

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Richard Jones**  
**- poems -**

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## Richard Jones()

Richard Jones is an American poet. He was born in London, England, received his B.A. and M.A. from the University of Virginia and an M.F.A. from Vermont College of Fine Arts. He is the author of seven books of poetry, most recently *The Correct Spelling & Exact Meaning* (Copper Canyon Press, 2010), as well as a number of limited edition volumes. *The Blessing: New and Selected Poems*, a selection of poems from six of his books, received the Midland Authors Award for Poetry for 2000. He is also the editor of the critical anthology *Poetry and Politics* (William Morrow and Company, 1985). In 2000, he published a compact disc, *Body and Soul*, in which he discusses the art of poetry. In 2011, he published *Thunder on the Mountain* (East of Eden Press), a nonfiction book that explores the relationship between poetry and painting. He is editor of the literary journal *Poetry East* and its many anthologies, including *The Last Believer in Words and Bliss*. He is currently professor of English at DePaul University in Chicago, where he has taught since 1987. He lives north of Chicago with his wife and three children.

# How Did You Meet Your Wife?

Swimming the English Channel,  
struggling to make it to Calais,  
I swam into Laura halfway across.  
My body oiled for warmth,  
black rubber cap on my head,  
eyes hidden behind goggles,  
I was exhausted, ready to drown,  
when I saw her coming toward me,  
bobbing up and down between waves,  
effortlessly doing a breaststroke,  
heading for Dover. Treading water  
I asked in French if she spoke English,  
and she said, "Yes, I'm an American."  
I said, "Hey, me too," then asked her out for coffee.

Anonymous submission.

Richard Jones

# Letter Of Recommendation From My Father To My Future Wife

During the war, I was in China.  
Every night we blew the world to hell.  
The sky was purple and yellow  
like his favorite shirt.

I was in India once  
on the Ganges in a tourist boat.  
There were soldiers,  
some women with parasols.  
A dead body floated by  
going in the opposite direction.  
My son likes this story  
and requests it each year at Thanksgiving.

When he was twelve,  
there was an accident.  
He almost went blind.  
For three weeks he lay in the hospital,  
his eyes bandaged.  
He did not like visitors,  
but if they came  
he'd silently hold their hand as they talked.

Small attentions  
are all he requires.  
Tell him you never saw anyone  
so adept  
at parallel parking.

Still, your life will not be easy.  
Just look in the drawer where he keeps his socks.  
Nothing matches. And what's the turtle shell  
doing there, or the map of the moon,  
or the surgeon's plastic model of a take-apart heart?

You must understand --  
he doesn't see the world clearly.

Once he screamed, "The woods are on fire!"  
when it was only a blue cloud of insects  
lifting from the trees.

But he's a good boy.  
He likes to kiss  
and be kissed.  
I remember mornings  
he would wake me, stroking my whiskers  
and kissing my hand.

He'll tell you -- and it's true --  
he prefers the green of your eyes  
to all the green life  
of heaven and earth.

Anonymous submission.

Richard Jones

# Sacrifices

All winter the fire devoured everything --  
tear-stained elegies, old letters, diaries, dead flowers.  
When April finally arrived,  
I opened the woodstove one last time  
and shoveled the remains of those long cold nights  
into a bucket, ash rising  
through shafts of sunlight,  
as swirling in bright, angelic eddies.  
I shoveled out the charred end of an oak log,  
black and pointed like a pencil;  
half-burnt pages  
sacrificed  
in the making of poems;  
old, square handmade nails  
liberated from weathered planks  
split for kindling.  
I buried my hands in the bucket,  
found the nails, lifted them,  
the phoenix of my right hand  
shielded with soot and tar,  
my left hand shrouded in soft white ash --  
nails in both fists like forged lightning.  
I smeared black lines on my face,  
drew crosses on my chest with the nails,  
raised my arms and stomped my feet,  
dancing in honor of spring  
and rebirth, dancing  
in honor of winter and death.  
I hauled the heavy bucket to the garden,  
spread ashes over the ground,  
asked the earth to be good.  
I gave the earth everything  
that pulled me through the lonely winter --  
oak trees, barns, poems.  
I picked up my shovel  
and turned hard, gray dirt,  
the blade splitting winter  
from spring. With hoe and rake,  
I cultivated soil,

tilling row after row,  
the earth now loose and black.  
Tearing seed packets with my teeth,  
I sowed spinach with my right hand,  
planted petunias with my left.  
Lifting clumps of dirt,  
I crumbled them in my fists,  
loving each dark letter that fell from my fingers.  
And when I carried my empty bucket to the lake for water,  
a few last ashes rose into spring-morning air,  
ash drifting over fields  
dew-covered  
and lightly dusted green.

Anonymous submission.

Richard Jones

# The Road

I, too, would ease my old car to a stop  
on the side of some country road  
and count the stars or admire a sunset  
or sit quietly through an afternoon....

I'd open the door and go walking  
like James Wright across a meadow,  
where I might touch a pony's ear and  
break into blossom; or, like Hayden

Carruth, sustained by the sight  
of cows grazing in pastures at night,  
I'd stand speechless in the great darkness;  
I'd even search on some well-traveled road

like Phil Levine in this week's New Yorker,  
the poet driving his car to an orchard  
outside the city where, for five dollars,  
he fills a basket with goddamned apples.

Richard Jones

# Tree

When the sun goes down  
I have my first drink  
standing in the yard,  
talking to my neighbor  
about the alder tree  
rising between our houses,  
a lowly tree that prospered  
from our steady inattention  
and shot up quick as a weed  
to tower over our rooftops,  
where it now brandishes  
a rich, luxuriant crown.  
Should we cut it down?  
Neither of us wants to -  
we agree that we like  
the flourishing branches,  
shade like thick woods.  
We don't say it,  
studying our tree in silence,  
but we know that if the roots  
get into the foundations  
we've got real trouble.  
John goes back inside.  
Nothing to be done in summer -  
not to those heavy branches.  
I balance my empty glass  
on top of a fence post.  
In the quiet early dark,  
those peaceful minutes  
before dinner, I bend down  
to the flower beds I love  
and pull a few weeds -  
something I've meant to do  
all day.

Richard Jones

# What Do You Do About Dry Periods In Your Writing?

When the writing is going well,  
I am a prince in a desert palace,  
fountains flowing in the garden.  
I lean an elbow on a velvet pillow  
and drink from a silver goblet,  
poems like a banquet  
spread before me on rugs  
with rosettes the damask of blood.

    But exiled  
from the palace, I wander --  
crawling on burning sand,  
thirsting on barren dunes,  
believing a heartless mirage no less true  
than palms and pools of the cool oasis.

Anonymous submission.

Richard Jones