

COMMENTS ON “THE SHEEP CHILD” AND “THE BEE”

by *Kevin Dickey*

What I'd like to share with you today is a little bit of my experience growing up with Dad and listening to him read his poetry. In fact, although you all know that I'm going to read “The Bee,” I'm going to read “The Sheep Child” as well. And for those of you who know, one of the poems is about me, and the other isn't, and I'll let you guess which one is which.

The first one I'll read is “The Sheep Child.” Since I grew up listening to Dad read this poem (as well as others), I heard him read it at various stages of my life. In the first stage, as a child, I certainly had no idea what bestiality was, and even though this poem derives its content from that subject, it becomes quite beautiful, especially as viewed through the eyes of the sheep child—the dead sheep child, pickled in that bottle way back in some dusty room. As my father used to say when he'd introduce this poem, and as Bronwen reminded me, “This poem has many faults, but you can't fault it for originality of viewpoint.” When I was a child and listened to this poem and heard him introduce it, he would be extremely tactful in its subject matter. And I'm sure he delighted, maybe in a devious way, in how the audience would react when they finally realized exactly what it was about, especially in light of the censorship he was having to deal with in the early sixties. As a matter of fact, he was chastised several times for reading this poem in public.

In any case, when I was a kid I didn't really know what this was all about, but I did pick up on the beauty of that viewpoint. Then, in the second stage, when I was an adolescent, I started to hear stories very much like “The Sheep Child.” For those of you who don't know, this poem is based on an agrarian legend of a child who's conceived by a farm boy and a sheep and who only lived for a very, very fleeting moment. To paraphrase the opening lines, people have “heard tell” that this thing, this freak is pickled in a museum somewhere in Atlanta, that you can actually go and see it, and that its eyes are open. So when I started hearing stories of this kind as an adolescent, and I'd go and listen to Dad read this poem again, I thought, “God, I didn't know Dad knew about these kinds of things.” But the imagery stayed with me. And the third stage, where this poem kind of came back to haunt me a bit, was when I was in medical school in embryology class, learning about the wonders of human development, spontaneous mutations and what can happen without any rhyme or reason to form the beautiful figure of a human being or turn it into something that is so totally disorganized that it cannot live. The first thing I thought of was this poem. I resisted the urge, but I did a fair amount of research to discover if this really could happen, and, of course, I realized it really couldn't.

So part of this poem is, in fact, a description, and the last part of the poem, which is truly the most beautiful piece, is told through the eyes of the sheep child, lying pickled in that big jar somewhere in the deepest, darkest bowels of a museum in Atlanta.

[*Reads “The Sheep Child.”*]

One of the things you understand, if you ever heard Dad read any of his poetry, is that if you went back to read it yourself, you really couldn't read it in anyone else's voice but his, and "The Sheep Child" was one of those pieces, at least for me.

And "The Bee" certainly has special significance for this place—Clemson—and for me personally. It's dedicated to the football coaches at Clemson College, 1942. This poem is derived from a true incident that occurred when I was six years old. I'd just like to spend a little bit of time talking about that incident and another one that certainly made a huge impression on me as a child. Certainly, a son's impression of his father is in many ways superhuman. Fathers are large, and they can do things that you never thought you could do. My father actually did a couple of things that I know I probably could never do as an adult. One of them I witnessed when I was three years old in a place called Gubbio, Italy, while my family was taking a prolonged trip in Europe. My brother Chris wrote about it very eloquently and was able to stir my memory and help me to really remember what had happened. I was the usual terrible three-year-old and ran away from my parents and onto a ski lift. Actually, it was kind of a round, tin-can-shaped car on a cable, which moved very quickly over about a thousand-foot precipice with the door wide open. And my father, without any hesitation, jumped over that precipice right into that car. As a three-year-old, I thought it was a matter of course because he was superhuman and could do these things, but now I realize, in middle age, that I don't know what might have happened had *my* son done that.

The second incident is the one on which "The Bee" was based. When I was six years old, we were on a routine family trip to the archery range (which we used to do fairly often) and were just finishing up and getting into the car. We were in one of those canyons above Los Angeles, near one of those mountain roads with many blind curves. Suddenly, this bee came out of the woods—not even woods. It came out of the grass over a picket fence. And I had the usual histrionic, childish reaction to a bee and ran off into the road. A little red pickup truck came around the bend, and I, in my frenzy, felt this vise-like grip on my right arm. It was my father's, and he pulled me back. Even though the poem embellishes upon the story, and makes it better, he was speechless at the time. But my mother wasn't.

I also want to mention that the poem's narrator goes on to talk about the expectations and failings of an athlete. He certainly speaks to many of you who have been athletes and have been in situations where your superiors had very high expectations only to find out that you can't live up to them. Obviously, we are here now because of the great successes that far, far out-shadow anything my father could have ever done at Clemson College on that football team in 1942.

[Reads "The Bee." The text below is the excerpt that decorated the printed program of Clemson's James Dickey Celebration. Besides a few lines at the beginning of the poem, the passage lacks the poet's long anticlimactic "talk about the expectations and failings of an athlete" to which his son refers.]

FROM JAMES DICKEY'S "THE BEE"

(TO THE FOOTBALL COACHES OF CLEMSON COLLEGE, 1942)

. . . I must live faster for my terrified
Small son it is on him. Has come. Clings.

Old wingback, come
To life. If your knee action is high
Enough, the fat may fall in time God damn
You, Dickey, *dig* this is your last time to cut
And run but you must give it everything you have
Left, for screaming near your screaming child is the sheer
Murder of California traffic: some bee hangs driving

Your child
Blindly onto the highway. Get there however
Is still possible. Long live what I badly did
At Clemson and all of my clumsiest drives

For the ball all of my trying to turn
The corner downfield and my spindling explosions
Through the five-hole over tackle. O backfield

Coach Shag Norton,
Tell me as you never yet have told me
To get the lead out scream whatever will get
The slow-motion of middle age off me I cannot
Make it this way I will have to leave
My feet they are gone I have him where
He lives and down we go singing with screams into

The dirt,
Son-screams of fathers screams of dead coaches turning
To approval and from between us the bee rises screaming
With flight grainily shifting riding the rail fence
Back into the woods traffic blasting past us
Unchanged, nothing heard through the air-
conditioning glass we are lying at roadside full

Of the forearm prints
Of roadrocks strawberries on our elbows as from
Scrimmage with the varsity now we can get
Up stand turn away from the highway look straight
Into trees. . . .

. . . Let me sit here with you, son,
As on the bench, while the first string takes back
Over, far away and say with my silentest tongue, with the man-
creating bruises of my arms with a live leaf a quick
Dead hand on my shoulder, "Coach Norton, I am your boy."