

THE SHARKS IN THE PARLOR:  
FACT, FICTION, AND FOREIGN POLICY

*by Christopher Dickey*

A little less than a year ago, I stood before you here in the Tillman Auditorium and talked about my father's wars and mine.<sup>1</sup> It's now my tremendous pleasure and honor to be invited back, this time as part of a broader James Dickey celebration. And while my wars—our wars—are still going on, and I am going to talk about them tonight in the context of “fact, fiction and foreign policy,” I thought maybe we could start out by reading part of a long poem my father wrote which has on its face (and even between the lines) nothing whatsoever to do with foreign policy.

It's about a shark, in fact. I read it again, for the first time in a long time, earlier this month while staying in a house on the water at Pawleys Island, South Carolina, a part of the country that's very important to my family and to me because my parents lived there for a time and both my father and mother are buried there. It's a place that has its own long history of American civilization, but also, still, a lot of intimate contact with nature. I have seen dolphins and ospreys and pelicans often from that beach, and one day last year my wife and I saw two sharks pursue a school of fleeing mullet into the air—and, yes, I mean all the way into the *air*: gape-mouthed, twisting their dorsal fins and tails without traction, thrashing for a long stunning second against the mid-afternoon sky. “So close,” we thought, standing on the sand. They were only about thirty yards off the beach. One of them was about six feet long, the other maybe four or five feet. So close.

Carol and I didn't do a lot of swimming after that. Not last year, or even this year, for that matter. And maybe that place and that experience have just made me especially partial to this poem, which is called “The Shark's Parlor.” But there are other reasons, too, to talk about it tonight.

It's a fairly long poem, so I won't read the whole thing, although I think you should, and out loud, if you want to have some fun. It takes place down on one of the Sea Islands off the coast of Georgia, not so far and not so different from Pawleys. A couple of young guys, the narrator and his friend Payton Ford, are staying in one of those rickety old houses built on stilts right out on top of the water. It's summer, and they don't have a lot to do, so they get themselves a big hook, and a two-gallon jug to use as a bobber, and some chain leader and some road kill and a bucket of blood. Then they row out to the end of their long rope, throw the hook and the blood and the road kill in the water, and row back to sit on the porch to wait for something to happen. Which it does.

The other end of the line is tied to the house, and something so big hits the bait that the whole place begins to shake. Payton runs for help, and before you know it half the town is hauling on the rope in a furious tug of war against the monster out there in the depths, putting their backs into it, going up the steps from the water into the living room, through the kitchen and down the back stairs, over a dusty road and into the dunes, still pulling until, finally, the shark begins to appear, “A hammerhead rolling in

beery shallows.” But the townspeople don’t see that, they just keep pulling. Now this enormous shark is being dragged up . . .

The front stairs the sagging boards still coming in up taking  
 Another step toward the empty house where the rope stood straining  
 By itself through the rooms in the middle of the air. “Pass the word,”  
 Payton said, and I screamed it “Let up, good God, let up!” to no one there.  
 The shark flopped on the porch, grating with salt-sand driving back in  
 The nails he had pulled out coughing chunks of his formless blood.  
 The screen door banged and tore off he scrambled on his tail slid  
 Curved did a thing from another world and was out of his element and in  
 Our vacation paradise cutting all four legs from under the dinner table  
 With one deep-water move he unwove the rugs in a moment throwing pints  
 Of blood over everything we owned knocked the buckteeth out of my picture  
 His odd head full of crashed jelly-glass splinters and radio tubes thrashing  
 Among the pages of fan magazines all the movie stars drenched in sea-blood  
 Each time we thought he was dead he struggled back and smashed  
 One more thing in all coming back to die three or four more times after death.  
 At last we got him out logrolling him greasing his sandpaper skin  
 With lard to slide him pulling on his chained lips as the tide came,  
 Tumbled him down the steps as the first night wave went under the floor.  
 He drifted off head back belly white as the moon. What could I do but buy  
 That house for the one black mark still there against death a forehead-  
 toucher in the room he circles beneath and has been invited to wreck?  
 Blood hard as iron on the wall black with time still bloodlike  
 Can be touched whenever the brow is drunk enough. All changes. Memory:  
 Something like three-dimensional dancing in the limbs with age  
 Feeling more in two worlds than one in all worlds the growing encounters.<sup>2</sup>

Now I will confess at this point that until I re-read that poem the other day, I’d been in something of a quandary about how to make these remarks concerning fact and fiction and foreign policy fit into the context of a James Dickey celebration. My father the poet, as you know, had no very high regard for facts.<sup>3</sup> And his study of foreign policy, for the most part, was limited to reading abbreviated wire service stories in the back pages of *The State* newspaper in Columbia, South Carolina, which are no very great help to anyone’s understanding and very probably fueled his contempt for the kind of truths that journalists claim to tell.

But fiction—ah, that was something my father truly did know something about: fiction as The Novel; fiction as The Poem; fiction as—The Poet.

“The pure adventurousness of making metaphors and poems is a condition that must be felt to be believed,” he wrote in one of his finest critical essays.<sup>4</sup> “I remember how tremendously excited I was when I first formulated to myself the proposition that the poet is not to be limited by the literal truth: that he is not trying to *tell* the truth: he is trying to *make* it. . . . What the poet is trying to accomplish is to discover relationships that give life: mental, physical, and imaginative life, the fullest and most electric sense of

being.”

Yes, indeed. What my father had tapped into was the cosmic power of the metaphor, and his explanation of how that shark took shape in his head is about as good a presentation as I know of the way the creative process, the fictionalizing or poetizing process—or let’s just say the *imagination*—actually works:

“The Shark’s Parlor,” is not about anything I have ever done or any actual fish I ever saw. A shark has been made out of the few hammerheads I have ever seen in the water, those I have seen hanging up at docks, and one I found dead on a beach. It is not quite that these sharks combined into one in my mind, but that the dead one on the shore drew into himself, as my strongest mental hammerhead, all the others, so that the others became him and contributed to him in my mind, where I then attempted to place him in another kind of sea, in a poem, and cause him to live and act there. But my apprehension of my shark was conditioned, as it must inevitably be, by what experiences, including pictures in books and dreams, I have had in other places and other times—and perhaps other lives—with sharks. . . . All of these things came together into the passionate and mysterious aura of association that this kind of fish had for me. And from these mixed sources I made a poem about an imaginary incident.

My father, remember, was concerned with the power of the imagination as a pure creative act. How far could he go? How out-there could he get? Just as a physicist tries to test the bounds of empirical knowledge about mass and energy—the physical world—the poet experiments with the outer limits of metaphorical knowledge in the metaphysical world.

Yet that creative process, pulling together different impressions into a whole imagined reality, is something all of us do, or should do, all the time. We take the disparate elements in our experience, and we project an image of something—we *imagine* something—that is new. The woman of our dreams, say? Or the man? An ideal house? A fabulous career? A shark just out there beyond the breakers?

In our heads the image is usually a little out of focus until we start to talk or write about it. Then we say, for instance, that the girl of our dreams has eyes like Cameron Diaz. Maybe she doesn’t, really. But now that we say it, she does. And the metaphors we make depend not just on our taste, or our aspirations, but on our experience. If we have never seen Cameron Diaz, then her eyes won’t be part of our metaphor for beauty.

## II.

What, you might ask, does any of this have to do with foreign policy?

I could have made the connection anyway. I could have told you why our image of a dream woman with Cameron Diaz eyes is relevant to the nightmare of Osama Bin Laden. On my own, I might even have linked James Dickey to Weapons of Mass Destruction. Honestly. But the 9/11 commission made it all very easy for me when it published its report a few weeks ago.<sup>5</sup> In this extraordinarily complete and well-written document, an entire chapter is devoted to the question of “Foresight—and Hindsight,”

explicitly addressing the matter of “imagination” and the fatal lack of it in Washington.

How could our government possibly have been so unprepared for what the 9/11 report calls “an event of surpassing disproportion”?<sup>6</sup> Here was the most powerful military machine in the world, the United States of America, a country that spends hundreds of billions of dollars a year on defense, attacked by nineteen suicidal zealots with box cutters. Who could have conceived such a thing? The plotters of Al Qaeda could, and did. In a real and terrifying sense, their weapon of mass destruction was their imagination, and that, it would seem, was lacking from our arsenal.

Now, the truth is, lots of people in Washington and elsewhere could see something like this coming. Not this, precisely. Something like it, though. And yet the information didn’t register with the public, or the so-called opinion-makers, or the government itself. “To us, Afghanistan seemed very far away,” says the 9/11 report. “To members of Al Qaeda, America seemed very close. In a sense, they were more globalized than we were.”<sup>7</sup> Their imaginings drew on a real world that we, to our peril, had mostly ignored.

Thus a National Intelligence Estimate distributed in July 1995 (that is, more than six years before the Manhattan apocalypse) “predicted future terrorist attacks against the United States—and *in* the United States. It warned that this danger would increase over the next several years. It specified as particular points of vulnerability the White House, the Capital, symbols of capitalism such as Wall Street, critical infrastructure such as power grids, areas where people congregate such as sports arenas, and civil aviation generally. It warned that the 1993 World Trade Center bombing had been intended to kill a lot of people, not to achieve any more traditional political goal.”<sup>8</sup>

By the end of the decade, even though the danger was mounting, the focus of public attention was altogether elsewhere. “As best we can determine,” say the authors of the 9/11 report, “neither in 2000 nor in the first eight months of 2001 did any polling organization in the United States think the subject of terrorism sufficiently on the minds of the public to warrant asking questions about it in a major national survey. Bin Laden, Al Qaeda, or even terrorism was not an important topic in the 2000 presidential campaign. Congress and the media called little attention to it.”<sup>9</sup>

Well, all I can say is that some of us sure did try. Those of us who made terrorism our beat wrote article after article. We looked at Bin Laden, at his networks, at the kinds of threats his people posed. We chased down leads in South Asia and the Middle East, the Balkans and Western Europe. Yet no matter how much we wrote, the message didn’t get through. We came up against an imagination gap that just couldn’t be bridged.

It was precisely during this period of great concern among terrorism experts and minimal attention on the part of the public, that I decided to write my first novel, a thriller called *Innocent Blood*.

In Central America, Europe and the Middle East, I had had a fair amount of first-hand experience with terrorism, counter-terrorism, even the terrorists themselves. You know that clichéd advice, “Write what you know”? Well this was a world I did know. I had a very good idea of the places terrorists recruited, the kinds of people they were looking for, the sorts of personalities they exploited. I knew the kinds of plots they were pursuing, generically if not specifically, and the risks that they posed to the American heartland. My ideas were not so different from what the intelligence community, many at the State Department, and a few independent analysts like Bruce Hoffmann were

reporting in 1994 and 1995. Indeed, I was drawing on much of their work as I wrote one article after another in *Newsweek* and *Newsweek International*. But the truth didn't seem to be getting through. And that is why, at first, I turned to fiction.

In 1994 and 1995, when almost all of the novel was written, I was typing it up in "real time." The fictional characters were developing in the environment—the settings—of the factual events I was reporting for news stories. If I'd been working at the Pentagon, I'd have said I was gaming out the possibilities inherent in the characters and situation. In fact, I wanted to imagine what the terrorists were imagining, see the world as they saw it. And I wanted to take the reader with me on that adventure by creating a terrorist-narrator who would not immediately seem alien to most Americans. This was not a poem, certainly. But in its way it was precisely what my father was talking about in his essay "The Self as Agent," when he writes about "an exploration and an invention of identity."<sup>10</sup>

Where did this "self"—this shark, of sorts—come from? I had met a woman who was all-American in looks and language but whose name was Arabic and whose father was an immigrant from Algeria who taught French—in Kansas. This struck me as strange and fascinating. I had just a couple of conversations with this woman, and she was certainly not a terrorist, but as I thought about her background, the "self" I wanted started to take shape: man, but more to the point an All-American blond, blue-eyed, boy-next-door sort of man, born and raised in Kansas to Yugoslav immigrant parents who never talked much about their faith or history.

In fact, the character, Kurt Kurtovic, has no very clear sense of his own identity. (Terrorists rarely do, at first.) He's searching for a sense of belonging. He joins the Army and becomes a Ranger. After the Panama invasion and the 1991 Gulf War, he goes on a search for his father's roots, exploring his just-discovered Muslim background in Yugoslavia at the beginning of the war there. He falls in with a group of Islamic extremists, joins the fighting against the genocide carried out by the Christians, and after witnessing horrible atrocities in Bosnia, he is persuaded to join an apocalyptic terrorist plot against the United States. Rashid, the figure who recruits Kurt, argues that only when the United States feels the pain that it inflicts on the rest of the world, or that it ignores, will there be any real chance to end the suffering. "In America you don't feel what you do," says Rashid, "You are in the eye of a hurricane that you create. Pain and suffering and injustice all over the world, and all you see is blue skies."<sup>11</sup>

I had begun with a kind of formula and outline, but as I wrote I found myself weirdly, uncomfortably, starting to identify with this Kurt, and to be influenced by him. That, too, is something Jim Dickey would have understood.

"As for the I-figure himself," my father wrote, "he is at first nebulous, ectoplasmic, wavering in and out of several different kinds of possible identity. He is a stranger in a half-chaotic place that may with fortune and time become familiar. Though by the time the poem is completed he may have come solid, dominant, and even godlike, he is tentative indeed at the beginning of the poet's labors. The poet in his turn exercises an expected vigilance, always ready to do what the agent-self inside the poem requests him to. . . ."<sup>12</sup>

Kurt quickly started taking over his own story, and, as it were, he started to teach me more about terrorism than I was teaching him. What personal obsessions would

drive his apocalyptic rage? What kinds of targets would he look for? What kind of weapons might he use? I didn't know when I started writing the book. I only found out as I went along, following behind him. And there was another twist. What started as a story of terrorism became, increasingly, a story of family.

My father would have understood that, too. "For some unfathomable reason, the poet may find his 'self' acting in quite an inexplicable way," he wrote, "often doing things that the poet never knew either of them knew." The author must "empathize, he must think himself into the character, but he must realize that his character also possesses the power to think itself into him and to some extent to dictate what he writes."<sup>13</sup>

By the end of *Innocent Blood*, published in 1997, I might not have become the shark, but I had a pretty good idea how this killer, and other fanatics like him, saw their world. They thought they were defending something greater than themselves. They believed they acted on behalf of God Almighty. Yet within those parameters they were reasonable. Thoughtful. In their own minds, they convinced themselves they were out to do good.

At the end of *Innocent Blood*, Kurt is having his doubts about terrorism—but not the ones you might expect. This is Kurt speaking in early 1997, the year *Innocent Blood* was published. That is, more than four years before September 11:

It's been a while now since real terror came to America. And to the heartland, too. My flat lands have tasted real fear and terror and death, and no place more than down the road in Oklahoma City. And some things have happened that I thought I'd never see, like when Clinton finally bombed the . . . Chetniks and sent troops into Bosnia to enforce a peace. It was too little and 200,000 Muslim deaths too late, but I guess it was something. But all of that, even Oklahoma City, seems a long way away from Westfield now. Maybe even further away than before.

Rashid was right when he said it would take something more than a single bomb to move America. The boys who took out the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, after all, just gave America another soap opera to watch, like O. J. Simpson or that woman who killed her two little babies in South Carolina. A TV drama, that was all it was. Rashid had wanted something more than that, at least. And so had I.

Of course, his plans didn't work the way they were supposed to. He wanted to kill thousands of people in the Trade Center, not just six. He wanted to flood the Holland Tunnel, as I figured out later. But he hadn't been around to supervise the job, and the idiots he was using wound up bringing in an FBI informer to help them. And I stopped the plague. . . . But I can't help asking myself: what if all of those plots, or even two out of three, had worked? I ask myself, would the Plan really have changed anything basic in America?

Maybe. I think the lesson can be taught. But it has to be clear and it has to be painful and it has to come at just the right time. Rashid's message was too ordinary: revenge for the Gulf War, for Palestine, for whoever was paying him. He had big ideas, but he wasn't really looking to change anything. He was just keeping score. And if the Americans had discovered that, they would never

have reacted the way that he—or at least the way that I—hoped. Pity and anger are the only two emotions they ever feel about the rest of the world. They would have felt sorry for themselves. They would have bombed Baghdad, again. Then they would have turned to other business. All those people would have died for nothing.

But I do believe Americans can be made to understand that they live in a universe of suffering, and to do that you can't just tell them about it; they have to suffer themselves. I think about the way they felt when they saw Rangers killed and dragged through the street in Somalia in 1993. Rangers! The best of the best, wiped out by a handful of Muslim warriors. And Americans didn't know what to make of it. They blamed logistics. They blamed the secretary of defense and the president. They knew they couldn't blame the Rangers. But it just never occurred to them that *God was on the other side*.

Americans are an arrogant people, steeped in sin, and someday that arrogance is going to be taken from them. They are going to experience a power greater than themselves—and they will finally *believe* it is a power greater than themselves—and if that happens, I do think they will be closer to God, and the whole world will be a better, safer place. I do believe that still.

But there are other things I'm not so sure about anymore.

How do you find that moment when the wake-up call really will wake them up? It's not that easy. You've got to watch close. The Internet helps. That's clear. You can take the pulse of the country, even of the world, sitting in your den in Westfield. And I do. . . . I pray five times a day by myself, now. . . . I ask for guidance, and I watch for big events. The Olympics was one I thought about. The Millennium is another.

And—this is what is hardest to know—could I really be the messenger? If the moment does come, will I know it? Could I truly hear the word? And could I act on it? I keep the Sword in a locked freezer in the garage. There is no way for me to get rid of it. And it is still ready to strike. But I can't tell you when the spirit will move me, or if it ever will. Maybe never.<sup>14</sup>

### III.

On September 11, 2001, as it happens, I was in New York City. And the moment I saw the second plane hit the towers, I was sure Osama bin Laden was behind the atrocity. That afternoon, too, a few people who had bought *Innocent Blood*—both of them, I think—called me asking how I'd known such a thing might happen. Of course I hadn't *known* beforehand. I had only imagined something like this, based on what I did know of the past, and of people, and discovered inside myself.

By the afternoon of September 11, 2001, the American public and politicians who had shown so little interest in Al Qaeda wanted to know everything there was to know, of course. We at *Newsweek* reported what was new. We re-reported what was old but suddenly of interest. We moved ever more deeply into the world of the terrorists, and they moved into ours. Fact had far surpassed the nightmares of most imaginations.

But a few weeks after the first shock of the attack, I started to think about Kurt

again. I wanted to know what he would be doing. How would he have felt watching, from Kansas, as those towers came down? What had his life been like these last few years? Would the spirit move him? Or had it left him?

I thought of other terrorists I had studied and watched and talked to over the years, and of a particular incident back in the 1970s, when Yassir Arafat decided to de-mobilize the infamous organization known as Black September. What did he do? He married off the boys, encouraged them to have children. Soon, if they were not exactly pillars of the community, neither were they terrorists.

Kurt would be married now, I thought. He would have a daughter, maybe. He might even have given up his faith, tried to forget the past, fixing all his hopes and dreams on his family. But when he watched those towers come down, he'd know his old life was going to catch up with him, one way or another, and he could never be safe with his family, or remain free, unless he did what only he could do: take terror to the terrorists. I guess, in his way, he was doing what we all wished we could do at that moment.

Kurt's path takes him in rapid, murderous succession to London, to Spain, and to Africa. There he spends some time with aid workers at a refugee camp just across the border from a wild corner of Somalia where an Al Qaeda cell is holed up. The rains are coming down hard in this barren land, and one day the refugee camp's crude mud mosque simply begins to fall apart under the storm, melting away, despite everyone's efforts to save it. In the aftermath, the director of the aid organization at the camp, a rather mysterious character named Faridoon, talks about questions of God and awe in a discourse that grew straight out of the headlines of 2001, as I was writing, again, in real time, but said something about the terrorists that these fictional characters understood before my conscious mind considered it:

"Awe is worth pondering, you know. Isn't that what Bin Laden was after? I mean, think about it. He saw a world where it was not just Allah, it was America that created 'awe.'" Faridoon practically screamed the word America. "America had everything for everybody—money for nothing and chicks for free." He laughed. "It was like a dream of evil and a nightmare for good. And what were the greatest symbols of that awe? No cathedral in America is as grand as the skyscrapers of New York. No symbol of American force is more obvious than the Pentagon. And they were so vulnerable! Hit them and the awe of America evaporates. It goes back to where it belongs—to God." He took the gritty towel out of my hand and wiped his face. "You can see how Bin Laden would think that."

"Yeah. I can see," I said.

Faridoon grinned. "If I were American," he said, "I'd give a lot of thought to the nature of awe. Because in the end, you know, that's all that protects you."<sup>15</sup>

This abstract concept, as it happened, was common in the Bush administration, part of its behind-the-scenes thinking about the Middle East even before 9/11, and central to judgments that later took us into Iraq. Analysts whose voices *were* listened to, like Reuel Marc Gerech of the American Enterprise Institute, had argued since the 1990s

that Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein was the central problem in the region because his mere survival after 1991 had “cracked the awe of America in the Middle East.”<sup>16</sup> And without that aura of invulnerability, unprecedented and unthinkable things could happen: terrorists could even dare to attack Americans on their home soil. It didn’t matter if there was a direct operational connection between Iraq and those terrorists, Gerecht argued after the fact, the defiant Saddam would have to go “if we really are serious about regaining the essential fear and respect without which American interests and American citizens simply are not safe.”<sup>17</sup>

The appeal of this particular approach, of course, is that it cuts right through the Gordian knot of diplomatic, political, cultural, legal and economic interests that might normally interfere with decisive action. If you focus on fear and respect, it would seem, everything else follows. Or at least people are scared of you and keep their distance. And if the policy fails, the answer is always “more fear, more respect.” The argument is not the result of thinking long and hard about awe, but of thinking wishfully: get rid of one guy, and all your problems are solved.

You’ll probably remember the opening days of the war last year. The initial bombing campaign, waged against a country which had no operational air force, was called “shock and awe.” Yet one of the greatest failings of the Iraq invasion and occupation, precisely, has been its inability to inspire awe among the Iraqi people, and its tendency to diminish the image of American power abroad. Before the war, Iraqis on the street thought the United States could do just about anything it wanted. Now they see, on those same streets as often as eighty times a day, America the vulnerable.<sup>18</sup>

Thinking metaphorically does not mean thinking simplistically, much less wishfully. In poetry, the elements of a metaphor can be taken from anywhere. In realistic fiction, they need to hew a little closer to conventional human experience. In foreign policy, creative thinking has to be linked directly to the complex realities of a wide world. Imagination is not the same as fantasy.

#### IV.

In Iraq we have found ourselves swimming with hammerheads every day. We are truly in *their* parlors, and the growing resistance we’ve run into often seems as willfully destructive and impossible to understand as that enormous bloody creature thrashing on the floor of my father’s beach house. Yet there are experiences that have touched all of us that can help us understand the rage we’ve encountered in Iraq. This is not to excuse the inhuman brutality of the terrorists, or embrace the cause of insurgents killing Americans. Far from it. But only armchair warriors and politicians can afford to ignore the thinking of the enemy. Anyone who actually has to fight and wants to win has to learn the way his adversary sees the world. And sometimes, uncomfortable as it may seem, you actually have to look inside yourself to do that.

As I stand here at Clemson, with its great Southern traditions, it seems to me that many of us here tonight should have a special insight into the minds of those Iraqis who will stop at nothing to drive us out of their country, despite our massive firepower, our hundreds of billions of dollars, and our best intentions. And we should also be able to understand that even if they are defeated, and learn to smile in our presence and do busi-

ness with us in a more normal environment, many will continue to hate us for generations to come.

The key lies in the word “occupation,” and the anger it generates among those who have felt its weight. “Occupation” doesn’t mean much to most Americans, because most of America has never been occupied. But most of America is not the South. As the historian C. Vann Woodward reminded us years ago in *The Burden of Southern History*, this is the only part of the country that has ever been conquered and subjugated. And after 140 years, I have to ask, does anyone with roots here *not* remember in some way, almost as part of his or her DNA, the pain of defeat and occupation? “Forget, hell!” you say.

A few days ago, I was watching the video of a documentary my father made about the South during the Great Depression, with folk songs recorded then, a mere seventy years after the end of the Civil War. The words give a pretty good idea of the emotions that lingered at that time. The most striking verse goes something like this:

Three hundred thousand Yankees is stiff in Southern dust!  
We got three hundred thousand before they conquered us.  
They died of Southern fever and Southern steel and shot,  
But I wish we’d got three million instead of what we got.<sup>19</sup>

You want to know the emotion in a lot of Iraqi hearts? That would about sum it up.

This lingering anger, this unreconstructed resentment as it applied specifically to the South, was something that James Dickey thought about a lot. In the early 1960s, during the centenary of the Civil War and some of the first militant years of the Civil Rights Movement, my father wrote a long essay called “Notes on the Decline of Outrage,” in which he tried to come to terms with the pride and the burden of growing up in this once-occupied land. “People do not want their sense of being Southerners to die,” he said, and that’s why there is “a tremendous, futile yearning back toward the time of the Civil War, when something concrete could be done, when a man could pick up a gun and *shoot* at something, in a setting of purpose and meaning.” Even what my father knew was a worthy and noble cause, the long-delayed enfranchisement of African-Americans by the Supreme Court and the Federal government, was seen as “the encroachment of Others,” he wrote, and the fight against it was viewed, by many in the South, as “heroic—the battle for one’s home and one’s mind against the invaders.”<sup>20</sup>

Think on that history, that almost unconscious recollection in the blood, and you will begin to see what kind of emotions we are up against today in a fight thousands of miles from here, in another land with another history. It does not necessarily matter that our intentions may be noble: to bring freedom and democracy and prosperity to a long-oppressed people. Make of yourself, for just a moment, a proud Iraqi who does not want his sense of being an Iraqi to die, even in a lost cause. You would be using the power of metaphor, creating a kind of fiction, but it would teach you a lot about the facts, and some of the failings of our foreign policy—and it might someday help us to find a way out of the traps we have set for ourselves.

My father, at the end of “The Shark’s Parlor,” turned this poem about an alien beast into a meditation on human experience.

. . . All changes. Memory:  
 Something like three-dimensional dancing in the limbs with age  
 Feeling more in two worlds than one in all worlds the growing encounters.<sup>21</sup>

For James Dickey, the poet, this was metaphor as pure adventure. For those of us who encounter America's wars and its enemies, imagination has come to seem a matter of survival.

### Notes

1. "Firebombings: From My Father's Wars to Mine," part of the Calhoun Lecture Series at the Strom Thurmond Institute, was published in the Spring 2004 edition of *The South Carolina Review* and is available online at <http://www.strom.clemson.edu/events/calhoun/guests/dickey.pdf> as well as at [http://www.clemson.edu/caah/cedp/Dickey/Dickey\\_Firebombings.pdf](http://www.clemson.edu/caah/cedp/Dickey/Dickey_Firebombings.pdf).
2. *James Dickey: The Selected Poems*, edited and with an introduction by Robert Kirschten (Hanover, NH, and London, UK: Wesleyan University Press / University Press of New England, 1999), pp. 82-84. A typographic error in this edition has changed "beery shallows" to "beery shadows."
3. See presentations by my brother Kevin Dickey and my sister Bronwen Dickey elsewhere in this issue of *The South Carolina Review*.
4. "Metaphor as Pure Adventure," collected in *The James Dickey Reader*, edited by Henry Hart (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), pp. 276-288. The passage cited is on p. 281.
5. *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (Authorized Edition; New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2004), 567 pp.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 339
7. *Ibid.*, p. 340
8. *Ibid.*, p. 341
9. *Ibid.*
10. *The James Dickey Reader*, p. 268
11. Christopher Dickey, *Innocent Blood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), p. 212
12. *The James Dickey Reader*, p. 270
13. *Ibid.*, p. 271
14. *Innocent Blood*, pp. 333-335
15. Christopher Dickey, *The Sleeper* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), pp. 104-105.
16. "The Necessity of Fear," an interview by Katie Bacon with Reuel Marc Gerecht, "The Atlantic Online," December 28, 2001. The full interview is no longer available on the Atlantic site except to subscribers, but it can be found posted at <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/598656/posts>. Gerecht first drew wide attention a few months earlier, in the July/August issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, with an article titled "The Counterterrorist Myth." It was still on the stands in many places on September 11, 2001.
17. *Ibid.*
18. The estimated number of attacks per day against Coalition forces in September comes from data shared by U.S. government and private security agencies in Baghdad. By November the number was up to 100.
19. The lyrics to "Good Old Rebel" are widely published on the Internet. One site which also carries the melody is <http://www.acws.co.uk/songs/rebel.htm>.
20. *The James Dickey Reader*, p. 242
21. *The Selected Poems*, p. 84