

ELEGY FOR THE
SOUTHERN
DRAWL

p o e m s

 RODNEY JONES

ELEGY

for the **SOUTHERN**

DRAWL

Rodney Jones



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The **CHANGING**
of the **PRESENT**

For Alexis

I dug a ditch three feet deep and eighteen inches wide
From where the roots had broken through
The Orangeburg pipe and clogged the line

To the end of the drive, and turned and dug
At a perpendicular out a ways and down
To tie in with the junction at the sewer main.

With a shovel and pick, with my sore back
And poet's hands, I accomplished this:
A narrow hole and deep, but undercut at the edges—

The chert kept sliding there. It was like a problem
With law or philosophy. The more
I threw out, the more kept pouring in.

Better the next afternoon when you joined me,
Sweating out your first day home from college
When others might have slept or shopped.

I could not see you, the hole had grown
So vast by then, but heard your rock can
Rattling in the depths, and an occasional

Shit or *goddam*, or an allusion to *The Inferno*.
Did I seem remote? Father was never so proud
Of daughter. We finished excavating by dark,

Snow clouds rolling toward us from the prairie.
That night we were like a Dorothea Lange family,
Hoarding water, using buckets instead of toilets.

Now in late spring I come back to our work,
And the pipe you fitted by cheating at the joints,
Silent in the underground, taking crap, still holding.

Down Time

Where there had been a landscape, I saw everything
Bare and no need for description, now that depression
Had soaked me up: no noise from the pine, the only green.
Sleep bore me on its inward-bearing gale,
Just blood veering off bone, neither voice nor dream,
And when I woke, the weak music of sewage
Rushing behind walls. I needed to lean away
From the face no one would recognize, and the name
No one would call. If I could have imagined
That I was truly alive, I would have wanted to die.
Then, each morning, with a little less dread,
I went out and saw the frost on the lawn
And the awkward water frozen under the bridge;
But for weeks, in the birds limping on oily wings
Across the snow, and the foxes cringing
From dumpsters, I felt my life twinned
With everything that sinks, all the lost women
And men who, finding no door, sleep in the cold,
And the children, beaten down, foundering in disease.
How casually they seemed to bear the knowledge
Of their deaths. And then, poof! It was over.
Light took in the crystals of the thaw. I could
Look into the eyes of others without shame.
It would take time, and still, I was not there,
If there is here, excited again, on the other side.
Before the pleasure of lying with a woman,
There would be the pleasure of washing hands.

Resurrections

Once I was drunk in a foreign city—
I had come to take apart a story,
Downhill from the cathedral,
Through narrow, cobbled streets,
Between walls of bougainvillea,
And turned uphill, and, passing
Under an arch, entered the district
Where the rich people live.
After all, this was a story
Of Ferraris, countesses, and islands,
Not *The Sound and the Fury*.

And this was the next-to-last night
I would get transcendently smashed,
Break lamps, stain rugs, and black out,
But first I would bestow on the author
Certain invaluable technology
As concerns the workings of plot,
For all you have to do to change
The Man with the Golden Gun
To *Under the Volcano* is reconceive
The descriptions, characters,
And settings, re-register the dialogue,
Parse it, and put it in other mouths.

When I arrived, I wanted to leave,
And when I left, I wanted to arrive.

I remember a vase in the foyer,
African masks on the wall,
The lovely manners of my host,
But not how it got to be light,
Roosters crowing down the block,
A radio crackling—"Jumping the
Reader," Forster called it in his book
On fiction—and is it so bad
To come to, mystically vertical
As though you had entered the story
In the middle, and the police were
Telling it in another language?

My friend Ed, three and a half weeks
After shooting out the lights of the bridge
Between Northport and Tuscaloosa,
Came to in a crack house in the country
In Mississippi. Kids asleep on blankets,
Young girls dancing. Mutterings and ramblings.
Grown-up sorrows. He stumbled out.
Bald dawn. Song over. The naked
Well-digger in the back seat of his car kindly
Directed him to the road to Hattiesburg.

Sometimes in AA I hear those stories, ·
Just moments really, of abundant
And over-blossoming human time.

How one night, inside the brilliant
Agitation of bubbles in the glass,
The way got lost, and the shame
On the other side of the steadfast
Ambition to feel things deeply
Began to manifest on one shoulder
The magenta tattoo of a cross.
I fidget with my pen and do not speak.

The common account of waking beside
A stranger or coming home to find
The sheets stripped from the bed
And the bank accounts closed
Doesn't mean much, and the things
That get you in court, minor
Embarrassing assaults, insults,
Public urinations, and DUIs,
Are ordinary reasons for speaking up.

How picayunish my drunken strategy,
Perfected years ago in a moment
Of aggravation, to walk the beach
From El Salvador to Los Angeles.
Hard night, we say: hard light
That frames both suicide
And hasty marriage: spin it
A decade or two, it comes back
W. C. Fields or Dean Martin.

The ideal is to speak without
Delusion, expecting no compliment,
Forgiveness being a form of vanity.
After a while you get the feeling
It's not the person weaving between
The lines of self-loathing and self-rapture
But the story that's anonymous.

One boy told of coming to
In a stolen airplane over Kentucky,
Thick clouds, the cops
Two states away talking him down.
Another guy, fat with a florid face,
Told of waking with no ID,
No money, and no idea
How he had gotten from
Minneapolis to Sierra Leone.

I only walked down the hill
And hid while my daughter
Waited for the bus. I asked mercy
At the gate, a little forbearance,
A little silence in the house
While sleep revised me.
I was a tourist in the country of amnesia
Where everyone is Judas facing the Virgin.
Though the prayer there is desperate,
It is offered joyfully, as a child lifts

A bleeding hand to his mother,
And in the manner of the god
Who suffered that we should love him.

The Fruit House

Once I'd let the door bump shut behind me,
The fruit house was a form of suffering.
Its dour lattice of ancient, moldy jars,
Its apparatus of egg sacs and spiders,
Grew suddenly plush as a burial vault.

I wondered, Was the dark invisible?
Did I smell to others as I smelled myself?
What did I really sound like when I sang?
The air held a funk like old, rained-on felt,
Scant oxygen, foot-thick granite walls,

And things I'd put a hand on but no name.
I thought, A few more minutes and mama
Will come with the jars of apple butter;
Then of two men from *Reader's Digest*:
One trapped underwater in a sinking car,

The other waking in a casket, interred alive.
That both survived charmed me a little while.
Not that I'd starve. Not that it was hell—
That would come later when two neighbors
Lowered me through the dark to clean a well.

Owls

Because I had not seen them in the woods until I saw them in a book
And then only a shadow darting among shadows,
I am not going to quote the silence of their wings.

And because before I ever learned the smell of a jonquil
The same essence rose from the chemical
Jonquil in fly poison, I go in confusion,

As one who got the order backwards,
Who learned marriage before sex
And punishment before crime.

A small man, happy with easements,
Preferring the polished image to the dull thing,
I might have sat in the cold moonlight watching.

But the forests were all photographed
And the birds all recorded
When I began. Let the earth separate

My own thoughts from the gray branches of the beech.
After the owls are gone there will
Still be the owl faces in the leaves.