you a life full of risk, and the whirlwind of joy that can be.
Don't try to bind me, just love me without and greed,
And I'll give you the world, and my heart, and the air that I breathe.

Slip the jesses, my love.
This hunter you own from the hood to the glove.
When the circling and striking are done and I land,
Let me come back to your hand.

I have no illusions to think that I know what will come.
I laugh at the concept of life as the simple result of the sum.
I just want to hold you and share with you all of this life
With the stars in the darkness and love in the light
And its dizzying height.

In *Adrift*, [mp3](#) Dale lets us listen to the conversation between the Celtic hero Oisín and his fairy wife Niamh. Dwelling in the land of Tir Na Nog (the Land of the Young), Oisín has every blessing of life, love and beauty for which a human could wish. In spite of his great fortune, he becomes increasingly consumed by a recurring nightmare that the fate of his Irish homeland requires his protection and care. Niamh's pleading and warning go unheeded, and Oisín crosses the sea. Once his foot touches land, all the rejuvenation of fairy is lost. He withers to his true great mortal age, unable to either protect Ireland or return to Niamh. Dale gives us the slow rolling swell of the ocean in her piano. Alto recorder does an admirable job masquerading as low D whistle. Cello, doumbek, fretless bass and electric guitar are all employed with such delicate touch and gentle blend. There's no extraneous or flamboyant sound that would detract from the sorrow and frustration of the lyrics.

Lover, dear lover, I've had a fell dream.
My mother's adrift on the sea.
My brothers have left her alone in the gale.
There's no one to save her but me.

*Oisín, Oisín, lay down your fair head.
I've given you gold, and I've given my bed,
And your mother lies sleeping, she's well and she's hale.*

Lover, dear lover, she's crying my name.
My mother's adrift on the sea.
She's none to protect her, no oar and no sail.
There's no one to save her but me.

*Oisin, Oisin, another will come.
I've given you riches; I'll give you a son,
And your mother is singing. She's well and she's hale.*

Lover, dear lover, there are tears on her gown.
My mother's adrift on the sea.
Her sons have all left her. I cannot now fail.
There's no one to save her but me.

*Oisin, Oisin, you've seen an untruth.
I've given you kinship; I've given you youth.
And your mother has comfort. She's well and she's hale.*

*Na wre gasa dha dreys tava'n dor
(Don't let your feet touch the earth)
Dus tre dhe vy
(Come home to me)*

Dale has included only two covers: Graham Pratt's ***Black Fox*** (wherein the Master Huntsman makes the mistake of uttering in the frustration of a foxless hunt, "If only the Devil himself come by we'd run him such a race!" and must run an exhausting race with Himself disguised as a fox) and the Stan Rogers standard ***Flowers of Bermuda*** (again illustrating sacrifice: a sea captain gives up his place in the only lifeboat so that his crew can row to safety.) Both are well crafted and memorable performances, but I'd rather focus on Dale's lyrics here.

The variety of source material in this CD is a highlight. Dale steps away from her comfortable Celtic foundation to explore other cultures, other musical rhythms and instruments. She's become fearless. From the 14th century medieval writer Giovanni Boccaccio's collection of Italian folktales, *The Decameron*, Dale sings a delightful story of ingenuity and invention in the pursuit of desire. Meet Pyrrhus, a crafty, horny, handsome trickster from ***Up into the Pear Tree***. The origins of his name refer to a Greek warrior whose victories were so costly as to be ruinous.

The young Madonna Lydia went out to take a stroll
Upon the arm of Don Ambruglio, her newly wedded lord.
Their serving man was Pyrrhus that day, as chance befell,
And though he was the husband's man, he longed to be her man as well.

Sweetly said Madonna with twinkle in her eye,
"I see a tree hung low with fruit; and oh! The highest one is ripe!"
The Don looked sagely upward, and nodded his assent,
And so the servant stripped to shirt and hose, and up the tree he went.

Up into the pear tree was handsome Pyrrhus sent;
There he thought of a clever plan,
And this is how it went:

When the noble pair below was seated on the ground,
From up above, young Pyrrhus made a show of looking shyly down.
"My lord...I cannot blame you — but it seems to me unwise
To kiss your wife so boldly here, and right before a servant's eyes!"

Ambruglio was taken aback, "My boy, what's that you say?
My wife and I are sitting here and not entwined in Cupid's play."
Said Pyrrhus, soul of innocence, "My eyes cannot agree,
But here, come up and take my place, my lord — perhaps it is the tree."

So up into the pear tree the foolish husband went
While Pyrrhus thought of the prize below
And hastened his descent.

There's nothing quite as pleasant as a summer's warm embrace,
And when the Don looked down he saw the ardent lovers face to face.
But to his cries the two below said simply, "What's the fuss?
Just as before, a yard or more still separates the two of us."

The Don cried, "It's a miracle! Let's cry it in the town!"
But with a smile, Madonna said, "I think that you should cut it down.
What good's a tree which lays a doubt on wives of good repute?
But Pyrrhus here has earned my gratitude for fetching me my fruit!"

So Pyrrhus felled the pear tree, as was his first intent
And once he finished his sweaty work
His vigor was all but spent.

The wondrous tree was lost; Ambruglio ne'er guessed the game,
But still the tale went far and wide and garnered him a certain fame.
Lydia was happy with this pleasant stroke of luck
And always called upon her Pyrrhus when she had some fruit to pluck.

And up into the pear tree was handsome Pyrrhus sent,
For there he thought of a clever plan
And that was how it went.

In my opinion, *Medusa* [mp3](#) is the most powerful song in the collection, but I've always had a soft spot for the women of Greek myth who were used badly, like Arachnea, Psyche and Medusa. Poor Medusa's very myth has been so violated over time. Originally she was an aspect of the goddess Athene imported to Greece from Libya where she was the Serpent-Goddess of the Amazons. In the bronze and iron age of 1st century Greece, the holy image of the Gorgon

Medusa as an ancient symbol of female power and wisdom became totally unacceptable. Patriarchy reduced Medusa from a revered aspect of the Triple Goddess, whose name means "sovereign female wisdom," to a god-raped virgin, betrayed and transformed into a hideous, snaky monster by Athena, and beheaded by the "hero" Perseus. Dale's Medusa roars with all her might, confident in her own beauty despite the curse of Gods and screams of "pretty men."

Mother would tell me I was the pretty one
Then she would cry all night
Nobody thinks that really they're being cruel
When they suggest that I should try to look like them
As if God loved the pretty ones best.

Damn 'em all —I create my own perfection
Damn 'em all —in the face of their rejection
Damn 'em all —well, this dog will have its day
My garden's full of pretty men who couldn't stay away.

Notice the ones who all like to criticize
Are the ones trying to hide —
Why should I sell my soul to be one of them?
Better to love the me within behind the skin
I choose to be a Goddess inside.

Confession enters the sheltered life of a 16th century Nottingham convent to let us listen to the prayers of an elderly nun pouring her confused heart out to God. Her charge, a lovely young novice named Marian, has turned her back on safety and convention to join with Robin Hood's Merry Men. As Dale describes, Marian never "spares a thought for those she left behind." There's a great deal of pain and mental anguish mixed in these plain words, as anyone who has ever stared into an abandoned room can attest.

The one I told you all about,
The pretty one who came her so devout,
She told me all the things she felt she'd lost,
And all the things she feared to be without.

I told her all the things that I'd been told,
Those comforts that I took when I was young,
But still I think she only saw me old.
I don't know what I said to make her run.

She's given up the veil, the vows she'd sworn,
Abandoned any effort to conform.
Without a word to anyone, she's gone her way alone,
A dove escaping back into the storm.

I tried to show her I could understand,
But still she chose to leave me for the cold.
It makes me doubt the woman that I am
And, God forgive me, all that I've been told.

So here I am again, I think I've sinned.
I can't exactly place the how or why.
I tried to be a sister and a friend.
I never dreamed she'd give this winged reply.

I mentioned before that Dale delves into diversity with her *Santiago* project. The last card in the spread is the creation myth of the Arctic Inuit. **Sedna** tells the tale of transformational beauty in spite of harsh and cruel treatment. The young maiden is very lovely and vain enough to turn down marriage offers from several hunters. In frustration, her father offers her to a dark and handsome stranger who carries her off. He is Raven in disguise, who sets her in a cold cave on a barren cliff, leaving her each day to hunt for fish. Sedna cries out for help, and the Arctic winds carry her voice to her father. Feeling bad for abandoning his daughter, he comes to her rescue.

When Raven returns with the night's catch to find an empty cave, he flies after his wife, stirring up a mighty storm with each beat of his fearsome wings. The father, frightened for his own life, pitches poor Sedna into the ocean. When she tries to climb back in the kayak, Daddy beats upon her frozen fingers with the paddle until they crack and fall off. She sinks into the deep.

Sedna, tormented and raging with anger, did not perish. She is the goddess of the sea, seated at the bottom of the ocean with her companions formed from her fingers, the seals, otters, and whales. Her fury against man drums up the violent seas and storms. Hunters must treat her with great respect. To calm her, shamans from the world above must swim down to her to comb her long, black, tangled hair. Thus placated, Sedna releases her companions, allowing the Inuit to eat from the bounty of the sea. After each catch, the hunter places a drop of water into the mouth of the animal, a gesture of thanks to Sedna for her kindness in allowing him to feed his family.

*Sedna roamed the deep,
The cold forgotten deep.
No one wants to be alone...*

From her hands they fell
Children of the ocean's swell
With ice's twinkle given sight.
She offered them a name
And seals they all became,
And laughing took a coat of dappled light.

From her hands they fell
Ever in the sea to dwell,
Nimble-fingered, quick and lithe.
She offered them a name

And otters they became,
Keepers of her secrets in the ice.

From her hands they fell,
The mightiest of all,
Slow and gentle as the tides.
She offered them a name
And whales they all became
To tread the paths the lesser are denied.

If you haven't figured out by now, I heartily recommend *The Road to Santiago*, and I hope that you will watch for Heather Dale. She's an amazing talent and a lovely human being with a great gift for story and song. If we're lucky, she's returning for Mythic Journeys '06 and you'll get another chance to hear this fantastic performer.

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