

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

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*Poetry*

Into the Stone  
Drowning with Others  
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Self-Interviews  
Night Hurdling  
Voiced Connections

# ***Buckdancer's Choice***

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**Poems by JAMES DICKEY**

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To Maibelle Swift Dickey

and

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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

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# *Part 1*

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## **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

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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.

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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

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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.

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## 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.”

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# 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.

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## 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,



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## 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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