

Classic Poetry Series

James Dickey
- poems -

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James Dickey(2 February 1923 – 19 January 1997)

James Lafayette Dickey was an American poet and novelist. He was appointed the eighteenth Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress in 1966.

Biography

Early Years

James Dickey was born to lawyer Eugene Dickey and Maibelle Swift in Atlanta, Georgia where he attended North Fulton High School in Atlanta's Buckhead neighborhood. In 1942 he enrolled at Clemson Agricultural College of South Carolina and played on the football team as a tailback. After one semester, he left school to enlist in the Army Air Corps. Dickey served with the U.S. Army Air Forces as a radar operator in a night fighter squadron during the Second World War, and in the U.S. Air Force during the Korean War. Between the wars he attended Vanderbilt University, graduating with degrees in English and philosophy, as well as minoring in astronomy. He also taught at the University of Florida.

Career

From 1950 to 1954, Dickey taught at Rice University (then Rice Institute) in Houston. While teaching freshman composition at Rice, Dickey returned for a two-year air force stint in Korea, and went back to teaching. (Norton Anthology, The Literature of the American South, 809) He then worked for several years in advertising, most notably writing copy and helping direct creative work on the Coca-Cola and Lay's Potato Chips campaign. He once said he embarked on his advertising career in order to "make some bucks." Dickey also said "I was selling my soul to the devil all day...and trying to buy it back at night".

He returned to poetry in 1960, and his first book, "Into the Stone and Other Poems", was published in 1960 and "Drowning with Others" was published in 1962, which led to a Guggenheim fellowship (Norton Anthology, The Literature of the American South) Buckdancer's Choice earned him a National Book Award in 1965. Among his better known poems are "The Performance", "Cherrylog Road", "The Firebombing", "May Day Sermon", "Falling", and "For The Last Wolverine".

After being named a poetry consultant for the Library of Congress, he published his first volume of collected poems, "Poems 1957-1967" in 1967. This publishing

may represent Dickey's best work—and he accepted a position of Professor of English and writer-in-residence at the University of South Carolina at Columbia.

His popularity exploded after the film version of his novel *Deliverance* was released in 1972. Dickey had a cameo in the film as a sheriff.

The poet was invited to read his poem "The Strength of Fields" at President Jimmy Carter's inauguration in 1977.

Personal Life

In November 1948 he married Maxine Syerson, and three years later they had their first son, Christopher; a second son, Kevin, was born in 1958. Two months after Maxine died in 1976, Dickey married Deborah Dodson. Their daughter, Bronwen, was born in 1981. Christopher is a novelist and journalist, lately providing coverage from the Middle East for *Newsweek*. In 1998, Christopher wrote a book about his father and Christopher's own sometimes troubled relationship with him, titled *Summer of Deliverance*. Kevin is a radiologist and lives in New England. Bronwen is currently a writer in New York City.

James Dickey died on January 19, 1997, six days after his last class at the University of South Carolina, where from 1968 he taught as poet-in-residence. Dickey spent his last years in and out of hospitals, afflicted first with jaundice and later fibrosis of the lungs. He also suffered from alcoholism.

Adultery

We have all been in rooms
We cannot die in, and they are odd places, and sad.
Often Indians are standing eagle-armed on hills

In the sunrise open wide to the Great Spirit
Or gliding in canoes or cattle are browsing on the walls
Far away gazing down with the eyes of our children

Not far away or there are men driving
The last railspike, which has turned
Gold in their hands. Gigantic forepleasure lives

Among such scenes, and we are alone with it
At last. There is always some weeping
Between us and someone is always checking

A wrist watch by the bed to see how much
Longer we have left. Nothing can come
Of this nothing can come

Of us: of me with my grim techniques
Or you who have sealed your womb
With a ring of convulsive rubber:

Although we come together,
Nothing will come of us. But we would not give
It up, for death is beaten

By praying Indians by distant cows historical
Hammers by hazardous meetings that bridge
A continent. One could never die here

Never die never die
While crying. My lover, my dear one
I will see you next week

When I'm in town. I will call you
If I can. Please get hold of Please don't
Oh God, Please don't any more I can't bear . . . Listen:

We have done it again we are
Still living. Sit up and smile,
God bless you. Guilt is magical.

James Dickey

At Darien Bridge

The sea here used to look
As if many convicts had built it,

Standing deep in their ankle chains,
Ankle-deep in the water, to smite

The land and break it down to salt.
I was in this bog as a child

When they were all working all day
To drive the pilings down.

I thought I saw the still sun
Strike the side of a hammer in flight

And from it a sea bird be born
To take off over the marshes.

As the gray climbs the side of my head
And cuts my brain off from the world,

I walk and wish mainly for birds,
For the one bird no one has looked for

To spring again from a flash
Of metal, perhaps from the scratched

Wedding band on my ring finger.
Recalling the chains of their feet,

I stand and look out over grasses
At the bridge they built, long abandoned,

Breaking down into water at last,
And long, like them, for freedom

Or death, or to believe again
That they worked on the ocean to give it

The unchanging, hopeless look
Out of which all miracles leap.

James Dickey

Buckdancer's Choice

So I would hear out those lungs,
The air split into nine levels,
Some gift of tongues of the whistler

In the invalid's bed: my mother,
Warbling all day to herself
The thousand variations of one song;

It is called Buckdancer's Choice.
For years, they have all been dying
Out, the classic buck-and-wing men

Of traveling minstrel shows;
With them also an old woman
Was dying of breathless angina,

Yet still found breath enough
To whistle up in my head
A sight like a one-man band,

Freed black, with cymbals at heel,
An ex-slave who thrivingly danced
To the ring of his own clashing light

Through the thousand variations of one song
All day to my mother's prone music,
The invalid's warbler's note,

While I crept close to the wall
Sock-footed, to hear the sounds alter,
Her tongue like a mockingbird's break

Through stratum after stratum of a tone
Proclaiming what choices there are
For the last dancers of their kind,

For ill women and for all slaves
Of death, and children enchanted at walls
With a brass-beating glow underfoot,

Not dancing but nearly risen
Through barnlike, theatrelike houses
On the wings of the buck and wing.

James Dickey

Bums On Waking

Bums, on waking,
Do not always find themselves
In gutters with water running over their legs
And the pillow of the curbstone
Turning hard as sleep drains from it.
Mostly, they do not know

But hope for where they shall come to.
The opening of the eye is precious,

And the shape of the body also,
Lying as it has fallen,
Disdainfully crumpling earthward
Out of alcohol.
Drunken under their eyelids
Like children sleeping toward Christmas,

They wait for the light to shine
Wherever it may decide.

Often it brings them staring
Through glass in the rich part of town,
Where the forms of humanized wax
Are arrested in midstride
With their heads turned, and dressed
By force. This is ordinary, and has come

To be disappointing.
They expect and hope for

Something totally other:
That while they staggered last night
For hours, they got clear,
Somehow, of the city; that they
Burst through a hedge, and are lying
In a trampled rose garden,
Pillowed on a bulldog's side,
A watchdog's, whose breathing

Is like the earth's, unforced --
Or that they may, once a year
(Any dawn now), awaken
In church, not on the coffin boards
Of a back pew, or on furnace-room rags,
But on the steps of the altar

Where candles are opening their eyes
With all-seeing light

And the green stained-glass of the windows
Falls on them like sanctified leaves.
Who else has quite the same
Commitment to not being sure
What he shall behold, come from sleep --
A child, a policeman, an effigy?

Who else has died and thus risen?
Never knowing how they have got there,

They might just as well have walked
On water, through walls, out of graves,
Through potter's fields and through barns,
Through slums where their stony pillows
Refused to harden, because of
Their hope for this morning's first light,

With water moving over their legs
More like living cover than it is.

James Dickey

Cherrylog Road

Off Highway 106
At Cherrylog Road I entered
The '34 Ford without wheels,
Smothered in kudzu,
With a seat pulled out to run
Corn whiskey down from the hills,

And then from the other side
Crept into an Essex
With a rumble seat of red leather
And then out again, aboard
A blue Chevrolet, releasing
The rust from its other color,

Reared up on three building blocks.
None had the same body heat;
I changed with them inward, toward
The weedy heart of the junkyard,
For I knew that Doris Holbrook
Would escape from her father at noon

And would come from the farm
To seek parts owned by the sun
Among the abandoned chassis,
Sitting in each in turn
As I did, leaning forward
As in a wild stock-car race

In the parking lot of the dead.
Time after time, I climbed in
And out the other side, like
An envoy or movie star
Met at the station by crickets.
A radiator cap raised its head,

Become a real toad or a kingsnake
As I neared the hub of the yard,
Passing through many states,
Many lives, to reach
Some grandmother's long Pierce-Arrow
Sending platters of blindness forth

From its nickel hubcaps
And spilling its tender upholstery
On sleepy roaches,
The glass panel in between
Lady and colored driver
Not all the way broken out,

The back-seat phone
Still on its hook.
I got in as though to exclaim,
"Let us go to the orphan asylum,
John; I have some old toys
For children who say their prayers."

I popped with sweat as I thought
I heard Doris Holbrook scrape
Like a mouse in the southern-state sun
That was eating the paint in blisters
From a hundred car tops and hoods.
She was tapping like code,

Loosening the screws,
Carrying off headlights,
Sparkplugs, bumpers,
Cracked mirrors and gear-knobs,
Getting ready, already,
To go back with something to show

Other than her lips' new trembling

I would hold to me soon, soon,
Where I sat in the ripped back seat
Talking over the interphone,
Praying for Doris Holbrook
To come from her father's farm

And to get back there
With no trace of me on her face
To be seen by her red-haired father
Who would change, in the squalling barn,
Her back's pale skin with a strop,
Then lay for me

In a bootlegger's roasting car
With a string-triggered I2-gauge shotgun
To blast the breath from the air.
Not cut by the jagged windshields,
Through the acres of wrecks she came
With a wrench in her hand,

Through dust where the blacksnake dies
Of boredom, and the beetle knows
The compost has no more life.
Someone outside would have seen
The oldest car's door inexplicably
Close from within:

I held her and held her and held her,
Convoyed at terrific speed
By the stalled, dreaming traffic around us,
So the blacksnake, stiff
With inaction, curved back
Into life, and hunted the mouse

With deadly overexcitement,
The beetles reclaimed their field
As we clung, glued together,

With the hooks of the seat springs
Working through to catch us red-handed
Amidst the gray breathless batting

That burst from the seat at our backs.
We left by separate doors
Into the changed, other bodies
Of cars, she down Cherrylog Road
And I to my motorcycle
Parked like the soul of the junkyard

Restored, a bicycle fleshed
With power, and tore off
Up Highway 106, continually
Drunk on the wind in my mouth,
Wringing the handlebar for speed,
Wild to be wreckage forever.

James Dickey

Creation Made Like Hope

Ethereal and supreme
Of tersest heaven it
has pronounced a daily storm
While hours have been supreme, it has
had hours in its
glee
A purple name
has covered the fans of sovereign
things about its
existence
Has raised and has rased, but
there has been no death
in these mornings

Has experienced and has perched
Has put up with it and has disinvested
Has raised and has razed
Has pondered and has asked
Has said and has raised

James Dickey

Falling

A 29-year-old stewardess fell ... to her death tonight when she was swept through an emergency door that suddenly sprang open ... The body ... was found ... three hours after the accident.

—New York Times

The states when they black out and lie there rolling when they turn
To something transcontinental move by drawing moonlight out of the great
One-sided stone hung off the starboard wingtip some sleeper next to
An engine is groaning for coffee and there is faintly coming in
Somewhere the vast beast-whistle of space. In the galley with its racks
Of trays she rummages for a blanket and moves in her slim tailored
Uniform to pin it over the cry at the top of the door. As though she blew

The door down with a silent blast from her lungs frozen she is black
Out finding herself with the plane nowhere and her body taking by the throat
The undying cry of the void falling living beginning to be something
That no one has ever been and lived through screaming without enough air
Still neat lipsticked stockinged girdled by regulation her hat
Still on her arms and legs in no world and yet spaced also strangely
With utter placid rightness on thin air taking her time she holds it
In many places and now, still thousands of feet from her death she seems
To slow she develops interest she turns in her maneuverable body

To watch it. She is hung high up in the overwhelming middle of things in her
Self in low body-whistling wrapped intensely in all her dark dance-weight
Coming down from a marvellous leap with the delaying, dumfounding ease
Of a dream of being drawn like endless moonlight to the harvest soil
Of a central state of one's country with a great gradual warmth coming
Over her floating finding more and more breath in what she has been using
For breath as the levels become more human seeing clouds placed honestly
Below her left and right riding slowly toward them she clasps it all
To her and can hang her hands and feet in it in peculiar ways and
Her eyes opened wide by wind, can open her mouth as wide wider and suck
All the heat from the cornfields can go down on her back with a feeling
Of stupendous pillows stacked under her and can turn turn as to someone
In bed smile, understood in darkness can go away slant slide

Off tumbling into the emblem of a bird with its wings half-spread
Or whirl madly on herself in endless gymnastics in the growing warmth
Of wheatfields rising toward the harvest moon. There is time to live
In superhuman health seeing mortal unreachable lights far down seeing
An ultimate highway with one late priceless car probing it arriving
In a square town and off her starboard arm the glitter of water catches
The moon by its one shaken side scaled, roaming silver My God it is good
And evil lying in one after another of all the positions for love
Making dancing sleeping and now cloud wisps at her no
Raincoat no matter all small towns brokenly brighter from inside
Cloud she walks over them like rain bursts out to behold a Greyhound
Bus shooting light through its sides it is the signal to go straight
Down like a glorious diver then feet first her skirt stripped beautifully
Up her face in fear-scented cloths her legs deliriously bare then
Arms out she slow-rolls over steadies out waits for something great
To take control of her trembles near feathers planes head-down
The quick movements of bird-necks turning her head gold eyes the insight-
eyesight of owls blazing into the hencoops a taste for chicken overwhelming
Her the long-range vision of hawks enlarging all human lights of cars
Freight trains looped bridges enlarging the moon racing slowly
Through all the curves of a river all the darks of the midwest blazing
From above. A rabbit in a bush turns white the smothering chickens
Huddle for over them there is still time for something to live
With the streaming half-idea of a long stoop a hurtling a fall
That is controlled that plummets as it wills turns gravity
Into a new condition, showing its other side like a moon shining
New Powers there is still time to live on a breath made of nothing
But the whole night time for her to remember to arrange her skirt
Like a diagram of a bat tightly it guides her she has this flying-skin
Made of garments and there are also those sky-divers on tv sailing
In sunlight smiling under their goggles swapping batons back and forth
And He who jumped without a chute and was handed one by a diving
Buddy. She looks for her grinning companion white teeth nowhere
She is screaming singing hymns her thin human wings spread out
From her neat shoulders the air beast-crooning to her warbling
And she can no longer behold the huge partial form of the world now
She is watching her country lose its evoked master shape watching it lose
And gain get back its houses and peoples watching it bring up
Its local lights single homes lamps on barn roofs if she fell
Into water she might live like a diver cleaving perfect plunge

Into another heavy silver unbreathable slowing saving
Element: there is water there is time to perfect all the fine
Points of diving feet together toes pointed hands shaped right
To insert her into water like a needle to come out healthily dripping
And be handed a Coca-Cola there they are there are the waters
Of life the moon packed and coiled in a reservoir so let me begin
To plane across the night air of Kansas opening my eyes superhumanly
Bright to the damned moon opening the natural wings of my jacket
By Don Loper moving like a hunting owl toward the glitter of water
One cannot just fall just tumble screaming all that time one must use
It she is now through with all through all clouds damp hair
Straightened the last wisp of fog pulled apart on her face like wool revealing
New darks new progressions of headlights along dirt roads from chaos

And night a gradual warming a new-made, inevitable world of one's own
Country a great stone of light in its waiting waters hold hold out
For water: who knows when what correct young woman must take up her body
And fly and head for the moon-crazed inner eye of midwest imprisoned
Water stored up for her for years the arms of her jacket slipping
Air up her sleeves to go all over her? What final things can be said
Of one who starts her sheerly in her body in the high middle of night
Air to track down water like a rabbit where it lies like life itself
Off to the right in Kansas? She goes toward the blazing-bare lake
Her skirts neat her hands and face warmed more and more by the air
Rising from pastures of beans and under her under chenille bedspreads
The farm girls are feeling the goddess in them struggle and rise brooding
On the scratch-shining posts of the bed dreaming of female signs
Of the moon male blood like iron of what is really said by the moan
Of airliners passing over them at dead of midwest midnight passing
Over brush fires burning out in silence on little hills and will wake
To see the woman they should be struggling on the rooftree to become
Stars: for her the ground is closer water is nearer she passes
It then banks turns her sleeves fluttering differently as she rolls
Out to face the east, where the sun shall come up from wheatfields she must
Do something with water fly to it fall in it drink it rise
From it but there is none left upon earth the clouds have drunk it back
The plants have sucked it down there are standing toward her only
The common fields of death she comes back from flying to falling
Returns to a powerful cry the silent scream with which she blew down
The coupled door of the airliner nearly nearly losing hold
Of what she has done remembers remembers the shape at the heart

Of cloud fashionably swirling remembers she still has time to die
Beyond explanation. Let her now take off her hat in summer air the contour
Of cornfields and have enough time to kick off her one remaining
Shoe with the toes of the other foot to unhook her stockings
With calm fingers, noting how fatally easy it is to undress in midair
Near death when the body will assume without effort any position
Except the one that will sustain it enable it to rise live
Not die nine farms hover close widen eight of them separate, leaving
One in the middle then the fields of that farm do the same there is no
Way to back off from her chosen ground but she sheds the jacket
With its silver sad impotent wings sheds the bat's guiding tailpiece
Of her skirt the lightning-charged clinging of her blouse the intimate
Inner flying-garment of her slip in which she rides like the holy ghost

Of a virgin sheds the long windsocks of her stockings absurd
Brassiere then feels the girdle required by regulations squirming
Off her: no longer monobuttocked she feels the girdle flutter shake
In her hand and float upward her clothes rising off her ascending
Into cloud and fights away from her head the last sharp dangerous shoe
Like a dumb bird and now will drop in soon now will drop

In like this the greatest thing that ever came to Kansas down from all Heights all
levels of American breath layered in the lungs from the frail
Chill of space to the loam where extinction slumbers in corn tassels thickly
And breathes like rich farmers counting: will come along them after
Her last superhuman act the last slow careful passing of her hands
All over her unharmed body desired by every sleeper in his dream:
Boys finding for the first time their loins filled with heart's blood
Widowed farmers whose hands float under light covers to find themselves
Arisen at sunrise the splendid position of blood unearthly drawn
Toward clouds all feel something pass over them as she passes
Her palms over her long legs her small breasts and deeply between
Her thighs her hair shot loose from all pins streaming in the wind
Of her body let her come openly trying at the last second to land
On her back This is it this
All those who find her impressed
In the soft loam gone down driven well into the image of her body
The furrows for miles flowing in upon her where she lies very deep
In her mortal outline in the earth as it is in cloud can tell nothing
But that she is there inexplicable unquestionable and remember
That something broke in them as well and began to live and die more

When they walked for no reason into their fields to where the whole earth
Caught her interrupted her maiden flight told her how to lie she cannot
Turn go away cannot move cannot slide off it and assume another
Position no sky-diver with any grin could save her hold her in his arms
Plummet with her unfold above her his wedding silks she can no longer
Mark the rain with whirling women that take the place of a dead wife
Or the goddess in Norwegian farm girls or all the back-breaking whores
Of Wichita. All the known air above her is not giving up quite one
Breath it is all gone and yet not dead not anywhere else
Quite lying still in the field on her back sensing the smells
Of incessant growth try to lift her a little sight left in the corner
Of one eye fading seeing something wave lies believing
That she could have made it at the best part of her brief goddess
State to water gone in headfirst come out smiling invulnerable
Girl in a bathing-suit ad but she is lying like a sunbather at the last
Of moonlight half-buried in her impact on the earth not far
From a railroad trestle a water tank she could see if she could
Raise her head from her modest hole with her clothes beginning
To come down all over Kansas into bushes on the dewy sixth green
Of a golf course one shoe her girdle coming down fantastically
On a clothesline, where it belongs her blouse on a lightning rod:

Lies in the fields in this field on her broken back as though on
A cloud she cannot drop through while farmers sleepwalk without
Their women from houses a walk like falling toward the far waters
Of life in moonlight toward the dreamed eternal meaning of their farms
Toward the flowering of the harvest in their hands that tragic cost
Feels herself go go toward go outward breathes at last fully
Not and tries less once tries tries ah, god—

James Dickey

For The Last Wolverine

They will soon be down

To one, but he still will be
For a little while still will be stopping

The flakes in the air with a look,
Surrounding himself with the silence
Of whitening snarls. Let him eat
The last red meal of the condemned

To extinction, tearing the guts

From an elk. Yet that is not enough
For me. I would have him eat

The heart, and, from it, have an idea
Stream into his gnawing head
That he no longer has a thing
To lose, and so can walk

Out into the open, in the full

Pale of the sub-Arctic sun
Where a single spruce tree is dying

Higher and higher. Let him climb it
With all his meanness and strength.
Lord, we have come to the end
Of this kind of vision of heaven,

As the sky breaks open

Its fans around him and shimmers
And into its northern gates he rises

Snarling complete in the joy of a weasel
With an elk's horned heart in his stomach
Looking straight into the eternal
Blue, where he hauls his kind. I would have it all

My way: at the top of that tree I place

The New World's last eagle
Hunched in mangy feathers giving

Up on the theory of flight.
Dear God of the wildness of poetry, let them mate
To the death in the rotten branches,
Let the tree sway and burst into flame

And mingle them, crackling with feathers,

In crownfire. Let something come
Of it something gigantic legendary

Rise beyond reason over hills
Of ice SCREAMING that it cannot die,
That it has come back, this time
On wings, and will spare no earthly thing:

That it will hover, made purely of northern

Lights, at dusk and fall
On men building roads: will perch

On the moose's horn like a falcon
Riding into battle into holy war against
Screaming railroad crews: will pull
Whole traplines like fibers from the snow

In the long-jawed night of fur trappers.

But, small, filthy, unwinged,
You will soon be crouching

Alone, with maybe some dim racial notion
Of being the last, but none of how much
Your unnoticed going will mean:
How much the timid poem needs

The mindless explosion of your rage,

The glutton's internal fire the elk's
Heart in the belly, sprouting wings,

The pact of the 'blind swallowing
Thing,' with himself, to eat
The world, and not to be driven off it
Until it is gone, even if it takes

Forever. I take you as you are

And make of you what I will,
Skunk-bear, carcajou, bloodthirsty

Non-survivor.

Lord, let me die but not die
Out.

James Dickey

Hunting Civil War Relics At Nimblewill Creek□

As he moves the mine detector
A few inches over the ground,
Making it vitally float
Among the ferns and weeds,
I come into this war
Slowly, with my one brother,
Watching his face grow deep
Between the earphones,
For I can tell
If we enter the buried battle
Of Nimblewill
Only by his expression.

Softly he wanders, parting
The grass with a dreaming hand.
No dead cry yet takes root
In his clapped ears
Or can be seen in his smile.
But underfoot I feel
The dead regroup,
The burst metals all in place,
The battle lines be drawn
Anew to include us
In Nimblewill,
And I carry the shovel and pick

More as if they were
Bright weapons that I bore.
A bird's cry breaks
In two, and into three parts.
We cross the creek; the cry
Shifts into another,
Nearer, bird, and is
Like the shout of a shadow—
Lived-with, appallingly close—
Or the soul, pronouncing
'Nimblewill':
Three tones; your being changes.

We climb the bank;
A faint light glows
On my brother's mouth.
I listen, as two birds fight
For a single voice, but he
Must be hearing the grave,
In pieces, all singing
To his clamped head,
For he smiles as if
He rose from the dead within
Green Nimblewill
And stood in his grandson's shape.

No shot from the buried war
Shall kill me now,
For the dead have waited here
A hundred years to create
Only the look on the face
Of my one brother,
Who stands among them, offering
A metal dish
Afloat in the trembling weeds,
With a long-buried light on his lips
At Nimblewill
And the dead outsinging two birds.

I choke the handle
Of the pick, and fall to my knees
To dig wherever he points,
To bring up mess tin or bullet,
To go underground
Still singing, myself,
Without a sound,
Like a man who renounces war,
Or one who shall lift up the past,
Not breathing 'Father,'
At Nimblewill,
But saying, 'Fathers! Fathers!'

James Dickey

In The Marble Quarry

Beginning to dangle beneath
The wind that blows from the undermined wood,
I feel the great pulley grind,

The thread I cling to lengthen
And let me soaring and spinning down into marble,
Hooked and weightlessly happy

Where the squared sun shines
Back equally from all four sides, out of stone
And years of dazzling labor,

To land at last among men
Who cut with power saws a Parian whiteness
And, chewing slow tobacco,

Their eyebrows like frost,
Shunt house-sized blocks and lash them to cables
And send them heavenward

Into small-town banks,
Into the columns and statues of government buildings,
But mostly graves.

I mount my monument and rise
Slowly and spinningly from the white-gloved men
Toward the hewn sky

Out of the basement of light,
Sadly, lifted through time's blinding layers
On perhaps my tombstone

In which the original shape
Michelangelo believed was in every rock upon earth
Is heavily stirring,

Surprised to be an angel,
To be waked in North Georgia by the ponderous play
Of men with ten-ton blocks

But no more surprised than I
To feel sadness fall off as though I myself
Were rising from stone

Held by a thread in midair,
Badly cut, local-looking, and totally uninspired,
Not a masterwork

Or even worth seeing at all
But the spirit of this place just the same,
Felt here as joy.

James Dickey

In The Tree House At Night

And now the green household is dark.
The half-moon completely is shining
On the earth-lighted tops of the trees.
To be dead, a house must be still.
The floor and the walls wave me slowly;
I am deep in them over my head.
The needles and pine cones about me

Are full of small birds at their roundest,
Their fist without mercy gripping
Hard down through the tree to the roots
To sing back at light when they feel it.
We lie here like angels in bodies,
My brothers and I, one dead,
The other asleep from much living,

In mid-air huddled beside me.
Dark climbed to us here as we climbed
Up the nails I have hammered all day
Through the sprained, comic rungs of the ladder
Of broom handles, crate slats, and laths
Foot by foot up the trunk to the branches
Where we came out at last over lakes

Of leaves, of fields disencumbered of earth
That move with the moves of the spirit.
Each nail that sustains us I set here;
Each nail in the house is now steadied
By my dead brother's huge, freckled hand.
Through the years, he has pointed his hammer
Up into these limbs, and told us

That we must ascend, and all lie here.
Step after step he has brought me,
Embracing the trunk as his body,

Shaking its limbs with my heartbeat,
Till the pine cones danced without wind
And fell from the branches like apples.
In the arm-slender forks of our dwelling

I breathe my live brother's light hair.
The blanket around us becomes
As solid as stone, and it sways.
With all my heart, I close
The blue, timeless eye of my mind.
Wind springs, as my dead brother smiles
And touches the tree at the root;

A shudder of joy runs up
The trunk; the needles tingle;
One bird uncontrollably cries.
The wind changes round, and I stir
Within another's life. Whose life?
Who is dead? Whose presence is living?
When may I fall strangely to earth,

Who am nailed to this branch by a spirit?
Can two bodies make up a third?
To sing, must I feel the world's light?
My green, graceful bones fill the air
With sleeping birds. Alone, alone
And with them I move gently.
I move at the heart of the world.

James Dickey

Pursuit From Under

Often, in these blue meadows,
I hear what passes for the bark of seals

And on August week ends the cold of a personal ice age
Comes up through my bare feet
Which are trying to walk like a boy's again
So that nothing on earth can have changed
On the ground where I was raised.

The dark grass here is like
The pads of mukluks going on and on

Because I once burned kerosene to read
Myself near the North Pole
In the journal of Arctic explorers
Found, years after death, preserved
In a tent, part of whose canvas they had eaten

Before the last entry.
All over my father's land

The seal holes sigh like an organ,
And one entry carries more terror
Than the blank page that signified death
In 1912, on the icecap.
It says that, under the ice,

The killer whale darts and distorts,
Cut down by the flawing glass

To a weasel's shadow,
And when, through his ceiling, he sees
Anything darker than snow
He falls away
To gather more and more force

From the iron depths of cold water,
His shadow dwindling

Almost to nothing at all, then charges
Straight up, looms up at the ice and smashes
Into it with his forehead
To splinter the roof, to isolate seal or man
On a drifting piece of the floe

Which he can overturn.
If you run, he will follow you

Under the frozen pane,
Turning as you do, zigzagging,
And at the most uncertain of your ground
Will shatter through, and lean,
And breathe frankly in your face

An enormous breath smelling of fish.
With the lungs staining your air

You know the unsaid recognition
Of which the explorers died:
They had been given an image
Of how the downed dead pursue us.
They knew, as they starved to death,

That not only in the snow
But in the family field

The small shadow moves,
And under the bare feet in the summer:
That somewhere the turf will heave,
And the outraged breath of the dead,
So long held, will form

Unbreathably around the living.
The cows low oddly here

As I pass, a small bidden shape
Going with me, trembling like foxfire
Under my heels and their hooves.
I shall write this by kerosene,
Pitch a tent in the pasture, and starve.

The Bee

One dot
Grainily shifting we at roadside and
The smallest wings coming along the rail fence out
Of the woods one dot of all that green. It now
Becomes flesh-crawling then the quite still
Of stinging. I must live faster for my terrified
Small son it is on him. Has come. Clings.

Old wingback, come
To life. If your knee action is high
Enough, the fat may fall in time God damn
You, Dickey, dig this is your last time to cut
And run but you must give it everything you have
Left, for screaming near your screaming child is the sheer
Murder of California traffic: some bee hangs driving

Your child
Blindly onto the highway. Get there however
Is still possible. Long live what I badly did
At Clemson and all of my clumsiest drives
For the ball all of my trying to turn
The corner downfield and my spindling explosions
Through the five-hole over tackle. O backfield

Coach Shag Norton,
Tell me as you never yet have told me
To get the lead out scream whatever will get
The slow-motion of middle age off me I cannot
Make it this way I will have to leave
My feet they are gone I have him where
He lives and down we go singing with screams into

The dirt,
Son-screams of fathers screams of dead coaches turning
To approval and from between us the bee rises screaming
With flight grainily shifting riding the rail fence
Back into the woods traffic blasting past us
Unchanged, nothing heard through the air-
conditioning glass we lying at roadside full

Of the forearm prints
Of roadrocks strawberries on our elbows as from
Scrimmage with the varsity now we can get
Up stand turn away from the highway look straight
Into trees. See, there is nothing coming out no
Smallest wing no shift of a flight-grain nothing
Nothing. Let us go in, son, and listen

For some tobacco-
mumbling voice in the branches to say "That's
a little better," to our lives still hanging
By a hair. There is nothing to stop us we can go
Deep deeper into elms, and listen to traffic die
Roaring, like a football crowd from which we have
Vanished. Dead coaches live in the air, son live

In the ear
Like fathers, and urge and urge. They want you better
Than you are. When needed, they rise and curse you they scream
When something must be saved. Here, under this tree,
We can sit down. You can sleep, and I can try
To give back what I have earned by keeping us
Alive, and safe from bees: the smile of some kind

Of savior-
Of touchdowns, of fumbles, battles,
Lives. Let me sit here with you, son
As on the bench, while the first string takes back
Over, far away and say with my silentest tongue, with the man-
creating bruises of my arms with a live leaf a quick
Dead hand on my shoulder, "Coach Norton, I am your boy."

James Dickey

The Dusk Of Horses

Right under their noses, the green
Of the field is paling away
Because of something fallen from the sky.

They see this, and put down
Their long heads deeper in grass
That only just escapes reflecting them

As the dream of a millpond would.
The color green flees over the grass
Like an insect, following the red sun over

The next hill. The grass is white.
There is no cloud so dark and white at once;
There is no pool at dawn that deepens

Their faces and thirsts as this does.
Now they are feeding on solid
Cloud, and, one by one,

With nails as silent as stars among the wood
Hewed down years ago and now rotten,
The stalls are put up around them.

Now if they lean, they come
On wood on any side. Not touching it, they sleep.
No beast ever lived who understood

What happened among the sun's fields,
Or cared why the color of grass
Fled over the hill while he stumbled,

Led by the halter to sleep
On his four taxed, worthy legs.
Each thinks he awakens where

The sun is black on the rooftop,
That the green is dancing in the next pasture,
And that the way to sleep

In a cloud, or in a risen lake,
Is to walk as though he were still
in the drained field standing, head down,

To pretend to sleep when led,
And thus to go under the ancient white
Of the meadow, as green goes

And whiteness comes up through his face
Holding stars and rotten rafters,
Quiet, fragrant, and relieved.

James Dickey

The Heaven Of Animals

Here they are. The soft eyes open.
If they have lived in a wood
It is a wood.
If they have lived on plains
It is grass rolling
Under their feet forever.

Having no souls, they have come,
Anyway, beyond their knowing.
Their instincts wholly bloom
And they rise.
The soft eyes open.

To match them, the landscape flowers,
Outdoing, desperately
Outdoing what is required:
The richest wood,
The deepest field.

For some of these,
It could not be the place
It is, without blood.
These hunt, as they have done,
But with claws and teeth grown perfect,

More deadly than they can believe.
They stalk more silently,
And crouch on the limbs of trees,
And their descent
Upon the bright backs of their prey

May take years
In a sovereign floating of joy.
And those that are hunted
Know this as their life,
Their reward: to walk

Under such trees in full knowledge
Of what is in glory above them,

And to feel no fear,
But acceptance, compliance.
Fulfilling themselves without pain

At the cycle's center,
They tremble, they walk
Under the tree,
They fall, they are torn,
They rise, they walk again.

James Dickey

The Hospital Window

I have just come down from my father.
Higher and higher he lies
Above me in a blue light
Shed by a tinted window.
I drop through six white floors
And then step out onto pavement.

Still feeling my father ascend,
I start to cross the firm street,
My shoulder blades shining with all
The glass the huge building can raise.
Now I must turn round and face it,
And know his one pane from the others.

Each window possesses the sun
As though it burned there on a wick.
I wave, like a man catching fire.
All the deep-dyed windowpanes flash,
And, behind them, all the white rooms
They turn to the color of Heaven.

Ceremoniously, gravely, and weakly,
Dozens of pale hands are waving
Back, from inside their flames.
Yet one pure pane among these
Is the bright, erased blankness of nothing.
I know that my father is there,

In the shape of his death still living.
The traffic increases around me
Like a madness called down on my head.
The horns blast at me like shotguns,
And drivers lean out, driven crazy—
But now my propped-up father

Lifts his arm out of stillness at last.
The light from the window strikes me
And I turn as blue as a soul,
As the moment when I was born.
I am not afraid for my father—
Look! He is grinning; he is not

Afraid for my life, either,
As the wild engines stand at my knees
Shredding their gears and roaring,
And I hold each car in its place
For miles, inciting its horn
To blow down the walls of the world

That the dying may float without fear
In the bold blue gaze of my father.
Slowly I move to the sidewalk
With my pin-tingling hand half dead
At the end of my bloodless arm.
I carry it off in amazement,

High, still higher, still waving,
My recognized face fully mortal,
Yet not; not at all, in the pale,
Drained, otherworldly, stricken,
Created hue of stained glass.
I have just come down from my father.

James Dickey

The Lifeguard

In a stable of boats I lie still,
From all sleeping children hidden.
The leap of a fish from its shadow
Makes the whole lake instantly tremble.
With my foot on the water, I feel
The moon outside

Take on the utmost of its power.
I rise and go our through the boats.
I set my broad sole upon silver,
On the skin of the sky, on the moonlight,
Stepping outward from earth onto water
In quest of the miracle

This village of children believed
That I could perform as I dived
For one who had sunk from my sight.
I saw his cropped haircut go under.
I leapt, and my steep body flashed
Once, in the sun.

Dark drew all the light from my eyes.
Like a man who explores his death
By the pull of his slow-moving shoulders,
I hung head down in the cold,
Wide-eyed, contained, and alone
Among the weeds,

And my fingertips turned into stone
From clutching immovable blackness.
Time after time I leapt upward
Exploding in breath, and fell back
From the change in the children's faces
At my defeat.

Beneath them I swam to the boathouse
With only my life in my arms
To wait for the lake to shine back
At the risen moon with such power

That my steps on the light of the ripples
Might be sustained.

Beneath me is nothing but brightness
Like the ghost of a snowfield in summer.
As I move toward the center of the lake,
Which is also the center of the moon,
I am thinking of how I may be
The savior of one

Who has already died in my care.
The dark trees fade from around me.
The moon's dust hovers together.
I call softly out, and the child's
Voice answers through blinding water.
Patiently, slowly,

He rises, dilating to break
The surface of stone with his forehead.
He is one I do not remember
Having ever seen in his life.
The ground I stand on is trembling
Upon his smile.

I wash the black mud from my hands.
On a light given off by the grave
I kneel in the quick of the moon
At the heart of a distant forest
And hold in my arms a child
Of water, water, water.

James Dickey

The Performance

The last time I saw Donald Armstrong
He was staggering oddly off into the sun,
Going down, off the Philippine Islands.
I let my shovel fall, and put that hand
Above my eyes, and moved some way to one side
That his body might pass through the sun,

And I saw how well he was not
Standing there on his hands,
On his spindle-shanked forearms balanced,
Unbalanced, with his big feet looming and waving
In the great, untrustworthy air
He flew in each night, when it darkened.

Dust fanned in scraped puffs from the earth
Between his arms, and blood turned his face inside out,
To demonstrate its suppleness
Of veins, as he perfected his role.
Next day, he toppled his head off
On an island beach to the south,

And the enemy's two-handed sword
Did not fall from anyone's hands
At that miraculous sight,
As the head rolled over upon
Its wide-eyed face, and fell
Into the inadequate grave

He had dug for himself, under pressure.
Yet I put my flat hand to my eyebrows
Months later, to see him again
In the sun, when I learned how he died,
And imagined him, there,
Come, judged, before his small captors,

Doing all his lean tricks to amaze them—
The back somersault, the kip-up—
And at last, the stand on his hands,
Perfect, with his feet together,
His head down, evenly breathing,
As the sun poured from the sea

And the headsman broke down
In a blaze of tears, in that light
Of the thin, long human frame
Upside down in its own strange joy,
And, if some other one had not told him,
Would have cut off the feet

Instead of the head,
And if Armstrong had not presently risen
In kingly, round-shouldered attendance,
And then knelt down in himself
Beside his hacked, glittering grave, having done
All things in this life that he could.

James Dickey

The Shark's Parlor

Memory: I can take my head and strike it on a wall on Cumberland Island
Where the night tide came crawling under the stairs came up the first
Two or three steps and the cottage stood on poles all night
With the sea sprawled under it as we dreamed of the great fin circling
Under the bedroom floor. In daylight there was my first brassy taste of beer
And Payton Ford and I came back from the Glynn County slaughterhouse
With a bucket of entrails and blood. We tied one end of a hawser
To a spindling porch-pillar and rowed straight out of the house
Three hundred yards into the vast front yard of windless blue water
The rope out slithering its coil the two-gallon jug stoppered and sealed
With wax and a ten-foot chain leader a drop-forged shark-hook nestling.
We cast our blood on the waters the land blood easily passing
For sea blood and we sat in it for a moment with the stain spreading
Out from the boat sat in a new radiance in the pond of blood in the sea
Waiting for fins waiting to spill our guts also in the glowing water.
We dumped the bucket, and baited the hook with a run-over collie pup. The jug
Bobbed, trying to shake off the sun as a dog would shake off the sea.
We rowed to the house feeling the same water lift the boat a new way,
All the time seeing where we lived rise and dip with the oars.
We tied up and sat down in rocking chairs, one eye on the other responding
To the blue-eye wink of the jug. Payton got us a beer and we sat
All morning sat there with blood on our minds the red mark out
In the harbor slowly failing us then the house groaned the rope
Sprang out of the water splinters flew we leapt from our chairs
And grabbed the rope hauled did nothing the house coming subtly
Apart all around us underfoot boards beginning to sparkle like sand
Pulling out the tarred poles we slept propped-up on leaning to sea
As in land-wind crabs scuttling from under the floor as we took runs about
Two more porch-pillars and looked out and saw something a fish-flash
An almighty fin in trouble a moiling of secret forces a false start
Of water a round wave growing in the whole of Cumberland Sound the one
ripple.
Payton took off without a word I could not hold him either

But clung to the rope anyway it was the whole house bending
Its nails that held whatever it was coming in a little and like a fool
I took up the slack on my wrist. The rope drew gently jerked I lifted
Clean off the porch and hit the water the same water it was in
I felt in blue blazing terror at the bottom of the stairs and scrambled

Back up looking desperately into the human house as deeply as I could
Stopping my gaze before it went out the wire screen of the back door
Stopped it on the thistled rattan the rugs I lay on and read
On my mother's sewing basket with next winter's socks spilling from it
The flimsy vacation furniture a bucktoothed picture of myself.
Payton came back with three men from a filling station and glanced at me
Dripping water inexplicable then we all grabbed hold like a tug-of-war.

We were gaining a little from us a cry went up from everywhere
People came running. Behind us the house filled with men and boys.
On the third step from the sea I took my place looking down the rope
Going into the ocean, humming and shaking off drops. A houseful
Of people put their backs into it going up the steps from me
Into the living room through the kitchen down the back stairs
Up and over a hill of sand across a dust road and onto a raised field
Of dunes we were gaining the rope in my hands began to be wet
With deeper water all other haulers retreated through the house
But Payton and I on the stairs drawing hand over hand on our blood
Drawing into existence by the nose a huge body becoming
A hammerhead rolling in beery shallows and I began to let up
But the rope strained behind me the town had gone
Pulling-mad in our house far away in a field of sand they struggled
They had turned their backs on the sea bent double some on their knees
The rope over their shoulders like a bag of gold they strove for the ideal
Esso station across the scorched meadow with the distant fish coming up
The front stairs the sagging boards still coming in up taking
Another step toward the empty house where the rope stood straining
By itself through the rooms in the middle of the air. 'Pass the word,'
Payton said, and I screamed it 'Let up, good God, let up!' to no one there.
The shark flopped on the porch, grating with salt-sand driving back in
The nails he had pulled out coughing chunks of his formless blood.
The screen door banged and tore off he scrambled on his tail slid
Curved did a thing from another world and was out of his element and in
Our vacation paradise cutting all four legs from under the dinner table
With one deep-water move he unwove the rugs in a moment throwing pints
Of blood over everything we owned knocked the buckteeth out of my picture
His odd head full of crashed jelly-glass splinters and radio tubes thrashing
Among the pages of fan magazines all the movie stars drenched in sea-blood
Each time we thought he was dead he struggled back and smashed
One more thing in all coming back to die three or four more times after death.
At last we got him out logrolling him greasing his sandpaper skin
With lard to slide him pulling on his chained lips as the tide came,

Tumbled him down the steps as the first night wave went under the floor.
He drifted off head back belly white as the moon. What could I do but buy
That house for the one black mark still there against death a forehead-
toucher in the room he circles beneath and has been invited to wreck?
Blood hard as iron on the wall black with time still bloodlike
Can be touched whenever the brow is drunk enough. All changes. Memory:
Something like three-dimensional dancing in the limbs with age
Feeling more in two worlds than one in all worlds the growing encounters.

James Dickey

The Sheep-Child

Farm boys wild to couple
With anything with soft-wooded trees
With mounds of earth mounds
Of pine straw will keep themselves off
Animals by legends of their own:
In the hay-tunnel dark
And dung of barns, they will
Say I have heard tell

That in a museum in Atlanta
Way back in a corner somewhere
There's this thing that's only half
Sheep like a woolly baby
Pickled in alcohol because
Those things can't live his eyes
Are open but you can't stand to look
I heard from somebody who...

But this is now almost all
Gone. The boys have taken
Their own true wives in the city,
The sheep are safe in the west hill
Pasture but we who were born there
Still are not sure. Are we,
Because we remember, remembered
In the terrible dust of museums?

Merely with his eyes, the sheep-child may
Be saying saying

I am here, in my father's house.
I who am half of your world, came deeply
To my mother in the long grass
Of the west pasture, where she stood like moonlight
Listening for foxes. It was something like love
From another world that seized her
From behind, and she gave, not lifting her head
Out of dew, without ever looking, her best
Self to that great need. Turned loose, she dipped her face

Farther into the chill of the earth, and in a sound
Of sobbing of something stumbling
Away, began, as she must do,
To carry me. I woke, dying,
In the summer sun of the hillside, with my eyes
Far more than human. I saw for a blazing moment
The great grassy world from both sides,
Man and beast in the round of their need,
And the hill wind stirred in my wool,
My hoof and my hand clasped each other,
I ate my one meal
Of milk, and died
Staring. From dark grass I came straight

To my father's house, whose dust
Whirls up in the halls for no reason
When no one comes piling deep in a hellish mild
corner,
And, through my immortal waters,
I meet the sun's grains eye
To eye, and they fail at my closet of glass.
Dead, I am most surely living
In the minds of farm boys: I am he who drives
Them like wolves from the hound bitch and calf
And from the chaste ewe in the wind.
They go into woods into bean fields they go
Deep into their known right hands. Dreaming of me,
They groan they wait they suffer
Themselves, they marry, they raise their kind.

James Dickey

The Strength Of Fields

... a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power and a life-enhancing return ...

Van Gennep: Rites de Passage

Moth-force a small town always has,

Given the night.

What field-forms can be,
Outlying the small civic light-decisions over
A man walking near home?
Men are not where he is
Exactly now, but they are around him around him like the strength

Of fields. The solar system floats on
Above him in town-moths.
Tell me, train-sound,
With all your long-lost grief,
what I can give.
Dear Lord of all the fields
what am I going to do?
Street-lights, blue-force and frail
As the homes of men, tell me how to do it how
To withdraw how to penetrate and find the source
Of the power you always had
light as a moth, and rising
With the level and moonlit expansion
Of the fields around, and the sleep of hoping men.

You? I? What difference is there? We can all be saved

By a secret blooming. Now as I walk
The night and you walk with me we know simplicity
Is close to the source that sleeping men
Search for in their home-deep beds.

We know that the sun is away we know that the sun can be conquered
By moths, in blue home-town air.
The stars splinter, pointed and wild. The dead lie under
The pastures. They look on and help. Tell me, freight-train,
When there is no one else
To hear. Tell me in a voice the sea
Would have, if it had not a better one: as it lifts,
Hundreds of miles away, its fumbling, deep-structured roar
Like the profound, unstoppable craving
Of nations for their wish.
Hunger, time and the moon:

The moon lying on the brain
as on the excited sea as on
The strength of fields. Lord, let me shake
With purpose. Wild hope can always spring
From tended strength. Everything is in that.
That and nothing but kindness. More kindness, dear Lord
Of the renewing green. That is where it all has to start:
With the simplest things. More kindness will do nothing less
Than save every sleeping one
And night-walking one

Of us.
My life belongs to the world. I will do what I can.

James Dickey