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GEORGIA HUMANITIES
LECTURE

**Articulating the Spirit:
Poetry, Community, and the
Metaphysical Shortwave**

by David Bottoms

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A few days after the attack on the Pentagon and the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, I received a phone call from Lea Donosky, the editor of the @ Issue section of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Over the past week, she said, the paper had received dozens and dozens of poems from its readers — poems in rime and meter, poems in free verse, angry poems, grief-stricken poems, but no poem they cared to publish. Still, she thought, people seemed to be expressing a need for poetry. Might I be able to get something into lines that she could run in their Sunday edition? Two things struck me immediately as not a little bit startling. First, I was jolted by the notion of a major newspaper in America commissioning a poem for publication, a fairly gutsy maneuver in journalism. Second, I was no less surprised that in a time of national distress so many people would turn to a genre that, in America, has never been popular, at least not in the commercial sense. Still poetry was, according to Donosky, the chosen mode of expression — no stories came in, no essays. Stories and essays generally take up more space, of course, and poetry affords us a more muscular and compact expression. All of that is true, but I suspect much more is at work here than a concern for economy of expression, much that has to do with world-view, with a different way of approaching the world than our usual nine-to-five stance. When we encounter the poem, as writer or reader, something unique is required of us, and we must call up aspects of our psyche that often lie buried under those more rational talents we use to negotiate the everyday traffic of the world. Ed Hirsch, in a marvelous book called *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love With Poetry*, calls the poem “a soul in action.” “The spiritual life,” he writes, “wants articulation — it wants embodiment in language.” True enough. The spiritual life needs

articulation. It needs to find a voice, but why poetry? What I want to talk about this morning is how poetry, of all literary genres, provides the most natural vehicle for the spirit. This concerns three particular aspects of poetry — the way poems come into the world, the way they deliver their message to us, and the nature of that message itself.

* * *

Poetry, of course, is an immense genre, and folks tend to see it, dissect it, and categorize it in many different ways, which depend ultimately, like all art, on one's fundamental world-view. This is all a way of saying that I can speak only of the poem as I know it. In doing so I'll probably do best to start at the beginning and acknowledge outright that poetry, for me, has always involved an element of the other-worldly. This, no doubt, is due in large part to the particular, if not unusual, way I first came to poetry, or perhaps I should say, to the particular way poetry first came to me. If there was anything strange about my childhood, it was my love of books. I was born in Canton, Georgia, in 1949, and grew up there in the 1950's and 1960's. Canton then was just about as American a place as I can imagine — a place both beautiful and bleak for its lack of anything we might call "the arts" — two traffic lights, a courthouse built of Georgia marble, a post office, a scattering of stores up and down Main Street. There was a library, yes, old and tottering at the head of the town, a beautiful Victorian ramshackle that radiated in its decades of dust all the mysteries of time, culture, and place. But by the time I was seven or eight years old and susceptible to its attractions, the city fathers

tore it down and built in its place a very utilitarian brick and concrete box, which looked like it should have had machine gun turrets on the roof.

Often I hear folks repeat the old saw that the best way for a child to acquire a love of reading is for the parents to read to that child and to read themselves. A father or a mother sitting comfortably in an easy chair, with an open novel in hand, is said to be a powerful model. This may be, but I wouldn't know. Not once in my entire childhood did I ever see my father or my mother sit down in the living room and pick up a book for the purpose of leisure. They simply were not book people. Television was their only entertainment. After a hard day at Holcomb Chevrolet or the Jones-Hendrix clinic, they had little energy for anything else.

Most of the books in our house belonged to me. Most of those were school books. My Granny Ashe had ten or so novels on a small bookshelf in her living room — two of those were *Gone with the Wind*, a hardback and a paperback — and my uncle had a book club edition of the novels of the Western writer Zane Grey. Other than the King James Bible that was just about the entire library of my extended family.

This is not to poor-mouth my “raising,” as they say where I come from, or to suggest that I suffered any childhood deprivations, a notion that would horrify my mother. Indeed, I was blessed with an exceptionally happy childhood in which I was surrounded by a family of strong and loving Southern Baptists, people who lived what they believed. I mention that it was not a reading family merely to point out a curious fact concerning my relationship to books and the call I felt them issue.

One great advantage I did enjoy, however, was my mother's encouragement. Though she didn't read herself, she understood well the importance of an education and pushed me to develop an interest in books. She took me to the county library and to McClure's Bookstore, a wonderful little shop owned by my second-grade teacher. It was a quaint and dimly lit place filled with many of the classics one would expect a child to read — Mark Twain, Jules Verne, Lousia May Alcott — as well as the more "with-it" adventures of the Hardy boys, Tom Swift, and Nancy Drew. And then there were those first teachers at Canton Elementary School — Ms. Jones, Ms. McClure, Ms. Cobb, the Bozeman sisters — extraordinary teachers, who emphasized not only the importance, but the joy of reading.

Poetry, however, came from another source. I'm sure I must have run across the usual sort of children's verse that everybody bumps into along the way — Robert Louis Stevenson, Lewis Carroll, and such — but I don't recall them. My earliest memories concerning a language I might call poetic go back to the mid-1950's and a basement room in the Canton First Baptist Church. I still recall vividly the rows of little round-backed chairs facing the blackboard where the children of the Sunday school's Primary Department met as a group to sing before they broke up into smaller classes for Bible stories. There, in that basement room, I first encountered the beauty, praise, and anguish of the Psalms, a poetry that has addressed for thousands of years the deepest of human concerns.

Even then, as a seven- or eight-year-old boy, I felt something in that antique and exotic English intimating the other-worldly, the sacred. Remembering that now puts me in mind of a bumper sticker I saw once on a pickup truck in Cobb County. It read, "If it ain't the King James, it ain't the Bible." I might not go

quite that far, but I must confess that I still feel much the same way about the music of the King James. What poet could argue with this heart-torturing lament from Psalm 102: “For I have eaten ashes like bread, and mingled my drink with weeping./ Because of thine indignation and thy wrath: for thou has lifted me up, and cast me down./ My days are like a shadow that declineth; and I am withered like grass.” Or the equally beautiful and infinitely more hopeful message of Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want./ He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.”

Another source of poetry that washed across me in great waves of language and imagery were those hymns we sang in church. “Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee.” Or another of my favorites, “Shall we gather at the river, where bright angel feet have trod?” My Grandma Bottoms, who had no great talent for music, used to croak out two old gospel songs, one after the other, almost constantly as she did her housework — “I’m gonna lay down my burdens, down by the riverside” and “Some glad morning when this life is o’er, I’ll fly away.” Now there’s a thought.

These psalms and songs, then, were my first experiences with language as art, with imagery riding waves of rhythm. They were also, certainly, my first encounters with the figurative meanings of language. Toward water imagery and its capacity for metaphor I was drawn most especially. Everyone, it seemed, was always crossing some body of water, the Jordan River or the crystal sea. And peace was like a river, the Gospel itself like a ship. A person’s life, I began to understand, is a journey, a setting out and a crossing over, which — if led the right way — ends at that most desirable destination when, as the bluegrass

musician Carter Stanley phrases it, “the great ship shall anchor in the harbor of love.”

* * *

Little wonder then that I have always seen the poem pointing toward something beyond the mundane noise of our everyday lives, and that I don't hesitate to call poetry the most natural voice for the spirit. But where precisely does poetry come from and how does it suggest to us meanings that transcend the literal stage props of the world?

A few days before he died, I had a long telephone conversation with my friend James Dickey. We rarely talked over the phone about poetry, but this time he wanted to talk about that, and about his own poetry. He told me that he was dying, and he wanted to know what I thought of his work. I told him, as I had always told him, that he was the champ, and I reminded him of a lunch we'd had several years earlier with the fiction writer Peter Taylor and of a story Taylor had told about his close friend, Robert Lowell. Lowell, he'd said, was a very jealous man, and he was jealous of no one more than he was jealous of James Dickey. There was a deep pause then on Jim's end of the line. He was remembering that lunch perhaps, or weighing the comment. Then he said something that has stuck with me. He said, “The goal of the poet is to make the world more available.” Lowell's flaw was that he had not made the world at large more available, but only the world of Robert Lowell. In his selfishness, Dickey thought, Lowell had gotten between the reader and the world.

The goal of the poet certainly should be to make the world more available. The reader wants to get at the world, to get into the world, to experience all the world has to offer. Oddly enough, however, and even more importantly, the world wants to get into the reader. This seems, at first, a rather strange notion, the world exhibiting a desire to communicate, a need to express itself, as though the world itself were some sentient and all-encompassing creature. Robert Penn Warren, however, loved to say that the world is always trying to tell the poet something, and that notion becomes slightly less bizarre if we posit behind the world a sentient Creator, which I am always happy to do. Years ago I used to think of the world as whispering its secrets, and the poet as something of an eavesdropper, a spy, a secret agent straining to hear, but more and more now I think of the world as shouting, yelling, screaming at us from all angles, virtually every moment of our lives — a place bursting with meaning, with overlooked significance, crazy for an audience, like a maniac on a street corner frantic to grab our attention, so eager to get all of its messages across that the truly significant are very often lost among the mundane and trivial. And therein we find the origins of the poem and the need for the poet, as intercepting spirit, as go-between, to sift through the indiscriminate howls and yaps and to interpret or translate for us the significant messages masked in the noise of everyday life.

If this seems a slightly odd notion, it's because we're accustomed to thinking of the artist as the origin or source of the art. The poet makes the poem, yes. The poet spills the words onto the page, one word behind another, and does so until the end of the line, and then until the end of another line, and so on until the poem is finished. The poet does, indeed, write the poem, but oddly enough, she

does not create the impulse for the poem, the engendering idea, the imaginative seed, which is, arguably, the real creative act. I point here to the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, and to his notion of the two stages of the creative process, which he discusses in his essay “Feeling into Words.” Stage one, what we might call the idea stage, he defines as that “first come-hither” of the poem, which presents itself as an image, a word, or perhaps even a phrase. This is followed, of course, by the making stage, the fleshing out of the poem onto the page. This making stage is clearly observable, but the idea stage is quite another story, much more mysterious and allusive, and therefore much more interesting.

As Mr. Warren, Mr. Heaney, and any number of poets suggest, the seed of the poem, the idea, seems to come in some hazy way out of the world. Everyone, without exception, has experienced the excitement of “getting an idea.” But who has ever stepped out of the shower, dried off, dressed, and walked into the kitchen to tell her spouse that she’s just created a great idea? No, we say, rather, that we “got an idea” or “had an idea.” All of this only echoes the great Mr. Yeats, who says in his autobiography, *The Trembling of the Veil*: “When a man writes any work of genius, or invents some creative action, is it not because some knowledge or power has come into his mind from beyond his mind?” Yes, this is to suggest that we experience this creative moment more as an act of reception, and that the creative moment is, indeed, a partially passive experience that is somewhat dependent on chance. If we are comfortable in accepting this description — and I am — then the question that arises immediately for the writer, or anyone who wants to facilitate the creative process, is this: When we all have access to essentially the same messages the world sends, why do some folks receive them readily

and others hardly at all? Why can three people walk together across Woodruff Park in Atlanta and by the time they reach Peachtree Street only one get the idea for a poem? Why can three people walk down the same sidewalk, see the same squirrel carrying off a bag of Frito's, see the same homeless man asleep on a bench, the same businesswoman talking on a cell phone, and only one get the idea for a poem? From where does this gift of perception come? Seamus Heaney calls it a talent, a "gift for being in touch," by which he means an inborn predisposition to approach the world in a certain attentive way. In this sense, he says, the poet is a kind of "diviner," one who intuits signals from the world that others fail to detect. The metaphor he uses here is a water-dowser, a person who is able to divine with the use of a forked stick the presence of underground water. Heaney insists that this gift cannot be learned, but I like to think we all possess it to some degree and can hone whatever portion we have. Indeed, like all other talents, without a great deal of exercise, it will most likely atrophy.

When I was a boy, as I mentioned, I listened to a lot of gospel music. One popular song I often heard on the radio was Albert Brumley's "Turn Your Radio On." One part goes like this, "Get a little taste of the joys awaiting. Get a little heaven in your soul, get in touch with God, turn your radio on." The implication here is that every soul, every spirit, is a radio receiver, a very apt metaphor for the poet, I think. Every soul is a radio receiver, but the poet has her radio turned on. The poet is, in the vernacular of my generation, "tuned-in." This heightened perception, this receptivity, is what Wordsworth in his famous preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* calls, a "more than usual organic sensibility." It is precisely that. The world sends signals constantly, millions in the time it takes to cross

Peachtree Street or to find a seat at a Braves' game or the symphony, but most of us tune in only what is immediately and obviously necessary to conduct our daily lives. This is the expedient way, since the greater part of everything else is background noise muddling the practical signals. Yet, as Robert Penn Warren suggests, the world is certainly trying to tell us more than whether the traffic light is green or red, or whether our box seat at the stadium is on the first- or third-base line. In that background noise there are messages about the connections in our lives, and the poet must not only have her radio turned on, she must be fine-tuned to those special suggestive signals, those subtle hints at the shadowy relationships that exist below the surface of things. And what are these signals, these clues to hidden meaning the world is constantly sending? Simply the metaphorical possibilities in everyday life, the suggestion of figurative connections.

Poetry more than any other literary genre rouses a language that rises above the literal and consequently evokes, as Ed Hirsch puts it, "a mode of *thinking* that moves beyond the literal." Yes, in poetry we actually begin to think in a different way, to open doors out of the physical landscape into an internal and spiritual landscape of more meaningful meanings and more truthful truths. To phrase this in a somewhat more mystical way, poetry is the literary genre that points most willingly to the veiled significance behind the physical world. These secrets unfold in the very unique relationship that poetry generates between reader and writer, an incredibly intimate relationship in which the interaction between individual minds depends largely on figurative expression. Few poets have been as heartened as I at the recent impulse toward narrative in American poetry, but I scratch my head at those poets who have pursued it almost single-mindedly at the

expense of metaphor, which a legion of critics and poets from Aristotle to Richard Wilbur have identified, quite correctly, as the fundamental element of poetry.

Recently I spoke to a gathering of scientists and technicians at CIBA Vision, here in Atlanta. I was to talk with them about the subject of vision, which they certainly know something about, and having never spoken to a group of scientists before, I was slightly fearful that they might dismiss my notions of artistic vision as some wacky brand of transplanted California new-age hocus-pocus. They were, however, very receptive, and this experience sparked in me an interest in the unfortunate conflict that has developed in our culture between certain dogmatic advocates of science and the many folks who hold out for a more abundant and spirit-nurturing world view. I believe in science, don't get me wrong, and I'm very grateful for its many undeniable benefits, but I don't believe exclusively in science. Science covers well certain areas of our experience, but humans have needs to which science ministers poorly or cannot minister at all. I like the way the philosopher Huston Smith phrases this in his recent book *Why Religion Matters*:

...the finitude of mundane existence cannot satisfy the human heart completely. Built into the human makeup is a longing for a "more" that the world of everyday experience cannot requite. This outreach strongly suggests the existence of the something that life reaches *for* in the way that the wings of birds point to the reality of air. Sunflowers bend in the direction of light because light exists...

I know this longing because I, too, feel it, and because the entire history of religion, art, and literature is a testament to it. Indeed, I think most artists will agree that there are many ways of knowing the world, and perhaps even the

afterworld. “I am convinced,” says Hirsch, “[that] the kind of experience — the kind of knowledge — one gets from poetry cannot be duplicated elsewhere.” I don’t hesitate to agree. Serious poetry is certainly an act of discovery, for the poet and the reader, and so a way of knowing. And what we discover through poetry, we discover through the power of the figurative. Story and physical detail are certainly important, but the poet never really creates anything physical in the poem. She only duplicates selected details of the original creation, only mimics and edits the first Creator. If there is any originality in the writing of a poem, it comes from the act of making metaphors, the act of giving new combinations to the various elements of the original creation. By harnessing two elements in a unique way, the poet can actually bring new dimension to both and at the same time imprint on the poem some sense of her own unique personality and world view. The gift of metaphor is simply the way it makes the world fresh, the way it teaches us to see the world from different angles, and the way it illustrates what Whitman calls “the vast similitude” that connects all things:

All distances of place however wide,
All distances of time, all inanimate forms,
All souls, all living bodies though they be ever so different, or in
different worlds,
All gaseous, watery, vegetable, mineral processes, the fishes, the
brutes,
All nations, colors, barbarisms, civilizations, languages,
All identities that have existed or may exist on this globe, or any
globe,
All lives and deaths, all of the past, present, future...

Metaphor, indeed, is the connecting process, the imaginative act of poetry that lets us leap beyond the confines of the physical world, beyond the confines of time and space.

So what does this say about the message of the poem? What does the poem tell us about the poet and what does it tell us about the reader? Or, perhaps, are the two messages really one in the same? I'm very attracted to Seamus Heaney's notion of the poem as personal archeology, the poem as personal dig. He says that the first time he ever wrote a poem he thought was truly good, he felt as though he'd "let down a shaft of light into himself." The poem can, indeed, be that sort of self-exploration, and quite often is to startling effect, but if the poem becomes meaningful in the largest sense, it will be an exploration of the personal that reveals the general contours of human experience. It will be a process that begins with the one but reveals the many. It will illustrate the large connection, "the vast similitude." As Jane Hirshfield says in her essay "The Question of Originality": "We turn to Shakespeare's sonnets to learn not about Shakespeare's life but about our own. The beauty, feeling, and understanding they hold throw off a continuing brightness, and within its circle the hand holding the page is also freshly lit." Yes, we as readers are that self-centered, and the poem that means in the fullest way will discover in the personal a connection to the whole. In fact, all serious poems start with the premise that the experience of the poet is not hers alone, but is in a vital way representative of every person on the planet. Herein, of course, lies the contagious power of poetry, which is simply the blessing of newfound significance. A small enlightenment begins to burn in one

person and before long the effect is seen in a neighborhood, a community, a culture.

One of my favorite movies illustrates this well. In his 1995 movie *Il Postino*, director Michael Radford tells the story of a small Italian island awakened to a higher consciousness by a visit from the exiled Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. The story is told through the eyes of Mario Ruoppolo, a postman who delivers Neruda's mail. Like most of the people on the island, Mario is very poor and without prospects. The islanders subsist, and barely that, on fishing. Mario hates fishing, and he lives under a cloud of deprivation and hopelessness. He is, however, not illiterate like many of his neighbors. Though uneducated, he can read and write, and when he comes across a book of Neruda's poems, he becomes curious about and then enamored of this man of ideas, this poet who sees in the various elements of the world beauties and possibilities that he and his neighbors have overlooked. One of my favorite lines in the movie comes when Mario falls in love with Beatrice, a beautiful young woman who works in her aunt's hotel and tavern. Mario is deeply smitten but he cannot communicate his feelings to this woman. He fumbles, stammers, turns mute every time he tries to speak to her. His spirit needs to find a voice, his spirit wants articulation. He needs not just words, but appropriate words, compelling words, words that are worthy of his emotion — so he sends her a poem, a poem he plagiarizes from Neruda's book. Beatrice is at first puzzled. She reads the poem, she reads it again. Gradually the images take hold, and the poem works its magic. Gradually she is swept away by Neruda's language and her world is changed. So much so that she notices Mario Ruoppolo. So much so that her aunt, much dismayed, notices her noticing Mario

Ruoppolo, and when her aunt discovers the poem, she takes it to Neruda to complain that her niece is being seduced. Seduced by metaphors, corrupted by metaphors!

This sets up the most illuminating line in the movie. When Neruda confronts Mario, very sympathetically, about his failure to confess his love and about stealing his poem, Mario says, “Poetry doesn’t belong to those who write it, but to those who need it.” I love that. There’s something powerfully revealing in the desperation of that statement. “Poetry doesn’t belong to those who write it, but to those who need it.”

Poetry, we must understand, not only fills a personal need, but a cultural need as well, and *Il Postino* is a narrow but vivid glimpse into the way poetry enhances the spiritual health of a community. Neruda’s poetry not only works its medicine on Mario and Beatrice, but gradually on Beatrice’s aunt and a few other members of the community. Even the islanders who are not directly touched by the power of Neruda’s language recognize the presence in their lives of a new and intangible significance. A fresh and powerful force has been loosed on their community, and it has changed the lives of a few of their neighbors. Out of the new ways these few folks approach the world, the island as a whole gradually rises to a higher level of awareness, to a greater appreciation of the natural beauties around them, and to a greater sense of significance in their lives and their traditions. So it is, I’ll wager, with all poetry and all cultures.

My subject here has been the poem, but I’ve been talking, of course, about all arts, all creative endeavors that seek out the ultimate meaning of our lives. Speaking of his life as a writer, Dickey once wrote: “It seems to me that I am the

bearer of some kind of immortal message to humankind. What is this message? I don't know, but it exists." Of course, he did know, although he chooses here to leave the question hanging. The message is the message of all poets and all poems at all times. It's the announcement of our commonality, our fundamental humanity, the significance of being the human creature at our particular moment in the world. It is a reminder to stay focused, to stay tuned-in, to continue the endless struggle of putting ourselves in the proper relationship with the enduring mysteries.

I want to close with a poem that may suggest some, or all, or perhaps none of the points I've tried to make, the title poem of my third book. Back in the early eighties I attended Florida State University in Tallahassee, where I received my Ph.D. in bass fishing. I had a little aluminum boat and a small outboard motor, and I liked to cruise up and down the little rivers around Tallahassee, dragging a wad of dead worms behind me. One of my favorite rivers, I remember, was the Wakulla, though I don't think I ever actually caught a fish out of those waters. Still, it was a gorgeous place. You'll know something of what I'm saying if I tell you that back in the early forties two of those Johnny Weismuller Tarzan movies were made there, along with a movie called "The Creature of the Black Lagoon." It was jungle, or about as close to jungle as one could get in the Florida panhandle.

Anyway, I was out in my boat one morning, just after daybreak, I think, when I came into a bend of the river, and about halfway through that bend a clearing opened up on the far bank. In the middle of this clearing stood one giant tree, jet black. It looked very strange and gave me an odd feeling — it looked as though

someone had taken a piece of black construction paper and cut out the silhouette of a giant oak tree and pasted it there on the bank. Then the feeling turned stranger because I could see that the tree was speckled all over with pink fruit. It was some sort of gigantic weird fruit tree. I drifted a little closer then and felt really odd because I saw that these things were not fruit at all. They were heads, and they were the heads of vultures. I'd come on a buzzard roost, the first I'd ever seen. They were packed into that tree literally shoulder to shoulder, so thick I could hardly see light through it.

Several years later, I was doing some reading about vultures, about how they are actually revered in other cultures, and I remembered that tree. A line or a phrase came to me, and I suddenly saw those vultures in a different way. Somewhere in the depths of my psyche a transformation had taken place, a re-evaluation of the American buzzard, and out of that came a poem called "Under the Vulture-Tree":

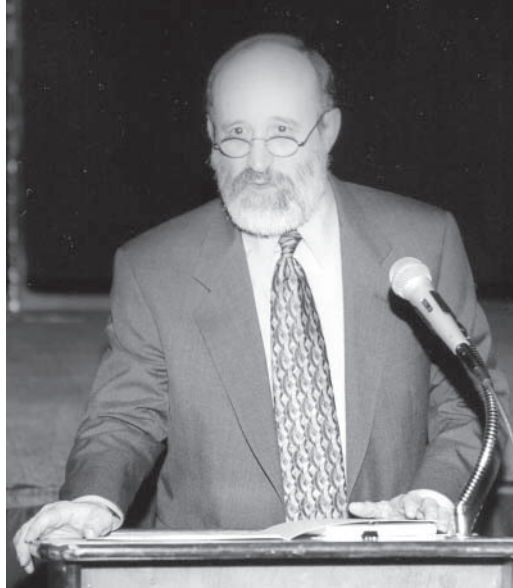
Under the Vulture-Tree

We have all seen them circling pastures,
have looked up from the mouth of a barn, a pine clearing,
the fences of our own backyards, and have stood
amazed by the one slow wing beat, the endless dihedral drift.
But I had never seen so many so close, hundreds,
every limb of the dead oak feathered black,

and I cut the engine, let the river grab the jon boat
and pull it toward the tree.
The black leaves shined, the pink fruit blossomed
red, ugly as a human heart.
Then, as I passed under their dream, I saw for the first time
its soft countenance, the raw fleshy jowls
wrinkled and generous, like the faces of the very old
who have grown to empathize with everything.

And I drifted away from them, slow, on the pull of the river,
reluctant, looking back at their roost,
calling them what I'd never called them, what they are,
those dwarfed transfiguring angels,
who flock to the side of the poisoned fox, the mud turtle
crushed on the shoulder of the road,
who pray over the leaf-graves of the anonymous lost,
with mercy enough to consume us all and give us wings.

* * *



David Bottoms' first book, *Shooting Rats at the Bibb County Dump*, was selected by Robert Penn Warren as winner of the 1979 Walt Whitman Award of the Academy of American Poets. His poems have appeared widely in magazines such as *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *The Paris Review*, and *Poetry*, as well as in over four dozen anthologies and textbooks. He is the author of five other books of poetry and two novels, most recently *Oglethorpe's Dream*. His *Armored Hearts: Selected and New Poems* was named by the Center for the Book as one of the top 25 books all Georgians should read. Among his other awards are the Levinson Prize, an Ingram Merrill Award, and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. He is currently Professor of English at Georgia State University. In 2000, Governor Roy Barnes appointed him Poet Laureate of Georgia.

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50 Hurt Plaza, Suite 1565
Atlanta, Georgia 30303-2915
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