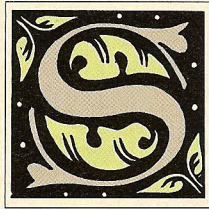


The Poet as Survivor

James Dickey, at 67, continues to search for a few immortal words ■ By Michele Cohen Marill



Some dark Thing is chasing James Dickey. It is gaining on him even as he slogs through the blackness, reaching, groping, seeking but finding no possible escape.

Except to awaken. And turn images of a nightmare into poetry.

Now the poet's voice resonates with the drama of his recurring dream. His face, veiled with venerable fatigue, projects something rapt and powerful.

"It's so horrible, you can never bear to look at it, but you know it's there.

"With me, it's always against a tremendous wind. Where you have to grasp twigs and grass and try to pull yourself. But the Thing behind you, trying to get you, is not impeded. . . . It's gaining on you. As the poet Synge says, 'And Death is making great strides running on my track.'"

A pause is as heavy as the voice. Students at the University of South Carolina, squeezed around a conference table, others spilling over to the sidelines, sit silent, mesmerized as the poet-author of *Deliverance* and *Alnilam* resurrects the Thing chasing him.

"That dream of pursuit and the inability to get away from something can yield some powerful kind of poetry. If we could just get it like it really is. If we could find the words."

At 67, after some three dozen books and a career that includes a National Book Award for a collection of poetry and a best-selling novel that was made into a movie, that is still James Dickey's waking pursuit. To escape mortality through the immortality of poetry. To turn ordinary emotion into something otherworldly. To find the words.

