

THE JAMES DEAN VARIATIONS

1. HOUSES

somehow, stay in the mind, remembered —
a piece of a porch, a lighted window
rectangular light in the darkness: Jonah says
this is where Jimmy lived. This is where
he had people who kept him — not his parents —
we are both fuzzy about relationships
but I'm impressed: they seem to know him.
O yes. Friend of Jimmy's. Rode that
motorcycle. O you're always welcome
do come in, they are urgent
out of the night.

2. HOW THINGS LAST

What stays on, long after
the kids are all grown up and gone
is some reminder: this basketball hoop
nailed to the tree

or, later, in town
we'll see how the house leans, lonely
on a corner of two-bit shops and stores
where Jonah says farm buildings were —
sheds and silos — their house
his father built, where Jonah was born.

The long, tall windows in front were salvage
he says, like the rest of the house, trash
lumber, whatever was at hand. God, he says
I hated those windows; no curtains
who could afford curtains? the light
one naked bulb, hanging down

and that light was brighter than heaven
he tells me. Here I was, a fat little kid
thought the whole world was looking in

I was dying, of embarrassment, he says
but I had my moment: James Dean
let me ride behind on his bike
and we found the sky.

3. ONCE WHEN I WAS

Natalie Wood, I wanted to ask him O James Dean
how did you manage to pick up that
bottle of milk and roll it

O, like Jonah, like anybody
across the brow like a savior
delivering relief — O James Dean, our own
icon at the drive-in, now lost forever
it was something about the eyes
just like Jonah, dark-lashed
depths and shadows of eyes
saw too much, had seen
too much; it was way later
a stout sleazy queen down south
remarked O how remarkable, those eyes

get you in trouble, Jonah would sigh; wish
(he often said it) I had any other kind of eyes.

Remarkable, saw the same eyes in a photo of Jack Kerouac.

MEETING GERALD LOCKLIN AT THE HOLIDAY INN BAR IN GREAT BEND, KANSAS

was this incredible
thing because, years and years so many years
like an old pair of scissors we have occasionally
crossed blades in the same places — that is, our work
occasionally cohabited on the same pages, which
does not instantly make for could you say "bonding"?
(I was afraid maybe what I laughed at
was supposed to be taken serious) but

O, incredible, Toad's a Teddy Bear, which just
proves maybe if you live long enough
and everybody's patient
Sonya Heinie wins the gold, the Cavalry comes
over the hill in time, and Fortune smiles.

— Ruth Moon Kempher

St. Augustine FL

MEETING THE TOAD

we're introduced in the tiny lobby
of bbc radio humberside
and trade small talk about magazines
before our fifteen minutes on the air.
"been in pearl?" he asks.
"yeah."
"how about wormwood?"
"nah, he hates my stuff."