

“Can’t Nothin’ Bad Ever Happen to Me Now”

A Tribute To James Dickey by Ellen Malphrus

Published in *Apostrophe* 1:3/4 (1998)

When Jim Dickey began to feel his final ascent into death he sent out wings to herald his coming. He sent them to the sea, and one of them came to rest in the palm of my hand, the palm he had kissed when I last saw him. Surrounded by stacks of books, he sat in his big chair that day and read to me from the new novel. As was our ritual, I reported on how the fish were biting in Bluffton and what new birds I’d seen, turning to them in the field guide while he asked what I thought of their colors and sounds and flight patterns. When it was time to leave, he took my right hand in his, opened my fingers out, and gently kissed the inside of my hand. Then he rolled my fingers into a fist, around which he held his own hands and said, “Now you hold on tight to that and can’t nothin’ bad ever happen to you.”

Many of the gifts that Dickey gave me - gifts you can hold in your hands, that is - are connected somehow with the natural world, especially with flight: a small volume of Audubon’s *Birds of America* inscribed with “Love from all the creatures of the air - including James Dickey”; the oil painting of a rather expressionistic hawk, its eerie wings looming outstretched, which he had done in 1957 with his sister-in-law’s paints; the bolo-like scarf tie he gave me the Christmas *Eagle’s Mile* came out. It had been presented to him in Austria in 1954 and bears the Austrian eagle in cloisonné. The most beryl gift of flight from him, though, was not in the form of some powerful bird of prey but in the most winsome of all creatures of the air - a butterfly.

It was bitter cold at the beach that Friday before Dickey died, much too cold for any but the foolhardy. My companion and I had walked past numb, hooded and bundled, pausing here and there at curiosities from the tide before, when a

bit of color caught my eye. A butterfly, of all things. I reached down and flicked away the mounded sand and ground shells that lay atop it, its disheveled wings matted together and leadened with wetness. There was the slightest stirring when I picked it up, and in total disbelief I brushed away more of the sand. It moved, impossibly alive, and when I blew warm air down into it I felt the metamorphosis, felt it lighten with the surprise of life. I thought of its battered determination, tossed about on the waves, washed to shore unable to free itself with flight. Of the wet sand and debris piling up on its ever-so-fragile wings as it lay dying. Slowly, slowly dying. Most unnatural.

But now it fluttered in stillness within my cupped hands, and when I looked more carefully not only were the colors of its pattern scratched and the edges of its wings tattered, but also its right set of wings was completely misplaced, the lower wing now atop the upper. I suppose from the wind sheer that had driven it into the ocean during its improbable flight down the coast.

That night I put it inside my upturned gaucho hat and in the darkness it made its way up onto the brim; when I awoke there it was, weary-winged but somehow still alive. The forecast was for even colder weather, so before going on holiday that weekend, my birthday weekend, I moved my as-yet unplanted camellias inside to protect them from the freeze and perched the miracle butterfly on the one with the most blooms, in hopes it might take sustenance from the nectar.

When I returned Sunday afternoon, around the time Dickey's heartbeat stopped, the wingbeat had stopped as well. But the butterfly - that unlikely, bedraggled creature of the air - had made its way to the tip of the tallest camellia and had outstretched its wings in flight position, had spread them completely outward, leaving behind the shape of magic while the spirit of it flew off into the Celestial with my dear friend and mentor, off to a place where wings no longer fail.

A Monarch butterfly had no business off the Carolina coast in the middle of January. But I, with brazen sentimentality, full aware that each of us close to him has his own such tales to tell, am satisfied that when Big Jim fell so ill that Thursday, the spirit of flight within him took wing - up and out of Columbia towards his beloved Pawley's Island and then down the shoreline to wish me well before he had to go. To deliver the kiss of a frail butterfly's wingbeat in the palm of my hand. To remind me that if I hold on tight to that blessing can't nothin' bad ever happen to me. It was him all right. No one else would have gone to the trouble.

@ 1998 Ellen Malphrus
All Rights Reserved