Randall Jarrell 899

more than these big rocks? Each one
cools fast in the dark and re-learns at night

—Oh so sincerely—its local part. 1983

The Indian Cave Jerry Ramsey Found 2

Brown, brittle, wait-a-bit weeds
block the entrance. I untangle their
whole summer embrace. Inside—soot from
a cold fire, powder of bones,
a piece of ceremonial horn: cool
history comes off on my hands.
Outside, I stand in a canyon so
quiet its pool almost remembers its
old reflections. And then I breathe. 1983

2. Jarold Ramsey (b. 1937), American poet who also writes on and collects Native American literatures.

Randy Jarrell 1914–1965

After Randall Jarrell’s death his friend Robert Lowell described him as the most
“heartbreaking” poet of his generation, and his friend and teacher John Crowe Ransom spoke of Jarrell’s “great flair for the poetry of desperation.” Many of Jarrell’s early poems were written out of his experience of the Second World War; they are
about the losses of war, about young men made childlike by the nearness of death and their obligations as killers. Many of Jarrell’s later poems are dramatic monologues which express the painful transformations of life and our desire to be changed
into something that we once were or that we ache to become.

Jarrell was born in Nashville, Tennessee, on May 16, 1914. His family
soon moved to California, his parents were divorced, and he spent a year or so in
Hollywood with grandparents and a great-grandmother. His long poem “The Lost World” is a recollection, with echoes of The Prelude, in which glimpses of papier-mâché dinosaurs and pterodactyls and an afternoon spent playing with the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer lion are the counterparts to Wordsworth’s pastoral. Jarrell returned to Nashville, where he spent a somewhat drab Depression childhood. His refuge was
books and the local public library. He later wrote two poems about the child as
reader, and other poems refer frequently to books which most people read when they are very young: Kim, The Wind in the Willows, Grimm’s Fairy Tales. The creatures of fairy tales through Jarrell’s poetry—exiled children, witches, dragons, helpful
animals; they live in a world which is sometimes hostile yet capable of being magically transformed.

Jarrell studied at Vanderbilt University, moving from psychology to English. In
1937–39 he taught at Kenyon College, and his friends there—John Crowe Ransom, Robert Lowell, and the novelist Peter Taylor—have all written of his gaiety, learn-

ing, and bright assurance. In 1942 he published his first book of poems, *Blood from a Stranger*, and enlisted in the Army Air Corps. He washed out as a pilot, then served as a control tower operator working with B-29 crews.

The poet Robert Fitzgerald described Jarrell as "practically the only American poet able to cope with the Second Great War." The war poems are to be found in two books, *Little Friend, Little Friend* (1945) and *Losses* (1948). The epigraph for the first is taken from an exchange between a bomber and its fighter escort: "... Then I heard the bomber call me in: 'Little Friend, Little Friend, I got two engines on fire. Can you see me, Little Friend?' I said, 'I'm crossing right over you. Let's go home...''" "Losses" is the stock term for military casualties—as in "Our losses were light today"—and both titles suggest Jarrell's concentration on the murderous mechanisms of war and the diminished, helpless men who operate them. In the poem "Eighth Air Force" the soldiers "wash their hands in blood, as best they can." Moved to cleanse themselves, they can find nothing untainted by their humanity. In another poem an aerial gunner is killed in his womb-shaped ball turret, and thus born into his own death.

After the war in 1946 Jarrell taught at Sarah Lawrence and served as acting literary editor of the *Nation*. He had, according to Lowell, a "deadly hand for killing what he despaired." His reviews—now collected in *Kipling, Auden, & Co.: Essays and Reviews 1935–1964* (1950)—were hortatory, sometimes cruel, scattered with allusions, full of memorable epigrams and witticisms. His contempt for bad poetry—and his pity for those who were satisfied with it—is explained by a complete devotion to imaginative literature. He believed that "Human life without some form of poetry is not human life but animal existence." Poetry may perhaps be our chief defense against that "wast of imagination, that inaccessibility to experience, of which each of us who dies a natural death will die." His most influential critical essays, those on Whitman and Frost, are richly documented, passionately argued appeals to readers to pay attention to poets who were neglected or improperly appreciated because fashionable criticism didn't know what to do with them.

From 1947 until his death Randall Jarrell taught at the Women's College of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro; he was occasionally absent on teaching assignments at other colleges and universities. In addition to his poetry and criticism, he published a novel, *Pictures from an Institution* (1954), and several books for children. In 1956 he was struck by a car and died on October 14. His last book of poems, *The Lost World*, was published in 1956.

In a brief catalogue of some of the perplexities which face us when we trace the development of modern poetry Jarrell includes the "dramatic monologue, which once had depended for its effect upon being a departure from the norm," and has now become "in one form or another the norm." Certainly it becomes the norm for Jarrell's later poetry. Much of his later criticism is concerned with prose—the short stories of Chekhov and Kipling. Christina Stead's novel *The Man Who Loved Children*—and he seems to have tried to bring into his poems some of the qualities of the prose he admired: a strong sense of character and particular circumstance, the expressive fluctuations of language, the aura of implication which surrounds dramatic speech. Jarrell usually touches his characters at a moment of private anguish. He writes:

But I identify myself, as always,
With something that there's something wrong with,
With something human.

Repeated in Jarrell's later poems we encounter the figure of an aging woman who mourns for a world she has lost or never more than dreamed of. The last poem of

2. The same, p. 76.
3. The same, p. 103.
5. The same, p. 12.
6. The same.
Jarrell’s last book, “Thinking of the Lost World,” is a meditation of what mortal man can regain from the past by an act of loving memory. Jarrell begins the poem in imitation of Proust, whom he called the “greatest of the writers of this century.” A spoonful of chocolate tapioca replaces the madeleine which induced Proust’s remembrance of the past. The poem concludes:

I hold in my own hands, in happiness,
Nothing: the nothing for which there’s no reward.

The recollected past is, of course, nothing: “Back in Los Angeles we missed / Los Angeles.” But the nothing recollected, by a final transformation, survives in the happiness of the poet and the eloquence of his poem.


90 North

At home, in my flannel gown, like a bear to its floe,
I clambered to bed; up the globe’s impossible sides
I sailed all night—till at last, with my black beard,
My furs and my dogs, I stood at the northern pole.

There in the childish night my companions lay frozen,
The stiff furs knocked at my starving throat,
And I gave my great sigh: the flakes came huddling,
Were they really my end? In the darkness I turned to my rest.

—Here, the flag snaps in the glare and silence
Of the unbroken ice. I stand here,
The dogs bark, my beard is black, and I stare
At the North Pole . . .

And now what? Why, go back.

Turn as I please, my step is to the south.
The world—my world spins on this final point
Of cold and wretchedness: all lines, all winds
End in this whirlpool I at last discover.

And it is meaningless. In the child’s bed
After the night’s voyage, in that warm world
Where people work and suffer for the end
That crowns the pain—in that Cloud-Cuckoo-Land

I reached my North and it had meaning.
Here at the actual pole of my existence,
Where all that I have done is meaningless,
Where I die or live by accident alone—

Where, living or dying, I am still alone;
Here where North, the night, the berg of death
Crowd me out of the ignorant darkness,
I see at last that all the knowledge

1. 90 North Latitude, that is, the North Pole.
2. In Aristophanes’ The Birds, an imaginary city built in the clouds by the cuckoos; hence, any fantastic, illusory world.
I wrung from the darkness—that the darkness flung me—
Is worthless as ignorance; nothing comes from nothing,
The darkness from the darkness. Pain comes from the darkness
And we call it wisdom. It is pain.

The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner

From my mother’s sleep I fell into the State,
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

Eighth Air Force

If, in an odd angle of the hutment,
A puppy laps the water from a can
Of flowers, and the drunk sergeant shaving
Whistles O Paradiso!—shall I say that man
Is not as men have said: a wolf to man?

The other murderers troop in yawning;
Three of them play Pitch, one sleeps, and one
Lies counting missions, lies there sweating
Till even his heart beats: One; One; One.
O murderers! . . . Still, this is how it’s done.

This is a war . . . But since these play, before they die,
Like puppies with their pappy, since, a man,
I did as these have done, but did not die—
I will content the people as I can
And give up these to them: Behold the man!

I have suffered, in a dream, because of him,
Many things; 7 for this last saviour, man,
I have lied as I lie now. But what is lying?
Men wash their hands, in blood, as best they can:
I find no fault in this just man.

3. "A ball turret was a plexiglass sphere set into the belly of a B-17 or B-24, and inhabited by two .50 caliber machine-guns and one man, a short small man. When this gunner talked with his machine gun a fighter attacking his bomber from below, he revolved with the turret; hunched upside-down in his little sphere, he looked like the feetus in the womb. The fighters which attacked him were armed with canons firing explosive shells. The nose was a steam hole" (Jarrell’s note).
4. "Eighth Air Force" is a poem about the air force which bombed the continent from England. The man who lies counting missions has one to go before being sent home. The phrases from the Gospels compare such criminals and scapegoats as these with that earlier criminal and scapegoat about whom the Gospels were written" (Jarrell’s note). And, later, Jarrell remarked: "Eighth Air Force" expresses better than any other of the poems I wrote about the war what I felt about the war.
5. "An operatic aria.
6. Pilate offered the Jews their choice whether Jesus or Barabbas should be released, and the people chose Barabbas. Pilate therefore went forth again, and said to them, Behold, I bring him forth to you, that you may know that I find no fault in him. Then came Jesus forth, wearing the crown of thorns, and the purple robe. And Pilate said unto them, Behold the man!" (John 19:4-5).
7. Just before calling on the Jews to decide between Jesus and Barabbas, Pilate received a message from his wife: "Have nothing to do with that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him" (Matthew 27:19).
A Girl in a Library 8

An object among dreams, you sit here with your shoes off
And curl your legs up under you; your eyes
Close for a moment, your face moves toward sleep...
You are very human.

But my mind, gone out in tenderness,
Shrinks from its object with a thoughtful sigh.
This is a waist the spirit breaks its arm on.
The gods themselves, against you, struggle in vain.9
This broad low strong-boned brow; these heavy eyes;
These calves, grown muscular with certainties;
This nose, three medium-sized pink strawberries
—But I exaggerate. In a little you will leave:
I'll hear, half squeal, half shriek, your laugh of greeting—
Then, decrescendo, bars of that strange speech
In which each sound sets out to seek each other,
Murders its own father, marries its own mother,
And ends as one grand transcendental vowel.1

(Yet for all I know, the Egyptian Helen spoke so.)
As I look, the world contracts around you;
I see Brünnhilde had brown braids and glasses
She used for studying; Salome straight brown bangs,
A calf's brown eyes, and sturdy light-brown limbs
Dusted with cinnamon, an apple-dumpling's...
Many a beast has gnawed a leg off and got free,
Many a dolphin curved up from Necessity—
The trap has closed about you, and you sleep.
If someone questioned you, What does thou here?
You'd knit your brows like an orangoutang
(But not so sadly; not so thoughtfully)
And answer with a pure heart, guilelessly:
I'm studying... If only you were not!

Assignments,
recipes,
the Official Rulebook
Of Basketball—ah, let them go; you needn't mind.
The soul has no assignments, neither cooks
Nor referees: it wastes its time.

It wastes its time.
Here in this enclave there are centuries
For you to waste: the short and narrow stream
Of Life meanders into a thousand valleys
Of all that was, or might have been, or is to be.
The books, just leafed through, whisper endlessly...

8. "A Girl in a Library" is a poem about the New World and the Old; about a girl, a student of Home Economics and Physical Education, who has fallen asleep in the library of a Southern college; about a woman who looks out of one book, Finshi's Eugen Omege, at this girl asleep among so many; and about the last of the poem, a man somewhere between the two. [Jarrell's note]
9. From The Maid of Orleans, a play by Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805): "With stupidity the gods themselves struggle in vain."
1. Jarrell's analogy between the girl's way of talking and an operatic aria is followed by three comparisons between her and three operatic heroines—the Egyptian Helen, Brünnhilde, and Salome—whose love led to the deaths of the men they loved.
Randall Jarrell

Yet it is hard. One sees in your blurred eyes
The "uneasy half-soul" Kipling saw in dogs. 2
One sees it, in the glass, in one's own eyes.
In rooms alone, in galleries, in libraries,
In tears, in searching of the heart, in staggering joys
We memorize once more our old creation,
Humanity: with what yawns the unwilling
Flesh puts its spirit, O my sister!

So many dreams! And not one troubles
Your sleep of life? no self stares shadowily
From these worn hexahedrons, beckoning
With false smiles, tears? . . .

Meanwhile Tatyana
Larina 3 (gray eyes nicked with the moonlight
That falls through the willows onto Lensky's tomb;
Now young and shy, now old and cold and sure)
Asks, smiling: "But what is she dreaming of, fat thing?"
I answer: She's not fat. She isn't dreaming.
She purrs or laps or runs, all in her sleep;
Believes, awake, that she is beautiful;
She never dreams.

Those sunrise-colored clouds
Around man's head 4—that inconceivable enchantment
From which, at sunset, we come back to life
To find our graves dug, families dead, selves dying:
Of all this, Tanya, she is innocent.
For nineteen years she's faced reality:
They look alike already.

They say, man wouldn't be
The best thing in the world—and isn't he?
If he were not too good for it 5 But she
—She's good enough for it.

And yet sometimes
Her sturdy form, in its pink strapless formal,
Is as if bathed in moonlight—modulated
Into a form of joy, a Lydian mode; 6
This Wooden Mean'a kind, furred animal
That speaks, in the Wild of things, delighting riddles.
To the soul that listens, trusting . . .

Poor senseless Life:

When, in the last light sleep of dawn, the messenger
Comes with his message, you will not awake.
He'll give his feathery whistle, shake you hard,

2. Alludes to Rudyard Kipling's poem, "Suppliant of the Black Aberdeen," in which the dog prays to his master not to leave him, and attributes to him the godlike power of having made "This dim, distressed half-soul that hurts me so."

3. The heroine of Pushkin's Eugene Onegin, Tatyana (or Tanya) Larina is a native country girl who is infatuated with the melancholy, cynical Onegin, but is rejected by him; he kills her friend's lover, Lensky, in a duel, and then travels abroad. She marries and becomes a sophisticated beauty, and in her own Onegin becomes infatuated with her, but though she still loves him she refuses to betray her husband.

4. From Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality": "But trailing clouds of glory do we come / From God, who is our home." He believed that children are endowed with a special awareness of nature that dies and dies after they are born and grow to adulthood.

5. Jarrell says in his notes that this is a quotation but declines to identify it.

6. A variant of the major scale in music, whose rather tone has been used by many composers to express a subdued, religious joy.
A Game at Salzburg

You'll look with wide eyes at the dewy yard
And dream, with calm slow factuality:
"Today's Commencement. My bachelor's degree
In Home Ec., my doctorate of philosophy
In Phys. Ed.

[Tanya, they won't even scan]
Are waiting for me..."

Oh, Tatiana,
The Angel comes; better to squawk like a chicken
Than to say with truth, "But I'm a good girl."
And Meets his Challenge with a last firm strange
Uncomprehending smile; and—then, then!—see
The blind date that has stood you up: your life.
(For all this, if it isn't, perhaps, life,
Has yet, at least, a language of its own
Different from the books; worse than the books'.)
And yet, the ways we miss our lives are life.
Yet... yet...

to have one's life add up to yet!

You sigh a shuddering sigh. Tatiana murmurs,
"Don't cry, little peasant"; leaves us with a swift
"Good-bye, good-bye... Ah, don't think ill of me..."
Your eyes open: you sit here thoughtlessly.

I love you—and yet—and yet—I love you.

Don't cry, little peasant. Sit and dream.
One comes, a finger's width beneath your skin,
To the braided maidens singing as they spin;
There sound the shepherd's pipe, the watchman's rattle?
Across the short dark distance of the years.
I am a thought of yours: and yet, you do not think...
The firelight of a long, blind, dreaming story
Lingers upon your lips; and I have seen
Firm, fixed forever in your closing eyes,
The Corn King beckoning to his Spring Queen.8

A Game at Salzburg

A little ragged girl, our ball-boy;
A partner—ex-Africa-Korps—1
In khaki shorts, P. W. illegible.
(He said: "To have been a prisoner of war
In Colorado iss a privilege.")
The evergreens, concessions, carrousels,

7. The "braided maidens," shepherd, and
watchman are minor characters in Richard Wagn-
er's opera who have good tunes to sing but are
utterly unaware of the significance of the events
which transpire around them.
8. "The Corn King and the Spring Queen went
by many names; in the beginning they were the
man and woman who, after ruling for a time, were
torn to pieces and scattered over the fields in order
that the grass might grow" (Jarrell's note).
9. Salzburg, a large city in central Austria, was
the headquarters of the American occupation forces
in that country after the Second World War.
1. The Africa-Korps was a German army sta-
tioned in North Africa and commanded by Erwin
Rommel.
Randall Jarrell

And D. P. ² camp of Franz Joseph Park;
A gray-green river, evergreen-dark hills.
Last, a long way off in the sky,
Snow-mountains.

Over this clouds come, a darkness falls,
Rain falls.
    On the veranda, Romana,
A girl of three,
Sits licking sherbet from a wooden spoon;
I am already through;
She says to me, softly: Hier bin i.
I answer: Da bist du.³

I bicycle home in my raincoat
Through the ponchos and pigtails of the streets,
Bathe, dress, go down four flights of stairs
Past Maria Theresa's sleigh
To the path to the garden, walk along the lake
And kick up, dreamily, the yellow leaves
Of the lindens; the pigeons are cooing
In the morning-glories of the gardener's house,
A dragonfly comes in from the lake.
The nymphs look down with the faces of Negroes,
Pocked, moled with moss;
The stone horse has sunk in marsh to his shoulders.

But the sun comes out, and the sky
Is for an instant the first rain-washed blue
Of becoming: and my look falls
Through falling leaves, through the statues'
Broken, encircling arms
To the lives of the withered grass,
To the drops the sun drinks up like dew.

In anguish, in expectant acceptance
The world whispers: Hier bin i.

1951

Next Day

Moving from Cheer to Joy, from Joy to All,⁴
I take a box
And add it to my wild rice, my Cornish game hens.
The slacked or shorted, basketed, identical
Food-gathering flocks
Are selves I overlook. Wisdom, said William James,

2. Displaced Persons: that is, civilians who lost
their homes during the war. The park named for
Austria's last emperor (1809-1860), and the sleigh
that belonged to the famous Queen Maria Theresa
(1717-1780) (line 22), evoke Austria's great days.
3. "I put into 'A Game at Salzburg' a little game
that Germans and Austrians play with very young
children. The child says to the grown-up, Here I
am, and the grown-up answers, There you are; the
children use the same little rising tune, and the
grown-ups the same resolving, conclusive one. It
seemed to me that if there could be a conversation
between the world and God, this would be it
(Jarrell's note).
4. Names of detergents.

5. Willia paraphrase
Is learning what to overlook. And I am wise
If that is wisdom.
Yet somehow, as I buy All from these shelves
And the boy takes it to my station wagon,
What I've become
Troubles me even if I shut my eyes.

When I was young and miserable and pretty
And poor, I'd wish
What all girls wish: to have a husband,
A house and children. Now that I'm old, my wish
Is womanish:
That the boy putting groceries in my car

See me. It bewilders me he doesn't see me.
For so many years
I was good enough to eat: the world looked at me
And its mouth watered. How often they have undressed me,
The eyes of strangers!
And, holding their flesh within my flesh, their vile

Imaginings within my imagining,
I too have taken
The chance of life. Now the boy pats my dog
And we start home. Now I am good.
The last mistaken,
Eccentric, accidental bliss, the blind

Happiness that, bursting, leaves upon the palm.
Some soap and water—
It was so long ago, back in some Gay
Twenties, Nineties, I don't know... Today I miss
My lovely daughter
Away at school, my sons away at school,

My husband away at work—I wish for them.
The dog, the maid,
And I go through the sure unvarying days
At home in them. As I look at my life,
I am afraid
Only that it will change, as I am changing:

I am afraid, this morning, of my face.
It looks at me
From the rear-view mirror, with the eyes I hate,
The smile I hate. Its plain, lined look
Of gray discovery
Repeats to me: "You're old." That's all, I'm old.

And yet I'm afraid, as I was at the funeral
I went to yesterday.

5. William James (1842–1910) was an American philosopher and psychologist; the quotation, slightly paraphrased, is from *The Principles of Psychology* (1890).
Thinking of the Lost World

This spoonful of chocolate tapioca
Tastes like—like peanut butter, like the vanilla
Extract Mama told me not to drink.
Swallowing the spoonful, I have already traveled
Through time to my childhood. It puzzles me
That age is like it.

Come back to that calm country
Through which the stream of my life first meandered,
My wife, our cat, and I sit here and see
Squirrels quarreling in the feeder, a mockingbird
Copying our chipmunk, as our end copies
Its beginning.

Back in Los Angeles, we missed
Los Angeles. The sunshine of the Land
Of Sunshine is a gray mist now, the atmosphere
Of some factory planet: when you stand and look
You see a block or two, and your eyes water.
The orange groves are all cut down... My bow
Is lost, all my arrows are lost or broken,
My knife is sunk in the eucalyptus tree
Too far even Pop to get it out,
And the tree’s sawed down. It and the stair-sticks
And the planks of the tree house are all firewood
Burned long ago; its gray smoke smells of Vicks.

Twenty Years After, thirty-five years after,
Is as good as ever—better than ever,
Now that D’Artagnan is no longer old—
Except that it is unbelievable.
I say to my old self: “I believe. Help thou
Mine unbelief.”

I believe the dinosaur
Or pterodactyl’s married the pink sphinx
And lives with those Indians in the undiscovered

6. The most daring of the musketeers in Alexandre Dumas’ The Three Musketeers and its sequel, Twenty Years After.

7. These words were spoken by the father of an epileptic child whom Jesus miraculously cured. (Mark 9:14).

8. A short drive from northeastern Florida.
Country between California and Arizona
That the mad girl told me she was princess of—
Looking at me with the eyes of a lion,
Big, golden, without human understanding.
As she threw paper-wads from the back seat
Of the car in which I drove her with her mother
From the jail in Waycross to the hospital
In Daytona. If I took my eyes from the road
And looked back into her eyes, the car would—I'd be—

Or if only I could find a crystal set
Sometimes, surely, I could still hear their chief
Reading to them from Dumas or Amazing Stories; if
If I could find in some Museum of Cars
Mama's dark blue Buick, Lucky's electric,
Couldn't I be driven there? Hold out to them,
The paraffin half picked out, Tawny's jeweled—
And have walk to me from among their wigwams
My tall brown aunt, to whisper to me: "Dead?"
They told you I was dead?"

As if you could die!
If I never saw you, never again
Wrote to you, even, after a few years,
How often you've visited me, having put on,
As a mermaid puts on her sealskin, another face
And voice, that don't fool me for a minute—
That are yours for good . . . All of them are gone
Except for me; and for me nothing is gone—
The chicken's body is still going round
And round in widening circles, a satellite
From which, as the sun sets, the scientists bends
A look of evil on the unsuspecting earth.
Mama and Pop and Dandeen are still there
In the Gay Twenties.

The Gay Twenties! You say
The Gay Nineties . . . But it's all right: they were gay,
Oh so gay! A certain number of years after,
Any time is Gay, to the new ones who ask:
"Was that the first World War or the second?"
Moving between the first world and the second,
I hear a boy call, now that my beard's gray:
"Santa Claus! Hi, Santa Claus!" It is miraculous
To have the children call you Santa Claus.
I wave back. When my hand drops to the wheel,
It is brown and spotted, and its nails are ridged
Like Mama's. Where's my own hand? My smooth
White bitten-fingernailed one? I seem to see
A shape in tennis shoes and khaki riding-pants
Standing there empty-handed; I reach out to it
Empty-handed, my hand comes back empty,
And yet my emptiness is traded for its emptiness,
I have found that Lost World in the Lost and Found

8. A short drive from southeastern Georgia to northeastern Florida.
Columns whose gray illegible advertisements
My soul has memorized world after world:
LOST—NOTHING. STRAYED FROM NOWHERE. NO REWARD.
I hold in my own hands, in happiness,
Nothing: the nothing for which there's no reward.

JOHN BERRYMAN
1914–1972

John Berryman’s poetry has an air of authority although it is often extremely eccentric and uneven. He succeeded in making the turgidness of his moody self seem momentous and fascinating, and won a considerable following. Like Robert Lowell, he wrote an intensely personal kind of verse. If it was theatrical, theatricality was an aspect of his personality, and it was only through that aspect that he could express himself.

Berryman was born John Smith on October 25, 1914, in McAlester, Oklahoma. He lived till the age of ten in Anaduro, a nearby town where his father, also named John Smith, was a banker and his mother a schoolteacher. Then the family moved to Tampa, Florida. It was here that his parents’ quarrels, furious for years, ended when his father shot himself outside his son’s window. “That mad drive wiped out my childhood.” In the penultimate poem of His Toy, His Dream, His Rest, Berryman described a visit to his father’s grave and commented, with unmitigated bitterness, “I spit upon this dreadful banker’s grave / who shot his heart out in a Florida dawn.” The widow brought John and a younger son to Gloucester, Massachusetts, and then to New York City. Here she married another banker, John Berryman, whose name the children took. The stepfather was soon to divorce his wife, but he remained kind to the children. He sent John to a private school in Connecticut (South Kent School), and then to Columbia College. John Berryman received a B.A. in 1936, and then attended Clare College, Cambridge, on a fellowship. When he returned to the United States he taught for a year at Wayne State, then from 1940 to 1943 at Harvard, and following that, for almost ten years, off and on, at Princeton. From 1955 till his death he taught at the University of Minnesota. A nervous, tense man prone to overdrinking, Berryman lived turbulently. He was married three times. In later life, he was converted back to Roman Catholicism, the faith of his childhood, and his last book, Delusions, Etc. (1972) debates faith with God in a way to indicate that the questions still agitated him. On January 7, 1972, he threw himself from a bridge in Minneapolis to end his life at the age of fifty-seven.

Berryman’s early work formed part of a volume entitled Five Young American Poets, published by New Directions in 1940. The influence of Yeats, Auden, Hopkins, Crane, and Pound on him was strong, and Berryman’s own voice—by turns nerve-racked and sportive—took some time to be heard. His voice has always been an amalgam, first of other poets but later of Berryman’s various selves, formal and informal in unexpected jumps. He shifts from educated language to wild dialect, and almost before he makes a statement begins to question and sometimes to mock it. These characteristics, expressed in contorted syntax, give the poetry an impressive air of painful self-involvement. In explaining the title poem of his third volume, The Dispossessed (1948), Berryman remarked, “It may be worth observing that I began with, or at any rate worked with, both the opposite directions that notion of dispo-

1. Dream Song 143.