“ALL BORN AND DYING, FOREVER AT ONCE”:
THE LAST MOTION(S) OF JAMES DICKEY

by Gary Kerley


In Summer of Deliverance, published in 1998, the year following James Dickey’s death on January 19, 1997, son Christopher recounts the story of visiting his ailing father in Columbia, South Carolina, for the last time. His father, dying of fibrosis of the lungs and taking oxygen through a breathing tube, has surrounded himself with mountains of books, drafts of poems, and pieces of essays and his latest unpublished novel Crux. Christopher Dickey ends his often angry and heartbreaking memoir of their estranged relationship on a hopeful note: they will spend more time together, his father will get help to try to rebuild his strength, and they will work together every day on projects.

From the mountain of books and folders closest to him, Dickey asked his son to bring him two manuscripts, one a slim volume of completed poems he called “Death, and the Day’s Light.” The other manuscript was in a thick folder, heavily annotated with notes. It held two long, incomplete and unpublished poems, “Show Us the Sea” and “For Jules Bacon,” that Dickey told his son he had been working on for 20 years. These were the most important poems he had written, he told him, and he implored Christopher to finish them after his death. Though Christopher felt inadequate to the task, he did try typing the different drafts, according to his father’s instructions, guessing at word choices, making corrections, and going back and forth with his father in phone conversations. Neither poem was completed, however, and eventually, the whole process was abandoned for the next ten years.

Enter Gordon Van Ness, a professor of English at Longwood University in Virginia and author of four previous books on Dickey, including a two-volume collection of his letters, The One Voice of James Dickey (2003, 2005). Van Ness proposed to the Dickey Estate, run by Christopher, his brother Kevin, and his sister Bronwen, that he be allowed to finish the two long poems, using the multiple versions now located among the James Dickey Papers at Emory University’s Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library. The result is Death, and the Day’s Light, which contains the aforementioned two long poems and five previously published poems, though none published by Dickey in book form during his lifetime. Taken together, this collection of Dickey’s poetry shows us the final motion of a major American poet’s life spent in the imagination. What Van Ness has accomplished, according to Christopher Dickey in his foreword to the volume, “is truly remarkable: he has found the voice of James Dickey; he has resurrected the genius” (Dickey x). Van Ness has been granted permission by the Estate to edit “Eden,” the last poem Dickey was working on and also is planning a biography of the poet. Thanks to Van Ness, we now have, not a collection of fragments or drafts, but a volume that stands on its own and one that surely will be the basis for further reassessments of Dickey’s long career as a poet.
While “Show Us the Sea” and “For Jules Bacon” are clearly the central focus and most intriguing poems of this important collection, the other five poems included in *Death, and the Day’s Light* complement the two longer poems in content, imagery, and theme and continue the “reverberating, self-generating world of linguistic interplay” and “word magic” (Kirschten 149) that had become the hallmarks of the structure and rhythm of Dickey’s later poetry. Read and studied together, all of them illustrate Dickey’s lifelong quest to translate experience into word and to place man squarely in the realm of his struggle to survive in nature.

Before turning our attention to the two long poems Van Ness has resurrected and completed, it is worth discussing the other previously published, though much briefer poems. All five of them—“Conch,” “The Drift-Spell,” “Last Hours,” “The Confederate Lines at Ogeechee Creek,” and “Entering Scott’s Night”—were published in journals from 1993 to 1997 and subsequently collected in Ward Briggs’s *The Complete Poems of James Dickey* (2013). They were not, as noted earlier, published in any Dickey volume during his lifetime. There is no way, of course, to know if Dickey would have chosen to put the poems in *Death, and the Day’s Light* in the same order as Van Ness has done, or if he even would have added to or taken out the poems in the thin folder he requested his son to bring him that day, but there is a certain balance in the volume’s structure as edited by Van Ness. The first two poems, “Conch” and “The Drift-Spell,” are placed under the heading “Two Poems: Son and His Mother,” and the volume ends with the longer, previously incomplete poems under the heading “Two Poems on the Survival of the Male Body,” giving a continuity and a pairing of child/parent relationships, as well as the ongoing theme in Dickey’s poetry of striving to unite past and present experience with the imagination.

The speaker in “Conch,” reprinted by *The New Yorker* in 1996, and the last of the 60 poems the magazine published by Dickey, says, “There is no / Whole truth, but this is all we have,” which looks back at *The Whole Motion: Collected Poems* (1992) and anticipates Dickey looking forward at the end of his life to getting well and getting back to the poetic themes of his younger, vibrant self after so much time spent on the novels *Alnilam* (1987), *To the White Sea* (1993), and the incomplete *Crux*. “The Drift-Spell,” a fragment first published in 1993 for a tribute honoring Dickey’s 70 years, was reprinted in the *Princeton University Library Chronicle* and the *Atlantic*. The poem was inspired by a trip Dickey took with son Kevin to visit the grave of Dickey’s first wife Maxine. Dickey imagined joining her in death, and in the poem the speaker senses the presence of the mother and himself in such natural forms as an owl or stone and their glorification in the child’s physical body. “From where I watched you glory in your body,” the speaker says, I “gloried with you.” Both poems celebrate creation and vision, the love of a mother for her son, yet there is always an awareness of the physical limits of time and the body: “death, and the day’s light.”

“Last Hours,” the third poem in the collection and published in *Southern Review* in 1994, is dedicated to Tom Dickey, the poet’s younger brother who died of cancer December 8, 1987. In a letter to Dave Smith, Dickey calls it “a savage poem about my brother’s death from colon cancer, in which, in his delirium…he turned from his lifelong preoccupation with the Civil War to the terrible career of Ted Bundy” (Van Ness 490). According to Van Ness, “Violence personalized in the figure of Bundy allows for an escape from the hauntedness of the hospital room and offers a kind of salvation” (269). At the end of the poem, the speaker, agonizing over the death of his brother, exhorts him to abandon the
Civil War figures of Generals James Longstreet and Stonewall Jackson and follow serial killer Bundy, who somehow will help him cross over into death. The poem is a recreated death watch, and, like the two previous poems, the speaker is keenly aware of death, but he is also aware of the redemptive power of the spirit that can live on in our loved ones after we die.

“The Confederate Line at Ogeechee Creek” was offered to David Bottoms by Dickey in a letter to the poet and appeared in Five Points in 1997. In this short poem, all nature is described as “trembling and trembling / Into certainty,” harkening back to the imagery in both “Conch” and “The Drift-Spell,” where everything seems to come together in the mind of the speaker. “Entering Scott’s Night” was written at the request of USC Professor Matthew Bruccoli for the centenary of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s birth September 24, 1996, but it was not completed in time and was published posthumously in The New Yorker in 1997. Henry Hart, in his 2000 biography The World as a Lie, sees Dickey “as an old man reflecting soberly on his life” (752) who identified with both Gatsby and Fitzgerald in the poem. The speaker is entering into Scott’s night, as the title says, as if he were in another life or on the other side of the looking glass, reflecting both Scott’s life and his own. Yet, as the duality of many of Dickey’s poems shows, time is both a moving presence and the present: “the night when the past / Has not passed.”

The task that Gordon Van Ness had given himself in preparing “Show Us the Sea” and “For Jules Bacon” for publication was daunting, and Christopher Dickey admits that he thought Van Ness would have walked away from the project several times. Some will question the need for such a volume as Death, and the Day’s Light, given that we have Dickey’s own Whole Motion and now Briggs’s Complete Poems, and there is no way to know if the volume Dickey would have published—if he had published one at all—is the volume we now have. However, because all three members of the Dickey Estate approved the project and Christopher Dickey praised Van Ness as “one of the best, most conscientious scholars of my father’s work” (x), this volume is a welcome addition to Dickey’s legacy as a poet. There are those who would argue, including myself, that anything that advances our knowledge of James Dickey as a poet is always a good thing.

In his “Editorial Note” to the volume, Van Ness lays out the rationale for the method of resurrecting the two long poems that had been alluded to by Dickey and others over the years but never published, except for a 23-line fragment of “Show Us the Sea” in the Summer 1990 issue of Partisan Review. One box of the James Dickey Papers at Emory contains the folder that Dickey himself had labeled “Death, and the Day’s Light.” All five poems in that folder had been previously published and discussed earlier in this review. In two other boxes are separate folders for “Show Us the Sea” and for “For Jules Bacon,” totaling more than one thousand typescript pages. “Show Us the Sea” consists of 15 identifiable drafts, notes, early fragments, and a last revision draft 59 pages long, with handwritten annotations. “For Jules Bacon” has eight drafts but no notes or early versions. Van Ness makes it a point to say that Dickey had working outlines for both poems. What Van Ness did was to collate all the typescripts, looking at the latest drafts, and choosing words that were most repeated. His editorial commentary goes into much more detail than specified here, but it is important to note that he had personally seen and been read from by Dickey a late version of “For Jules Bacon” at the poet’s home in 1994, so he knew the poet was working on it late in life. Dickey had made substantial progress toward completing both poems,
Van Ness says, and Dickey's insistence that son Christopher complete them shows that he was hopeful that _Whole Motion_ would not be his last volume of poetry.

Some readers will question Van Ness’s collaborative method, even suggesting that what we are reading of the two long poems is not Dickey’s work, since there is no way to tell, without gaining access to the multiple drafts, typescripts, and manuscript versions at Emory, where Dickey leaves off and Van Ness begins. What I want this review to stress, however, is that these are the words we have, and these two poems will be discussed in light of not only how they came to be published, but also how their content, themes, and style illustrate the nature of all of Dickey’s poetry.

“Giving a Son to the Sea,” a 47-line poem first published in _The New Yorker_ in 1969 and then reprinted as the second part of a section called “Messages” in Dickey’s 1970 collection _The Eye-Beaters, Blood, Victory, Madness, Buckhead and Mercy_, is the idea for “Show Us the Sea.” In the poem, an aging father is looking at his blond-haired lifeguard son on the beach and remembering him at age six when he fired a toy gun at his father with the message “I Love You.” Now, the toy gun symbolizes the real risk of death as the speaker is realizing not only his own mortality, but also the inevitable pain and fear they both must face. As Ronald Baughman puts it, “The speaker remains resigned to but saddened by the inevitable changes in his relationship with his son” (100). While “Show Us the Sea” does not contain any of the same lines as “Giving a Son to the Sea,” its themes of love, searching, man and nature, and loss reverberate throughout Dickey’s verse and shows us that he was getting back to his earlier, poetic self. As Van Ness notes, “Show Us the Sea” is a long, re-imagined expansion of the scene from “Giving a Son” and is “a meditation on fathers and sons, youth and old age, and death and immortality” (xxxvi).

“Show Us the Sea” begins and ends with a prayer-like admonition: “Real God, roll.” A Whitmanesque array of poses and revelations, the poem has the speaker imploring his son to show everything he can to him. He wants his son to fix what really cannot be fixed: his own mortality, or God’s will rolling over the world. Posturing and posing are at the heart of the poem, and the father sees his son as “the second birth,” another chance for him as well. He laments what he was once but sees hope in the son’s power to change, to fix the world so that the speaker is not just an observer of his son’s life but also a participant in that new life. Losing and finding are the keys to the father’s admonishment to the son to show what can be. The oft-repeated incantation “Show us the sea” is important to the movement of this long poem. It holds it together, along with the idea of a real God rolling through everything, so that the father can relive his own youth by watching his son: “I have been everywhere you point.” It is noteworthy that the book’s title “Death, and the day’s light” is cited in the poem because it illustrates both the natural world’s growth and expansion and also the resolution of the end of man’s life. When the speaker says, “One can think of the world / As it most truly is and something to be shown to us” [my italics], the son is showing his father, and all of us by implication, what ultimately is to come. The poem ends with the speaker/the father/Dickey and his sons in a final plea for revelation: “Show us the sea, / Second son, for the one time: the one time / of all. Real God. Roll. / Roll.”

“For Jules Bacon” is dedicated to the weightlifter and bodybuilder who won the Mr. America contest in 1943. Born in Philadelphia and 89 at his death on January 13, 2007, Bacon was spokesman for the York Barbell Company in Pennsylvania and appeared
regularly on the cover of *Strength & Health* and wrote articles for it. As a young airman bivouacked in the Pacific during World War II, Dickey was sent the September 1943 and March 1944 issues of the magazine and, like many of those stationed during the war, read it and used Bacon for inspiration in building themselves up for survival. In the poem the speaker implores Bacon to give him strength and life, just as the speaker in “Show Us the Sea” implores his son to help him survive. Jules Bacon has inspired the speaker to build his strength so he can endure the war. He asks the bodybuilding star to give him the power to save himself, to make him into “a new man” who could “have it all.” The speaker believes that if he follows Bacon’s example and makes his body stronger, he can defeat death. At the end of the poem, the speaker exultantly exclaims what he hopes to gain from fighting against the discarded and rusting machinery of the war, the decay of the jungle, and the physical decaying of the body: “Life! / War roared with life, and you saved me.”

In the afterword to *Death, and the Day’s Light*, Dave Smith discusses the style of Dickey’s later poetry, as illustrated in such volumes as *The Zodiac* (1976), *Puella* (1982), and *The Eagle’s Mile* (1990). He notes that some readers saw a diminishing of Dickey’s talent in these later works; he laments that “the later poems have been utterly undervalued, misread, viewed as veering off into a dead-end, rather than an evolving rhythm” (83). Yet, the line structure and rhythm of both “Show Us the Sea” and “For Jules Bacon,” I would argue, are perfectly suited for the subject matter of their constant movement toward a final discovery. It is as if each speaker’s insistence on being shown, being moved forward, is illustrated by the line breaks, repetition, and parallel elements of Dickey’s style. Gordon Van Ness says that both poems play off one another in a “double vision” that celebrates “the male body against the diminishment of time, a physical war against death that includes connections to Dickey’s thematic concerns of family and love” (xxx). The style illustrated in *Death, and the Day’s Light* and the content of the two long poems, as Smith rightly defines it, are “many motions in one” (256), and this last volume continues and fulfills Dickey’s resolute movement toward discovery and insight, as he previously sought by rethinking and renaming his earlier published volumes: *The Early Motion* (1981), *The Central Motion* (1983), and *The Whole Motion* (1992).

Mercer University Press and Gordon Van Ness have done a great service to the readers of James Dickey and American poetry. There will certainly be misgivings about the two long poems not being the “true” Dickey, even though Van Ness has made a conscientious, meticulous effort to put himself in the background. I believe such apprehension will diminish as further studies of Dickey’s poetry are published, thanks largely in part to *Death, and the Day’s Light*. More studies, no doubt, will be done based on the James Dickey Papers at Emory, and this important volume gives readers the chance to keep Dickey’s poetry at the center of his literary life, where it belongs.

**Works Cited**


Life is the thing that exists in spite of time, but I am a hand-maiden to time. I feel in opposing directions. The unfortunate muchness of me: fully full and fully empty.

Each day had felt like an uncut page, to be opened or not, the leaves like an accordion or envelopes containing I knew not what. In my mind a Dickensian serial living, the trees turned to industrial landscape, the fluorescence turned smoke, smog, the canned air inhaled as particulate. At my desk, I was a human bottle-brush inside some chimney, a small child with small fingers for small unnoticeable tasks. The unfortunate muchness of it: fully full but fully empty.

My brain sits squarely on a gray and shrunken comma, the amygdala glows like a red-light district at the hit of your mouth turning down, even as a turned down coverlet, even as an invitation, it was suspect. I curled up to you in the dark and couldn’t stand it. I slept on the floor, comforted by how firmly it pressed up against my hip, how it didn’t give when I rolled around praying for sleep. The unfortunate muchness of it: fully full though fully empty.

I’d like to slough off my skin, Bartholomew-like, slipping into a wrapper-less saintliness, blood dried and cleaned by meeting with oxygen.