

**Michael Chitwood's**

**SPILL**

**(Tupelo Press, 2008)**

**A READER'S COMPANION**

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## Where Did That Come From?

I am often asked at readings or writers' conferences where my poems come from. My smart aleck answer is that I don't know and I don't want to know, fearing that if I took away the mysterious part of writing, it would no longer be interesting to do. But I don't really think that's what the questioner is asking. I don't think I can explain the jumps and linkages that happen during the creative process (and that's the part I don't want to try to explain), but what I think the question is about is how a particular poem got started. For the most part the answer to that is clear to me, and I thought I would try to describe the spark that lit the fuse for each of the poems in *Spill*.

### Section One: *Finding the Dog*

Blue Sky — One day on a walk, I was thinking about the small town where I grew up. It was a rural, mountain town, very traditional during the period of my childhood. It suddenly hit me that everyone I had known then believed in God. I was sure of it. That seemed remarkable to me, living as I was with my own questioning and in a freethinking university town where I could name any number of people who did not believe. So, first line.

Flight — The story at the center of this poem had been waiting around a long time. It happened to my brother-in-law and his son. I had wanted to write about it ever since my brother-in-law told it one Thanksgiving or Christmas. It would periodically surface during my writing time. What allowed me to finally get it was when the image of the slow-motion running and flight.

Waltzing the Dog — I used to dance with my collie. Not something you forget easily.

Meat — We have an old-fashioned butcher shop in town and I went in and saw the chart for the cuts of meat. I thought, "It looks like a map."

Dog — My collie again. He did eat the pantyhose. I did pray. Of course, the adult me invented new words for the prayer.

Snapper — I was driving near a swampy area and caught sight of something along the road side. I thought I knew what it was and hadn't seen one in years. Sure enough it was a snapping turtle, about a 25-

pounder. They are fierce-looking creatures (as I describe in the poem) and I immediately thought back to another encounter with a snapper.

In January — The images in this poem came from the word “laminates.” I thought of that description for the light and the images of those games with the clear plastic sheets came from that. I completely made up the Garden of Eden part.

Whisperings on Wednesday Morning — Hearing swing chains screeching somewhere in my neighborhood put me on a school playground.

Finding the Dog — This poem started with a sound. I had found a dead deer in the woods near my home (I take a lot of walks) and heard the “sizzle” of the maggots working in the dead flesh. I had heard that sound on another very sad occasion. My dog had been missing about a week when I found him.

The Morning After Being Saved — This poem began with the title. At 13, I was “saved” at a evangelical revival service and then was so disappointed in the following days after the religious fervor wore off and everything seem so ordinary.

Knot — I was thinking about the phrase “scotch it” and tried to imagine a situation in which that phrase would be used.

## **Section Two: Speed, Plunder, Devour**

The Cello — I heard a story on National Public Radio about a musician whose instrument was so valuable she would book it a seat on the airplane rather than take a chance of it being lost or roughly handled. The image of the instrument in the airplane seat stuck.

Old Snow — During a hike with friends, we passed patches of snow in shade and you could feel the shift in temperature as you went by them. I thought “the chill like a breath on your neck.” That phrase stayed around and brought about “Old Snow.”

Walking — For about a year I watched this woman try to walk her dog every morning. It was amazing to me how the dog stopped at almost the same spot every day.

To Be Saved You Must Be Spent — Dogwoods are one of my favorite trees, and they are one of the first to blossom in spring. When they drop their early white petals, it looks like a letter that’s been torn up and scattered. I was thinking about what that letter might have said.

The Seagulls of Wal-Mart — I live two and a half hours away from the ocean and yet there are seagulls in the parking lot at the Wal-Mart. I kept wondering what was up with that.

Kingdom of — The image of the tools outlined to mark their place came to me out of the blue, and I wanted to create a poem that captured the atmosphere of the room that was the workshop of someone who would do that.

The Window — From a second story window, I watched a guy in a suit approach a big puddle of water in front of an office building. He just walked around to another door, but in my mind's eye he leapt.

On Being Asked to Pray for a Van — I did get the fundraising letter and it struck me as so silly to pray for a vehicle that I thought, "Why not pray for all it's parts as well." I couldn't resist the pun at the end.

Maher-shalal-hash-baz — I was team-teaching a short course on the book of Isaiah and the eighth chapter was on my mind when I came upon the hawk as I walked across the University of North Carolina's (UNC's) campus.

Hands — This was an assignment I gave myself after I had the "Gloves" poem.

Gloves — This started with the first line when I realized that, literally, you could give yourself a hand.

Deer Hunting in Rain — I'm a deer hunter and use tree stands. I liked the notion of "sitting in a stand" and of trying to capture the spiritual nature of spending hours alone in the woods.

### **Section Three: A Good Problem**

Spill — During my father's treatments for leukemia he received countless bags of blood platelets that often took more than an hour to empty because using a pump, as would be done for whole blood, would damage the platelets. So, I had much time to contemplate those bags full of yellow liquid.

The Life — Bats are mammals and therefore could be carriers of ticks. What a flight.

The Promised Land — My neighbors were moving and watching the moving van guys at work, pieces of furniture sometimes carried on their backs, reminded me of scenes from the movie *The Ten Commandments* when the Israelites were packing up and leaving Egypt.

Neighbors — Deer plague our suburban neighborhood, eating everything. Occasionally they get clipped by cars, which brings in the birds of this poem. Being close to buzzards and hearing their powerful wing beats as they take off is a spooky experience.

Sheds — I know of at least one case where a shed such as described in the poem has saved a marriage. I wanted to pay homage to the mystical time spent in that ramshackle place.

The Annunciation — This poem began from seeing a dog trot through the snow angel my daughter had made. Dog and God. God and dog.

My Daughter's Hair After Her Bath — I had tried for years to get a rat-tailed comb into a poem. Naturally, it would be mean.

A Good Problem — This poem began with the contradictory phrase “a good problem.”

How You Know which One is Yours — Political poems are hot potatoes. They can quickly turn into rants or soapbox sermons. After his death, I brought home some of my father's clothes and his smell in the coat gave me a way to get at this poem.

The Snowfield at Lone Fountain — I loved the sound of the name of this little community, the connection of the “o”s and “n”s between the words. The name had so much atmosphere. It just kept calling to me.

I Don't Know How Certain Things Came into my House — I noticed that refrigerator magnet one day and was completely surprised. Where did it come from? Can things get into your home without you knowing? Are they thus animated spirits.

Ferns — I was getting ferns ready to come inside for the winter and suddenly had the sensation that I was combing a head of hair.

Just a Minute — This poem began with the line “It's the day that dogs/ will describe for us/ exactly what fear smells like.” What else would happen I wondered.

The Soul on its Leach, the Body on its Leash — The soul and the body.  
The human and the animal. The woman bringing her dog up the street  
everyday.

Spanish Needles, Beggar's Lice, Cockleburrs — I love the names of these  
little stick-tights and when the phrase "The bushes' ambush" occurred to  
me the poem was off and running.

Saved — After his death, we had to clean out my father's garage. I don't  
think he had ever thrown away a single thing.

Dog's God — It seemed this dog-haunted book needed this poem and  
when people come up with images of God's appearance He/She always  
looks like us. I thought it would be the same for dogs.

If I Die before I Wake — The first poem I ever learned. It is, of course,  
supposed to be a comfort but it has another side.

Afternoons in October — Another walk, and it was so quiet you could  
hear the falling leaves touching down.

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## **At Play in the Graveyard: A Conversation**

Recorded at the Michael Chitwood Literary Festival,  
at Emory & Henry College, on October 19, 2007,  
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**Michael McFee (MM):** This is the last event of the Michael Chitwood Festival here at Emory & Henry. It's been a wonderful celebration, with great papers from Bob Denham, Thorpe Moeckel, and Tara Powell. I'm delighted to be here with my best buddy Mike Chitwood, not in the least because five years ago I was also here with Mike, though at that time he was asking the questions and I was doing the answering.

**Michael Chitwood (MC):** So it's déjà vu all over again.

**MM:** It's payback time! Seriously, I want to start this conversation, which is a continuation of a decades-long conversation that Mike and I have been having about poetry, by doing something that Mike did at the beginning of his interview with me: that is, by asking him to read one of his poems. He randomly picked the poem that I read, but because I like to control things, I've already picked his. I want Mike to read it and then tell us, as he asked me to do, what is characteristic or what is uncharacteristic about this Michael Chitwood poem.

**MC:** The poem that Michael has selected is called "Laundry." Before I read it, though, I want to pause and say what a tremendous honor this festival has been and how fine the papers were. They were among the best that I've ever heard at one of these events. Not to disparage other years' papers, but these were just excellent. I really appreciate the time and effort that Bob and Thorpe and Tara put into them and for these presenters' and Michael's willingness to be here. And I want to thank John Lang for his tremendous organizing skills and his sweating all the details to make this run so smoothly and be such a pleasurable an event.

**MM:** Amen!

**MC:** Now to the poem that Michael selected, which is from my book *Gospel Road Going*. "Laundry" is in a section of the book that has four poems in it, one for each of the groups of characters I talk about in the book as a whole. There's a poem for the boys, called "Sumac," and a poem for the girls, called "Dolls," and a poem for the women, "Laundry," and a poem for the men, called "Boots." So this is "Laundry":

Like an old song,  
the familiar lines repeated,  
sheets, shirts, dresses, pants  
and, behind, the under things.

Gotten out of again,  
grease, the salt of sweat,  
the day's slough and smear,  
rinsed, wrung, lifted to light.

They wore the wind,  
invisible work that like a ballad  
hung joy and sorrow  
side by each, coming clean.

They waved and walked.  
They billowed and snapped,  
whispered, waited, sometimes sported  
a common beetle like a fancy brooch.

So what makes this a typical Chitwood poem, if there is such a thing? I guess the first thing I would say is that, like much of my earlier work, it's set in a rural place, the mountains of Virginia, with a rural activity, hanging out the laundry rather than drying it indoors in a clothes dryer. It was my grandmother's habit to hang all the underwear *behind* the sheets and the dresses and everything else because she didn't want anybody who might be passing on the road to see that. It's her country modesty that's coming through in that detail. "Laundry" is also fairly short, which my poems tend to be. I've written a few that go on for several pages, but those are rare. This poem is also typical in taking an object as its subject, the object being clothes without people in them. I love object poems, as Michael knows. Like my other newer poems tend to be, it's also a threshold poem, in that things that are usually inside — the laundry folded and put away or hung in a closet — are in this case outside. So the poem reflects that interface between the indoor world and the outdoor world, the natural world. That's how I would say the poem might fit into my work.

**MM:** Is "Laundry" uncharacteristic in any way?

**MC:** No, I don't think that it is, though perhaps it's uncharacteristic because it's in quatrains.

**MM:** That's the only thing that occurred to me, because your free verse doesn't tend to have uniform stanzas.

**MC:** No, it doesn't. But actually both "Laundry" and "Boots" use such stanzas, mirroring one another, as I intended them to.

**MM:** One thing I like about this poem, Mike, that I think is characteristic of your work is how much is implied but not stated. For example, to me there's a tremendous amount of work implied in this poem — not just the doing of the laundry, but how the clothes that are washed are freed of grease, the salt of sweat, the day's slough and smear. Even the wearing of the wind is a kind of work. Could you talk about the role of work and working people and the working life in your poems?

**MC:** They're all very important to me, and central, of course, to my book *The Weave Room*. Work is what I learned growing up. I come from working class people. My father wore a tie to work, but he was the first in my family to do so. He was really the only man in my immediate surroundings — and almost every house that I could see from my house was occupied by relatives — who wore a tie to work.

**MM:** Ties seem an evil image in your work. You're not a fan of ties.

**MC:** But the doing of work was very important. In my community growing up, what you did was who you were. It was your identity, and for that reason work is central to my poetry.

**MM:** Last night at your reading you mentioned the impact that Seamus Heaney's poem "Digging" had on you, a poem that is also about work. Is that why that poem resonates so powerfully for you?

**MC:** Yes, I think so. What I feel in that poem by Heaney is that he's in the same situation I am, which is that he's from working class people who do hard, physical labor, manual labor, while he no longer does that. He's a teacher, he's a writer, he's a critic, he's a translator. And those are the roles I've adopted, too, so his poem speaks to me very deeply. Many people in my hometown don't really grasp the fact that I have a job, that teaching two courses at the University of North Carolina each semester, and writing for newspapers and radio, and making books of poetry is actual work. You stay at home, they ask. You don't go somewhere and do something? Well, of course I do go to my classes and meet with my students, but we sit around and talk about literature.

**MM:** Did this situation instill in Heaney — and does it instill in you — some measure of guilt about not being like your ancestors?

**MC:** Oh, absolutely. I think it's what motivates me to work as hard as I can at what I do because I do feel a bit guilty that my hands are very soft, and I know that if I were to do what my brother does for one day, I'd be exhausted.

**MM:** You once said, and I quote, “I went to college on textile money, and what I learned in those summers of working in the Angle Plant was as important as what I learned from Shakespeare.” What did you learn?

**MC:** Well, I think what I learned is that sense that work is important and that you should take your job seriously and do it the best that you can. Some people might have looked at the jobs in that Angle Plant and said, “It’s just monotonous; it’s just drudge work.” But the people who worked there did not; they took it very seriously, and they had a great amount of pride in what they did. They could tell you how many flawless bolts of cloth they had turned out. They had a very low rate of error compared to the J. P. Stevens Company nationwide, and they were very proud of that record because they knew they did good work. If what you did was who you were, then how you did it was your reputation, and that was also very important.

**MM:** A reputation that can’t be bought. You earned it.

**MC:** Yes, exactly. You earned it, as you earned your paycheck. One of the sayings I heard that appears in *The Weave Room* is, “I don’t have to back up to take my paycheck,” a statement meaning that you could take it honorably, that you could take it face-to-face because you’d done a good day’s work.

**MM:** Another of my favorite quotes of yours, though this one came in an email, not in a printed interview, claims that your two obsessions are money and God [laughter]. Money, of course, comes from work and from what one does there. “Laundry” is not a particularly God-haunted poem, though there’s something about the phrase “lifted to light” and this urge toward light and ascent that seems to recur in a lot of your poems. Could you speak a bit about this wrestling with God and topics like prayer and heaven and all the religious imagery that comes up, especially in your new book, *Spill*?

**MC:** That’s certainly the direction I’m going in now. God is probably the bigger dog of the subjects you’ve mentioned. Again, it goes back to my childhood in that I grew up in a fairly evangelical church, certainly evangelical for Methodists. It was closer to a Baptist church in many ways because it was a country church. The church was very important to my parents, both of whom were deeply religious. My mother remains quite religious. So I got that influence early on, as a kid, before the filters are up, this fairly conservative evangelical approach to Christianity. It’s going to be with me, I’m sure, for the rest of my days. You get infected early, and it’s *there*; it’s always going to be something that I wrestle with. Now, in mid-life, as my ideas about it have changed, it’s still something that concerns me. You could call it an obsession, I suppose, but it remains a big concern in my writing.

**MM:** It reminds me somewhat of a teacher and a mentor of yours about whom you once said, when interviewing me at this festival, “Another honoree of this festival, Charles Wright, often says that his poetry is about three things: language, landscape, and the idea of God.” And you said to me, “I was wondering if you could just sum up your work for us in that fashion.”

**MC:** Well, those are three things that I could apply to my own writing, though probably language less so for me. But definitely landscape. And for me it would be more God rather than the idea of God. Charles is distancing himself a little bit there because my emphasis, my journey, in that regard is much more tactile. It operates at the bloodstream level.

**MM:** You didn’t grow up with the idea of God. You grew up with the reality of God. It was a fact like this table.

**MC:** Yes, in the church.

**MM:** I think Charles’s approach was more intellectual and is more intellectual, so it’s natural that he would speak of the *idea* of God. Yours is more personal. You have a poem that’s entitled “The Small Town Voice of God.” To me that’s an interesting angle on this extremely old subject, perhaps the oldest subject for poetry. Are you conscious of that when you’re writing: “I can’t do that trope, I can’t do that image, because they’ve already been done”?

**MC:** Not really. If something were to come into a poem that’s clearly derivative, I think I would see that and worry about it. But the poem you mentioned is set at a football game, and God and football tend to get mixed up together in small towns, especially rural southern small towns, where football can be god, with a lower-case *g*. There’s often a prayer before a game, a practice that seems rather weird if you think about it, particularly if the speaker is asking for a win. It’s hard to decide which side God might root for.

**MM:** Before we leave the religious dimension of your poems, I’ve got to ask when you discovered the God/dog connection, this bone that you’ve been worrying for many years now. What planted that seed?

**MC:** It may have been Charles again. Blame everything on Charles. Dogs play a major role in Charles’s work, too. His tend to be constellations, the canine constellations. I don’t really know. But animals are for me a way toward what I see as the great Spirit, toward spirituality. Particularly when I was a young boy, dogs were a big part of my life and very important to me, an avenue for my emotions. If you haven’t cried over a dead dog, you haven’t truly lived, I don’t think. The natural world, especially via dogs in my case, is my path to a spiritual life.

**MM:** It just occurred to me while we were talking that, like God, dogs don't talk. They don't say anything.

**MC:** But they communicate.

**MM:** Do they love?

**MC:** Absolutely. I have a line in "Finding the Dog" in *Spill* where a boy asks his father, "Do dogs have a soul?" And the father answers, "This one did."

**MM:** That's a great line — and a great answer, too, for a father. You sort of modified that email to me, the one in which you said that your obsessions were God and money, with an email an hour or so later in which you said that your obsessions were less money and God than sex and God.

**MC:** That's probably closer to reality right there.

**MM:** I had a good time re-reading all your books for this festival, and I was surprised by, and fairly pleased by, how often sex and desire and other very basic human urges — which may not have been much discussed by Emory & Henry's founders — came up in your poems. Do you have anything to say about dealing with such subjects in poetry?

**MC:** Sexual desire is such a rich subject in poetry. Gregory Orr, who, along with Charles Wright, was one of my teachers at the University of Virginia, spoke recently at the University of North Carolina (UNC) and noted that if you are a lyric poet, your subjects are sex and death. I would take things less in the direction of sex and turn them more in the direction of sensuality. It's very important to me that my poems have the senses in them — and by the bucket loads. I think that's just the way I'm wired. Even as a kid, I can remember being very attracted to the sensuality of the world. One of my first memories is of lying out in my yard in some clover without a shirt on and noting the difference between the feel of that clover against my back and the feel of the grass. That's just how I arrived on this planet.

**MM:** I think that's why you're a poet, too. I've heard several other poets say that their early memories are of being outside in the sun or in the grass or in the yard. I guess *sensuality* would be a better word than *sexuality* to describe that experience. As we preach to our poetry students all the time, poems aren't really about ideas; they're about the senses.

**MC:** Exactly. And what I preach to my students is get the smells in there because smell is one of the greatest transmitters of emotion. I can

recall right now how my grandmother's cinnamon toast smelled when she would take it out of the oven.

**MM:** T. S. Eliot once said that he thought that smell was the most ignored sense in poetry. But I think you've remedied that.

**MC:** I try to get smells into my poems. They're odiferous.

**MM:** To return to what you said about Orr's remark that sex and death are the principal subjects of lyric poets, death is certainly another big topic, like God or sex and sensuality, that you're not afraid to write about. Your poems are very death-haunted, as well as God-haunted. One thing that interests me about your biography is that you grew up right beside a graveyard. Do you think your proximity to that graveyard had anything to do with the ease with which you write about death?

**MC:** I think it probably did because the graveyard was my playground. I literally played among the tombstones. There, on those tombstones, were all the names that were so familiar to me. My grandfather was buried right there beneath a double tombstone, and on the other side was my grandmother's name and, during my childhood, one date. That was rather spooky because the tombstone was just there, waiting for the day when she would join him, something that she has now done. But because it was family and relatives and people I had known, the graveyard seemed familiar, not spooky. Mysterious, yes, but not frightening. So I think that is why I come to approach death in the poems in the way that I do.

**MM:** And of course as we age, death does become increasingly a part of our lives, with friends and relatives and loved ones passing away.

**MC:** Is it Auden who says, "These days I just record in my journal the deaths of friends"? You get to a certain stage in life, and you certainly find that you've lost more friends than you did as a child.

**MM:** Do you think that poetry is a way of resisting that undertow of mortality and of asserting life in the face of so much death?

**MC:** Yes, I do, and to record, to remember, which accords a kind of life, a kind of afterlife, to the dead. My grandmothers, my dad now, in some ways still live through me, through everybody that remembers them.

**MM:** And, if you're like me, always will. My parents have been dead for twenty years, and yet they surface all the time. And almost always the way they re-emerge is in poems, without my consciously thinking about them.

**MC:** Except that now, I have to say, it really spooks me out when I look in the mirror and my dad is rising up through the waters of that mirror.

**MM:** We haven't talked any about technique, about being a writer, from the nuts-and-bolts point of view. I wonder if you could walk us through the typical process of composing a Chitwood poem from the very beginning until it's immortalized in a book [laughter].

**MC:** Well, I usually write in the mornings because that's when I'm the freshest. Some poets work best after midnight, but I'm a sleep-after-midnight poet. Perhaps that preference goes back to what we were saying earlier about work, that you get ready in the morning and go off to your day's work. Once I get my daughter on the bus — my son is now in college and so no longer a part of the daily routine of our lives — and my wife drives off to her very busy and hectic job, I get my second cup of coffee and go either to the front porch, which is where I like to write in good weather, or to a favorite chair inside the house. I follow that routine because it lets me know that it's time to write. I have the pad that I always use and the pen that I always use.

**MM:** What kind of pad?

**MC:** The pad is a legal pad, not a yellow one but a standard-length white one in a black folder.

**MM:** What kind of pen?

**MC:** The pen is a Bic medium point with black ink, although recently I have discovered uni-ball pens and like them a lot. So anyway I go to one of my chairs, and if there's something that's been rattling around in my head, I might just jump right in and get started on that, if I have a phrase or an image I'm working with. If not, I'll probably read a little bit in one of two poets, either Charles Wright or Seamus Heaney. They're my touchstones that get me going, and I read them at that point less for the poems themselves than for the music of their words. Sometimes I'll even read just parts of poems, especially with Charles, who has many longer sequences. I may not even start at the beginning of a poem but just plop into one to hear the music.

**MM:** So they don't distract you because they're so familiar?

**MC:** Yes, they're familiar, and I'm not reading them in order, and I'm not reading them for meaning at that point. So then I'll work for a couple of hours, usually, and see what comes up. If it's been a good morning, I might type up what I've written, but usually not. Ordinarily, I let it set for a day or two before I type it up and then come back to it. As it comes closer to what I think of as a finished product, I will type it up and put it into cold print because that format makes it easier to edit. When I've completed three or four poems, I send them to you and get the helpful comments back.

**MM:** And then I feel guilty and I need to get four back to you. What interests me about the process you've described is this: You are one of the most prolific writers I know — a prolific good writer, who at the same time doesn't overproduce. And yet it sounds to me as if a big part of the process of writing a poem is waiting, not rushing it.

**MC:** It is, and that's the hardest thing to learn. It's the thing that young writers seem unable to do. They want to rush through it. And that first draft usually brings a great feeling. You've got the words down there, and you feel really good about them. And then young writers are so discouraged when they go back to the poem and realize that they need to rewrite it. But to be a good writer that's what you've got to come to love: the process of revision and the patience that it takes, the waiting for that line that just won't come right.

**MM:** When Tobias Wolff was at UNC, you may remember him saying, "I feel most like a workman when I'm revising." That's such a wonderful quote. It's the sense of getting in there and hammering it until you get it right.

**MC:** My grandfather was a master furniture maker. He died when I was six, but I can remember watching him at work, and it was the process that seemed to be the pleasing thing, not that he would have a finished bookcase at the end of it but the actual working on it, sanding it, then feeling the finish to see whether it was right yet or whether it needed more sanding.

**MM:** Sounds like working on a poem.

**MC:** Very much so.

**MM:** When you started out writing poetry here at Emory & Henry, or earlier, who first got you going on poetry? I know that later Charles Wright became a major influence, but who were your first inspirations? Who made you think, "I like that, I'd like to try that"?

**MC:** There were three people at Emory, one of whom is sitting in the audience, who took me seriously, and for that reason I took myself seriously. Those people were Bob Denham, Dan Leidig, and LaMarr Smith. I think those three, and Steve Fisher and others like him, are the real reason you come to a small college like Emory & Henry, which is that your professors know who you are and really pay attention to you. Or at least that was the case for me. So those three teachers really helped me along. And here at Emory I discovered two poets who let me know that certain subject matter was acceptable in poems. One was James Dickey. The other was David Bottoms, whose work I encountered when one day LaMarr Smith handed me a book entitled *Shooting Rats at the Bibb County Dump*. Both of those poets really sang to me because I

didn't know that you could write a poem about shooting rats at a dump, which was something I had done with my father. I thought that poems had to be about daffodils.

**MM:** And even earlier, it might be that a poet like Whitman, who certainly wrote about subject matter that wasn't typically written about in the mid-nineteenth century, might have been an eye-opener for you.

**MC:** Yes, Whitman definitely, though a little bit later. I was heavy into Whitman at the University of Virginia. He was really an influence there. In fact, for my master's thesis defense, I had to list my two greatest influences, and I listed Walt Whitman and the King James Bible.

**MM:** That comment has provoked a question from the audience.

**Question:** I would have thought that your two major influences would have been the King James Version of the Bible and Emily Dickinson rather than Whitman, especially in terms of the concision of your lines. You don't seem to write Whitman's long line.

**MC:** No, I don't. But Whitman, I think it was his cadence, in part, and his working class perspective that spoke to me. Dickinson came later as an influence but not at that time.

**MM:** Your lines do tend to be short, but they're not short in quite the same way as hers are.

**MC:** No, not as syntactically clipped.

**MM:** They're hymns, but they're a different kind of hymn.

**MC:** And they're not in common meter.

**Question:** Do you ever look back at your earlier work and consider how it has evolved?

**MC:** Well, I don't usually re-read my earlier work. It seems like that might be counter-productive. I do hope that my work has evolved because I don't want to be writing the same poem over and over. And I think that it has, particularly in the last two books, *From Whence* and *Spill*, which are taking a new direction. They're more concerned with spirituality and less focused on rural life because I've now lived in Chapel Hill for almost two decades. So it doesn't seem genuine to me to still be writing the hog-killing poem [laughter].

**MM:** We've been talking so far as if the only thing you write is poetry, but that's not so. You also have two collections of essays and stories. You send me stories to read on a fairly regular basis. Another honoree of this festival, Fred Chappell, once said, "I only write fiction when I don't have the brains to write poetry," one of his typically hilarious comments.

But I'm wondering whether you could say a few words about the difference between writing prose and writing poetry, or about what leads you to write one rather than the other. And would you also say something about that in-between ground we call prose poems.

**MC:** I guess I'm naturally a poet by temperament. I tend to think that in literature someone is either a long-distance runner, which would be the novelist, or a sprinter, which would be the poet. My temperament is to be the sprinter. But I enjoy trying to push that envelope a little bit. I came to prose fiction somewhat through journalism and through my work in public relations, for which I wrote a lot of prose. So I began to feel that I could write about some topics and experiences with a story rather than a poem. The people I grew up around are natural-born storytellers. They tend to tell too much of the story, accumulating too many details. Maybe that's why I tend to write shorter things, even when I'm writing prose, because I'm trying to avoid that flaw. But I've been pushing myself more towards stories lately.

**MM:** Is that because you want to be on *Oprah*?

**MC:** Well yeah, who doesn't? [laughter]

**MM:** What you say about stories is interesting because even your poems, along with their fresh images and original language, have a strong narrative element. I've often wondered whether the driving force behind both your poetry and prose isn't that appetite for stories, that urge toward storytelling and portrayal of character. Do you think that's a fair assessment?

**MC:** Yes, I think it is fair. That's certainly where I started. My poetry may be moving away from that impulse somewhat now, but that's where I came from. If you look at a book like *The Weave Room*, I think of it as basically one long narrative that runs through all the poems. They can stand alone, but there is also that narrative arc unifying the book.

**MM:** Yes, the individual poems are part of a larger story. And of course this entire stack of your books is also telling a story, and that's part of the pleasure of looking back through them, seeing what parts of the story are most interesting to the writer.

**MC:** In my poetry what I like to do is see how much of the story I can imply.

**MM:** You also seem drawn to what Patsy Cline would call trouble and honey, and I think that's a good instinct, to explore the parts of the story that maybe aren't working or the part of the character that's not right, or that's troubled or edgy somehow.

**MC:** I once heard Allan Gurganus say, “Start with trouble.” That’s where really interesting stories start. No tension, no story.

**MM:** I’m glad you used that word because in re-reading your poems I was again impressed at how, even in the shortest poems, there is some kind of tension or torque that gives the poem a tensile strength.

**MC:** I hope so. I hope so. Because we both know that that quality is what strength derives from.

**MM:** Another kind of poetry you write that may not be quite as much in vogue these days is nature poetry. If you’re like me, most of your students at UNC don’t know nature and so don’t write about it. But you do. You know the names of things, and nature still seems to interest you. Why, living in a suburb of Chapel Hill, do you continue to write about nature?

**MC:** Well, as I mentioned earlier, the outdoor world is the path to my spirituality, and so I care about it deeply. I do worry about the younger generations who walk across campus with their ear-buds in. They wouldn’t know what a mockingbird sounds like if it perched on their shoulder.

**MM:** They don’t notice that hawk or squirrel.

**MC:** No, they don’t. Or they’re horrified by it if they do. It concerns me that all of us spend so much time indoors now. We don’t even pay much attention to the weather anymore unless there’s a hurricane — and then we observe it on *The Weather Channel*.

But I want to return to your earlier question about prose poems, which I never answered.

They’re a really interesting form to me, one that I write a lot. Of course, some poets would say that there’s no such thing. When Richard Wilbur was at UNC for a reading, I asked him about the prose poem. As you know, he’s very much a formalist poet, so I asked him whether he thought there was such thing as a prose poem. And he said, well, I suppose there could be, but I’ve never seen one. But the prose poem is actually a very old form, going back to Baudelaire and Rimbaud and even further.

**MM:** Yes, going back to the Bible even, with its parables, for example.

**MC:** Prose poems take so many different forms now, from Charles Simic’s quirky little surreal oddities to Russell Edson’s parables. I just think it’s a form that’s very entertaining to work on.

**MM:** Right, and if you’re like me, sometimes a poem doesn’t want to come forth in lines and stanzas, and then there’s something about a sentence and a paragraph that liberates you. And again I think that

your prose poems, compared to the Simic weirdness and the Edson parabolic qualities, are often driven by character, by story, by situation, a scene. Your prose poems don't have the length or the discursiveness of a story, but they don't quite have the concision of a poem.

**MC:** And they depend more on the sentence as their unit of measure rather than the line.

**MM:** Yet they can still have the verbal charge that we associate with poetry. Before we leave nature altogether, I want to ask if you think you write about that external world in part because it's disappearing or diminishing. Is there an elegiac quality to your poems about nature?

**MC:** Yes, I worry very much about that decline. Soon we'll all be living in subdivisions that are named for what the contractors tore up to build them. The subdivision in which I live is called Fox Meadow, and I've never seen a fox there and probably won't.

**MM:** And there's another subdivision in Chapel Hill called Windhover, named after the Gerard Manley Hopkins poem. There are no falcons there.

**MC:** So that loss of nature is of great concern to me. The impulse of poetry is to praise and record, and so I'm recording that hawk ripping apart a squirrel on the UNC campus, although there are plenty of squirrels there.

**MM:** Yes, we can afford to lose a few. And a few deer, for that matter. Speaking of which, you are a hunter and continue to hunt annually with your kin. Is one of the reasons you continue to do that so that you can remain in contact with the natural world?

**MC:** Yes, it's one of the great pleasures of my life to spend four or five hours sitting in a deer stand. You have to pay attention to the world when you're sitting there because there's nothing else to do. It's a kind of Zen that you have to develop. You can't fidget around making a lot of noise; you have to be quiet.

**MM:** It's a kind of meditation. As with a poem, it's a sort of waiting.

**MC:** But it has to be an alert waiting. You can't be drowsing off or thinking about other things. You've got to be paying attention.

**MM:** With every sense, because you're not sure how you're going to know what's coming.

**MC:** Yes, usually I hear the deer coming first. I don't see it. I hear it before I see it.

**MM:** You've written in both prose and poetry about your dad's teaching you to fire a shotgun — and about the recoil. Perhaps you'd like to say something about that.

**MC:** That's one of the first memories imprinted on me. When I was about six years old, my dad had given me a 410 shotgun, and we were out to use it. I can still see the squirrel sitting on a limb. The gun was so heavy that I had trouble holding it up, so he was standing with his arms around me, bracing me from behind. Thus when the gun went off and recoiled against my shoulder, I had nowhere to go, so it was like a slap, a fist, hitting my shoulder. I was bruised, quite literally, by that experience with the natural world, but it was a good bruise; it was a stamp of approval.

**Question:** What do you consider the most important things you gained from your experiences at Emory & Henry? You touched upon this topic earlier, but perhaps you could elaborate a little.

**MC:** First of all was that mentoring from such good professors as those I mentioned, Denham and Fisher and Smith and Leidig, among others. One thing I didn't realize that I was going to get, because I didn't realize that at some point down the road I would be in front of a classroom at a university, was a lesson in how to teach, how take your students seriously and really pay attention to them, how to take that job seriously. That was something I hadn't anticipating learning when I entered Emory & Henry. The other thing that's really important, I think, is that, because this is so small a college community, I had a sense of being watched — not in a Big Brother sort of way, not in a being-spied-on way, but because people paid attention to what students did. So your actions were important, and you were accountable for your actions. That was a tremendous lesson to learn and to take with me into the world beyond this campus, and I hope that I still have that lesson with me.

**MM:** The sense of responsibility? Of duty?

**MC:** Yes, the sense of responsibility, the duty of community.

**MM:** That's what's always impressed me about Emory & Henry, how seriously the people here take service, for example, not as something they have to do or that if they don't do they'll be punished, but as a genuine desire, a sincere impulse.

**MC:** To be of use.

**MM:** Before we finish our conversation, and given the nature of this festival over the quarter century of its existence, I thought I would quote a wise interviewer who once asked me if I minded being called an Appalachian writer and just what that term meant to me. We were

talking about this topic with Bob Denham the other night: what it means to be Appalachian in general but particularly what it means to be an Appalachian writer. A poem like “Laundry” isn’t specifically Appalachian, and yet it seems shot through with what might be called an Appalachian sensibility or outlook. What do you have to say on this topic?

**MC:** Of course this is a question that comes up at this festival quite often, and I think it’s a good question. When I think of the term “writer” as I apply it to myself, I don’t want to put any adjective in front of it, whether “Appalachian” or “Southern” or any other such terms, because I think they limit the imagination. But, on the other hand, if a critic or reviewer or a scholar wants to call me an Appalachian writer or a Southern writer, I certainly have no trouble with that label because, undeniably, that is where I’m from. And particularly with the earlier work, it’s very grounded in that region, which I’m proud to be from.

**MM:** It’s part of your identity.

**MC:** Yes, it’s part of my identity. So call me an Appalachian writer, that’s fine. But I don’t think of myself as the spokesman for the region.

**MM:** I wonder if since you have left the mountains you’ve become more aware of your Appalachian-ness in writing — maybe just in your whole being.

**MC:** Yes, absolutely, the first time that somebody makes fun of your accent and you realize that you have an accent. Everybody you knew talked just like you did. You do become conscious of that regional identity, sometimes in a good way and sometimes in more negative ways that make you self-conscious about it.

**MM:** When you’re younger, you may be more embarrassed by it, but if you’re like me, the older you get, the more you think: I’m proud of that.

**MC:** My wife has made much more of an effort to drop her accent because it’s more important for her, in the higher echelons of the business world as she’s gone up the corporate ladder, to have *g*’s on the ends of her words. And she makes an effort to do so.

**MM:** Mike, this has been a great conversation. I wish we’d had a chance to talk about more of your 246 poems in six volumes, as Bob Denham helpfully quantified them yesterday in his paper. This has been a wonderful festival, and I appreciate your good spirits, your good humor, your good answers to these questions. As always I want to thank the members of the audience at Emory & Henry because they ask such good questions and are attentive throughout these proceedings. And I would like to echo Mike’s thanks to John Lang, who has been doing this for so many years. I truly mean it when I say his diligent and faithful service to

this place will never be forgotten by Appalachian writers and Appalachian readers.

To conclude this interview and the Chitwood Literary Festival, Mike is going to read a poem, one that will pull everything together.

**MC:** This poem is called “Answer,” just recently published in *The Southern Poetry Review*. It’s in three parts, and as we discussed earlier, it is God-haunted in the sense that each part has the word “prayer” in its title.

Answer

### Morning Prayer

A kid has left a tricycle  
at the edge of my yard.

A tricycle has such an expectant look.  
*Hey, I’m ready to go.*

*Has anyone noticed I’m red?  
And have a bell?*

*And handlebar tassels!*  
What could possibly call

a life away from this contraption?  
Questions are such three-legged things,

sturdy, upright,  
standing on their own.

They’ve got anxious pedals,  
and someone gone off somewhere.

And silent bells burring  
at the edge of the yard.

\*

### Prayer at Midday

I’m going to sit out here  
until I get some discernment.

Nothing yet.  
Maybe I should eat something.

Maybe a spoonful of yogurt

is all that's between me and enlightenment.

Inside I've left the radio on.  
A rumble of music I can't really make out.

Rock? Country? Celtic Fusion?  
Hard to tell through the wall.

But music without a doubt.  
Without a doubt.

\*

### Evening Prayer

Someone is using the PA  
at the high school football field.

I can hear the giant grumblings  
from the back porch.

It's as if someone is translating  
billboards into a dead language.

I can't tell what he's announcing,  
what event is being narrated.

It's a quarter mile through the trees.  
Long pauses while something happens

I can only hear tell of.  
Such graceful movements garbled.

When it ends it will be a while  
before I can be sure.