

2008

# James Dickey at Florida

Kevin Clark

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Clark, Kevin. "James Dickey at Florida." *The Iowa Review* 38.2 (2008): 108-112. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.6494>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

KEVIN CLARK

*James Dickey at Florida*

—1973

PERFORMANCE

The first time I saw James Dickey  
He stood at the head of the class, unzipped  
His wetsuit jacket, then announced  
In surplus Buckhead slur,  
*You don't fuck around with poetry.*  
Don Armstrong smiled so still

No one saw him. Bridget's perm sank.  
When you're masturbating, he said,  
There's that feeling just before you come . . .  
—*That's poetry.* Donna's lovely fingers  
Twirled still beneath her throat.  
You'd think my history of bad acid

Would have readied me, but  
I too churned in the vortex. Before  
*Deliverance*, he'd been teaching  
At Bread Loaf where Auden had only  
Five students. Wystan, ol' friend,  
He asked, How is it you have so few

And I so many? Auden told him  
He'd ask a simple question, then dismiss  
Those who answered wrong.  
—Now he'd ask us the same:  
*Why do you write poetry?*  
I fell and froze. Two weeks back

I'd read Auden's Q-and-A.  
—I'm born to. —I have something to say.  
—It's in the blood. Down the row  
They came, each wrong answer  
Stung by the clipped dismissal:  
*You'd* be out of the class. *You'd* be out. *You.*

Do I give the right response and blow  
His cover? As if miraculous light  
Poured up from the lacquered desk  
To save me, he nodded past my chair.  
Soon, someone hemmed  
Auden's dull trimeter:

*I like to play with words.*  
Then, without warning, he staged  
A battle of accents. First  
The movie's cracker sheriff  
Barks *he'd* written "Dueling Banjos."  
Then Brando's puffed Don Vito throats:

*I said, You don't fuck around with poetry.*  
That's when the dueling personas  
Waged a litany of suicidal proofs:  
Thomas is gone. Jarrell is gone.  
Roethke is gone. Plath. Berryman.  
A pause came on like bourbon—

And as the last lean trick amazed us,  
Armstrong's seat sat empty:  
Lowell, he said, will be the next to go.  
—Shadows shimmered in the margins,  
But we hung rapt still. Quiet  
Bled us pale. One after another,

He gripped us each in a long scowl,  
Then dropped his gaze toward  
The waxed, fluorescent grave  
Of the seminar room. I rode  
My heart down a sink hole.  
He walked out, left himself for dead.

#### ENGINE

Weeks later backlit by The Millhopper's bar lights Bridget's floating hair  
As promise and aesthetic our second beer entering the veins  
Of her story: how the giant poet pulled her without shame to the pool table  
Bourbon no water no lyric just fame how he asked her quick like that  
And when she laughed him off in the first neon mist of thinking  
This is a comic ride he's joking he turned without ceremony  
To the grad student from Psych then the blonde bartender then  
Donna sitting with her professor boyfriend when at last he hulked alone  
To a barstool, reciting stories to the mirror until he rose  
And the door opened for his dark walk home Bridget said his grip  
Locked her arm with such soft metal amazing focus, she said,  
Elemental —detached, corrected Donna —a pilot, I'm thinking now,  
Trying to out climb the flak the concussive strobe the will to rise  
Above an illimitable sky I'd wanted the mysteries the poems

The sex Bridget's breath in my hair not just the life, but  
The orbital star-strewn realm to which each line aspires that year  
I mimicked his fast, hunter's yawp but in truth I'd dreamed a different  
Romance a woman as conduit and twin the complementary vocable  
That completes the code moves the aerie gears of the last lock  
Until we've crossed past bliss itself into the weightless lyric union  
At the heart of poetry —didn't we all? Even those young professors  
Of the South married before the hallucinatory countercultural acids  
Had bleached away the iambs the dates the seven ambiguities the cramped  
Hieroglyphs scrawled over their fugitive drafts each premature father

On a track I'd come to hope for all lined up against the back wall  
Of the class three weeks later drawn to spectacle to history

And region When in a brooding globe of spirits the poet hauled himself  
Into his seat before the dark-haired visitor not gravitas but hell-to-pay  
In his eyes on his right hand an oversized turquoise Thunderbird ring—  
He never looked at his mistress from the Carolinas, his “secretary”  
Handing out our copied poems, a thin smile bobbing its incessant Yes  
Donna's broken music first her sweet-dreams mimicry of Mr. Henry's songs  
Undoing the poet whose mouth curled and snapped its No then snarled  
How bad this first line read— and even then before the primacy  
Of what's-to-come you could see in his face the right engine sputter  
The words fail then: the maw opened like a hole in the sky then:  
We heard the woman speak into the silence Oh, she doesn't know,  
She thinks it's a good line and how the poet turned to stare a bare  
Half second how the right hand lifted how the woman's cheek  
Went white then purpled after the backhand struck— I can still track

His hand its open caesura the quick mid-flight hesitation in the old  
Parlance, he'd pulled his punch— a poem twisting nose-down  
In freefall each flexed line gone flaccid the old oceanic sky breaking  
Open like cowardice —or the last silk shreds of what's right  
Snapped off at last...

He spun Donna's poem to the floor, said  
He didn't want to do more *student* poetry— the dark-haired woman  
Quiet as a grave, eyes brimming, a bird rising in red on her face—  
When a grad student in Lit handed him an open book asked if he'd read  
One of his poems and so he looked down upon the story  
Of the young man who leaves his motorcycle roadside convoys  
Through the junkyard to some grandmother's Pierce Arrow—  
While stunned and shot we actually listened not one of us had risen  
In protest— the narrator held and held to Doris Holbrook  
With terrific speed the poet's voice as taut as the string-triggered 12-gauge  
The girl's father held in wait for him— that gun compelling

The sort of lust that drives a boy like this    who soon leaves Doris Holbrook  
As she scrambles with car parts back to her old man...    —to this day  
I can hear the poet's throat scratching its pitch-perfect rasp toward closure  
The boy on his engine    the poet wild to be wreckage he's already become  
And the rest of us: virgin players    each desk edge scoring our bloodless hands