

# Mortal Sorrows

By Rodney Jones

The tortures of lumbago consumed Aunt Madge,  
And Leah Vest, once resigned from schoolmarming,  
Could not be convinced to leave the house,  
And Mrs. Mary Hogan, after birthing her fifth son,

Lay bedfast for the last fifty-two years of her life,  
Reporting shooting pains that would begin  
High in her back and shear downward to the feet,  
As though, she said, she had been glazed in lightning;

And also, men, broken on bridges and mills,  
Shell-shocked veterans, religious alcoholics—  
Leldon Kilpatrick, Johnson Suggs, Whitey Carlyle:  
They came and sat there too, leafing through

Yellowing *Pageants and Progressive Farmers*;  
And, one by one, all entered in and talked  
While the good doctor gargled a dark chaff  
In his pipe and took down symptoms,

Annotating them on his hidden chart—  
Numbness, neuralgia, the knotted lymph,  
The clammy palms—and then he'd scratch  
His temple's meaningful patch of white

And scrawl out his unfailing barbiturate prescription  
To be filled by his pharmacist brother-in-law  
Until half the county had gathered as in a lap—  
The quantum ache, the mutiny in every house.

How much pain, how many diseases  
Consigned to the mythological, the dropped  
Ovaries, the torn-up nerves, what women  
Said, what men wanted to believe? Part of it

Laughable, I know. Still I want someone  
To see, now that they lie safe in graves  
Beyond the vacant stores, that someone  
Listened and, hearing the wrong at the heart,

Named it something that sounded real, whatever  
They lived through and died of. I remember  
Mrs. Lyle who called it a thorn in the flesh,  
And Mr. Appleton, who had no roof in his mouth.



Rodney Jones was born in Falkville, Alabama. He was educated at the University of Alabama and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. He teaches at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale and is on the Illinois Arts Council. Jones has set himself apart as a master of the modern lyric and his poems are rooted in the rural South of his childhood.

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