


# Brief Tracks

poems   
by JIM THOMAS

EDITED BY  
Joe Benevento



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I dedicate this book to the Thomas family, in Jim's name.

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# INTRODUCTION

During his lifetime, and particularly from the 1960s until his death in February of 2009, Jim Thomas steadily published his poetry in a few hundred different literary journals, magazines, and newspapers, including *Descant*, *The Cimmaron Review*, *The Chariton Review*, *Poetry Ireland*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *New Mexico Humanities Review*, *Wind*, *The Cape Rock*, *Poetry Wales*, *Midwest Poetry Review*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *English Journal*, *Paintbrush*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *RE: Arts & Letters*, *The Kansas City Star*, and *Sou'wester*. In spite of this long-term, prolific output, Thomas only ever put together one book of poems, *Seed Time, Harvest Time* (Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1990). In *Brief Tracks*, I have selected from the hundreds of published and unpublished poems Jim Thomas left behind that did not appear in his first book. The Thomas family has given me access to all the available candidates for inclusion, almost four hundred poems, in order to create this posthumous volume.

My original conception for a final book of Jim Thomas's poems was to put together a chapbook of the poems I knew best; as poetry editor of *Green Hills Literary Lantern* for the past fifteen years, it has been my privilege to publish over thirty of his poems in our journal (twenty of the sixty-nine poems appearing in *Brief Tracks* were first published in *GHLL*). However, once I saw how many poems were available to me beyond the *GHLL* selections, once I had the opportunity to look at poems with a range dating back to the '60s all the way up to just weeks before Thomas's death, I knew I had to take on the more ambitious project of a fully representative selection of poems for a writer whose work clearly merited a second volume.

Those familiar with Jim Thomas's work know that he was a lyric and narrative poet, whose poems often revolved around themes of nature, family, and rural life. They also are aware that he was equally comfortable in free verse and form poetry, with a particular deftness within the sonnet form (T. R. Hummer, during a reading at Northeast Missouri State University in the



'80s, identified Thomas as "one of the finest writers of sonnets in America today"). Readers of this present volume, however, will discover Jim Thomas to have been far more than a careful recorder of domestic life and the natural world and a master of more than sonnets alone. The poet of *Brief Tracks* has a considerable range, both thematically and lyrically.

The first two subdivisions of this book, "Some of the Hidden Stars" and "The Carnival" do focus on poems about nature and family, respectively, but they reveal far more than a fellow who liked to hunt and fish and who cared tremendously for family. Though Jim Thomas certainly was that fellow, the poems in *Brief Tracks* demonstrate that he wasn't *just* that fellow or that poet. For example, the first grouping does include poems about fishing ("The Limit," "All the Time There Is," and "Fergus's Pool") and hunting ("Fall Hunts" and "Two Hunts"), but in all of those poems, while Thomas, as ever, is able to get the fishing and hunting details down with steady realism and lyric precision, the poems become far more than a discussion of how he caught trout or shot deer. Themes of cycles, the nature of loss, and eternal return predominate. Even more to the point, a majority of Thomas's nature poems aren't about hunting or fishing at all, and range from an at once poignant and humorous poem about frog song ("Lovers") to darkly humorous, almost naturalistic poems about nature's casual killing ("Dinner Companions" and "Breakfast Guest"). And while there is the Jim Thomas who predictably feels remorse over maiming a fellow mammal in "Muskrat," there is also the surprise of the almost demonically gleeful coyote killer of "Cave Lupum." Perhaps most particularly revealing is the opening poem, a simple prayer in three irregularly rhyming six-line stanzas, in which Thomas wishes for purple martins to inhabit the houses he has constructed for them ("Grace Notes"), to a poem in rhyming couplets masterfully masked by enjambments that explains the poet's most profound reasons for venturing out into nature at all ("The Retriever").

The family poems include some of the dearest poems a son ever wrote about a father ("The Heavy Rain" and "Stan's Tree") and lyric poems that express a simple love of his own wife, children, and grandchildren ("Of Sun and Silkworms" and "A Letter to My Mother," to name a few). But there are also poems willing to admit the limitations and challenges of family life ("Next on ABC: What's My Line" and "The Plum Bouquet"), and perhaps the most ambitious poem of the section, "The Carnival," an intentionally dizzying, rhyming tour de force that best approximates Thomas's sometimes whirlwind approach to life and art. The final poem, "Last Place," includes a wistfully dark joke about where we all end up, but also an inside joke, a rare, overtly academic ploy by this PhD English professor, Fullbright scholar-poet, who most often belied his own erudition: an epigraph in Spanish by a nonexistent writer, "Alfonso Real, hijo," made up by Thomas himself.

The final two sections of this volume are where admirers of Jim Thomas's poetry will find perhaps his most engaging and maybe surprising work. "Scotch and Snow" assembles poems least directly connected to each other thematically, though it includes poems about being a writer ("Scotch and Snow" and "A Grumbling Weed"), about the sheer joy of sensual living ("Catnap" and "The Dinner Bell"), and about bouts with sadness and loneliness for the sometimes troubled introvert Thomas's almost exaggeratedly extroverted daily personality allowed very few people ever to witness. This latter quality comes out most clearly in a poem with a comic title, "Shopping for Words on a Chilly Evening," though also in "Scraping through Dry Grass," and the opening, "I would kiss." This grouping also includes travel poems centered in Mexico and Bulgaria, and a comic, image-rich tour de force, this time in garrulous free verse, about the pleasures of and temptations in apricots ("Confessions of an Apricot Fancier"). There's even a darkly surreal early poem, "Happy Sounds," and in the section title poem, "Scotch and Snow," a single final phrase that perhaps best captures Thomas as both person and poet: "inebriate of daily plainness."

The final section of the book is devoted to poems about time, death, and dying, fittingly so since they include Jim Thomas's last few poems before his own death. Even so, aside from the very last poem, "View from Room 102, HADH," which clearly shows Jim receiving the blood transfusions that kept him alive the last months of his bone marrow cancer, it might be difficult to figure out which were his final poems, since he was focused on time, on the final end, for most of his poetic life. In poems he wrote thirty years or more before his death, he is already considering the inevitable end. He felt the loss of his own parents so keenly that he refers to himself twice in this collection as an "old orphan." Though his declining years were mostly healthy, his focus on time running out ("On Watches" and "Dream Voyage"), on what others' deaths say to us ("Picking Blackberries with Mrs. Sperry," "The Cure," and "Hay Crop"), and on trying to embrace the remaining time ("Sunday Evening" and "A June Hit"), would seem almost morbid if not for the consistently gentle humor and keen lyricism rendered again and again in these poems. One might even argue that Jim Thomas's poems are so often full of a most genuine vitality precisely because he keenly understood and recorded both the humble joys of daily life, and the unwavering reality that it must always lead, as in his sonnet "Some Hill I Passed," to a "darker threshold finally crossed."

It is inherently presumptuous on any editor's part to put together a grouping of poems for a writer who cannot have the last say about their arrangement. It's more than probable that Jim Thomas would not have put together his last volume exactly as the one I place before his readers now. But he, like any veteran writer, understood it is the reader who ultimately must decide the writer's relevance and even his meanings. I invite all of Thomas's admirers, and the many new ones I hope to deliver him, to draw your own conclusions about the merits of my organization of this work. My consolation is that a second book of Jim Thomas's poems now exists, and there is nothing I have done in putting it together that

can take away from the power, truth, and lyricism of each of these fine poems.

Joe Benevento  
Kirksville, Missouri  
June 2009

## ABOUT THE EDITOR

Joe Benevento is professor of English at Truman State University, where he teaches courses in creative writing and American literature and serves as co-editor of the *Green Hills Literary Lantern*. His poems, stories, and essays have appeared in more than two hundred literary journals, including *Poets & Writers*, *Bilingual Review*, and *The Chattahoochee Review*. He has published six books of poetry and fiction, including his novel, *The Odd Squad*, a finalist for the 2006 John Gardner Fiction Book Award.