

The Strength of Fields

By James L. Dickey

*... a separation from the world,
a penetration to some source of power
and a life-enhancing return ...*

Van Gennep: Rites de Passage

Moth-force a small town always has,

Given the night.

What field-forms can be,
Outlying the small civic light-decisions over
A man walking near home?

Men are not where he is
Exactly now, but they are around him around him like the strength

Of fields. The solar system floats on
Above him in town-moths.

Tell me, train-sound,
With all your long-lost grief,
what I can give.

Dear Lord of all the fields
what am I going to *do*?
Street-lights, blue-force and frail

As the homes of men, tell me how to do it how
To withdraw how to penetrate and find the source
Of the power you always had
light as a moth, and rising
With the level and moonlit expansion
Of the fields around, and the sleep of hoping men.

You? I? What difference is there? We can all be saved

By a secret blooming. Now as I walk
The night and you walk with me we know simplicity
Is close to the source that sleeping men
Search for in their home-deep beds.
We know that the sun is away we know that the sun can be conquered
By moths, in blue home-town air.

The stars splinter, pointed and wild. The dead lie under
The pastures. They look on and help. Tell me, freight-train,
When there is no one else
To hear. Tell me in a voice the sea
Would have, if it had not a better one: as it lifts,
Hundreds of miles away, its fumbling, deep-structured roar
Like the profound, unstoppable craving
Of nations for their wish.

The moon lying on the brain

as on the excited sea as on

The strength of fields. Lord, let me shake

With purpose. Wild hope can always spring

From tended strength. Everything is in that.

That and nothing but kindness. More kindness, dear Lord

Of the renewing green. That is where it all has to start:

With the simplest things. More kindness will do nothing less

Than save every sleeping one

And night-walking one

Of us.

My life belongs to the world. I will do what I can.

Notes:

The epigraph of this poem was originally omitted in the changeover to the new website. Because of this, reciting the epigraph is optional for the 2019-2020 Poetry Out Loud season.

James Dickey, "The Strength of Fields" from *The Whole Motion: Collected Poems 1945-1992*.

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Source: James Dickey: *The Selected Poems* (Wesleyan University Press, 1998)



Although he considered himself first and foremost a poet, James Dickey is best known for his nightmarish 1970 novel *Deliverance*, made into a popular film. Born in Georgia, he spent most of his life in the South, working first in advertising and then, following the success of his first books of poetry, as a creative writing professor. His book *Buckdancer's Choice*, which featured harrowing poems about his experience as a bomber pilot in WWII and the Korean War, won the 1965 National Book Award. In 1977 Dickey delivered a poem at Jimmy Carter's inauguration gala.

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