

## **Excerpts from James Dickey's Journals – from the book *Sorties***

### ***Poetry/Writing***

What I want to do most as a poet is to charge the world with vitality: with the vitality that it already has, if we could rise to it. This vitality can be expressed in the smallest thing and in the largest; from the ant heaving at a grain of sand to the stars straining not to be extinguished.

I wish the poem to be a large, intense and complete experience.

That strange, strange lucidity: that is the thing I want. The poem should be as though the most astonishing things were being said in a radically new and simple kind of English.

The most important single ingredient that any poem can have is a sense of necessity. There must be this sense of urgency and consequence, all in an imaginative kind of communication.

I want a fever in poetry; a fever, and tranquility.

What I have done as a writer has been done by a combination of will, intelligence and abandon. None is any good without the others.

The ability to cut away the literary frills and affectations and to say something necessary: that is the mark of a great writer.

What I want most in poetry is a haunted clarity.

In poetry, as in guitar playing or anything else, after a certain point one spends one's time trying to eliminate the little fuck-ups.

The kind of poetry I like most is extreme, simple, passionate and imaginative.

### ***Guitar Playing***

Play with confidence, power and relaxation. If one can add abandon to that, one has the thing as it should be had. To that, add precision.

More chord studies on guitar. These are very valuable. The whole instrument is opening up in ways I never thought possible.

Guitar playing very good, especially when I am sober. In about another 10 years I will be able to do whatever I want with the instrument.

### ***Middle Age***

The terror of middle age is like the terror of George Orwell's beggar in the streets of a large city: people look at you but they do not notice you. In some ways you have already become a ghost.

The sadness of middle age is absolutely unfathomable; there is no bottom to it.

The awful thing about growing older is that one can feel one's sense of the consequence of things – the feeling of their consequence – leaking away day by day. No matter what situation one finds oneself in, it is always the same; the main sentiment that occurs to one is simply "what does it matter?" In middle age, with the end still a good ways off, but maybe not, one is resigned in the most terrible way. The list of the possibilities of the things that one can do grows shorter and shorter. But much more terrible than that is the fact that the list of things that one wants to do gets shorter and shorter, faster and faster.

It strikes me as being very odd, and symptomatic of a great many things, how much more important the word "pleasant" becomes as one gets older.

At the age of 48, one becomes aware of a singular, distressing, strange and exhilarating thing: the world and experience gets going faster and faster. Life is speeded up, the lid comes off and one has no recourse but to go with bodily desire, imaginative abandon, delight, frustration and death.

### ***Drinking***

I have been drunk, more or less, for about the last 25 years. Everything I remember is colored at least to some extent by alcohol. What to make of this?

I must let youth go, and liquor with it.

The great thing about not drinking – the greatest thing – is that when you have a good feeling or a good idea, you can truthfully say it is not false.

I am sick of the petty wildness and the phony ecstasy of drinking. It is a relief to go back to being what I am, what I was intended to be.

### ***Miscellaneous***

The longer I live, the longer and better the whole perspective of possibility becomes, and the more I see how necessary it is to throw one's self open to the least chance impulse or stimulus coming from anywhere.

To be precise and reckless: that is the consummation devoutly to be wished.

The main thing is to ride the flood tide. Only a few get a chance to do this and one year of it is worth a thousand years of mediocrity.

A man cannot pay as much attention to himself as I do without living in hell all the time.

If intelligence and imagination are not releases into joy and fulfillment, it is better not to have them.

The world, the human mind, is dying of subtlety. What it needs is force.

What we all want is savage delight.

Work is easy. The thing that makes it hard is persuading yourself that it is hard.

A wonderful short dream this afternoon of sand, ocean and some kind of duplicity involving myself and two girls. I have very rarely had a nicer time.

Wonderful trip to Charleston this weekend with family. The weather was lovely, the city was lovely, the houses and walled gardens were lovely. Everything was as lovely as it is possible for things to be in Charleston, and that is lovely indeed.

Alert and relaxed: that is the secret.

I think we are all talking ourselves to death, me included.