James Dickey practices surrealism as writers in the nineteenth century practiced realism. Illusions, often terrifying, are what he calls "lies," and he insists, as Oscar Wilde did, that art is the fashionsing of falsehoods. Once his imagination takes hold of some strange, often monstrous event, like "The Fiend"—a voyeur contemplating the thought of rape—or "Falling"—the fall from a plane of a young airline stewardess—he pursues it relentlessly until it subsides in darkness. "As Longinus points out, there's a razor's edge between sublimity and absurdity. And that's the edge I try to walk. Sometimes both sides are ludicrous... But I don't think you can get to sublimity without courting the ridiculous." Dickey is a gothic poet, as Flannery O'Connor was a gothic writer, whether he domesticates the monstrous or allows his monsters to range undomesticated.

Dickey spent six of his mature years in advertising. In between writing advertisements for Coca-Cola he composed some of his best poems, and the same secretary typed both the ads and poems. Dickey has in his verse a purposiveness and insistence, a demand for attention and for recognition, that is perhaps not so much an echo of his days in advertising as an indication of why he was good at it.

As a boy Dickey read Byron, and he recalls that Byron’s poems were the first he ever bought. The idea of the poet as a man of action has been with him from the start, and it has suited his powers as an athlete. He has wanted to be an "intensified man" or a "totally responsive man." Dickey was born in a suburb of Atlanta on February 4, 1923. Already tall—six feet three—as a boy, he became a high school football star. His interest in poetry had been awakened by his father, a lawyer, who delighted in oratory and used to read to him famous speeches to the jury. Dickey went on to Clemson College in South Carolina in 1941, but left after a year to enlist in the air force. In between a hundred combat missions in the Pacific, he read Conrad Aiken and an anthology of modern poetry by Louis Untermeyer. His particular favorites were apocalyptic poets, Dylan Thomas and George Barker among the English, Kenneth Patchen among the Americans.

On his return from the war Dickey went to Vanderbilt, where he worked with an older student’s zeal to learn about anthropology, astronomy, and philosophy, and to study foreign languages as well as English literature. A friendly professor, Monroe K. Spears, encouraged him to write more poetry, and when he found that Dickey felt he must only describe actual experiences, urged him to write as the poem, rather than the experience, necessitated. "That idea was the bursting of a dam for me," said Dickey. As a senior at college he had a poem accepted by the Sequoia Review. He was determined to write, but thought he might do graduate work as well, first at Vanderbilt, and then at Rice University in Texas. The air force recalled him to active service for the Korean War, during which he spent two years as a training officer. On his return he went, after a year in Europe, to the University of Florida, nominally to assist the novelist Andrew Lytle, but chiefly to teach. A dispute arose over the propriety of a poem he read to a group; he abruptly resigned in April 1958, and went to New York at the age of thirty-three. McKenna-Ericson took him on as a writer of advertising copy. He stayed there for a time, then shifted to Atlanta agencies, and finally gave up this work in 1961; to accept a Guggenheim Fellowship and spend a year in Italy. Since that time he has taught, lectured, written, and been for two years (from 1966 to 1968) Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress. He published a novel, Deliverance, in 1970, and another, Ashland, in 1977.

Dickey's poetry is arresting and powerful. It is characterized more by force than by grace, action, which imparts deep emotion to the poems. Misery seems to be the natural, even inspired, quality of Dickey's work as a "jewel" of nature and life.
by grace, more by conceptual intricacy than by wit, which is an aspect of a conversation, where the reader is a silent participant. Part of its pleasure lies in the sense it imparts of abundance and confidence. "I don't believe in the kind of cool difficulty people nowadays affect," he said. He has a keen sense of an archetypal world underlying the real one, accessible to the poet as to other men and women at unusual moments, and often this deepening or descent from level to level is the theme of his poem. Most of his poems are in the first person, but the "I" in them is rather impersonal, even if based upon actual experience, because it is on its way to becoming "an inspired outline of myself" ("Chenille"). As a young man at Vanderbilt Dickey was taken with the views of the Agrarians, who wished to keep man in intimate relation with nature. But he has not scorned machines, included them rather (as in "The Jewel") as part of the nature with which he wishes to be on terms of extravagant intimacy.

5. The same, p. 66.

The Hospital Window

I have just come down from my father,
Higher and higher he lies
Above me in a blue light
Shed by a tinted window.
I drop through six white floors
And then step out onto pavement.

Still feeling my father ascend,
I start to cross the firm street,
My shoulder blades shining with all
The glass the huge building can raise.
Now I must turn round and face it,
And know his one pane from the others.

Each window possesses the sun
As though it burned there on a wick.
I wave, like a man catching fire.
All the deep-dyed windowpanes flash,
And, behind them, all the white rooms
They turn to the color of Heaven.

Ceremoniously, gravely, and weakly,
Dozens of pale hands are waving
Back, from inside their flames.
Yet one pure pane among these
Is the bright, erased blankness of nothing.
I know that my father is there,

In the shape of his death still living.
The traffic increases around me
Like a madness called down on my head.
The horns blast at me like shotguns,
And drivers lean out, driven crazy—
But now my propped-up father

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1082 James Dickey

Lifts his arm out of stillness at last.
The light from the window strikes me
And I turn as blue as a soul,
As the moment when I was born.
I am not afraid for my father—
Look! He is grinning; he is not

Afraid for my life, either,
As the wild engines stand at my knees
Shredding their gears and roaring,
And I hold each car in its place
For miles, inciting its horn
To blow down the walls of the world

That the dying may float without fear
In the bold blue gaze of my father.
Slowly I move to the sidewalk
With my pin-tingling hand half dead
At the end of my bloodless arm.
I carry it off in amazement,

High, still higher, still waving,
My recognized face fully mortal,
Yet not, not at all, in the pale,
Drained, otherworldly, stricken,
Created hue of stained glass.
I have just come down from my father.

The Heaven of Animals

Here they are. The soft eyes open.
If they have lived in a wood
It is a wood.
If they have lived on plains
It is grass rolling
Under their feet forever:

Having no souls, they have come,
Anyway, beyond their knowing.
Their instincts wholly bloom
And they rise.
The soft eyes open.

To match them, the landscape flowers,
Outdoing, desperately
Outdoing what is required:
The richest wood,
The deepest field.

For some of these,
It could not be the place

1. A hue of stained glass.
Buckdancer's Choice

It is, without blood.
These hunt, as they have done,
But with claws and teeth grown perfect,
More deadly than they can believe.
They stalk more silently,
And crouch on the limbs of trees,
And their descent
Upon the bright backs of their prey
May take years
In a sovereign floating of joy.
And those that are hunted
Know this as their life,
Their reward: to walk

Under such trees in full knowledge
Of what is in glory above them,
And to feel no fear,
But acceptance, compliance.
Fulfilling themselves without pain

At the cycle's center,
They tremble, they walk
Under the tree,
They fall, they are torn,
They rise, they walk again.

Buckdancer's Choice

So I would hear out those lungs,
The air split into nine levels,
Some gift of tongues of the whistler

In the invalid's bed: my mother,
Warbling all day to herself
The thousand variations of one song.

It is called Buckdancer's Choice.
For years, they have all been dying
Out, the classic buck-and-wing men

Of traveling minstrel shows;
With them also an old woman
Was dying of breathless angina,

Yet still found breath enough
To whistle up in my head
A sight like a one-man band,

1. A buckdancer is a man who does the buck-and-wing, a tap dance often performed with wooden shoes.
Freed black, with cymbals at heel,
An ex-slave who thrively danced
To the ring of his own clashing light

Through the thousand variations of one song
All day to my mother’s prone music,
The invalid’s warbler’s note,

While I crept close to the wall
Sock-footed, to hear the sounds alter,
Her tongue like a mockingbird’s break

Through stratum after stratum of a tone
Proclaiming what choices there are
For the last dancers of their kind,

For ill women and for all slaves
Of death, and children enchanted at walls
With a brass-beating glow underfoot,

Not dancing but nearly risen
Through barnlike, theatrelike houses
On the wings of the buck and wing.

The Sheep Child

Farm boys wild to couple
With anything with soft-wooded trees
With mounds of earth mounds
Of pine straw will keep themselves off
Animals by legends of their own:
In the hay-tunnel dark
And dung of barns, they will
Say I have heard tell

That in a museum in Atlanta
Way back in a corner somewhere
There’s this thing that’s only half
Sheep like a woolly baby
Pickled in alcohol because
Those things can’t live his eyes
Are open but you can’t stand to look
I heard from somebody who

But this is now almost all
Gone. The boys have taken
Their own true wives in the city,
The sheep are safe in the west hill
Pasture but we who were born there
Still are not sure. Are we,
Because we remember, remembered
In the terrible dust of museums?
Falling

Merely with his eyes, the sheep-child may
Be saying saying

I am here, in my father's house.
I who am half of your world, came deeply
To my mother in the long grass
Of the west pasture, where she stood like moonlight 30
Listening for foxes. It was something like love
From another world that seized her
From behind, and she gave, not lifting her head
Out of dew, without ever looking, her best
Self to that great need. Turned loose, she dipped her
face
Farther into the chill of the earth, and in a sound
Of sobbing of something stumbling
Away, began, as she must do,
To carry me. I woke, dying,

In the summer sun of the hillside, with my eyes
Far more than human. I saw for a blazing moment
The great grassy world from both sides,
Man and beast in the round of their need,
And the hill wind stirred in my wool,
My hoof and my hand clasped each other,
I ate my one meal
Of milk, and died
Standing. From dark grass I came straight

To my father's house, whose dust
Whirls up in the hall's for no reason
When no one comes piling deep in a hellish mild
corner,
And, through my immortal waters,
I meet the sun's grains eye.
To eye, and they fail at my closet of glass.
Dead, I am most surely living

In the minds of farm boys: I am he who drives
Them like wolves from the hound bitch and calf
And from the chaste ewe in the wind.
They go into woods into bean fields they go
Deep into their known right hands. Dreaming of me,
They groan they wait they suffer
Themselves, they marry, they raise their kind.

Falling

"A 20-year-old stowaway fell to her death tonight when she was swept
through an emergency door that suddenly swung open. The body . . .
was found three hours after the accident."

—New York Times

The states when they black out and lie there rolling when they turn
To something transcontinental move by drawing moonlight out of the great
James Dickey

One-sided stone hung off the starboard wingtip some sleeper next to
An engine is groaning for coffee and there is faintly coming in
Somewhere the vast beast-whistle of space. In the galley with its racks
Of trays she rummages for a blanket and moves in her slim tailored
Uniform to pin it over the cry at the top of the door. As though she blew

The door down with a silent blast from her lungs frozen she is black
Out finding herself with the plane nowhere and her body taking by the
throat
The undying cry of the void falling living beginning to be some-
ing
That no one has ever been and lived through screaming without enough
air
Still next lipsticked stockinged girdled by regulation her hat
Still on her arms and legs in no world and yet spaced also strangely
With utter placid rightness on thin air taking her time she holds it
In many places and now, still thousands of feet from her death she seems
To slow she develops interest she turns in her maneuverable body

To watch it. She is hung high up in the overwhelming middle of things in
her
Self in low body-whistling wrapped intensely in all her dark dance-
weight
Coming down from a marvellous leap with the delaying, dumbounding
ease
Of a dream of being dawn like endless moonlight to the harvest soil
Of a central state of one's country with a great gradual warmth coming
Over her floating finding more and more breath in what she has been
using
For breath as the levels become more human seeing clouds placed
honestly
Below her left and right riding slowly toward them she elaps it all
To her and can hang her hands and feet in it in peculiar ways and
Her eyes opened wide by wind, can open her mouth as wide wider and
suck
All the heat from the cornfields can go down on her back with a feeling
Of stupendous pillows stacked under her and can turn turn as to some
one
In bed smile, understood in darkness can go away slant slide
Off tumbling into the emblem of a bird with its wings half-spread
Or whirl madly on herself in endless gymnastics in the growing warmth
Of wheatfields rising toward the harvest moon. There is time to live
In superhuman health seeing mortal unreachable lights far down seeing
An ultimate highway with one late priceless car probing it arriving
In a square town and off her starboard arm the glitter of water catches
The moon by its own shaken side scaled, roaming silver My God it is

good
And evil lying in one after another of all the positions for love
Making dancing sleeping and now cloud wisps at her no
Raincoat no matter all small towns brokenly brighter from inside
Cloud she walks over them like rain bursts out to behold a Grey-
hound
Bus shooting light through its sides it is the signal to go straight
Down like a glorious diver then feet first her skirt stripped beautifully
Falling 1087

Up her face in fear-scented cloths her legs deliriously bare then
Arms out she slow-rolls over steadies out waits for something great
To take control of her trembles near feathers planes head-down
The quick movements of bird-necks turning her head gold eyes the insight
Eyesight of owls blazing into the hencoops a taste for chicken over
Whelming

Her the long-range vision of hawks enlarging all human lights of cars
Freight trains looped bridges enlarging the moon racing slowly
Through all the curves of a river all the darks of the midwest blazing
From above. A rabbit in a bush turns white the smothering chickens
Huddle for over them there is still time for something to live
With the streaming half-idea of a long stoop a hurting a fall
That is controlled that plummets as it wills turns gravity
Into a new condition, showing its other side like a moon shining
New Powers there is still time to live on a breath made of nothing
But the whole night time for her to remember to arrange her skirt
Like a diagram of a bat tightly it guides her she has this flying skin
Made of garments and there are also those sky-divers on TV sailing
In sunlight smiling under their goggles swapping batons back and forth
And he who jumped without a chute and was handed one by a diving
Buddy. She looks for her grinning companion white teeth nowhere
She is screaming singing hymns her thin human wings spread out
From her neat shoulders the air beast-crooning to her warbling
And she can no longer behold the huge partial form of the world now
She is watching her country lose its evoked master shape watching it lose
And gain get back its houses and peoples watching it bring up
Its local lights single homes lamps on barn roofs if she fell
Into water she might live like a diver cleaving perfect plunge

Into another heavy silver unbreathable slowing saving
Element: there is water there is time to perfect all the fine
Points of diving feet together toes pointed hands shaped right
To insert her into water like a needle to come out healthily dripping
And be handed a Coca-Cola there they are there are the waters
Of life the moon packed and coiled in a reservoir so let me begin
To plane across the night air of Kansas opening my eyes superhumanly
Bright to the dammed moon opening the natural wings of my jacket
By Don Loper moving like a hunting owl toward the glitter of water
One cannot just fall just tumble screaming all that time one must use
It she is now through with all through all clouds damp hair
Straightened the last wisp of fog pulled apart on her face like wool revealing
New darks new progressions of headlights along dirt roads from chaos

And night a gradual warming a new-made, inevitable world of one's
Own
Country a great stone of light in its waiting waters hold hold out
For water: who knows when what correct young woman must take up her
Body
And fly and head for the moon-crazed inner eye of midwest imprisoned
Water stored up for her for years the areas of her jacket slipping
Air up her sleeves to go all over her? What final things can be said
Of one who starts out sheerly in her body in the high middle of night
Air to track down water like a rabbit where it lies like life itself
Off to the right in Kansas? She goes toward the blazing-bare lake
James Dickey

Her skirts neat her hands and face warmed more and more by the air Rising from pastures of beans and under her under chenille bedspreads

The farm girls are feeling the goddess in them struggle and rise brooding On the scratch-shining posts of the bed dreaming of female signs 95

Of the moon male blood like iron of what is really said by the moon Of airliners passing over them at dawn of midwest midnight passing Over brush fires burning out in silence on little hills and will wake To see the woman they should be struggling on the roof-tree to become Stars for her the ground is closer water is nearer she passes

It then banks turns her sleeves fluttering differently as she rolls Out to face the east, where the sun shall come up from wheatfields she must

Do something with water fly to it fall in it drink it rise From it but there is none left upon earth the clouds have drunk it back

The plants have sucked it down there are standing toward her only 105

The common fields of death she comes back from flying to falling Returns to a powerful cry the silent scream with which she blew down The coupled door of the airliner nearly nearly losing hold Of what she has done remembers remembers the shape at the heart Of cloud fashionably swirling remembers she still has time to die Beyond explanation. Let her now take off her hat in summer air the contour Of cornfields and have enough time to kick off her one remaining Shoe with the toes of the other foot to unhook her stockings With calm fingers; noting how fat a easy it is to undress in midair Near death when the body will assume without effort any position Except the one that will sustain it enable it to rise live Not die nine farms hover close widen eight of them separate leaving

One in the middle then the fields of that farm do the same there is no Way to back off from her chosen ground but she sheds the jacket With its silver sad impotent wings sheds the bat's guiding talpiece 110

Of her skirt the lightning-charged clinging of her blouse the intimate Inner flying garment of her slip in which she rides like the holy ghost Of a virgin sheds the long windsocks of her stockings absurd Brassiere then feels the girdle required by regulations squirming Off her no longer monobutocked she feels the girdle flutter shake In her hand and float upward her clothes rising off her ascending Into cloud and fights away from her head the last sharp dangerous shoe Like a dumb bird and now will drop in SOON now will drop

In like this the greatest thing that ever came to Kansas down from all Heights all levels of American breath layered in the lungs from the frail

Chill of space to the loam where extinction slumbers in corn tassels thickly And breathes like rich farmers counting will come among them after Her last superhuman act the last slow careful passing of her hands All over her unharmed body desired by every sleeper in his dream: Boys finding for the first time their loins filled with heart's blood Widowed farmers whose hands float under light covers to find themselves Arisen at sunrise the splendid position of blood unearthly drawn Toward clouds all feel something pass over them as she passes Her palms over her long legs her small breasts and deeply between Her thighs her hair shot loose from all pins streaming in the wind

Of her body let On her back Ti

In the soft loam The furrows for in her mortal outl But that she is the That something is not Turn go away Position no sky arms Plummet with her Mark the rain with Or the goddess in Of Wichita. All that Breath it is all Quite lying still Of incessant grow Of one eye fad That she could have State to water Girl in a bathing suit Of moonlight 120 From a railroad track Raise her head from To come down all Of a golf course On a clothesline Lies in the fields A cloud she can Their women from Of life in moonlight Toward the flower Feels herself go up Not and trics

Alan Dugan is cons to life itself. One poet and this description "prisoners of this world there is no escape at all" he says in "Letter to land of promise but Not that the rest of
Of her body let her come openly trying at the last second to land
On her back This is it THIS
All those who find her impressed
In the soft loam gone down driven well into the image of her body
The furrows for miles flowing in upon her where she lies very deep
In her mortal outline in the earth as it is in cloud can tell nothing
But that she is there inexplicable unquestionable and remember
That something broke in them as well and began to live and die more
When they walked for no reason into their fields to where the whole earth
Caught her interrupted her maiden flight told her how she cannot
Turn go away cannot move cannot slide off it and assume another
Position no sky-diver with any grin could save her hold her in his arms
Plummet with her unfold above her his wedding silks she can no longer
Mark the rain with whirling women that take the place of a dead wife
Or the goddess in Norwegian farm girls or all the back-breaking whores
Of Wichita. All the known air above her is not giving up quite one
Breath it is all gone and yet not dead not anywhere else
Quite lying still in the field on her back sensing the smells
Of incessant growth try to lift her a little sight left in the corner
Of one eye fading seeing something wave lies believing
That she could have made it at the best part of her brief goddess
State to water gone in headfirst come out smiling invulnerable
Girl in a bathing-suit ad but she is lying like a sunbather at the last
Of moonlight half-buried in her impact on the earth not far
From a railroad trestle a water tank she could see if she could
Raise her head from her modest hole with her clothes beginning
To come down all over Kansas into bushes on the dewy sixth green
Of a golf course one shoe her girdle coming down fantastically
On a clothesline, where it belongs her blouse on a lightning rod:
Lies in the fields in this field on her broken back as though on
A cloud she cannot drop through while farmers sleepwalk without
Their women from houses a walk like falling toward the far waters
Of life in moonlight toward the dreamed eternal meaning of their farms
Toward the flowering of the harvest in their hands that tragic cost
Feels herself go go toward-go outward breathes at last fully
Not and tries less once tries AH GOD—

ALAN DUGAN
b. 1923

Alan Dugan is conspicuously unaffiliated—to other poets, to any affirmative creed,
to life itself. One poem has in its title the words, "from an Alienated Point of View," and
this description applies to all his work. The final poem of his first book speaks of
prisoners of this world, and it is as a prisoner that Dugan writes, confident that
there is no escape and that come what may it will be as bad as it is now. He lives, as
he says in "Letter to Donald Fall," at "Dugan's Edge." In Dugan, America is not the
land of promise but of decadence, to be denominated in terms of various despair.
Not that the rest of the universe is any better.