THE ONE GLIMPSE WE GET

By

ROGER DEAN JONES

Bachelor of Arts
Sam Houston State University
Huntsville, Texas
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Master of Arts
Sam Houston State University
Huntsville, Texas
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THE ONE GLIMPSE WE GET

Thesis Approved:

Gordon Weaver
Thesis Adviser

Thomas L. Warren

Edward P. Walling

William J. Rugg

Norman N. Durham
Dean of the Graduate College

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Five years ago, in the introduction to my Master's thesis--a collection of poems entitled Arkansas Tombstone Inscription--I stated that I wished in the future to make my poems "as clear and simple" as possible. I felt those two qualities to be the most important any poetry can exhibit: clarity, because of my belief that poetry should communicate (and because I'd read enough contemporary poetry to have seen how many present poets believe in intentional obfuscation); simpleness (as opposed to simplicity or simple-mindedness) because I felt at that time that our most important life-experiences are simple, and I agreed with the ancient Chinese poet Tu Fu's dictum to young poets that "the poet's ideas should be noble and simple "

Since that time, and that group of poems (many of which were subsequently published in a Texas Review chapbook, Remembering New London), my views have changed somewhat, reflecting the five years of study and poetic experimentation I've undertaken at Oklahoma State University. I continue to believe in the virtue of clarity in poetry. However, I now substitute richness for simpleness. This change has been prompted by my reading experiences since that time and by my realization of the obvious fact that life's experiences often are not simple--some, in fact, are inconsolably and unsolva-

bly complex, and require great doses of time and patience. At twenty, or even twenty-five years of age, the young poet often has not been subjected to those forces in society that fragment the psyche and effect what T.S. Eliot lamented as the "dissociation of sensibilities."[1] Throughout the ages, but particularly during this century, the task of the poet or artist has been to come to creative terms with this fragmentation (and this necessity has sparked some of the most brilliant and original experiments in literary history) In the 20th century novel, for example, this coming to terms has been largely a matter of form, leading to Joyce's stylistic panorama in Ulysses, Virginia Woolf's stream-of-consciousness, and Faulkner's multiple points-of-view. In poetry, the fragmentation has produced a diversity of constituencies: the Imagists, the Fugitives and Agrarians, the "Black Mountain School," the Beat Movement, the so-called "New York School," and the individual workshops of the past twenty years, usually college-based. Whereas fiction has explored form, poetry has dwelled primarily on an exploration of epistemology, following in Wordsworth's path to investigate the mind, its perception of images, and its synthesis of what it receives (which, in turn, causes this fragmentation I mention).

My studies of these movements, writers, and techniques

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[1]T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot, Frank Kermode ed , New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1975, p. 64.

have greatly affected my views about poetry, and I've begun to employ various of the poets' techniques in order to capture more accurately the chaos of my own creative drives. For, as Robert Penn Warren points out in Democracy and Poetry, the finished poem may be seen as the "emblem of the organized, complete self."[2] I have gradually started trying to replace simpleness in my poetry with richness, which might be defined simply enough as a certain measure of stylistic and thematic complexity in a poem. One finds in the poetry of our finest writers a fascinating and almost innumerable assortment of techniques and devices that help create a complex poem, whose various images, lines, and vocal shifts tug and fight with one another, but somehow (if successful) come together in an aesthetically successful unity. The richness of a poem, however, involves more than simply mastery of craft.

The past five years, I have admired most those poems which have touched something human--emotion, conviction, spirit, temporality, and other elements which escape logical categorization. Thus, richness is not only a technical, but a thematic, quality, and requires of the poet more than just a rational interest in the subject. If poetry should do anything, it should clarify experience, and prompt the reader to realize more urgently his own humanness, and his uniqueness, as well as his unity with others who share similar

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[2]Robert Penn Warren, Democracy and Poetry, (Cambridge, Mass.; Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 69.

experiences. Too often nowadays we read the private, self-reflexive poem which, as Robert Frost once pointed out, seems to be saying "Let's see you understand this, you damned fool!" So richness also involves community: as Wordsworth points out in the Preface, the poet should be no more or less than "a man speaking to other men."[3]

As this collection's title--The One Glimpse We Get--indicates, my major thematic concern is the brevity of life and experience. The collection's three divisions reflect this theme. Section One is comprised of poems about childhood and the speaker's initiation into the larger worlds of adulthood and human mortality; Section Two consists of poems about women, and male-female relationships (which, ideally, provide us with one way to combat the brevity of life, or at least our sense of it): Section Three consists of a miscellany of subjects, all related to the theme of time. These poems represent a number of different subjects, and a large amount of experimentation with various styles, all aimed toward the still-unfolding goal I have of writing a clearer, richer poem.

In general, my poems begin with a dominant image or line, or with a story hopefully exhibiting some sense of narrative urgency. In almost every poem I've written, the dramatic situation has been the most important factor, but I've learned

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[3]William Wordsworth, "Preface to Lyrical Ballads," from Selected Poems and Prefaces of William Wordsworth, Jack Stillinger, ed., (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965), p. 453.

to explore more widely for the voice and line-length or method most conducive to whatever effect I wish to achieve. In such poems as "Turning," "The Man in the Caboose," and "The Onset," I have experimented with extremely short lines which run, usually, no more than two to three stresses per line. Of the three most commonly recognized line-methods available to poets--traditional meter, so-called "breath-units," and syntactical or caesura-oriented lines--I've most commonly chosen the last. I've been influenced by Philip Levine's short lines, and by his method of breaking a line in order to create momentary ambiguity and harmonies within the poem. In "The Man in the Caboose," for example, I have these lines:

> You glance one into the brown face,
> featureless but for the smile, a wide
> swath glowing in the window's
>
> dark. By now
> it's an instinct of childhood: hand up
> you wave.

Syntactically, these two sentences come together in the line "dark. By now." which fuses these words together to form an image of the moment itself being dark, which otherwise is not indicated in the poem. Numerous other poems, including "The One Glimpse We Get," "The Sound at the Edge of Sleep," "Go," and others, employ this line-method.

Several poems, such as "Solstice, No Lights," "Late

August Star Fall," and "The Affair," make use of traditional meter--mainly iambic pentamenter, though I usually try to vary rhythms in accordance with the imagistic or narrative demands the poem makes overall. For example, in "Late August Star Fall," occasional variations in the pentameter line not only help to vary the rhythms somewhat, but also help me to signify the shifts in consciousness that occur in the poem--from childhood (the speaker) to adult experience (the mother and aunt).

Occasionally I operate with a longer line. The line in "Again: A Kinser Dream," for example, was directly influenced by James Dickey's broken line "wall of words" method, as he employs it in "Falling," "The Birthday Dream," and other recent poems.[4] In "Again: A Kinser Dream," I needed a line which would enable me to create a wider imagistic panorama, and to approximate, within the line, the hypnotic sense of dreams. The line also enabled me to incorporate more narrative structure in the poem, since the long lines tend to slow the sense of narrative motion in the poem, freeing the poem to "roam around" more and to include more narrative exposition, or "scaffolding." The space within the line also help catch the reader's attention and hold it on the speaker's specific consciousness, which is vital in

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[4]Dickey's use of this "wall of words" was first labeled as such by Dickey himself in Sorties. An interesting discussion of it appears in Dave Smith's article "The Strength of James Dickey," Poetry 137:6 (March, 1981), pp. 349-358.

"Again: A Kinser Dream."

"Again: A Kinser Dream" also exemplifies a type of poem I've occasionally attempted (influenced by my mentor, T.R. Hummer) in which I incorporate as many disparate experiences as I can and juxtapose them in order to create some sort of unity. All poems juggle disparate experience, of course, but the more dissimilar the experiences, the more unusual the poem is. In "Mastery. The Encyclopedia of Medical Self-Help," I've woven into one poem a handful of childhood memories whose relationships to each other are mainly associative, or subliminal. In this type of poetry, I've been influenced by Dave Smith, also, whose collection Dream Flights contains longer, more sequential poems. In most of Smith's poems, a central image serves as a unifying, totemic center around which the poem's images and events converge--a "vortex," we might say. In "Mastery. The Encyclopedia of Medical Self-Help," the encyclopedia serves in this manner, and allows me to cluster the images and memories together without any need for a strict narrative structure, an overwhelming speaking persona, or other devices poets use to create unity in a poem.

One of the most difficult obstacles a poet meets is the matter of handling time in a poem. Critic Northrop Frye, referring to a distinction first made by Gerard Manley Hopkins, speaks of two types of poems: "a transitional kind, which operates in narrative and story-telling, following the rhythm of the continuity of life in time, and a more medita-

tive kind, which turns away from the sequential experience and superimposes a different kind of experience on it. The superimposing provides an intense concentration of emotion and imagery, usually on some concrete image."[5] Contemporary poets and critics traditionally refer to this distinction as the difference between narrative and lyric poetry. These distinctions, as any poet would acknowledge, ultimately break down, since there are elements of lyric in the narrative, and vice versa. However, they do serve as accurate labels for the two basic poetic impulses: the need to tell a story (historically represented by epic poetry; and other types which celebrate time's grand sweep); and the need to create, as Frost expressed it, "a momentary stay against confusion" (represented by hymns, pastorals, sonnets, and other lyric forms).

Stylistically, my poems are usually lyrics, though I include a number of narratives here as well. Such poems as "Turning," "The Sound at the Edge of Sleep," "Her Men," and "Otherness. The Corral" fix the speaker in a specific moment and situation which open up to reflection and medititation. Poet Stanley Plumly has decribed the lyric impulse as depicting the "emotional intensity and emotional values, the penetration, the depth of the poem. . . Lyricism is the intelligence, the power, the energy which holds the storyline in

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[5] Northrop Frye, "Approaching the Lyric," rep. in Lyric Poetry, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 31-37.

place; that withholds the forward-motion from simply spilling into the amorphous future."[6]

In "Otherness. The Corral," for example, the speaker watches a girl brush a horse; her actions trigger in his mind a memory of his grandmother instructing him about horses, and a subsequent memory of the grandmother's commital to an insane asylum. He informs us that the girl will leave him in due time. Thus, the poem is a recreation of the consciousness of a speaker suspended by a single moment and action. By his elaboration of the future, we realize that what we actually have is a speaker pretending to be in the present, but who is actually looking back on it all. This particular device enabled me to create an extended metaphor in the poem. Horses, of course, are the traditional symbol of power and "unbridled" passion. Here, I've also fused that traditional usage of the horse with the image of horses as symbols of beauty, irrationality, will, and, finally, insanity I conceive the "rich" poem as one which compresses time, experience, and poetic technique in this manner.

I've handled time in a different manner in another lyric poem, "The Diseases of Childhood," a piece which owes influence to two of America's most prominent lyric writers, William Matthews and Sharon Olds. In this poem's first stanza, I take the subject through as many metaphorical

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[6]Stanley Plumly, "An Interview with Stanley Plumly," Wayne C. Dodd, interviewer, Ohio Review, No. 25 (1980), p. 34.

variations as possible, in an attempt to expand the meaning of the word "diseases." In the second stanza, the poem shifts to a specific time, place, and subject (the second-person "you"). In stanza three, the poem focuses even further on a specific image, illustrating the passage of time to the "you." In addition to its handling of time, I feel this poem also exemplifies the use of voice. In all of my poems, I try to give the speaker as distinct a voice as possible. In "The Diseases of Childhood," the voice conforms quite naturally to the iambic pentameter rhythm. The meter breaks down somewhat in the second stanza to coincide with the speaker's shift from remembered childhood to the less-secure present--a shift also signaled by the speaker's references to the doctor's black bag. As in "Otherness. The Corral," the compression of metaphor, the use of voice, and the shift from one time frame to another hopefully creates the complexity I seek in a poem now.

In addition to expanding the moment, lyric poetry also involves specific qualities of sound, an elusive quality which has been thoroughly discussed, argued, theorized about, and, by many poets, ignored. The word lyric itself traditionally signifies any poem "suitable to the accompaniment of a lyre." In the free-verse poems I've written, I especially rely on assonance, alliteration, and internal rhyme to create the sense of music and rhythm necessary to the piece. I've been greatly influenced by the sound qualities --the richness--in Galway Kinnell's poetry. In "Summer

Night: Changing a Tire," I employ a number of Kinnell's sound devices--not only those already mentioned (assonance, alliteration, internal rhyme), but also certain compositional devices Kinnell employs: specifically, his manner of balancing external "plot" or story-telling with a lyrical elaboration on the situation or image he presents. The speaker of "Summer Night: Changing a Tire" presents an extremely simple story: he and a friend stop by a rural road and, as the friend fixes a flat tire, the speaker describes the scene around them, which, to him, represents somewhat the external nature of the present moment. I tried to establish in the poem a number of contrasts or dualisms: action vs. contemplation, light vs. darkness, being vs. non-being, motion vs. stillness, and so on. Likewise, the speaker and his friend represent opposites: practicality vs. romantic passivity; and, poetically, narrative vs. lyric (since the speaker wishes to dwell on the moment, while the friend prefers to travel on). The speaker see-saws back and forth between what he sees and what he feels or imagines. Often these shifts are signaled by sound--the friend's banter about the price of tires, the sound of the jack. The smooth harmonies of thought and contemplation are interrupted by the consonance of action. Likewise, the speaker's figurative travel--his flight into the insect-filled meadow, his penetration of the tire's "white ring"--ends in actual travel, which, by way of his final reflections, becomes a journey toward the unknown.

The subject of death figures in many of these poems

particularly those in the last section. I have been greatly influenced by the writings of Carl G. Jung, whose essay "The Soul and Death" expresses his view of death as not only the "end of a process," but also as an Archimedean point enabling us to look back on life and to attribute to it whatever meaning or significance we wish. In "Crows: Night in New Hampshire Woods," the speaker associates his fear of the pervasive darkness with the dissolution of self, and with death. In "Go," the speaker remembers when, as a boy, he ran a footrace with his aging father, whose challenge to the boy represents the father's own way of defying mortality. In "Solstice, No Lights," the speaker's baby represents life, and its cries call the father back to the world of necessity and trouble, rather than allowing him to contemplate the considerable implications of death and eternal stillness. Finally, in "Late August Star Fall," the speaker sees, in the spectacle of the Perseids, an image of what we romantically view as the mythic glory of death in war.

A critic once mentioned that James Wright wrote about the subject of death because death, to Wright, is "the ultimate loneliness." In many of my poems, this view of death also holds true. The poems in the section which deals with male-female relationships also demonstrate the degree of loneliness we contend with in our marriages and relationships. For example, the female in "The Affair" escapes her husband's irrationality by fleeing to the speaker. In "The One Glimpse We Get," the speaker associates a failed love affair with a

somberness he has experienced in other situations. The female in "The Man in the Caboose" also fantasizes about the male in the train, who becomes a means of escaping the forlornness of her own sad marriage. I do not view all relationships or marriages as unhappy, of course, and when they are unhappy, often it is the result of natural human tendency toward dissatisfaction in any situation--the result, often enough, of our failure to keep in mind the meaning of life's brevity (or, perhaps, of brooding on life's brevity in the wrong manner).

Thematically and technically, these poems represent my efforts to communicate what strikes me as important about experience. I am committed to the goal of clarity partly because I am convinced that poetry has lost a share of its traditional audience because poets have ceased writing to a general audience, and, in many instances, write now to create a sense of mystery (or perhaps simply to fool one another). However, I am also aware that the "general readership" sometimes includes the lazy reader as well, and I feel that poetry should not be simple to the point of being elementary. As Robert Penn Warren argued in "Pure and Impure Poetry," "nothing should be legislated out of poetry."[7] Thus, whereas five years ago my future goal as a poet was to make my poems "clear and simple," I am now willing to sacrifice simpleness

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[7]Robert Penn Warren, "Pure and Impure Poetry," from Selected Essays, New York: Random House, Inc., 1976, p.

in order to recreate nuance, and the various levels of thought and feeling we experience with each single moment. I hope and trust that the poems in this collection represent the first steps toward this goal.

PART I

AGAIN: A KINSER DREAM

He wears a huge black patch on one eye: can't talk,
just hands the hen to me, its feathers shiny
as a gun barrel. My father nods, makes a word
with his hands and Kinser walks away pleased.

A year later, darkness of the garden in summer
still with me, the farmhouse down the hill: This
is how the world must be: sun on green leaves,
an earthworm stitching its way through damp soil.
Down the hill, clapboards sparkle. Inside,
my grandmother, parents are up, getting on
with day's work: me not in my bed: again

the sharp squawk, the beat of wings against tin:
the neighbor's blind alley-cat spread-eagled
against honeycomb wire: dark wall of the henhouse:
that pose suspended: those blue eyes fixed
on nothing in this world: the body, paws, teeth move
in precision, and the hen at the top corner, frantic:
and now my family's warning, faint, at last
experienced. The cat shreds last feathers

till the squawking stops Light shifts. Dizzy,
I can't think what to do: then see
a board on the ground, get in one good blow

(no stanza break)

to the spine as the cat slips past, totters into woods.
I stand in a bloody pool of feathers, the hen
at my feet, wattle drooped over the open beak:
and I look down the long dirt road in front of the house,
think of Kinser, the day he gave me the hen
as a gift. It fluttered under my arm, soft, eyes gleaming
the gleam I saw in Kinser eyes a month later
in his garden: rising: eye patch lifted:
a huge hole in his head. He stares at me, stares
with the good eye: and I open my eyes, find myself
again in that dream. My ears pound with blood

and in darkness now I lie, see the farmhouse as clearly
as it was in summer heat, garden drying, cat poised
against the screen: my grandmother, parents patiently
hang over the bed. I breathe deep, speak to them,
begin to tell them everything: begin to tell them
the warning they uttered: again: again:
the word <u>ferocity</u> I chant to myself as if just now
finding it: a word I carry into whatever comes.

MASTERY. THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MEDICAL SELF-HELP

On the Tuolomne River bank behind Ernie Wheeler's,
at thirteen we croak in our new voices:
Ernie's proud, but fear rises
in the thickening shape my body
is taking.
Night outside, Ernie's still
laughing. I can see farther
than the shingled roofs of childhood;
in the sky the merciless
Bear witnesses everything, and I am ready
to read whatever else it holds in its gaze.

By my bed, the encyclopedia, age-battered
relic foxed by years on my father's
top shelf. How its gold
letters had shone. Each night
I slip into its pages to learn
more than just names of afflictions,
terms that explain the motions
I feel nights in my body. One by one

their terrors fall from darkness
into my hands, safe in their naming.
I cross and recross the clear plastic chart
of blood, its red-blue lines

(no stanza break)

streaking through the limbs, up
to two clear eyes, and the dark arch
blooming over the heart. One night

I come downstairs, nose bleeding,
my mind prickled over and over:
what is happening? In dimness
I check the flow of blood I know
begins somewhere beyond those malevolent
animal eyes, ends in the warm
spot on my rag. When it thickens,
I go back to my bed. Above me
ages of blood course on, hiss
like the Tuolomne's night-rush

into which a month later I will stare
from the bridge, my face an oval lit
by the lamp my father holds upstream
in a rowboat with two firemen. They plumb
the Tuolomne bottom, drop grappling hooks
into the black water to snag Ernie's body.

(stanza break)

Thirteen, I want to be something
man-like, to take this death by name
and ride the black flow as far as I can,
upstream, beyond any terms--
mercy, hate, or love.

SEED

In the yard the mimosa tree swings
lightly. A young girl's summer
dress floats on the clothesline,

the baby's tinny chime far away.
For an hour I've been cradled
in the mimosa's bottom limbs,

opening and closing my hands
on a dry green pod: two seeds,
three, four in a line.

If I shift, shimmy into the limbs,
small pink blooms fall to a pool.
I will come down not knowing

what calls, or even if I heard
that voice. The house is swept clean,
white tiny furniture in one room.

Smiling, she walks in the door,
takes me to the window, lifts
her shirt to show me the long scar.

LATE AUGUST STAR FALL

Nothing shoots so straight as their memory:
my mother, aunt are up to the Fifties,
jobs, kids, the death of parents

The summer sky is warm, deep, mythic,
awash in time, incalculable distance.
I'm in the yard, flanked by fiery

marigolds, bursts of chinaberries
in the tree I lean against. On the porch
they flip through the familiar book,

Slaton County World War II Service Men.
Born too late, I can only imagine
Pearl Harbor, Bataan, Normandy. Overhead

meteors leave a mortar's wake, long white arcs
through the blackened air over Terrell's pasture.
My aunt can recite the dead by heart;

my mother runs her finger down a page
to find the grade school friend lost on Iwo Jima,
the baker's boy bayonetted by a German.

(stanza break)

Some photos have so faded only eyes peer out:
The county's Negro soldiers are grouped at back,
shots of Berlin's boot-black rubble,

the violet smoke-stalk over Nagasaki,
VJ Night on Slaton's flag-thronged streets.
At last they close the book, look up.

The heavens churn like seas
my uncles rode across to battle, momentary
flashes fine as etchings.

THE ONSET

About five Uncle Edmond walked out
the door, sat on the sawhorse
to sharpen his axe. Through the glass
I saw the snowfall thicken, the wind
blow it slant. Fire
dropped, evening
was settling: we needed
wood, but all we had
lay damp, unchopped
by the barn. I noticed

his wide dark shoulders as he stood
with his shiny axe--Jesus
he's big--wearing
that black felt coat, hat,
stiff brogans. He clomped off,
passed the gate, ambled
toward the barn. The snow
whirled faster, sky
darkened, drifts swelled
toward the door, Uncle Edmond's
footprints on the porch already
filled with snow. It nibbled him
away bit by bit, a dim gray form
like a crow, faded and flicking

(no stanza break)

in distance, slowly
becoming invisible, till I only
imagined him drop the axe, splintering
wood a dozen directions. Now

night has settled, flakes spin
and sparkle in porch light. I see
my own reflected face
on the inside of the window, look it
in the eye, the mouth
moving toward a question:

<u>did you ever see a man</u>,
<u>any man, disappear</u>
<u>this way before</u>?

A SEEKER

I stand firm to the big oak
at twilight in Enslen Park, counting
with my eyes closed to a hundred. Friends,
when I turn, are hid in dark
that climbs the top branches
of elms; already
sprinklers flick long arcs
across a ball field
and a cat slips into alley shadows.
Following, I see a neighbor's barrel
breathing a thick cord of smoke
into heavy air. I walk
as far as Old Man Webb's house, stop
beneath the streetlight on his corner,

stare into the garage next door: a mattress
seethes from its rusty hook
on the wall. By now
all windows up and down
the street are shining, each house
shut. I know
in the last one a thin man leans back,
strikes a Camel and runs
his eyes down the sad columns
of the Daily Herald. I could enter

(no stanza break)

that light again, sit at the feet
of a gentle woman who would reach
down, stroke my hair,
and praise me for all things
I left tonight, undisturbed.

But stay out--
night falling inward, wrapping
each flower bed, trunk--
chasing day
to the last spark.

GO

I do not know why he took me
down there, drew the line,
had me start. On Go
I was already ahead, fox-quick.
But he closed in, overalls flapping
each long stride, past night-still
pines, past fence posts--shining
obelisks at roadside--snap of wind
in my ears, mouth. Far ahead

my sister stood, the finish line
a dim stripe of proch-light
beside her in the road. On my neck
his chuffing grew hotter;
he reached down for a boy's
lost speed. Breath

racing we ran up the hill
in sandy ruts. Bean fields
rose in moonlight as he drew almost even,
my sister cheering Run
daddy. We flashed by,
my margin the distance gained
in Go--the word he yelled, running on.
In the middle of the road

(no stanza break)

I gasped, the night
spun. Dizzy,
hands on knees, I look up:
his back, overalls-straps dim, fades
over the last hill. Nothing on earth
will make him stop.

TURNING

Sounds grow. Frog and cricket
gurgle up from pondside and grove
Birds, names I never learned, whistle.
Fourteen, perplexed, I stop
halfway between the barn and house
in a pasture that seems ready
to swallow me. I lift
my hand to see if its purpled form
is real. Brief
as a shot, spring's first
lightning minutely defines it
in sudden white: it looks
much larger, a thick vein
beneath one knuckle, the fingernail
dirtied with day's planting.
Already the ground trembles.

PART II

OTHERNESS. THE CORRAL

for Melissa Peterson

The farm girl who has brought me
to meet a grandmother leans still
on the rail. She watches me lead the last
of four great Morgans out for her
to curry. If you make any sudden moves
they'll never come, my grandma would say.
If you don't channel fear through the calm word.
In the tight circle of corral,

the girl brushes the wind-blown strands,
roan in evening sheen. Her even motions,
the Morgan's ripple of mane, pull me
ten years back to grandma, her hair incandescent
in the window. She didn't know I stood at dusk
in the door, watching her in the calm;
didn't know I felt in her
a presence, a finality the word could not prevent.
She would be gone soon, bound

by scrubbed white walls, a small room
where even a vase of daisies was treacherous,
till she kicked down the last
gate, bolted through, Gone
as this girl soon will be,

(no stanza break)

her long hair gleaming across her back,
trim legs digging hard into flanks;

this girl whose eyes will at last turn
huge, fiery; who will wheel away from any gesture
I make, her vanishing too quick for me
in time enclosed, guttering
the sound not yet word enough to work.

AN ERRAND

How peaceful the main street before sunrise,
how still, stage-like, curbs
swept clean, one well-clad mannequin
poised in Ripley's window. We rubbed

our eyes from the luff of sleep, rose
back into the world
to find our neighbor Mrs. Lee
standing on the curb where the Greyhound stops
twice a day, her gray hair scarfed up,
her beat Tourister beside her
In minutes my brother has thrown it
in the trunk, helped her in her side.
No time passes, nothing's said

till we're back on that night-dark
county highway, moving past
miles of deep-scented sorghum fields
where we seem to hover all night,
lost in the headlights that sweep
past farmhouses, brush
the sides of barns on curves.

Down the long ribbon of years
I sink back, sense the curves

(no stanza break)

before we lean into them, and think
as we pass it again, sudden
in our lights: the old shack
Mrs. Robinson--her friend--perished in,
its windows broken,
skull-black porch collapsing

Mrs. Lee swings her head
to look at it, already in darkness
as we turn onto our dirt road,
big rocks banging underneath.
We pass our house
where our father will rise soon,
put on his pants for another day
at the riverbottom; we pull up

at last in her driveway, and I want
to reach my hand to straighten
the silver lick spilling from her scarf
over one ear in wind,
to lie my hand across the shoulder,
<u>welcome back</u>. But she's staring
past the fields, westward, California,

(no stanza break)

father dead and buried, nothing
to go back for now, nothing
but what's here, the most
unlikely place on earth.

THIS MORNING YOU TALKED IN YOUR SLEEP

I turn from your speech
as though it were mine,
as though I hear pure fear
spell itself once
and evaporate.

Once I watched letters rise
as a boy, form
nonsense in the thick
alphabet soup. It seemed
futile to try
translating that cryptic
tongue. But here,
an hour before school-
children rabble past
your door with sharp
cries, and birds
on the awning create
chatter we can't ignore,

those hoarse sibilants
spill one by one like the note
I've tried to write for months
to an old lover who thinks
I'll forget her. Her wracked face

(no stanza break)

washes up in a fear
I keep having. Like jeering
in a mirror, I'm wild again;
she's yelling: everything
keeps coming out backwards.

HER MEN

These days they work in East Texas oilfields,
strong-armed from wrestling
chains and bits of the big rigs. At home
they bring their unmistakable scent.

Burke leans in his chair, his leg snapped
in a blowout. Tom stands straight
as a derrick, speaks
to his father the specific
language of petroleum. Burke nods
at each term, adds his own

while she watches in the kitchen door.
She's rattled by their thick black prose,
iron as a rig. The whole house is stained:
oil on the furniture, the rug She has surrendered
all but the kitchen where she listens,
the only room free of the irrevocable taint.

SOLSTICE, NO LIGHTS

When he turns, he feels the earth swing
into its own stillness, snow, the broken
limbs in the grove. He has wandered
uphill to stand below the loft and pulley,
his hands jammed in pockets. The match
flared when he touched it to a pool

of water and crankcase oil. It burns
bright for his month-old firstborn
crying in that woman's arms She reached,
switched off the light, so he came
up the small path. Now
against the barn he sees his form

flicker, not quite human, like the tiny
voice downhill, Come or Go. If not
for the small voice, he could stand
here all night. If not for the voice
he could watch a blue flame flutter
between two black gulfs, knowing
in time they would surely join.

GOLD

Waking to a warm curl of your hair
spooled around my knuckle, I feel the hard
curves we take into the valley. Behind us
the Sierras stretch, a long smoky line.

Surely, we were there, had stood
in thin ruts where cars no longer pass,
felt the cool firs gathered around us,
breath like the air of wagons that rattled
through here to the unyielding rivers. Once

a nugget fell into my hand
from a tour packet my father ordered.
Go West! the flyer said.
He held up the map, ran his finger
down the road to our new town

while I gazed at the gleaming chunk,
dense light congealing around us.
All the way out in a '57 Country Squire
I sat behind him, rubbing the gold, coaxing
its shine. When classmates came,

I held it deep in a fist
everyone touched Only the salesman's son

(no stanza break)

looked closer, yelled Fool's gold!
flung it into the culvert. Sunset,
I waded the depth, hunting spark.
a glint, anything salvageable.

Today, after hours of chipping
each other on the mountainside,
we descend into golden evening. What we have
we've seized from murky dream,
and we cling hard as waters clear
like others who pass this way.

THE ONE GLIMPSE WE GET

1.

One evening many thousand
from now, sitting on the porch
as the sun slips past
the orchard and dark green
oak clump marking her husband's

land, she will stop a moment,
a half-shelled bowl of peas
in her lap. Her sight will drift
through the rose trellis, will not see
him come up exhausted from his work,

stomp his boots free
of the sticky red clay so hard
to get rid of, let slap
the screen door behind him
as he goes in to wash.

She will gaze at distance--
not on one rough oak trunk,
nor the searing eyes of some light-
stunned animal, but on the strange
unmistakable curves the twilight takes

(stanza break)

slipping behind all that remains
She will think back
ten years to when she stood
in sun, closed eyes to the eyes of one
who loved his own sadness, ears

to his voice, in harmony
with the night-owl she hears pipe one
deep chord from the heart of the woods
She will shake her long black hair, look down
at stained fingers. Still

the decade-gone face floats
at the end of the porch, laughing
as the air fills with the free
fall and tangled flight of bats.

2.

I press my hand to my ears
to kill the coarse scrape: my father
slogging a hoe back and forth

(no stanza break)

in the wheel-barrow, mixing concrete
He rolled out front, tipped Wet cement
dropped in thick rocky lumps.
He troweled it flat, lifted
the frame, went to mix more.
Block by block he brought the long
sidewalk closer to the driveway
where I stood. At last
he patted the rough bulges
from the final square, called me
close, brought me down
on all fours to press my small
hand into the soft warm gray.
When it was there, he took
my finger, traced a tiny
name beside the print,
already hardening. On hands and knees
we gazed up that long clean stretch--

my mother's roses bloomed
alongside in the yard. One full
purple bud turned toward the end
of the street where that darkness

(no stanza break)

began, that calm
I could never quite take
my eyes and disturbed heart away from.

THE MAN IN THE CABOOSE

The last evening freight rolls
past the country crossing,
cars on the rails a heavy
clank clank, the signal
banging on its pole. You wait,
home and husband in mind, radio tuned

idly. Sliding by
he passes in his little box on top.
You glance once into the brown face,
featureless but for the smile, a wide
swacch glowing in the window's

dark. By now
it's instinct from childhood: hand up,
you wave. He nods,
waves back, and the smile
flashed behind your eyes
is like the flashcube
hours after the picture:

the upturned crescent burns
in nargins of thought
Barrier lifted. you stop
on track, watch

(no stanza break)

the snake-end of train turn
the last bend. Back in gear,

you course the bumpy road, hit outskirts
of this town you leave
any time you can. Looking
in the mirror, you raise hand
to straighten hair, adjust pin,
but the hand stops

and the humming grows· where
was he going and what
image did you, with a notion, wave off
as if in dismissal?

THE AFFAIR

It was gray, mid-summer, still dusk, and we imagined
the town's close scrutiny as we passed
the paintless century-old Calvert grade school
where you taught, and the cafe and pool hall.
From my car's hanger you plucked
the flowered cotton dress
anyone in town would know you by.
You cautioned me to take back streets, alleys,
and craned down each both ways to spot

your husband's cherry-red pickup.
You shuddered, remembering how his eyes were all
you could see that night at home in June-hot dark;
how he bolted from bed and the nightmare he was having
and stumbled to the closet; how you heard
the rifle bolt click as he sighted you;
felt yourself go limp, cross-haired in his jealousy,
dead--till the rifle clicked empty.

I never asked why you chose me to run to
or why you decided to go back.
That evening we crept the streets till fear caught
and you told me to drive you to the outskirts--
an old country highway north of town.
I let you out by the cemetery,

(no stanza break)

holding your pink suitcase and the dress
As I drove off, you shrank in my mirror,
still waving, head down in that familiar direction

NEVER AGAIN, SUSAN

your name shouted in this park
where moonlit dogwoods float
in spring growth Motor idling,
drunk, Jerry Mack and I

stop to piss on the oiled road,
highest hill in town. Your house
sparkles among others
through bare boughs. Radio towers
wink bright red, On. On.

downhill our exhaust
coils into the secret slots
of foliage where cars seethe
all night, filled with the ache
of perfect strangers. I don't know

where you are now, but your name
lives in this crackling air. Susan,
I shout for you the last time
knowing nobody waits.

WEDDING DOLLS

to my grandmother, C.H., 1898-1980

Does she hear his steps again
down the long street? Morning,
the last year, he comes home,
both arms hugging grocery sacks.
One knee simply gives out,
he lands in the middle
of Baylor Street: a can of beans rolls
down the sidewalk, the wind
blows a curl of green stamps
across a vacant lot. He looks up
toward the house, climbs to his feet.

The last year of his life
Grandpa shook more and more
with Parkinson's. He spilled
milk when he poured it in out mugs.
She's slap him, wipe, complain
he did it purposely.

She sits on the edge of the bed,
a pool of sawdust at her feet
as she draws the butcher knife again
and again across the two dolls
he gave her before the wedding.

(no stanza break)

Cedar chest propped open, she drifts
through mania, our voices: family,
family. Nearer
the steps are one two one.

PART III

CROWS: NIGHT IN NEW HAMPSHIRE WOODS

Here, hills hunch, conspire. Crows
roost in branches. I do not
know what creeps tonight as I walk home,
miles from town in a night fired

from juniper, birch, underbrush scented menthol.
Once a crow knocked snow onto the poet
of this region, who wanted to hurl
his shape into old woods. I consider nights

when sleep is torn by the screech-owl;
mornings, sun so fierce I am blinded.
The smoke of dead fires snakes up the flue
of who I was, am, ever will be. Only
the steady shoe-squeak nails me to my heartbeat.

THE TRACK

Each night the track where I run is ringed
with middle-aged men
sweating through darkness to reverse
what every tight body ultimately loses hold
and years toward, the lardish comfort.
Resting against the stands, I lean
and watch them lap the lamplit ring:
huge sneakers flop, tummies
jostle beneath damp T-shirts as if
sand-filled; socks wrinkle
and slide farther down each lap.
Younger men glide smoothly around them
into the unlit half
of the oval. The older men run back out
into the light, circle on circle till through.
Then hands hoist skyward atop heads;
strained smiles erupt as if the body
were at last admitting the place for pain.
Each man slips on trousers and passes
the gate to cars parked in the lot, chariots
waiting to glide them home.

"NOTHING IN THIS PLACE"

--Millay

for my father

Your dream of Alaska dies
a little each year. Long ago you took
Mt. McKinley down from the cracked frame
hung over our dining room wall
where, devoid of conversation, I stared,
the white-peaked horizon
shining like the profile of a prostrate man
up from the dead. You scatter
our house with books, photos of Anchorage
in summer, a farmer hugging a cabbage
large as a tub, totems
with wings of birds, eyes of men,
hammered from pine in Eskimo regions.

I begin to dream of going
there myself. In due time
anywhere seems more worthwhile
than here. Some where else
lures me like the would-be lover,
her mystique a new rejection of charms
we felt certain we possessed.

(stanza break)

You talk of fishing the Kuskokwim,
heaving trout from cold shallows.
When I return from the city, sick
of the greased track my body rides
with the other trained bodies,
I listen to you: your talk bellows
the itch I feel for lands
we will never visit or approach.
You never made it farther
than Colorado. The books, photos
disappear. Alaska lives
mainly as the white in your hair.

THE SOUND AT THE EDGE OF SLEEP

Family deaths quake and settle,
this sound remains: pears
dropped to earth as I lie
in bed, a still farm
night almost too hot for sleep.
When the one night breeze comes
from God knows where, trees
rustle, a cluster of pears
rains down, the gentle
yet unsettling thump deep
in my ear. Afterwards
in stillness, cows groan
in the far pasture; fish chop
the lake's surface. And I lie
stunned in my room's darkness
at that one sound--the moment--
drummed at sleep's edge, still echoing.

SISYPHUS DESCENDS

They never describe
how the boulder
rumbles and conks
along behind him,
or how he must race
down his rough-faced mountain
or be crushed.

Descending,
the inanimate stone
assumes a bear's love,
the atmosphere of a planet,
and inertia
like a notion that begins
as gravel.

Sprinting a blink ahead
he is thinking all the way
to the bottom, where the rock
tumbles to a stop, where
he must pivot,
steady it with small hands,
mount it to his shoulder like a stock,
and bear them both upward again.

AFTERMATH

And the gap opened in the sky above your head
is the silence you hear each time you think
of the world's concluding roar. Tree down,
you listen to echoes: long snarl of chainsaw,
pine snapping through foliage. The shock
of falling spreads everywhere:

your dead, could they ever return
to live more deeply for you and depart
again? Still, your answer
would be these--grief and wonder--
torn free like leaves settling from the next
tree's disturbed limbs: the living
stretch their forms into the spaces
the dying leave us.

MISSING CHAPTERS

Each year, diligent as a biographer,
my father seeks a war buddy, whom I know
from a blanched photo, and legend.
As if it were Patton's, he pieces
the story together, though in India
the only bombs were locusts, the only sorties
mosquitoes' nightly hum. He picks up

the trail in Las Vegas, carries it
as far as Pennsylvania; describes the war
effort in Delhi, the tedium of parachute packers,
seasonal monsoons, how barracks shimmied at night
once during an earthquake Dates and places
congeal around his friend, a man well-read
in Kipling, fluent in Hindustani, yet whose gift

for farting once impressed a whole platoon.
I try to enter that war, to know a soldier
whose heroic deed was to help my father survive
the boredom, whose life story vanishes
somewhere in the Fifties, amid the blackened
caraters of bad marriage and alcohol,
the old cliche: a flier who bails out

in fog and is never heard from again.

BEST FRIEND, KILLED ON A RIG

for Jerry L.

Afterward, the stillness:
roughnecks leaping off the rig to find you
half-gobbled in the earth, hopelessly
entangled in cables, in probability
like a spider's web I think
of all the signs we had,
your bad eyesight, the near-wrecks. In dream
I tell you as I did in life to watch out,
be alert, and predict, as you disbelieve,
how you'll die young, leave
the new family you fantasized about those
night-trips home from high school games.

Once you helped turn the impossible
triple-play to lift us from sure-death.
Already then I embraced the blend,
faith and luck, those superstitions we risk
our lives for And when college jaded me--
so many sides--you pressed on, believer.
Yet in our town's small funeral home
you looked down once at the pasteled face
of a friend's father, untimely death.
I saw you shake your head, unable to turn away.

(stanza break)

Today, bending over your face, waxy and old,
I see creeping across the left side
a deep bruise the mortician couldn't cover,
like an eclipse, a perplexity.
All day it hovers, clue to everything:
the dark green boil and hush of trees,
the rush of passersby, the leave-taking.

THE DISEASES OF CHILDHOOD

mumps, chicken-pox, rubella, strep-throat, etc.

These we link together as though they were family,
check them off one by one as they travel
through town or community, like revivals
or census-takers. They're our first
brief glimpse of the body's faithlessness--
chevrons of youth, signs we cipher by
like the ABCs or Multiplication Table
They cross our early years like clouds,

though the doctor who stoops over you and feels
the swollen nodes on the side of your head
insists they're as natural as marriage
Remembered, he calms you, his black bag beckons,
and you sink back down, feverish, disheveled,
less well taken care of,
while a rhombus of light sags
across your bed and an old nest unravels
in the mulberry limbs outside your window.
The street'a at rest from chatter and swarm of kids;
this atmosphere of absence grows ponderous,

like privilege, yet tainted with the faint sadness
you feel on the night when you're healing.

(no stanza break)

It's a sadness you recognize elsewhere now--
in hospital waiting rooms, in corners
of the bathroom mirror where you spot
beneath shaving cream the two jowls
that once were mumps, cresting.

SUMMER NIGHT. CHANGING A TIRE

for Jerry M.

No traffic tonight, no lights,
though the world casts its won, and fireflies
spark in the meadow on one side,
in dark pines on the other. You drop

the last lug in the hubcap, tug the wheel,
head turned to what roars
behind us, a sound so vibrant
it streams from each space
in the great distance. If I could,
I would change my body and fly
into that singing; I would become
the new summer's sheen. Here
there's only talk, another wheel
to roll up, and you're telling me
the price of tires, how they always fail

when you're here: nowhere.
When you lift the tire up I can see
in its white ring a darkness farther away
than pine: years,

the steady lilt of eons, a sleep-
like sound that would go on if not

(no stanza break)

for the ping of tire iron, the steady clank
of the jack bringing us back down
Then you lean on the door, your cigarette
burning orange rings in the night,
your angular face expressionless
You say nothing and already we are turned
toward tomorrow Even if you remembered,

lost friend, what could I tell you
years later on this night? Only
that one of us leaned and watched while
one changed a tire, oblivious
to what sang or shone at that roadside
where no one pauses. We're moving

again, our headlights cutting
the full dark down the road, an oiled stretch
of asphalt taking us no place
we can call home.

WHIPPOORWILL, REMEMBERED

The grandfather clock's rich peal
at the foot of stairs, cowbells you woke to
one Sunday morning on grandparents' farm,
the sporadic clanking drifted through back pastures,
they are all detached now from that hidden
bird who sang spring and summer dusks
across the road, a fierce green room
of sweet-gum, pine. Once your father listened

after midnight as he gazed upward at nothing,
his cigarette red as the tower nearby pulsing
waves of music or alert. Beside him
you mother slept on: who could know
what a man past forty thinks, clamped in darkness,
insects whirring like dim gods? You watched
through your door as the glow passed,
the bird paused: fell through that interval

until you were the man your father warned of,
leaden in bed, sleepers' breath around you
like tiny pleas, no opening in woods,
no singing, even the radio dead. That is why
you think back so hard: the whippoorwill
suddenly breaks forth in the brain's room--
chimes to you clearer than June rain, or time,
whose details scale off, leaving this filament

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VITA

Roger Dean Jones

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: THE ONE GLIMPSE WE GET

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Pittsburgh, California, October 22, 1954, the son of Melvin W. and Edith E. Jones. Single.

Education: Graduated from Elkhart High School, Elkhart, Texas, in May, 1973; received Bachelor of Arts Degree in English from Sam Houston State University in August, 1978; received Master of Arts Degree from Sam Houston State University in August, 1980, completed requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy Degree at Oklahoma State University in May, 1986.

Professional Experience: Teaching Assistant, San Houston State University, English Department, August, 1978, to May, 1980, Teaching Assistant, Department of English, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma, August, 1980 to May, 1984; Adjunct Instructor of English, Lamar University (Beaumont, Texas), August, 1984 to present.