

INTRODUCTION

by *Wayne Chapman*

Skip Eisiminger's "General Introduction" (on p. 3) and my prefatory remarks (on pp. 17-18) for the section "Dickey the Writer" have already introduced many of the participants of Clemson's James Dickey celebration, September 15-16, 2004. There were additions to the second day, for instance in a panel called "James Dickey's Legacy as a Research Subject," the section following this one. And the celebration featured two groups of poets, several of whom have given us essays as well as poems and so have been introduced above. They are Skip Eisiminger, who read poems in our first "Poets' Perspective" panel and then chaired the second; John Lane, who read poetry in the second but has also contributed an essay to the preceding section; and Alabama poet laureate Sue Walker, who read on the occasion her valedictory poem "To Create Contiguity: James Dickey and the Word" but also an essay on the "deep ecology" of the poet's language (see above). As in the first two sections of this issue, we are pleased to lead off here with the observations of one of Dickey's children. A radiologist rather than a poet (see p. 17), Dr. Kevin Dickey gives an insightful commentary to the selections he read from his father's poems. "The Bee" was of course an obvious choice because it is simultaneously about Kevin Dickey as a child and about the strength his father drew from memorable coaching on the 1942 freshman football squad at Clemson. Kevin Dickey's assigned role in the program was that of panel "Respondent" though he stole the show. Now I cannot imagine a more sensitive reading of "The Bee," unless the poet were to read it himself. Moreover, the poet *was* reading it, in a sense, as the son spoke with the father's voice internalized.

Professor Robert Hill, co-author of the Twayne series book *James Dickey* (1983; with Richard J. Calhoun), currently teaches at Kennesaw State University. He was formerly on the English faculty at Clemson University, which is where he met his wife, Jane, who was at that time a graduate student mentored by Calhoun and hostess to one or more off-campus receptions for Dickey and the English Department. She is presently chair of English at the University of West Georgia, and her tribute to Dick Calhoun may be read in *SCR* 37.1 (fall 2004): 12-13. Three of Robert Hill's poems have appeared elsewhere. "Borges Essaying a Poem on James Dickey . . ." and "Sweet Pea" are reprinted from the *James Dickey Newsletter* (1984, 1985), and "Of All Possible" first appeared in the *Southern Review* in 1978.

Two poets from the original program, Ronald Moran and Virgil Suarez, are not represented here, save by notice. Moran's poems for the celebration were recently published in the collection *Saying These Things* (Clemson University Digital Press, 2004) and favorably reviewed by Gilbert Allen ("Well Said," *SCR* 37.1, pp. 189-91). Suarez was kept from participating by serious hurricane damage to his home in Tallahassee. Not part of the public ceremony as such, "Dickey poems" by Catharine Savage Brosman (New Orleans) and David Middleton (Nicholls State University) were later solicited for this issue and appear here for the first time. Both poets occasionally publish in *SCR*.

COMMENTS ON “THE SHEEP CHILD” AND “THE BEE”

by Kevin Dickey



What I'd like to share with you today is a little bit of my experience growing up with Dad and listening to him read his poetry. In fact, although you all know that I'm going to read "The Bee," I'm going to read "The Sheep Child" as well. And for those of you who know, one of the poems is about me, and the other isn't, and I'll let you guess which one is which.

The first one I'll read is "The Sheep Child." Since I grew up listening to Dad read this poem (as well as others), I heard him read it at various stages of my life. In the first stage, as a child, I certainly had no idea what bestiality was, and even though this poem derives its content from that subject, it becomes quite beautiful, especially as viewed through the eyes of the sheep child—the dead sheep child, pickled in that bottle way back in some dusty room. As my father used to say when he'd introduce this poem, and as Bronwen reminded me, "This poem has many faults, but you can't fault it for originality of viewpoint." When I was a child and listened to this poem and heard him introduce it, he would be extremely tactful in its subject matter. And I'm sure he delighted, maybe in a devious way, in how the audience would react when they finally realized exactly what it was about, especially in light of the censorship he was having to deal with in the early sixties. As a matter of fact, he was chastised several times for reading this poem in public.

In any case, when I was a kid I didn't really know what this was all about, but I did pick up on the beauty of that viewpoint. Then, in the second stage, when I was an adolescent, I started to hear stories very much like "The Sheep Child." For those of you

who don't know, this poem is based on an agrarian legend of a child who's conceived by a farm boy and a sheep and who only lived for a very, very fleeting moment. To paraphrase the opening lines, people have "heard tell" that this thing, this freak is pickled in a museum somewhere in Atlanta, that you can actually go and see it, and that its eyes are open. So when I started hearing stories of this kind as an adolescent, and I'd go and listen to Dad read this poem again, I thought, "God, I didn't know Dad knew about these kinds of things." But the imagery stayed with me. And the third stage, where this poem kind of came back to haunt me a bit, was when I was in medical school in embryology class, learning about the wonders of human development, spontaneous mutations and what can happen without any rhyme or reason to form the beautiful figure of a human being or turn it into something that is so totally disorganized that it cannot live. The first thing I thought of was this poem. I resisted the urge, but I did a fair amount of research to discover if this really could happen, and, of course, I realized it really couldn't.

So part of this poem is, in fact, a description, and the last part of the poem, which is truly the most beautiful piece, is told through the eyes of the sheep child, lying pickled in that big jar somewhere in the deepest, darkest bowels of a museum in Atlanta.

[Reads "*The Sheep Child*."]

One of the things you understand, if you ever heard Dad read any of his poetry, is that if you went back to read it yourself, you really couldn't read it in anyone else's voice but his, and "The Sheep Child" was one of those pieces, at least for me.

And "The Bee" certainly has special significance for this place—Clemson—and for me personally. It's dedicated to the football coaches at Clemson College, 1942. This poem is derived from a true incident that occurred when I was six years old. I'd just like to spend a little bit of time talking about that incident and another one that certainly made a huge impression on me as a child. Certainly, a son's impression of his father is in many ways superhuman. Fathers are large, and they can do things that you never thought you could do. My father actually did a couple of things that I know I probably could never do as an adult. One of them I witnessed when I was three years old in a place called Gubbio, Italy, while my family was taking a prolonged trip in Europe. My brother Chris wrote about it very eloquently and was able to stir my memory and help me to really remember what had happened. I was the usual terrible three-year-old and ran away from my parents and onto a ski lift. Actually, it was kind of a round, tin-can-shaped car on a cable, which moved very quickly above a thousand-foot precipice with the door wide open. And my father, without any hesitation, jumped over that precipice right into that car. As a three-year-old, I thought it was a matter of course because he was superhuman and could do these things, but now I realize, in middle age, that I don't know what might have happened had *my* son done that.

The second incident is the one on which "The Bee" was based. When I was six years old, we were on a routine family trip to the archery range (which we used to do fairly often) and were just finishing up and getting into the car. We were in one of those canyons above Los Angeles, near one of those mountain roads with many blind curves. Suddenly, this bee came out of the woods—not even woods. It came out of the grass over a picket fence. And I had the usual histrionic, childish reaction to a bee and ran off

into the road. A little red pickup truck came around the bend, and I, in my frenzy, felt this vise-like grip on my right arm. It was my father's, and he pulled me back. Even though the poem embellishes upon the story, and makes it better, he was speechless at the time. But my mother wasn't.

I also want to mention that the poem's narrator goes on to talk about the expectations and failings of an athlete. He certainly speaks to many of you who have been athletes and have been in situations where your superiors had very high expectations only to find out that you can't live up to them. Obviously, we are here now because of the great successes that far, far out-shadow anything my father could have ever done at Clemson College on that football team in 1942.

[Reads "The Bee." The text below is the excerpt that decorated the printed program of Clemson's James Dickey Celebration. Besides a few lines at the beginning of the poem, the passage lacks the poet's long anticlimactic "talk about the expectations and failings of an athlete" to which his son refers.]

FROM JAMES DICKEY'S "THE BEE"

(TO THE FOOTBALL COACHES OF CLEMSON COLLEGE, 1942)

. . . 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 are 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. . . .

. . . 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."



SUE WALKER

TO CREATE CONTIGUITY: JAMES DICKEY AND THE WORD¹

It seems a simple question:
 How do we get to the river?
 But what if
no one of us knows
a damned thing about woods
or rivers? What if we cannot
 find a mark on the map
 that would take us
 where we would go,
 take us into the mindscape
 laid down in squiggles
 of cells, to learn through direction:
a lesson, a moral, a life principle,
A Way.

Perhaps we cannot decipher
 Nature, the big N spelling of it,
 the sheer fall of cliff-light,
 the rapid drop and prattle
 of water against stone,
 one small canoe engaging
 the thrust of words,
 asking as did Gertrude Stein:
 is there a “there” there?

What do you say, James Dickey?
 Does Nature rage within us,
 the eternal Wild, the call
 of the dickey-bird: tit willow
 tit willow, tit willow

as I say to him dickey-bird
 why do you sit singing
 willow, tit-willow, tit-willow?

¹The words and lines in italics are those of James Dickey.

*Trees with thin leaves
sensitive as willows*
grow thick in swamps,
around the Chattooga,
in the 300,000 acres
of the Mobile-Tensaw Delta.
Have you explored these rivers,
these woods en route to Mississippi, JD:
willow woods as wild
as the Cahulawasee can be,
*the living strive of it,
the breaking and coming together*
in a chiastic braiding of tide?

Riding the river feels profound,
*motion built into it
by the composition of the earth,*
its lineage of links, bonds,
and correspondences.

There is much, too much, to know.
We turn to nails: screw nails
and cinch nails, dog spikes,
barbed cars, broom,
penny and finishing nails,
to things we can fool with our hands.

We master design: superimpose
one image on another,
making
a kitten's head appear
under the pointed chin
of a girl in silk britches.

When we see our own image
in the water's face,
in the mirror's glass
in a beast's glowing eye,
seeing is not seeing at all.
The inside is outside,
big N, little "n"
merging, blending, bleeding
mindscapes, language human
and other, the sound of the wind,
of dulcimers madding the sky,

leading *toward a new beaven*
and a new earth.

The body, that bezonian, protests dust,
 strives for survival set in bone marrow.
 Machines fail *as political systems do*;
 all those asses and elephants
 and Green Parties who can't hold to Truth
 any more than they can
 heal their poor ailing hearts.
Life is so fucked-up
and complicated.
 A man hunting himself,
 a woman seeking herself
 in stark, sheer cliffs of fall
 must measure fantasy
 and live with it
as inconsequential as that may be.

Sometimes it is called Deliverance
 even if
 there is only the friction of sheets
 in a bed with a weakened frame
 or a heap of pine straw
 fallen from brother trees.

Look. The larvae of linden moths
 are letting down their hair
 even as
 the government would rid the world
 of their wringing and twisting.
 No matter what, here
 or there in a country
 like the USA or a county, say,
 where nine-fingered people
 strum and scream as the sun
 blazes open their mouths.

Everybody needs somebody
 to help them get where they think
 they want to go

even if

they find they had no business

being there on the edge of wrong
or right,

even when

where they wanted to go
brought forth the question
“Why am I here?”

even as

*the rational eye fixed on something
that wasn't there.*

Spectacles and speculation
merge
in certain unrepeatable occlusions

even as

streams flow into rivers,
into bays, into gulfs and oceans

even as

*trees and bushes connect,
becoming one solid thing*

that is worked through.
We have to battle rapids,
wend word-ways, making
them surrender meaning.
It's never as easy
to grab hold of a word
as it is a rope with fraying edges.

Language is wild, *wild*.
Thoreau called it ‘tawny grammar’
as he wrote of this vast, howling,
savagely, unruly, Mother of ours,
the shape-shifting Earth
girdled in ruin: quakes
and hurricanes, ice storms,
and searing, oppressive heat.

“There.”

There is linked
 with birth, death, with
 sexual difference,
 construction and deconstruction,
 puella floating the river of nouns,
 rowing through the onslaught of verbs
 vying for a “say” as the current
 is heart, is muscle, sinew and nerve,
 one artery fighting to stay open
 because life is there begging,
 in places where
 daily ways of living
 a life cease to work
 like a mule
 carrying cargo up and down
 a cobbled road like that in Clovelly
 by the sea.

Philo, on the creation.
 said snakes could speak
 with a man’s voice,
 and I think, no doubt,
 this is true. I’ve heard
 them hissing in classrooms,
 listened to the rattle in their throats,
 and was afraid. I know you wonder
 how it would be to assume the body
 of a snake, to hang from rafters
 in a rural barn, to crawl
 into a wheelbarrow and lie there
 beside the turn of a river
 while human consciousness
 fades in the flicker
 of a cold-bloodied mouth
 emitting the fetid musk of fear.

Edward Wilson says we are born
 with ophidiphobia. The replication
 of giant molecules informs who we are.
 Awe and veneration of the serpent
 marks our genes as the repugnant serpent
 brings an endowment of magic
 to the human mind, and we see
 things not as they are, but as we are

processed and processing the currents,
the undercurrents of our wildest lives.

Listen Jim, on summer nights.
sleeping on a screened porch
with the light of the stars
softly touching my forehead,
I have listened to chorus frogs
as they mate near dawn.
Run the edge of your fingernail
Along the fine teeth of a comb
and you'll sense what they say.

I can read the frozen half-smile
of a cottonmouth, look
into its startling yellow eyes
and move as snake handler
moves, pin the handsome body
back of its head, grasp
its narrow neck, behind
the masseteric muscles
and lift the creature clean
out of the raddled river,
lift it convulsing in anfractuous air.

Perhaps this is only a dream,
perhaps it another's story,
but a coming forth into the light
of being woman made pure
by language, by the saying
of what is read, is seen,
a mystic sentiency: spirit
reveling in taste and touch
and smell, the fecund earth
breathing, breathing,
delivering us home,
mosquito and fly, wolf and woman,
roaming bear, blind white shrimp
wading the underground stream
of a cave in North Alabama,
hoot owl and raven, cock
and crow, goat, cow, pig,
any man—Bobby Trippe,
Drew Ballinger, Lewis Medlock,
Ed Gentry, you, James Dickey,

returning home
to the transfused language
of heart and blood.

ROBERT W. HILL

BORGES ESSAYING A POEM ON JAMES DICKEY ESSAYING A
POEM ON THE IMPENDING BLINDNESS OF BORGES

First, I suspect him
of haunting the library
to learn how long it takes
and if suburban ears
will sharpen like a wolf's
to hint some sneaking killer
hard upon the blind man's
treasure-trove, or if his skin
will learn to prickle
at the faintest breaths of speech
a week away or in another town
to tempt marauding businessmen
to guess the prey be easier
now, for his infirmity (and then
to spring like an unknown heir
in a Board meeting, rich light
stroking vaguely the mahogany
expanses to his clamorous
and irreversible pre-emption,
scoundrels routed and confused),
or if tongue and scent
will tell him now if women
are in heat, or, doglike, he
may smell and taste the fear
of a stark antagonist
whose trepidation known
would turn the edge back
into his own heart—victory!
for the blind man whose body
now has recompensed the whole
for partial deprivation.

But if he should cry out
in joy at such reward, and if
the voice should hoarsely roar
or wither to a whisper,
some shock of diminution
then might make the point
so artistically evaded (for
blind is no cheap stunt,
no graven calf to grind
and pulverize to drink for bitter
disapproval, a lesson to learn
and share in stone letters
or postcards with angry
condescended crowds—it is
no way in: blind is black,
or we are always seeing,
grays and blurring smokes
across the face as seeing,
only indistinct, and yet distinct
in their own way, some shades
and foggy drifts imperative
if we not lie ourselves to sleep
in wistful clarity).

... He may have heard
(I think I have, or I have said,
or shall)—not in general lore—
that to go blind is to affect,
not meaning to, something
somewhere else, the body
traumatized and senseless
to its wretchedness
diffused in misdirection
to the ear lobe, larynx, marrow,
phantom pains on missions
discreet but merciless
(if not to change the voice,
perhaps the growth of nails or
speed of digestion or the
crumbling of teeth hastened
after false remission of decay,
to feel again the pieces
molder in the mouth, the hard
glitter of survival go soft
just before time falls over).

One can focus on blindness,
with notice deal with it
directly, as though stiffening
at the dentist's touch before
the drill (readiness is all,
we sometimes feel—the executioner
will run to blood yet one more time
his finger on the sharp-to-dis-
appearing axe-edge), blindness
more heroic than daily choices,
possibilities fewer, depth
beyond imagination.

... The poet is large,
blond, and sagging notice-
ably at every point. Perhaps
his legs (I understand he runs
and runs) are less sagging
or more, from such effort
as to squander their support).
He studies my blinding.

Second, his admiration
is of course flattering (I
thought, faltering, as if
the time had come now
to give up awe and write of me—
when we write of anyone,
it is of ourselves), but if
the need to know how to see
(or how to go blind)
is interesting to Americans (he
seems egregiously American to me)
then the flattery strikes
less than the exploitation.
I am not snakes or sharks or sheep.

Perhaps it would be better
that he make his own eyes
go weak for obscure Latin poets,
or that he write, in tiny letters,
tales and ruminations he himself
must prove by dim or brilliant
light (he may, if he should learn,
seek confirmation of Xatcol, I know).

I can tell him
(and it appears that I will, or do)
that to make the poem is not the same
as to be blind.
... He knows deceptions
full of meaning to be worried by some
into order. None of us here shall say
there is pattern in the sea because
the chaos is monstrous and irresistible.

We need safety and quiet,
even if it cannot be seen clearly
as it once could, left now
only to touch and hoping
in the good will of listeners
and the ministrations of clerks
whose filed and rendered truths
allow some fine degree of error,
even in the numbers fractioned
and reduced, with letters and dates
to qualify and radicalize
with no chord to cut across a bow,
no string drawn to lean quietly
as it might into some thrusting thing
which neither of us can lately report
or see, though we try like heroes.

J THE PRETENDER

—for James and Jim

We watch him in his bed trying
to watch a very large bearded man
who has recently lost weight from worry
and residual flu stuff, waving on the other
side of the window, hands fisted triumphantly
over one shoulder then the other
like Joe Palooka's victory-waves—
one wave-shake overhead to the left,
one to the right and again, but the glare
from the night-time indoor lights
keeps us from seeing the big ol' 50-year-old

In *Popeye*
there's a bulb-headed
drooling baby Swee'pea
all in white, legless
in a nightshirt like fog.

Pigs seem pitiable
and monstrous anyway,
to me: reddish-hairy
or pearl-grey-sleek
thinning like hopes
brushed to the pink
skin after scalding.

Turkeys are seasonal.
Pigs are always subject:

their cannibalism
is lately in the news
for blizzards in the North.

Cattle just wallow and die
for their oppression
(not of shock, for that
implies some form of ecstasy,
high death from within):

they mortify
by circumstance,
necks deep in drifts
when earth and sky
are just in reach.

They lunge and flail
like scholastics lost
in a sudden dream
of robes and ropes.

Sweet peas are colored variously.
I remember only pastels, however.

I'm inexact in my details,
but I insist on them as they are:
like Dickey, with oviparous rattlers

(nabbed by a critic whose name escapes me),
or Coleridge, whose star resides
between the horns of the crescent moon.

That way perhaps
lies power.

Some details are right
when hearts are wrong: good
hearts sometimes loosely
at the mercy of facts:

under formidable drifts, the light
seeping a blue distance, tunneling
the soft sub-crust, glaring past
their spoonish snouts, pigs
on strong and tilting limbs
are going to eat their own.

OF ALL POSSIBLE

Winding up the trash
from the second bathroom
as some declining Mahler
drifts like fog of the Baskervilles
with all intents and purposes
diverted for some short
and necessary suspense,
following the stacked
furniture like a trail
of jawbone carnage and fishhooks
from all adventure tales and
outdoor books, intricate operas,
and insidious reasonings, in-
delicately, and uncompensated
by symphonic grandeur,

resting upon homely instruments
scraping and stirring dry or wet
the dull linoleum the dentist
had laid before we moved
in or could speak our minds,

I'll mop the house in a minute
and raise from the disorderly
spindle another record, cast
awry for its cheap thinness
and imperfect center.

While Keats feared the verges
and lusted for the grand
There to settle
Here, broke his last
and stronger lung, tore his chest
to light, and doctors
wondered at how long
he'd kept it in,

and while Roethke's verges
were his ground, the turning
planes of sanity where
his red and plasmic needs
were thin enough to manage,
sharp enough to hurt,
taut enough to sound,

in no despair, but mostly
unsurprised at treachery and chance,
I tread a ghosted ground
between the middle and the ends,
between between and sliding
like a chain on ceramic tile
new mopped and shining.

JANE HILL

WRECKAGE FOREVER

I.

Our best car, a fiendish green
Fiesta six years old and well

into its second 100,000 miles,
bears the scars of your having
sliced away the reflector
that once clung to the gentle slope
just above the left rear wheel.
You did this in our worst year,
slamming an unused hammock post
instead of me.

For four years that reflector
has ridden safely stored
beneath the driver's seat,
no disturbance really, just
a reminder of repairs to be
done when time and money
allow. Lately it has been joined
by the rear-view mirror,
left unattached for want
of proper glue, and a strip
of jagged plastic sprung loose
from just beneath the door.
Also there is a thermostat
—here a repair has been done,
but we save the spare,
just in case. I've also noticed
a waiting belt, frayed and flimsy
rubber, tucked, neat and unobtrusive,
on a ledge beneath the hood.

I wonder at our clinging
to these things without cause,
only the mirror essential
and even that almost luxury
after months of accommodation.
You begin to talk of trade,
but instead we buy tires
and brakes and safety to move on,
our spare parts rumbling there
beneath us as we go.

II.

As I drive daily across Highway 106,
I begin to think myself

Doris Holbrook liberated, rolling
ever toward you, my lover,
domesticated and waiting
in high expectation of the treasures
I bring now to you each day.
I see us growing old together
with this car, the heap of broken
pieces beneath and finally surrounding
us growing ever more various
and mindful that this is our life,
the motion and the mishaps,
that we carry it all,
each in our turn,
bring it always home,
a sign, a pledge.

On sunny days the seats
melt in my mind, no longer
separate buckets but a soft
and roomy couch. The foam
padding that threatens to ease
its way between the cracked
and splitting seams becomes
then softest down for us
to pluck away easily as tissues
from a box and make pillows
for our heads to rest
amidst these fragments we tote,
to shore against our ruin.

III.

Without the respite of Dickey's
parking lot quiet as a cemetery,
without the giddy freedom
of rushing air and handlebars
to wring, we accelerate with caution
and downshift when we must,
driven not by the imposing figure
of someone who might punish us
for love but by the cold thought
of what might happen without it.
We leave nothing behind.

I imagine myself very old
and alone, looking at our children,
ready to die and join you
if only I can be sure
that, despite their shame
at this ancient wreck
loaded with junk and scraps
from years of use, they
will not sell or trade away
this monument to our different
brand of wreckage. I will look
a laser into their souls
to extract their promise:
we wouldn't, for the world.

ODE TO A CLAY POT

*Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.*
—John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”

Simple or no, we cannot say
along the Mississippi at Bettendorf,
where one small miracle of time
freezes sun and moon at once
to remember sinking and rising
over the strong brown god
of water and our lives.

No peaceful, static lingering
moment. Instead we drive
the rattling metal bridge at speed
in excess of law or logic. Yet still
we are given the flame, the red-
orange wafer of sun over river
declining to our right in union
with the white-silver resurrection
of moon to our left. Beneath
us, the bridge, and below it,
below our small machine, the illusion
of its speed, forward thrust, lies
the river, moving, always moving,

by only the chosen, shining few
through words and poses, life rendered
in its most tortured shape for art's
sake and suffering's, self's larger
selfness—however they would put it,
their perfect lines and letters
falling from the same magic sky
that holds our moon and our sun,
this river, that we have seen and
known and remembered ourselves—
with Jim's help.

Real love is moving, always moving,
like the river, but shaped by human
hands, not god's or poet's; is adrift
in moments swirling faster than we can
count, can grab only in what littered
bits we hold and shape with clay-
marked hands, decorate without skill,
wrap in humble rags, hold close
and move, wait from one magic moment
of sun and moon till the next. Live
and love, together, write the story
in joint motion, no aubade misdefined,
remembered as if joy were not
the essence of its character.

We take our ecstasy from the rough
splintered wood of now and tomorrow
and beyond beneath us sure
as a bridge, stronger
than steel, safe as the machine
we have vowed to steer, the shape
we have chosen to contain us.

MEN WITHOUT WAR

—for *David Van Vorst*

By accident of birth, no war
for these, boys whose lives are lumber rafts
adrift without purpose: no shape,
no control. They ask us aboard
to learn with them as we might,
to take their chance.

bracketed tonight by sun and moon,
but always motion, its one
certain path no consequence
of planets, stars, suns, orbs.
No consequence at all, but
meaning, simple meaning. Or no.
We cannot say but must believe
as surely as we believe the bridge,
the motion, this moment, all time.

While he waited for Huck—and waited,
Jim might have known this moment
or another. Might have scooped
dark clay rich as food from the bank,
taken it aboard and shaped with strong,
gentle hands a pot; might have fired it
in the kiln of the sun's dance
on water or in the roaring furnace
of his love; might next have cooled
this pot to touch in the moon's
eerie glow; wrapped it in soft rags
to wait again, for his wife,
left behind but never, for a moment,
forgotten, always loved.

Tonight I see that pot clear
as sun and moon and river between,
clear as Bettendorf and its bridge
and all our lives before and behind
us. The shape is round
and open, also deep; the color,
gray-brown with golden flecks,
like the river and Jim's love. I see
his design, drawn with care despite
little skill, his stick, pen knife,
lucky ten-dollar gold piece moving
against the surface to record
what we have seen: sun, moon,
river joined, a moment frozen,
preserved to say all we know or need:

real love is never perfected stillness,
wrought high beauty, exquisite pain
at parting sorrow that evokes
the higher instant sharply felt

Howard rides, strands of hair flying loose
from the braid down his back, with his dog
in the back of his red truck. He laughs bending
from the waist, raising one knee,
numbers moving inside his head like sparklers
he brings on the 4th of July. He has decided
to let them dance, to bear what they will do.

John's puffy hands hang from his thin frame,
music trapped inside them. The words have come,
and he waits for tunes, turning his harmonica
to catch the sun off the mountains or meteors
falling in the night. He knows the music
will come like light, if only he can wait.

From behind his beard, James's eyes look out,
older than the world, seeing
from a cold tunnel full of fire.
What he sees he keeps inside: the things war is made
of: dancing numbers, trapped music,
cold fire, burning, burning . . .

Their minds hold. They wait,
inside their tenuous private peaces,
sign truces with themselves, hold their rafts
together. We would not have known
had they not been left to show the way:

each must make his peace and live it,
learn control, shape the force within his brain,
become a man without war.

PARENTS LIKE PIGS

We choke
on screams
at the dream's image:
the sow gorging on
flesh of her own
pink baby's body

(pink to blood
to tendon's tougher
red, then bone,
white, fragile,
all open
to our eyes);
we choke back
"Not us! Not us!"
and breathe too fast,
too hard to know
which of our babies
we have killed
or will,
which won't grow
from lethal love
or words unspoken
or too late
understood;
we choke and sob,
sleep to wake
them for another
day: family life:
roast pork dinner.

DANCING IN PARADISE

An acorn on tile,
fear falls
to bounce, as I,
a reluctant Alice,
step through the glass:

The villa becomes
ours alone. Darkness
melts the veranda,
but above, the sky
holds a cup
of light to christen
us.

Deer gather
on the lawn below,

kneel to serve
the amazing grace
of what they behold:

one thousand candles
sparked to life,
an orchestra full volume
behind wide-flung ballroom
doors, and me

in a gown of deepest
green flecked with gold,
you in Gatsby white,
dancing this night
in paradise.

Owls fly down from hills,
settle soft on fawns' sweet
backs. Bears come, too,
and even gentle snakes,
congregate without fury,
ignite in tribute
candles of their own.

We swirl and glide with more
than ease, a jumble
of green and white shot through
with drops of splendor.
The animals hold their breath,
believe we have
hair of fire.

We carry the night
to dawn. The sun finds
us undaunted, dancing
still, our candles
brighter than the day.

A dream, I know.
But as you approach,
I do believe I might
ask and you would say
yes and we'd dance
on my tiny porch
at the cracked edge

of what looks like paradise,
the scratchy sound
of a boom-box tape
transporting us
to another place
we have never been.

I see the glimmer
of gold against the villa's
white, white walls
visible to me only
through the deep watered
green of a hundred trees
and a dozen yards
of garden grass, upon
whose cushioned swells
deer kneel
in anticipation.

JOHN LANE

OUTING PROGRAM

His rucksack has been beside the door for days, a canoe
strapped to the car roof like a missile aimed for terra firma.
His neighbors think he's some kind of scientist,
the instruments of his profession metallic and oversized,
but important and portable to the acceptable extreme.

Soon, his fingers will forget the topography of that country,
so he sends letters to provinces still full of trees,
He announces his finger tips to the oaks and sparrow hawks.
Each print is a compass bearing lost among those already
orienteeing in the outer district's forested dips and rises.

He longs for some conjunction close to home, but nearby wilderness
has been surveyed, the creek straightened. Even the underbrush
is leveled in his sector, the shadows intent on disappearing too.

One night he dreams he drives the car far into the county, looking

for roads intersecting at odd angles, a sign left for someone like him, a starting point for approaching the Green Wall, the Bottomless Pool, the Old Stone Bridge, Indian Trail, Deer Valley, and Dark Corner.

He finds nothing but the gridded century exhausted and stretching beyond the highway maps. It is as if the fixed foot of a great compass has scratched through the local groves and meadows, leaving behind an original geometry thought innocent by the precocious Greeks.

So he drives on until there stands the last old growth, unmeasured, no precise bore holes to announce its endurance. He empties his sack of its implements— tent and tin cup— sets up camp in the oak's shadow, takes down the battered canoe, provisions it for a momentary expedition, floats downstream, each mile a little closer to where it all began.

THE FEAR PROGRAM

When I taught kayaking we called any beginner afraid to submit to learning the Eskimo roll “signing up for the fear program.” The part that got them was when they realized their head had to dip below the lake water. The awareness began to leave, chilling their eyes to frozen cherries in a bowl. I watched them all as they snapped the buckles of life vests, slipped the spray skirts over their hips like a tight skin. There were always two or three. Sometimes a man I would never guess who'd sit, his knees shaking, as others slipped in the long kayaks to test their fit. We would still be high and dry, miles from the rolling lake, but he would wait until all the others tried their pastel boats back and forth in the dust before finally committing.

That man knew kayaking could kill him, no matter how professional we were and sure. It was not like signing up for tennis, or racquetball. The physics of water and blind chance can wrap a boat around a rock in the smallest of currents. Even the best paddlers make mistakes. But it's worth it, life's a river, and I'd rather have a roll in any situation I'd float into downstream, with death the takeout.

“What’s my name?” I’d yell at rank beginners
we tipped over in kayaks. We’d be right beside
them, rolling them upright with our shoulders,
no risk, only dark lake water, the spinning boat,
and their own desire. “John,” the ones comfortable
with the darkness said. “What?” said those who’d learn
in a day or two. “Ugh.” The sound of the fear program.
I still hear it when I come up against something
that sets the watery darkness echoing deep in me.

FIRST PSALM OF THE MAD KAYAKER

Though I walk all day on asphalt,
Concrete, and milled hardwood,
My feet abide and long for flow.

Though the streets span rivers
On bridges, I stop at the crossings
And look downstream with longing.

Though electric companies
Build dams and choke the narrows
With utilities, I dream them free.

Though the valley has deep shadow
Where the river takes a hard bend,
I fear no evil there.

I dwell in the roaring house
Of water and strap my boat to the truck
When the holy water rises.

I walk the scouting rock
And it is that promenade which
Restores my bony dry soul.

On the river I fear no evil—except
The evil of encroaching suburbs,
run-off, parking lots, and oily streets.

For though I go to the river
For strength, there are those

Who see it as a blankness to fill—

Dump seepage, drainage ditch,
Poison sluice, effluent valve, dye vat,
Silt slurry, waste channel, sewage leak.

For these are the voices of doom,
For these are the shrill notes
Of the out-of-touch and wandering

In the desert of commerce.
For these are the product of staring
Too long into human stillness.

Though my days among humans
Are numbered, I will dwell forever
In the country of wild rivers and cut-banks,

Of eddies, and riffle gardens.
I will lie down in the shallows.
They will restore my soul.

CATHARINE SAVAGE BROSMAN

DICKEY AT RICE

Such a mismatch, one could say prosaically—
and it was a prosaic place, peopled by chemists
and physicists, mathematicians, engineers,
and a few strange humanists. No artists, though,
except unofficial, in the wings, which may be
the best place for art, “born of constraint,” as Gide
well wrote, dying today of too much
freedom. Anyhow, James Lafayette Dickey III,

on the teaching circuit, was there, “instructor
in English,” as per the catalogue. Good Methodists
and Baptists called Rice then “the atheist
school”; but nonetheless it was a priggish place,
work-driven—with so little time for sin,

such general sobriety, that one believed the claim
that no one on the faculty had been
adulterous. Along with other underlings, ill-paid,

he lived with us—a few young women students
come from out-of-town—in garden-type
apartments—two-storied white brick buildings in a U.
Cape jasmine—creamy blossoms like moist skin,
sensual leaves—and thick pads of grass—
St. Augustine—steamed in the Gulf's dense air.
The campus was a mile away; we usually walked,
girls, instructors, often in the rain; poems

were conceived and born then in his head, perhaps,
the way his neighbor, Mr. Brown, in math,
pondered problems as he paced, his staring eyes
—live fish on ice—fixed on arcane formulas.

A friend took Mr. Dickey's English course,
and doubtless learned some things; her memory,
though, is of a chair, itself placed on a table,
and someone folded on it like a heron, chatting

amiably in his smoky Southern drawl. Across
the courtyard, where his windows faced
our bedroom, he'd arranged, we thought, some sort
of optical device. Years later, in Virginia, I
spoke to him after a talk. Mnemosyne
and whiskey worked. "I do remember you;
I used to watch you from my window, with my glass."
I fancy him, at present, in some distant world,

where he and poetry—his Beatrice, his hound
of heaven—have met in whole, substantial being,
looking down with longing at this world,
so green, so blue, the object of unending wonder,
as of grief, and wishing he could touch the sky
from underneath and smell the jasmine, feel again
the crispness of the grass, follow a girl
into the heart of summer, suffering life and love.

DAVID MIDDLETON

THE PROGRESS OF THE MOON

"Victor Hanson understands the intimacy that should exist between men and land ... it is not only humanity that needs his words, the planet does."

—James Dickey, jacket comment for Victor Davis Hanson's book
Fields Without Dreams: Defending the Agrarian Idea (1996)

Through woods the moon moves deep and high in night
Over the winter limbs of oak and elm,
Old groves of frosted mistletoe and light,
The magic facts of matter's elder realm:

Above, great constellations, placed and found,
Chaos and order one in wild control,
The burning wing and tongue, the well-turned ground
Of Pegasus and Draco round the pole;

Below, this world of star-drawn mist and cloud,
Of hills and seas far eons shape and waste,
Sublunar runes long-chiseled in the shroud
Of bough and bone by nothing laced and braced;

And in between, an arcing sphere whose course
Had once kept heaven fixed above earth's crust,
No more a verger marking the divorce
Of realms that mix telluric, stellar dust.