THE ART OF POETRY NO. 20

JAMES DICKEY

In 1960, when he was thirty-seven—an age at which most men have abandoned pretenses at having creative gifts—James Dickey published his first book of poetry, *Into the Stone,* a Scribner's *Poets of Today* volume that he shared with two other unknown poets, Paris Leary and Jon Swan. In the years since, Dickey has become one of the most powerful voices in American poetry.

But, ironically, it was fiction, not poetry, that made Dickey's name a household word. After toying with *Deliverance* for nearly ten years, he finished it in a great thrust of energy in 1969. Those who knew Dickey closely, however, were aware that *Deliverance,* while a publishing phenomenon, was not the center of his creative objective. He once remarked to a student, "*The Eye-Beaters* is worth a hundred *Deliverances*."

This interview took place in Dickey's Lake Katherine home in Columbia, South Carolina. It was recorded in three sessions (two in May 1972 and one in May 1974) in his huge den with an inch-thick gray carpet and an appropriate wall of books. Dickey, a large, bearish man, has a voice to match. Throughout the tapings he poised on his chair's edge, sucking air through his teeth in anger at incompetent poets, and often shaking with laughter at good

one-liners. On the first day he wore a pink shirt with French cuffs; the next sessions found him garbed in jackets and pants of leather or suede. After each day's taping, Dickey played the guitar, took his interviewer canoeing, or demonstrated his skill with the bow and arrow. He is adroit with all three, perhaps excelling on the six-string. He has contributed numerous guitar tapes to the Library of Congress in addition to providing some of the music for *Deliverance*.

This fall, his long poem, *The Zodiac*, will be published, followed by his second novel, *Alnilam*.

—Franklin Ashley, 1976

INTERVIEWER

You have said you got where you are today, an established poet and novelist, "the hardest way possible, unsolicited manuscripts." Can you tell us about it?

JAMES DICKEY

It was very difficult to do; I didn't have any precedent; I didn't know any writers, editors, publishers, or agents. They might have been in the outer part of the solar system as far as I was concerned. I just knew that I liked to write and I had some ideas that I thought might work out as poems. So I wrote them, then sent them around. As they say, I could have papered my bedroom wall with the rejections.

I began to send stuff out when I was at Vanderbilt, and the only way that I knew where to send anything was to go into the stacks of the library and get a magazine out that I admired, like the *Sewanee Review,* and get the address off the masthead and send the poem to the guy who was the editor at that address. I sent poems in and I kept getting back these form rejections. In 1948 or 1949 I

remember with what wonder I saw true human handwriting on the rejection slip. It said, “Not bad.”

INTERVIEWER

What made you decide to commit yourself to writing?

DICKEY

Like most American writers I kind of backed into it. I liked poetry; I liked to read it. I’m the kind of person who can’t be interested in a thing without wanting to see if I can’t get out there and do a little of it myself. If I see somebody shooting arrows, I want to get a bow and see if I can shoot some myself.

INTERVIEWER

Did the legendary Vanderbilt crowd have much effect on you?

DICKEY

There is no sense in which it could be said that I was a latter-day Fugitive or Agrarian. But Donald Davidson was my teacher,* and he’s the single best teacher that I’ve ever had with the possible exception of Monroe Spears. He made poetry and intellectual life important; all you had to do was walk into his classroom and you knew you were in the presence of some important spirit. I got interested in anthropology, astronomy, the kind of thing that Donald Davidson stood for. But the whole Vanderbilt ethos and Agrarianism and cultural pluralism were just academic subjects to me. I’m much more interested in them now than when I was in the milieu that produced them.

INTERVIEWER

What did you do when you graduated?

DICKEY

I took an M.A. in 1950 and became an instructor in technical

* Donald Davidson was not, in fact, Dickey’s teacher, although Dickey often claimed as much.

English and report writing at what was then called The Rice Institute in Houston, Texas, but almost immediately after my appointment I went off to the Korean War.**

INTERVIEWER

When did you get into the advertising business?

DICKEY

A few years after the war—1956, and I stayed in it until 1961. I worked with three different agencies—first I was with McCann-Erickson, on the Coca-Cola account, where I was known not as Jungle Jim, but as Jingle Jim. I then moved to Atlanta and worked with an agency called Liller Neal and Battle, where I worked on fertilizer accounts, mainly. Also banks and Pimento products. I then took a position as creative director and vice president of an Atlanta agency called Burke Dowling Adams, where I engineered the advertising campaign dealing with the awarding of the transcontinental run by Delta to the West Coast. Now, in connection with my film work, I fly that airline all the time.

INTERVIEWER

How important was your work to you? Do you regret leaving it?

DICKEY

No. I'm glad I left it. But if I had four or five different lives, or the proverbial nine lives, I would like to spend one of them in business. It's a fascinating and exciting way to live. It's very frustrating; it's got its hang-ups; it's a man-killing pace; and it's tremendously difficult. But I love business people and I met some really terrific people whom otherwise I wouldn't have known. I wouldn't have had any relationship to them unless *that* were the relationship: making deals, working with them on their problems, and selling their products. I enjoyed it. There's something about the nine-to-

** While Dickey was recalled to service in the Korean War (he had served abroad during World War II), he was stationed in Alabama, Mississippi, and Texas, and never went to Korea.

five existence and the five-thirty cocktails after work on Friday afternoons and talking over the problems of the week with your buddies who are working on the same problems that's really kind of nice. I remember it with affection and with a certain amount of gratitude. Nevertheless, I don't have that many lives. I have only one, so when it was time for me to leave, I left.

INTERVIEWER

What were you writing during your business period?

DICKEY

I wrote my whole first book, *Into the Stone,* on company time. I had a typewriter and I had a bunch of ads stacked up in those famous brown envelopes with work orders on them. When I had a minute or two, I'd throw a poem into the typewriter and try to work out a line or get a transition from one stanza to the next. But the business world gives you almost no time to do anything but business. You are selling your soul to the devil all day and trying to buy it back at night. This can work out fine for a while, but after that the tensions and the difficulties begin to mount up and you see that you are going to have to make a choice. This took place with me after about five and a half or six years.

INTERVIEWER

What made you decide to make your final commitment to writing, to say, "This is it, I am leaving"?

DICKEY

Age. I knew I couldn't have it both ways much longer, and as they say in the pro football games or basketball games on Sunday afternoons, "The clock is running." I didn't have that much time. I needed a lot more time to do my work and not *their* work. And there is also the feeling of spending your substance, your vital substance, on something that is really not that important—of giving

the best of yourself, every day, to selling soda pop. You just don't want to let yourself go that easily. You can't. Or I couldn't, anyway.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think in some ways it is a commitment to a kind of artificial moral order?

DICKEY

Well, if you work for the Coca-Cola Company, the first thing you're told is how many people's jobs and lives depend on the drink and how old and venerable and honorable the company is, that the pension plans are good, the medical plans are good, and so on. But after all, it's only soda pop, and you're quite sure in the end that you don't want to spend your vital substance on something that's not any more important than a soft drink. If you go with the Coca-Cola Company, Pepsi-Cola, RC, or any of them, you enlist yourself in a war that was going on before you were born, and will go on after you die. It's a little bit—I hate to drag this in—like Vietnam. You fight limited engagements in limited areas and nobody ever wins.

INTERVIEWER

After *Into the Stone* came out, did you think that you were going to succeed as a poet?

DICKEY

I didn't know then, and I still don't know. The Guggenheim people wrote to me and asked me if I would like to stand for a fellowship and to send in whatever I had to offer. I was in one of those Scribner three-decker, large economy-size packages of young poets with Paris Leary and Jon Swan, and I sent them that, and presto, lo and behold, they gave me some money—several thousand dollars. I said to Maxine, "This is our escape hatch. Let's sell the house and go and live in Italy. Why the hell not? When are we

ever going to get another chance?" I swore I was going to go back to Europe before I was forty. I made it at the age of thirty-nine.

INTERVIEWER

What sort of effect did Europe have on you and your writing?

DICKEY

Italy was especially good. First of all, there was what Davidson used to talk about all the time, cultural pluralism: different wines, different dishes, different paintings, different lifestyles, all kinds of different things that give such richness and variety to life. What we'll end up with if the world gets increasingly Americanized is life in a gigantic Rexall's. Of course, you can go into Rexall's and get a lot of things you need. You can also get a lot of things you don't need, but might be interested in having. There are a lot of diversified products in Rexall's. But Rexall's is Rexall's. It's not the same as going to a bullfight or going to a folk dance in Sicily or going into the Uffizi Museum in Florence.

When an American goes to Europe, he doesn't go there to get just another version of America. He wants *difference*. You see fields of tulips in Holland. You never saw anything like that in your life. You see cliffs down on the Amalfi Drive, you see people in an Italian village. The guys having a drink together. Why, by God, they fall into each other's arms—and they just *saw* each other last night; they were probably drunk together last night. You don't see Americans do that. Americans are pushing each other away all the time, even the men and women.

INTERVIEWER

Would you advise a young writer to go abroad for a while?

DICKEY

Yes. I believe that a broad scan of experience can be nothing but beneficial to a young writer. It may be confusing at the beginning, but the increment of his personal memory bank can be only

for the best. To cite but one example, look at Hemingway's experience of Paris. Take others: Henry James's experience of London, J. B. Priestley's sojourn in Arizona, and Stephen Crane's in Cuba. You name it.

INTERVIEWER

What other advice would you give?

DICKEY

I don't know. The talent game is a tough game. Luck plays an enormous part in it. It's not like business, though luck has a very strong place in business too. You can write one good poem by luck or hazard that's going to make people want your work. Whether or not you can produce anything good later on is not the important thing. It's that you struck it right then. It's the same with a novel—I wrote *Deliverance*. The movies bought it, it was serialized, written into a dozen languages; it's the best novel I can write, but there's also an enormous element of luck in it. I wrote the right book at the right time. People were caught up in a savage fable of decent men fighting for their lives and killing and getting away with it. My next novel could be a failure.

INTERVIEWER

How can a young poet know if his work is really worthwhile?

DICKEY

You never know that. I don't know it; Robert Lowell doesn't know it, John Berryman didn't know it, and Shakespeare probably didn't know it. There's never any final certainty about what you do. Your opinion of your own work fluctuates wildly. Under the right circumstances you can pick up something that you've written and approve of it; you'll think it's good and that nobody could have done exactly the same thing. Under different circumstances, you'll look at exactly the same poem and say, "My Lord, isn't that *boring*." The most important thing is to be excited about what you

Falling

Transcontinental   low moon   the states are dark   each successively
as dark as the last. There is some leak of air somewhere in the cabin
And someone is disturbed. In her blue uniform, there near the galley
With racks of trays, she gets a blanket, and begins to pin it up
over the faint ear-whistle of air coming in from the darkness.
Then she is in total dark and cold. The door blew out   and she found
Herself with her arms and legs in the killing dark and her cry   one
Long way turning to wind. Can this be me   here in this place   turning
On myself   feeling around me the flutter   of garments   in this
Cold of God   and yet I am spaced some way or other   on air   I can
Place my hands and feet in it   death is still three or four miles
Down it is not so cold as it was   but cold. I have time to look
At everything in the dark. There are lights   a highway   towns
And then the glitter of water   the moon racing slowly through
The curves of a river   a lake opens its eye   the darks change
Throughout the enormous air. I can spread my legs   and my skirt
Catches on the air   I can circle until there is little there is no
Sense of falling   but flight   (delicately maintained   the air whistles
faintly but I am suspended between earth and heaven   the plane I was
on is probably landing in Chicago   I have been falling for hours
It is warmer   I can see the shape of the continent   lose its
Shape   If I fell into water I might live   so let me begin
To plane across the air in my jacket and skirt   moving like an owl
Across the space of midnight   toward the glitter of water   It is
a journey through the uncreated   through chaos   where nothing
Holds   Here is a usual young woman flying upon the dark like a goddess
Heading for the slowly opening eye   of water   cross-country
Cross-country through the country of the air   possessing for an
Instant the continent as a diess would possess it   travelling above the
Heads of sleepers on farms   the hawmows sharpening as I pass over
Them   the boys' penises rising   the farm girls feeling the goddess
In them brooding on the four posts of the beds   dreaming of fire
Of comets   and javelins   fireworks   a great woman scrawled in stars
Overhead in the calm night   and will wake to see a woman   struggling
The stars struggling to become a woman. Water is nearer and now I am
Over but cannot fall into it   I am streaking like a jet in my jet
Stewardess's uniform   And the ground is closer   the dark
Of fields   a total dark and I have just time to fling off my one
Shoe   to pull off my stockings   It is abnormally easy to undress
Tumbling   I can assume any position the air has to offer   take off
The sad wings of my jacket   the bat's gliding leather of my skirt
The intimate flying-garment   The inner flying garment of my slip
The long airstreams of my stockings   my brassiere   letting my breasts
Warm on the air   and my girdle   and all of us float down almost
Together   but myself gradually leaving them   finally fighting away
From my head my shoe, the last thing   and will descend now in this
State into the warm fields   trying as I can to land   on my back.
Whoever finds me will find me as I am   and will not understand
my [illegible] it will, more deeply. It will all be broken this kind of thing
Is what one does when there is nothing to be done   makes a gesture
Understood by nothing or by no one   in the dark   and will lie

In the fields   life broken out   but with one breath   believing   I could
Have made it back to water I overpassed   when in the goddess state
[illegible] flown too close to   the goddess state to [illegible]

Page one of "Falling," courtesy of Washington University in St. Louis

are doing and to be working on something that you think will be the greatest thing that ever was. One of the difficulties in writing poetry is to maintain your sense of excitement and discovery about what you write. American literature is full of people who started off excited about poetry and their own contribution to it and their own relationship to poetry and have had, say, a modicum of success and have just gone on writing poetry as a kind of tic, a sort of reflex, when they've lost all their original excitement and enthusiasm for what they do. They do it because they have learned to do it, and that's what they *do*. You have to find private stratagems to keep up your original enthusiasm, no matter what it takes. As you get older, that's tougher and tougher to do. You want to try to avoid, if you possibly can, the feeling of doing it simply because you *can* do it.

INTERVIEWER

What are some of these private stratagems?

DICKEY

A very great deal of exercise, to keep the body moving, because when the body moves the mind is inclined to move with it. At times, a certain amount of alcohol helps. The point is to get to a certain *level* at which the creative flow can best take place. Any means to effect this end is to the good.

INTERVIEWER

How do ideas for poems come to you?

DICKEY

Well, I can give you one example, of course there are many. But, I remember when I was in Okinawa and the war was over and we went out to one of the invasion beaches near Buckner Bay, me and my co-fliers, and we went swimming and there was an old amtrac there in ten feet of water that the Japanese had stove in—big holes in the sides of it—and I swam down and sat in the

driver's seat. That image stayed with me and years later, twenty or twenty-five years later, I wrote "The Driver."

INTERVIEWER

You also write about things that an ordinary person would pass by, like the jump of a fish, or the movement of trees, or light.

DICKEY

That could almost be cited as the definition of a poet: Someone who notices and is enormously taken by things that somebody else would walk by. The major thing for a writer to do is develop some means of selecting the *best* of his memories and ideas and images and to build on them and reluctantly let the others go.

INTERVIEWER

Can you describe the genesis and working out of a poem based on an image that most people would pass by? "Dust," for example?

DICKEY

"Dust" was a collusion between or among two or three different kinds of elements. I wanted to try to utilize a stanza form with a short first line, evolving into longer lines, and at the end coming back to a short line. This is purely a technical problem. The second element was literary: I wanted to work with the biblical statement "But dust thou art, to dust returneth." The third element that was important was the sense of lying about half drunk in a California afternoon and looking up through the sunlight shining through the window and really noticing—as one will do when one is about half drunk—these strange little things in the air. They are always spiral shaped and it seemed to me that this might have something to do with venereal disease, with the spirochete and so on. So that was the fourth element. I tried to get all of them together in one poem.

INTERVIEWER

You speak of technical elements. How do you feel about free verse?

DICKEY

I go back and forth. Sometimes I like to write in very strictly measured forms. I think there are tremendous advantages accruing to that. But then I also want to try to open out the poem and make what I have recently been calling the "balanced poem," and make gaps within the lines and write in bursts of words. You shouldn't restrict yourself . . . what Yvor Winters did, and say that it's got to be this way or it's no good at all. You should experiment. You should wander around a bit; you should risk being wrong. Actually, free verse is not a term that I myself care much for. I would call it unrhymed, irregular verse, because I remember what Mr. Eliot said—that no verse is free for the poet who wants to do a good job, and it really *isn't* free. What you are talking about is that you are not writing a rhyming or a regular verse, but more of an open, organic form.

INTERVIEWER

Does form ever control your subject matter?

DICKEY

I used to be much interested in inventing forms; for example, the form in "The Hill Below the Lighthouse" dictated the subject matter. What I did was to work out a refrain scheme—I call it a returning rhyme—so that each stanza had an end line that was italicized. And the end stanza of the poem—the sixth or seventh, I forget which—was made up of the refrained lines themselves.

INTERVIEWER

Do you show your poems in a working stage to anyone else?

DICKEY

It depends. There are some things that I show to certain selected people if I think the words have reached the stage where their future development might prove good. But generally I keep the successive drafts of a poem to myself, because I conceive the poetic process as quite a private matter between the poet, his hand, and the blazing white island of paper which he is trying to populate or eliminate.

INTERVIEWER

How many drafts do you usually do?

DICKEY

It depends on the poem. With a longer one like "The Firebombing," I'd say certainly one hundred and fifty to one hundred and seventy-five, because you are searching all the time for some kind of order—some constitution to order whatever it is you are trying to say. Then, you are also trying to render it unforgettable. We poets are shameless people. We try to give whoever reads our poems something that they simply cannot shake. And if you try to do this in a long poem, you have to have some kind of executive order that makes the parts contribute to the whole, so that the audience will remember both the whole and the parts that contributed to it.

INTERVIEWER

What about a shorter poem like "Remnant Water"?

DICKEY

Oh, there are over thirty drafts of that. It's a kind of Vermeer, a still-life piece; this is relatively unusual for me. Most of my things depend on violence and length. But "Remnant Water" is a short piece, and so the whole revolves around the placement of each single word and not the presentation of an action, as it does in "The Firebombing." I worked on that an awful long time. It might point

a new direction, I don't know. But it is necessary that one experiment; that a poet should work out different kinds of direction.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever have the temptation to change a poem after it's published?

DICKEY

I have a paranoid thing about making absolutely sure before I let anything go out under my name that it is as good as I can do at that particular time. I might have second thoughts about it later, but I'm willing to stand on it when I turn it loose; therefore, it gets very hard for me to turn one loose.

INTERVIEWER

When you think about *Poems: 1957-1967*, what poem are you least enchanted with yourself?

DICKEY

Well, I don't know. The title poem "Drowning with Others" is one that I would like to make into a much longer poem—much, much longer. It's anthologized all over the damn place—but I can see possibilities in it now that I didn't see then.

INTERVIEWER

It's always ironic that the more successful a person gets, the more under attack he comes. I've noticed that there is an increasing amount of bitterness by a great number of people toward your work. Do you have any sort of response to their criticism?

DICKEY

Most of the time I don't even know what it is. It seems to me that a lot of it is politically oriented. For some reason or other I've had the right-wing monkey put on my back. But I'm not right-wing, I'm not left-wing, I'm not any wing.

INTERVIEWER

After all, you did work for Eugene McCarthy at one time as a speechwriter.

DICKEY

Yes, I did.*** He was my closest friend in Washington. That doesn't concern people. The fact that William Buckley is also a very close friend *does* concern people because that gives them an automatic put-down. I just don't worry about it. I've got too much work to do. It seems to be an invariable rule that people who don't have a strong creative drive, but find themselves in the creative competitive market, are eventually and inevitably going to put other writers down by means of politics.

INTERVIEWER

Some of your detractors have mentioned the fact that they felt that you should use your influence, your place in the world, for the "betterment of man."

DICKEY

If I knew what it was, I might do that. But I don't know. There's this tendency in American life to assume that because someone is good or maybe just notorious or publicized in one realm that he's a universal authority on everything. So, Frank Sinatra or John Wayne can tell you how to vote. What competence do *they* have in politics? Or that a poet can tell you about ecology or something of that sort. A poet is only a professional sensibility. His opinion in politics is no better than anyone else's ninety-nine percent of the time. But they're always being interviewed and always being asked their political opinion: What should we do with the military, what should we do with the economy, with government spending, et cetera. Poets don't know anything about that. If they did, they wouldn't be poets. This is not to say that they are precluded from knowing anything about it at *all;* it is to say,

*** Dickey did serve as an adviser to Eugene McCarthy, but he was never his speechwriter.

however, that just because they are poets their opinions should not be paid any more attention to than anybody else's. It does not give them any privilege or any insight or any clairvoyance as to the political and economic and military future of America.

INTERVIEWER

You don't feel, then, that since a poet has a highly developed sensitivity about our universe and about our place in the world and our society, he should make public pronouncements about the direction our society is taking?

DICKEY

I think in that way lies madness. No; all he's got is his own sensibility and his own opinions as a private citizen. But he has no privilege. Insight, yes. Maybe a poet could come along who could solve all our problems, but I haven't seen him yet. The history of poets pronouncing on public issues is notoriously dismal.

INTERVIEWER

I remember you quoted Auden talking about poetry: "For poetry makes nothing happen." Do you believe that?

DICKEY

I think that if it does make anything happen, it's deep in the individual's sensibilities; it's not in the public arena. As John Peale Bishop says, when the poet, or the critic, mounts the soapbox, the garbage remains in the streets.

INTERVIEWER

Did your job as poetry consultant to the Library of Congress involve you in the political world? One thinks of Archibald MacLeish trying to get Pound out of St. Elizabeths.

DICKEY

Well, Archie was the *librarian* of Congress, and his name is

engraved in gold just inside the entrance way of the library. The consultancy is quite a different thing. I did try to get several of the incarcerated Russian poets out of prison without success. My position was not such as that which Archie occupied. My name is not engraved in gold letters, and I would not have had the capacity to occupy the position that Archie had, nor would I have accepted it if offered. My position was that of being the only equivalent that the United States has of poet laureate. Frost was in the chair, Robert Lowell was in the chair, and Robert Penn Warren was in the chair. The job is as the incumbent conceives it: he can do as much or as little with it as he likes. He can lecture, he can initiate programs that the library will implement, he can arrange for lectures in the Coolidge auditorium, he can travel for the State Department, or he can do nothing at all except accept the position as a sinecure. I chose to be a working consultant. I set up an arrangement with the local ETV station to film the readings that I proposed, so that the library would have the nucleus of a filmed archive of writers, novelists, and poets that would eventually be the equivalent of the spoken archives that the library is famous for. Videotape made this possible. Universities and students may now go to the Library of Congress to see and hear, for example, John Updike reading from his works. Also John Cheever, William Stafford, Josephine Miles, and many another.

It is also part of the tradition of the consultancy that the consultant take at least one extended trip. Frost, for example, went to Russia. I went to New Zealand, Australia, Japan, and Alaska. I made the job hard, and now that it is over, I am glad that I did.

INTERVIEWER

You got into what you call your *one* political foray when Yevtushenko was here, in this country. Why?

DICKEY

Well, he's a close friend. I like him very much, but I profoundly disapprove of the kind of thing he does. He uses poetry as a pre-

text for making bohemian speeches. He's a great deal better poet than Allen Ginsberg, but he does the same *sort* of thing. I don't think poetry is well served by that. Poetry *can* speak on topical things eloquently. Look at Yeats on the riots of 1916, for example. But we should not be led into the corner of assuming that poetry is no good that does not speak on news items. If a man wants to write about the circle that's made in the water when a fish jumps, he should be able to write about that and should not be charged off as irrelevant because he's not writing about the Vietnam riots. You should have the whole gamut: political action, the jump of the fish, or the space program. You should have anything you want.

INTERVIEWER

It seems Allen Ginsberg is the diametrical opposite of you.

DICKEY

I certainly hope so. I think Ginsberg has done more harm to the craft that I honor and live by than anybody else by reducing it to a kind of mean that enables the most dubious practitioners to claim they are poets because they think, If the kind of thing Ginsberg does is poetry, I can do *that*. They damn themselves to a life of inconsequentiality when they could have been doing something more useful. They could have been garbage collectors, or grocery-store managers. Poetry is, as Yeats has said, "a high and lonely profession." It is very easy, too easy, to pick up on the latest thing in the newspapers and write a poem. That's all Ginsberg does. He just doesn't have any talent. I'll do a Ginsbergian poem or a Robert Bly poem for you right now.

INTERVIEWER

Do you consider them in the same school?

DICKEY

Well, not exactly the same, but they take off from the same . . . launching pad. Their poem goes:

> It is the hour when the Americans in Vietnam are
>   examining their hands.
> The dead are lying below the tangles of jungle brush.
> All over Minnesota snow is beginning to fall over the
>   missile silos.

INTERVIEWER

A Southern writer said, "James Dickey first came to my attention as a reviewer and I thought he was one of the roughest around." You've been pretty rough on some of your contemporaries. For what reason?

DICKEY

Well, I'm not all that rough. I have a very naive feeling as a reviewer. I don't believe that a reviewer or a critic can really criticize well unless he can praise well. I always liked that about Randall Jarrell. He praised well. James Agee praises well. You've got to be able to like the right things to be enabled to dislike the wrong things. People misconstrue John Simon. He *does* praise well. He doesn't find much to praise, but he praises well. John Simon hates so much so vehemently because he likes so little so strongly.

INTERVIEWER

Let's talk about someone that you do like strongly. What attracts you so much to William Stafford?

DICKEY

It's because he has the ability to say amazing things without seeming to raise his voice. He's kind of *murmuring*. I've never encountered a poet like that. He's not doing a lot of vast, tearing, rhetorical stuff like Lowell does, or a lot of kinky, tricky self-derogation like John Berryman. He's talking like an American Midwestern farmer who just has this capacity to say startling, quiet stuff.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel that Stafford is making a more significant contribution to American letters than Lowell is?

DICKEY

Yes, I do. I think Stafford will mean more to people over a longer period. Maybe not to the makers of textbooks or anthologies, but he's a people's poet of the finest kind; he's instantly understandable, and he gives you an enormous amount to think about without hollering at you, or without beating you down. Roethke was like that. Stafford, in a completely different way, has that same quality. He doesn't have the crazy, apocalyptic kind of a feel that Roethke has, but he's got an easygoing, quiet, authoritative, human, imaginative voice.

INTERVIEWER

Did you know Roethke?

DICKEY

Yes, I did indeed. I knew him quite well during the last two years of his life. He was a strange, terrifying, and terrified man. He seemed to have no confidence in himself. He was constantly afraid of being fired from the University of Washington because of his drunkenness and his periodic insanity. He feared becoming destitute, though he had a fine house on John Street overlooking the sea, a devoted wife, and friends who would have gone to the gallows for him. None of this seemed to do him any good. He read, it seemed, every scrap of paper on his work that appeared in print, and conceived endless literary enmities toward this, that, and the other literary critic or rival poet. Despite the fact that he was a little hard to live with, he was on the whole a lovable man, and it is still difficult for me to believe that he is gone from us.

INTERVIEWER

You had an article in the *Atlantic,* "The Greatest American Poet: Theodore Roethke." Why is he the greatest?

DICKEY

I don't see anyone else that has the kind of deep, gut vitality that Roethke's got. Whitman was a great poet, but he's no competition for Roethke. Lowell is a fine poet. He's a narrow, tragic, personal, confessional kind of writer. He's very good. But you can be interested in his hang-ups, his family, for just so long. In order to read Lowell and to like Lowell or Anne Sexton or any of the people that follow after Lowell, what is presupposed is that their life and their situation is going to be eternally fascinating to you. And it isn't. I *am* interested in Roethke's relationship to the ocean, because that gets me *into* it. I can participate. I can't enter Lowell's family. Of course, Lowell is an enormously powerful writer. The measure of his ability is that he can *make* you interested in his family; whereas Sylvia Plath, writing poems like "Daddy," is ridiculously bad; it's embarrassing. Lowell is a big writer, and he *compels* you to be interested. People like Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton just embarrass you.

INTERVIEWER

How do you respond to the emergence of Sylvia Plath as a celebrated figure?

DICKEY

She's not very good. She's just someone who killed herself out of literary desperation—out of desperation to be literarily notable. Someone ought to write an article called "The Suicide Certification," which assumes that if you're a poet and you kill yourself, then you have *got* to be good. No way.

INTERVIEWER

One time you called it "suicide chic."

DICKEY

Well, of course, if you're taking your own life, that's a horrible situation. Al Alvarez seems to think, in his recent book on suicide, that she was just doing it as a gesture and she hoped it wouldn't come off. So she killed herself by mistake. She's the Judy Garland of American poetry. If you want to kill yourself, you don't make an *attempt;* you do it. You make sure that the thing comes off. Suicide *attempts,* and then writing *poems* about your suicide attempts, is just pure bullshit! Sylvia Plath is of a certain talent, a very modest talent. Anne Sexton is better than she is, and I don't care much for her, either.

INTERVIEWER

What is your opinion of the famous Southern women writers—Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Katherine Anne Porter, and Flannery O'Connor?

DICKEY

The women of the South have brought into American literature a unique mixture of domesticity and grotesquerie. There have been two routes open to the Southern woman writer. She could research a historic subject—such as Elizabeth Madox Roberts did in *The Great Meadow,* which deals with the opening up of Kentucky—couple this with domestic images from her own life, and write her fiction out of these two considerations; or she could deal with eccentric village types, such as Carson McCullers and Eudora Welty frequently do and Flannery O'Connor does to an extreme. The Southern women writers of the two generations that produced our great ones were singularly immobile, but then so was Emily Brontë. They had little breadth of experience, but much penetration into a specific and still milieu. They are remarkable writers. But their scope is limited to the local and domestic with, in some cases, an admixture of the grotesque. I like it all. This is the way my women see things, and it is an interesting way that sheds light.

INTERVIEWER

Is there something about the South that is peculiarly advantageous for the writing of poetry and fiction?

DICKEY

Yes, I think there is. Due to their past, their history, their rural background, Southerners are lonely people. They very seldom have anyone to talk to. The result of this has been that when a Southerner encounters another human being he talks his head off. Add to this the very strong folklore and the legendary quality of local stories, anecdotes, and jokes, and you have the basis for Southern poetry and also for Southern fiction. Out of this situation, plus a certain superficial literariness (as in the case of Faulkner), came a great literature. But there are certain obvious defects. One of these is the eternal sameness of Southern fiction, which almost always deals with a family either in a single generation or covering several generations. One cannot reasonably assume that a wide reading public is going to be interested in yet another novel dealing with the Lutrell family in Ellijay, Georgia, with its criminally inclined son and its seduceable daughter. With poetry it is quite different. A mystical element enters. It enters into the landscape, the rivers, and the animals. Our greatest poetry has been written out of Southern landscape, and not out of Southern people. This is to the good, I think.

INTERVIEWER

Has the poetry of Robert Frost, particularly the country poems, been of interest or impact?

DICKEY

I don't care much for Robert Frost, and have never been able to understand his reputation. He says a good thing now and then, but with a strange way of averting his eyes while saying it that may be profound and may be poppycock. If it were thought that anything I wrote was influenced by Robert Frost, I would take that

particular work of mine, shred it, and flush it down the toilet, hoping not to clog the pipes.

INTERVIEWER

Did you know him?

DICKEY

Yes, I knew him slightly, and spent a couple of afternoons with him when I was teaching at the University of Florida in 1955, and a more sententious, holding-forth old bore who expected every hero-worshiping, adenoidal little twerp of a student-poet to hang on his every word I never saw.

INTERVIEWER

One of the things I think that you do enjoy is an audience. Can that be the death of a poet, if he enjoys performing?

DICKEY

It sure killed off poor Dylan Thomas. He didn't write even *one* poem in the last six years of his life.* Everybody adored him, paid him a lot of money; why should he write another book of *poems,* and maybe give the critics a shot at him that would lower his reading fee? Everybody *loved* him; he was screwing all the coeds in America, drinking all the whiskey, and he'd get up there and read his poems, and then he'd go on and read them somewhere else. He got a lot of dough for it. I mean, what incentive for him to write *was* there? To survive, a poet has to find some way of maintaining his original enthusiasm for *poetry,* not for the by-products of poetry, not for the fringe benefits of poetry, but for *it*.

INTERVIEWER

One time you were answering some irate poet and you said, "It's ironic to me that so many poets go about defending themselves in the wrong way; the real test lies in the poem."

* Thomas's output was indeed negligible in the last six years of his life, but during this time he wrote at least six poems.

DICKEY

Listen, a poet's pages are filled up with what he's done, that he can live on and trade on; but he has *got* to find some way to love that white empty page, those words he hasn't said yet.

INTERVIEWER

I think some people thought that you came out with *Deliverance* as a kind of afterthought, but I know from talking to you earlier that you had thought about *Deliverance* a long time. Why did you decide to finally go ahead and do it?

DICKEY

Well, I did think about it a long time. I started it about ten years ago and finished it about two years ago. It is misleading to leave it at that, because it would cause people to believe that I did nothing but work on *Deliverance* all that time—year after year. I wrote seven or eight other books during that time. *Deliverance* was really not high on the priority list at all. As Thomas Lovell Beddoes said of his own involvement with his lifelong work, never finished, called *Death's Jest Book,* I just gave it another kick whenever I got around to it. But, by damn, when it began to look like *Deliverance* was really capable of being finished, then I started leaning on it and pushing, and working on it until it finally *did* get finished. Nobody was more surprised than I was, because this novel was just something lying around in a drawer. I liked the story, and I got to where I was interested in the characters, and so on. I didn't know anything about writing novels—I still don't know much about it.

INTERVIEWER

What sort of process did you go through in writing the novel—shifting from poems to a fictional work?

DICKEY

The main problem for me, as I recall, was finding out ways to

do without the poetic line, because I had really relied heavily on the line, and the way the human eye moves across the page, what happens when you read a line of verse and the way it goes into the next line. I had to learn a whole new set of conventions, to work with the sentence and the paragraph, which I didn't know very much about.

Deliverance was originally written in a very heavily charged prose, somewhat reminiscent of James Agee. But it was too juicy. It detracted from the narrative thrust, which is the main thing that the story has going for it. So I spent two or three drafts taking that quality out. I wanted a kind of unobtrusively remarkable observation that wouldn't call attention to itself. That's why I made the narrator an art director. He's a guy who *would* see things like this; a writer would perform all kinds of cakewalks to be brilliant stylistically, which would have interfered with the narrative drive of the story.

INTERVIEWER

You have so many interesting set pieces in there. One that struck me was that part beginning "there is always something wrong with people in the country," which you ended: "there was no way for me to escape, except by water, from the country of nine-fingered people." Did you ever feel like putting something like that into a poem?

DICKEY

No, it was the other way around, because some of the same events that are depicted in *Deliverance* have been in poems—such as the boat going by the effluent pipe where the chicken heads and the feathers are. I wrote it into poetry first. Then I pulled it out of the poem and used it in the novel.

INTERVIEWER

Did you feel as if you were reducing it, changing it to prose?

DICKEY

It really wasn't a question of changing it over from one thing to the other. It was a question of reconceiving it in terms of another medium. The poems that I wrote were as a kind of three-part sequence, as I remember, called "On the Coosawattee." The same events and circumstances and physical situation over twenty years ago in north Georgia were what I was trying to reconceive in terms of the novel.

INTERVIEWER

What do you feel *Deliverance* is going to say later on?

DICKEY

I don't know. It has been variously reviewed. I don't really read very many reviews of anything I write. If somebody comes up to me and says, "Jim, there's a fabulous review in the *Atlantic* and you must read it; he's crazy about the book," then I'll read it. If the guy says it's a horrible review and that I'm the Antichrist himself, then I don't read it, because I don't want to go around filled with resentment against some stranger. That bleeds off your energies; you take them out in useless hatred. I need the energy for other things. I've known writers who are absolutely destroyed by adverse opinion, and I think this is a lot of shit. You shouldn't allow that to happen to yourself, and if you do, then it's *your* fault. My course is set; I know what I'm going to do. As Stephen Dedalus says, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* I'm ready to make a lifelong mistake. I believe in making a lifelong mistake, but I don't believe in being guided by people who write about me. Why, there's not anything that could ever be said about a person either good or bad that hasn't been said about me. But it doesn't matter. I'm going to write my way, and if that doesn't agree with people's sensibilities or even their digestions, it doesn't make any difference to me. If it's a lifelong mistake, it won't be the first one that's been made.

INTERVIEWER

What sort of contribution do you, yourself, feel that *Deliverance* will make?

DICKEY

I'll tell you what I really tried to do in *Deliverance*. My story is simple: there are bad people, there are monsters among us. *Deliverance* is really a novel about how decent men kill, and the fact that they get away with it raises a lot of questions about staying within the law—whether decent people have the right to go outside the law when they're encountering human monsters. I wrote *Deliverance* as a story where under the conditions of extreme violence people find out things about themselves that they would have no other means of knowing. The late John Berryman, who was a dear friend of mine, said that it bothered him more than anything else that a man could live in this culture all his life without knowing whether he's a coward or not. I think it's necessary to know.

INTERVIEWER

You don't feel, then, as some critics have said, that this particular work can be viewed as an exercise in violence?

DICKEY

No. At least not in the sense that Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* is an exercise in violence. What I don't like about Sam's work is that it has that obvious element of contrivance in it. *Deliverance* is something that could happen. You run up against bad men who would just as soon shoot you as look at you. In fact, some of them would rather. So what do you do? This is a story about what you *do*.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel that it is in the tradition of the grand male fraternity that dominates Hemingway's fiction?

DICKEY

Hemingway's people are bullfighters and boxers. Their *business* is violence. My men are decent guys. Lewis is a survival freak who is a nut on special disciplines, such as archery, canoeing, and so on. Suburban people, especially these fellows, are supposed to get out there and look at nature a little bit . . . have fun before it all disappears. Lewis might be a little obsessive about it. But the other guys— Ed Gentry, the narrator, for example, is just a decent guy with the job of providing for his family who happens to be fascinated with Lewis. Ed Gentry is not a bullfighter, a boxer, a tournament archer, or a racing canoeist. He's a guy who has a tangential relationship with these things that his obsessed buddy insists on talking about and doing. Drew is another decent guy, and is untroubled. He's America's own man. He's what the culture develops and the culture hopes for . . . a decent family man, he tends to his business, he does his job, and he has a couple of mild hobbies, like playing the guitar. Bobby, the other fellow, is a fat, lecherous, country-club guy who never should have been up in the woods to begin with. We get those men together and we have them beset by the blind fury of two disgusting human beings; and we see what the decent guys do.

INTERVIEWER

Is this kind of a warning to us?

DICKEY

I don't know whether it is or not.

INTERVIEWER

Some people felt like it might have been a kind of social commentary, thinly disguised.

DICKEY

I don't know. My interest was in just simply writing the story, and letting the symbolism fall where it may. Hemingway was right

about that. You don't try to build in, self-consciously, a bunch of preconceived symbols. If we make a real river, and real canoes, and real men, and real monsters, and real arrows, and real shotguns, and real woods, and real rapids and white water, then all the other stuff will take care of itself.

INTERVIEWER

What of your writing now? What's it like being a post-*Deliverance* writer?

DICKEY

It's not so bad. My preoccupation is with poetry, and everything else is a spin-off from that—novels, literary criticism, screenplays, whatever. If I lose poetry, which is the center of my creative wheel, I lose everything. I don't propose to let that happen. I want to write another book of poems, and then maybe have a big collection in a few years. Then I want to turn away from everything I've ever done in poetry and strike out in a completely new direction, if I can find what it is.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have any ideas?

DICKEY

The main thing in poetry is the discovery of an idiom and the exploitation of it over an area of thought for a long period of time. It is discovering an idiom such as Christopher Marlowe did—he really discovered blank verse—that's important. He didn't do it all himself. He found it too early. But Shakespeare *did* do it. I want to get at a kind of new way of using the English language which would not be mannered in such a way as, say, John Berryman is mannered, and would not be so lax as, say, Randall Jarrell is lax. I don't mean to make them into two possible poles, but we could use them as a starting place. There are some possibilities of the English language which have never even been hinted at. I don't

know whether I can get at them or not. It may be a little like the blind man in the blacked-out room looking for the black cat that ain't there. That's very much the feeling I have, and yet I believe I can touch him every now and then. One of these days, I'm going to grab him.

INTERVIEWER

Who do you go back to and want to read again?

DICKEY

My writing really couldn't be assessed by what my tastes are, because I love to read and I'll read anything. I love to read good bad poets, like Roy Campbell and Vachel Lindsay. If I want to turn my critical apparatus on and write an article, then I can turn my critical apparatus on and write an article. Nothing is easier. But I also like the thrill of a wide reading net, and a lot of the bad poets appeal to me just as much as the good ones do. This may be unfortunate.

INTERVIEWER

If you had to have a frank conversation with Berryman or Vachel Lindsay, what would you say to them?

DICKEY

I'll tell you what I would talk about with Berryman, if I could get him back. Of course, his body lies shattered on the ice of the midwinter Mississippi River. But Berryman was a man of intense friendships. His friendships meant more to him than his love affairs—more than anything else. His experience was very narrow. Sitting around drinking with Delmore Schwartz, or with Randall, or Lowell, was about as intense as John ever got. There was a poem of his in his posthumous book that was based on a phone call that I made to him when I was drunk and he was drunk, and it was a very moving thing for me to open up Berryman's posthumous book and to come upon a poem titled "Damn You, Jim D.,

You Woke Me Up." His friendships were all-important to him, and *that's* what I would talk to John Berryman about.

INTERVIEWER

How about Lindsay?

DICKEY

It would have to do with the relation of the poet to the public by means of the public reading, communicating with hundreds of strangers. Lindsay was the first great proponent and probably the greatest practitioner of this form of human communication. The next great one was Dylan Thomas, who could read, in his rich South Welsh voice, the telephone book and make it sound like scripture. People are very deeply moved by the sound of the human voice that says—that seems to say—deep rhythmical things. In my own time a whole generation of poets has been sustained by public appearances and by the deep need of people to be moved by true, imaginative words.

INTERVIEWER

You've known a great many poets personally. Do you find some common characteristic—in their madness, their vision, their discipline?

DICKEY

I would have to put the answer in the form of a paradox. Most of them are what the world would call weak men and women. They are wayward, licentious, heavy drinkers, irresponsible, unable to maintain a household properly, and subject to unpredictable vagaries of conduct. But, turning the coin to its other side, the best of them are incredibly strong people who will drive headfirst through a steel wall to get their work done. This is the type of person I admire most. I admire the type as I do, I suspect, because I am one of them.

INTERVIEWER

Do you keep in touch with fellow poets?

DICKEY

I am almost completely out of touch with them. They often write to me, but because of my heavy schedule I almost never have the time to answer. My correspondence deals with current and future projects which I am embarked upon. I would like nothing better than to engage in lengthy literary correspondence about time, life and its meaning, love, death, sex, and art with poets such as Robert Lowell or James Wright, but I do not have the time. I suspect that they don't either, but I like to think that they would welcome such a correspondence, could it be done. But it can't. My letters should never be collected, for most of them concern business, which is a very dull subject, for me no less than for anyone else who might be so underprivileged as to read them.

INTERVIEWER

We've talked a good deal about American poets, but English poets are always on the scene; some critics contend that the best contemporary English poet is Philip Larkin.

DICKEY

Oh, my Lord. Philip Larkin is a small kind of vers de société writer. He's one of these Englishmen of the welfare state who write self-effacing poems about how much he hates his record collection. That's not what we need. We need something that will affirm the basic possibility. This self-effacing stuff is so goddamned easy, it's tiresome.

INTERVIEWER

Is this the same poetic attitude you were discussing when, in reviewing James Merrill, you said, "his characters are always coming across each other in museums"?

DICKEY

That's right. But I don't have anything against Philip Larkin, or Ted Hughes—who's different. He's a guy who has a kind of ersatz violence that's equally easy to do. Hughes writes the kind of stuff I throw away. Larkin's all right; he's pleasant and kind of low-key—but that's all. No, no, the only really good guy over there and the only one who has any originality or interest for me is W. S. Graham, the Scottish poet. He's the real stuff.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you like Graham?

DICKEY

He has an original language. He can say amazing things. Larkin can't say anything amazing. Ted Hughes gives you the effect of a weight lifter who can't get the weight up.

INTERVIEWER

If there is a direction now in America, what do you think it is?

DICKEY

It could be toward some new and strange simplicity. Stafford has made a run at it.

INTERVIEWER

Is the country more a part of it than the city?

DICKEY

You have to keep to your sources as a writer. There are good writers who have the urban consciousness. John Hollander is one of them. He's a very fine writer. Auden is another one. He's always a little bit embarrassed by landscapes, or mountains or rivers, or any of the big natural forms.

INTERVIEWER

Except Iceland.

DICKEY

Yes, except Iceland. I don't know what he *did* in Iceland, or what he saw up there, but he was always a little bit embarrassed by nature, and he'd rather write about the city and the glass-and-chromium kind of culture we have. He didn't like it, but he was *used* to it and he knew it. I think the really good poets of now, and the ones who are going to be good, are going to be poets of dying nature. They're going to be like Lewis in *Deliverance:* people who are paranoid about getting out and seeing a little bit of this world before it disappears. I think the great poet, who is going to come, is going to be the poet who can see in a single grass blade—a single surviving grass blade—heaven and earth, or the lost paradise. There are not going to be that many more grass blades. The animals are going, the trees are going, the flowers are going, everything is going. So the poet who is going to be the great poet of the future is going to be that poet who can tell us what that last grass blade, popping up through the cement, means—*really*.

INTERVIEWER

In *This Is My Best,* in which you are collected, you said that you considered "The May Day Sermon" to be your best poem. Do you still?

DICKEY

Yes I do. Certainly. It's the best I can do—my big effort.

INTERVIEWER

Why does it work for you?

DICKEY

I think because it's got that kind of poetical wildness that I seek for. "Falling" has some of it also.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean by "wildness"?

DICKEY

Something that no one could imagine if he hadn't felt it. It's really a kind of madness I feel when I'm writing. It's not an induced madness from alcohol or other things of that nature. I don't know what it is, but it lets me achieve the kind of thing I did in "Falling," and especially in "The May Day Sermon."

INTERVIEWER

You've talked about age being the great enemy, and here you are fifty years old.

DICKEY

Well, for me it can go two ways. One of them is that I'm at the end, right now, and I've already said my thing and there's no more for me to do. The other side of the coin is that I'm at the beginning, that I have finally arrived at the beginning and it's all to do yet, and what I've done up to this time is nothing at all compared to what might be possible. I think it's necessary for a writer to have this sense of possibility and also to have the sense of being finished, because you don't know which it is.

INTERVIEWER

What are you working on now?

DICKEY

A poem called *The Zodiac*. It's about twenty-five pages long, and it's far better than "The May Day Sermon" . . . if I can just last. It is the best I can do . . . But boy, I'll tell you, the thing that is exciting to me is that I have spent fifty years crawling up the hill of Parnassus on my hands and knees, and now I want to see if I can fly.

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