

The background of the cover is a high-contrast, black and white photograph of a forest. The trees are rendered in stark white against a deep black background, creating a graphic, almost abstract effect. A prominent, vertical red stripe runs down the right side of the image, adding a splash of color to the monochromatic scene.

POEMS BY
JAMES DICKEY

BUCKDANCER'S
CHOICE

WINNER OF NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

Buckdancer's Choice

Poetry

Into the Stone
Drowning with Others
Helmets
Two Poems of the Air
Poems 1957–1967
The Eye-beaters, Blood, Victory, Madness, Buckhead and Mercy
The Zodiac
The Strength of Fields
Head-Deep in Strange Sounds
The Early Motion
Värmland
Falling, May Day Sermon, and Other Poems
False Youth
Puella
The Central Motion: Poems 1968–1979
The Eagle's Mile

Prose

Jericho: The South Beheld
God's Images
Wayfarer

Fiction

Deliverance
Alnilam

Children's Poetry

Tucky the Hunter
Bronwen, the Traw and the Shape-Shifter

Criticism

Sorties
The Suspect in Poetry
Babel to Byzantium

Belles Lettres

Self-Interviews
Night Hurdling
Voiced Connections

Buckdancer's Choice

Poems by JAMES DICKEY

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I. Title.

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To Maibelle Swift Dickey
and
Eugene Dickey

life-givers

Part 1

The Firebombing

Part 2

Buckdancer's Choice

Faces Seen Once

The Common Grave

Reincarnation

Them, Crying

The Celebration

The Escape

The Shark's Parlor

Part 3

Pursuit from Under

Fox Blood

Fathers and Sons

I. THE SECOND SLEEP

II. THE AURA

Sled Burial, Dream Ceremony

Gamecock

The Night Pool

The War Wound

Mangham

Angina

Dust

The Fiend

Part 4

Slave Quarters

Buckdancer's Choice

Part 1

The Firebombing

Denke daran, dass nach den grossen Zerstörungen Jedermann beweisen wird, dass er unschuldig war.

—Günter Eich

Or hast thou an arm like God?

—*The Book of Job*

Homeowners unite.

All families lie together, though some are burned alive.
The others try to feel
For them. Some can, it is often said.

Starve and take off

Twenty years in the suburbs, and the palm trees willingly leap
Into the flashlights,
And there is beneath them also
A booted crackling of snailshells and coral sticks.
There are cowl flaps and the tilt cross of propellers,
The shovel-marked clouds' far sides against the moon,
The enemy filling up the hills
With ceremonial graves. At my somewhere among these,

Snap, a bulb is tricked on in the cockpit

And some technical-minded stranger with my hands
Is sitting in a glass treasure-hole of blue light,
Having potential fire under the undeodorized arms
Of his wings, on thin bomb-shackles,
The "tear-drop-shaped" 300-gallon drop-tanks
Filled with napalm and gasoline.

Thinking forward ten minutes
From that, there is also the burst straight out
Of the overcast into the moon; there is now
The moon-metal-shine of propellers, the quarter-
moonstone, aimed at the waves,
Stopped on the cumulus.

There is then this re-entry

Into cloud, for the engines to ponder their sound.
In white dark the aircraft shrinks; Japan

Dilates around it like a thought.
Coming out, the one who is here is over
Land, passing over the all-night grainfields,
In dark paint over
The woods with one silver side,
Rice-water calm at all levels
Of the terraced hill.

Enemy rivers and trees

Sliding off me like snakeskin,
Strips of vapor spooled from the wingtips
Going invisible passing over on
Over bridges roads for nightwalkers
Sunday night in the enemy's country absolute
Calm the moon's face coming slowly
About
the inland sea
Slants is woven with wire thread
Levels out holds together like a quilt
Off the starboard wing cloud flickers
At my glassed-off forehead the moon's now and again
Uninterrupted face going forward
Over the waves in a glide-path
Lost into land.

Going: going with it

Combat booze by my side in a cratered canteen,
Bourbon frighteningly mixed
With GI pineapple juice,
Dogs trembling under me for hundreds of miles, on many
Islands, sleep-smelling that ungodly mixture
Of napalm and high-octane fuel,
Good bourbon and GI juice.

Rivers circling behind me around
Come to the fore, and bring
A town with everyone darkened.
Five thousand people are sleeping off
An all-day American drone.
Twenty years in the suburbs have not shown me
Which ones were hit and which not.

Haul on the wheel racking slowly

The aircraft blackly around
In a dark dream that that is
That is like flying inside someone's head

Think of this think of this

I did not think of my house
But think of my house now

Where the lawn mower rests on its laurels
Where the diet exists

For my own good where I try to drop
Twenty years, eating figs in the pantry
Blinded by each and all
Of the eye-catching cans that gladly have caught my wife's eye
Until I cannot say
Where the screwdriver is where the children
Get off the bus where the new
Scoutmaster lives where the fly
Hones his front legs where the hammock folds
Its erotic daydreams where the Sunday
School text for the day has been put where the fire
Wood is where the payments
For everything under the sun
Pile peacefully up,

But in this half-paid-for pantry
Among the red lids that screw off
With an easy half-twist to the left
And the long drawers crammed with dim spoons,
I still have charge—secret charge—
Of the fire developed to cling
To everything: to golf carts and fingernail
Scissors as yet unborn tennis shoes
Grocery baskets toy fire engines
New Buicks stalled by the half-moon
Shining at midnight on crossroads green paint
Of jolly garden tools red Christmas ribbons:

Not atoms, these, but glue inspired
By love of country to burn,
The apotheosis of gelatin.

Behind me having risen the Southern Cross
Set up by chaplains in the Ryukyus —

Orion, Scorpio, the immortal silver
Like the myths of king-
insects at swarming time —
One mosquito, dead drunk
On altitude, drones on, far under the engines,
And bites between
The oxygen mask and the eye.
The enemy-colored skin of families
Determines to hold its color
In sleep, as my hand turns whiter
Than ever, clutching the toggle —
The ship shakes bucks
Fire hangs not yet fire
In the air above Beppu
For I am fulfilling

An “anti-morale” raid upon it.
All leashes of dogs
Break under the first bomb, around those
In bed, or late in the public baths: around those
Who inch forward on their hands
Into medicinal waters.
Their heads come up with a roar
Of Chicago fire:
Come up with the carp pond showing
The bathhouse upside down,
Standing stiller to show it more
As I sail artistically over
The resort town followed by farms,
Singing and twisting
All the handles in heaven kicking
The small cattle off their feet
In a red costly blast
Flinging jelly over the walls

As in a chemical war-
fare field demonstration.
With fire of mine like a cat

Holding onto another man’s walls,
My hat should crawl on my head
In streetcars, thinking of it,
The fat on my body should pale.

Gun down
The engines, the eight blades sighing

For the moment when the roofs will connect
Their flames, and make a town burning with all
American fire.

Reflections of houses catch;
Fire shuttles from pond to pond
In every direction, till hundreds flash with one death.
With this in the dark of the mind,
Death will not be what it should;
Will not, even now, even when
My exhaled face in the mirror
Of bars, dilates in a cloud like Japan.
The death of children is ponds
Shutter-flashing; responding mirrors; it climbs
The terraces of hills
Smaller and smaller, a mote of red dust
At a hundred feet; at a hundred and one it goes out.
That is what should have got in
To my eye

And shown the insides of houses, the low tables
Catch fire from the floor mats,
Blaze up in gas around their heads
Like a dream of suddenly growing

Too intense for war. Ah, under one's dark arms
Something strange-scented falls — when those on earth
Die, there is not even sound;
One is cool and enthralled in the cockpit,
Turned blue by the power of beauty,
In a pale treasure-hole of soft light
Deep in aesthetic contemplation,
Seeing the ponds catch fire
And cast it through ring after ring
Of land: O death in the middle
Of acres of inch-deep water! Useless

Firing small arms
Speckles from the river
Bank one ninety-millimeter
Misses far down wrong petals gone

It is this detachment,
The honored aesthetic evil,
The greatest sense of power in one's life,
That must be shed in bars, or by whatever
Means, by starvation

Visions in well-stocked pantries:

The moment when the moon sails in between

The tail-booms the rudders nod I swing

Over directly over the heart

The *heart* of the fire. A mosquito burns out on my cheek

With the cold of my face there are the eyes

In blue light bar light

All masked but them the moon

Crossing from left to right in the streams below

Oriental fish form quickly

In the chemical shine,

In their eyes one tiny seed

Of deranged, Old Testament light.

Letting go letting go

The plane rises gently dark forms

Glide off me long water pales

In safe zones a new cry enters

The voice box of chained family dogs

We buck leap over something

Not there settle back

Leave it leave it clinging and crying

It consumes them in a hot

Body-flash, old age or menopause

Of children, clings and burns

eating through

And when a reed mat catches fire

From me, it explodes through field after field

Bearing its sleeper another

Bomb finds a home

And clings to it like a child. And so

Goodbye to the grassy mountains

To cloud streaming from the night engines

Flags pennons curved silks

Of air myself streaming also

My body covered

With flags, the air of flags

Between the engines.

Forever I do sleep in that position,

Forever in a turn

For home that breaks out streaming banners

From my wingtips,

Absolution? Sentence? No matter;

The thing itself is in that.

Buckdancer's Choice

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Not dancing but nearly risen

Through barnlike, theatrelike houses
On the wings of the buck and wing.

Faces Seen Once

Faces seen once are seen

To fade from around one feature,
Leaving a chin, a scar, an expression

Forever in the air beneath a streetlight,
Glancing in boredom from the window
Of a bus in a country town,
Showing teeth for a moment only,
All of which die out of mind, except
One silver one.

Who had the dog-bitten ear?
The granulated lids? The birthmark?

Faces seen once change always

Into and out of each other:
An eye you saw in Toulon
Is gazing at you down a tin drainpipe
You played with as a dull child
In Robertstown, Georgia.
There it is April; the one eye

Concentrates, the rusty pipe

Is trembling; behind the eye
Is a pine tree blurring with tears:

You and someone's blue eye
Transforming your boyhood are weeping
For an only son drowned in warm water

With the French fleet off Senegal.
Soon after, the cancer-clamped face
Of your great-grandfather relaxes,

Smiles again with the lips of a newsboy.
Faces seen once make up

One face being organized

And changed and known less all the time,
Unsexed, amorphous, growing in necessity
As you deepen in age.

The brow wrinkles, a blind, all-knowing
Questioning look comes over it,
And every face in the street begins

To partake of the look in the eyes,

Every nose is part of that nose
And changes the nose; every innocence and every

Unspoken-of guilt goes into it,
Into the face of the one
Encountered, unknowable person who waits
For you all over the world,
In coffee shops, filling stations, bars,
In mills and orphan asylums,

In hospitals, prisons, at parties,
Yearning to be one thing.

At your death, they — it is there,
And the features congeal,
Having taken the last visage in,
Over you, pretesting its smile,
The skin the indwelling no
Color of all colors mingled,
The eyes asking all there is.

Composed, your own face trembles near

Joining that other, knowing
That finally something must break

Or speak. A silver tooth gleams;
You mumble, whispering “You
Are human, are what I have witnessed.
You are all faces seen once.”

Through the bent, staring, unstable dark
Of a drainpipe, Unity hears you —

A God-roar of hearing — say only
“You are an angel’s too-realized

Unbearable memoryless face.”

The Common Grave

I

Some sit and stare
In an unknown direction, though most lie still,
Knowing that every season
Must be wintered.

II

The mover of mists and streams
Is usually in the weeds
By twilight, taking slowly
A dark dedicated field-shape.

III

Of all those who are under,
Many are looking over
Their shoulder, although it is only one leap
To beyond-reason gold, only one
Breath to the sun's great city.
All ages of mankind unite
Where it is dark enough.

IV

The midstrides of out-of-shape runners,
The discarded strokes of bad swimmers,
Open-mouthed at the wrong time —
All these are hooked wrongly together.
A rumor runs through them like roots:
They must try even harder
To bring into their vast,
Indiscriminate embrace

All of humanity.

V

In someone's hand an acorn
Pulses, thinking
It is only one leap,
Only one.

VI

In the field by twilight are
The faller in leaves through October,
The white-headed flyer in thistles
Finding out secret currents of air,
The raiser of mists from the creekbed,
A fish extending his body
Through all the curves of the river,
The incredible moon in the voice box
Of dogs on All Souls' Night.

VII

All creatures tumbled together
Get back in their wildest arms
No single thing but each other,
Hear only sounds like train sounds,
Cattle sounds, earth-shakers.

VIII

The mover of all things struggles
In the green-crowded, green-crowned nightmare
Of a great king packed in an acorn.
A train bends round a curve
Like a fish. An oak tree breaks
Out and shoves for the moonlight,
Bearing leaves which shall murmur for years,
Dumfoundedly, like mouths opened all at once
At just the wrong time to be heard,

Reincarnation

Still, passed through the spokes of an old wheel, on and around
The hub's furry rust in the weeds and shadows of the riverbank,
This one is feeling his life as a man move slowly away.
Fallen from that estate, he has gone down on his knees
And beyond, disappearing into the egg buried under the sand

And wakened to the low world being born, consisting now
Of the wheel on its side not turning, but leaning to rot away
In the sun a few feet farther off than it is for any man.
The roots bulge quietly under the earth beneath him;
With his tongue he can hear them in their concerted effort

To raise something, anything, out of the dark of the ground.
He has come by gliding, by inserting the head between stems.
Everything follows that as naturally as the creation
Of the world, leaving behind arms and legs, leaving behind
The intervals between tracks, leaving one long wavering step

In sand and none in grass: he moves through, moving nothing,
And the grass stands as never entered. It is in the new
Life of resurrection that one can come in one's own time
To a place like a rotting wheel, the white paint flaking from it,
Rust slowly emerging, and coil halfway through it, stopped

By a just administration of light and dark over the diamonds
Of the body. Here, also naturally growing, is a flat leaf
To rest the new head upon. The stem bends but knows the weight
And does not touch the ground, holding the snub, patterned face
Swaying with the roots of things. Inside the jaws, saliva

Has turned ice cold, drawn from bird eggs and thunderstruck rodents,
Dusty pine needles, blunt stones, horse dung, leaf mold,
But mainly, now, from waiting—all the time a symbol of evil—
Not for food, but for the first man to walk by the gentle river:
Minute by minute the head becomes more poisonous and poised.

Here in the wheel is the place to wait, with the eyes unclosable,
Unanswerable, the tongue occasionally listening, this time
No place in the body desiring to burn the tail away or to warn,
But only to pass on, handless, what yet may be transferred

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