

From Whence

Michael Chitwood

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Throughout his collection of poems *From Whence*, Chitwood seems bent on disproving fellow Southern poet Allen Tate who once wrote, “The typical southern conversation is not going anywhere.” Chitwood cites this disparaging comment in his prose poem “Easy Street, Continental Heroes, Luck, the Destination of Southern Conversation, and Dust.” The rambling title suits the poem’s style, at once an homage to and a dig at Tate—a dig because all of Chitwood’s poems, even if they take the scenic route, do indeed lead somewhere.

While Chitwood is a gifted storyteller, his real strength lies in endings. For example, a piece about digging a drainage ditch (“Digging”) concludes with the surprising line, “This red wound in the dirt has leapt up.” Despite his straightforward style, most of Chitwood’s poems contain at least one such twist in phrase or plot to delight his readers. “Duty and History” transforms the sound of a father polishing his Sunday shoes into “the flutter of a dove,” and not just any dove: “The proper name is Mourning Dove. / Four of them in the dogwood.” For a poet with such a talent for endings, it is no surprise that the final and title poem of his collection is the crowning accomplishment. “From Whence” is an accessible and other-worldly invocation of the moon, humorous as it explains, “The moon is on government business” and hypnotic when it asks, “Come shine, silver me a little.”

The title of that poem and the collection comes from Psalm 121, an appropriate source for poems that tackle many religious themes. For example, “Acolyte” explores a boy’s anxiety over lighting candles for a church service and the possibility of snuffing out God. Moreover, *From Whence* is an appropriate title for a collection much resembling a memoir. Loosely speaking, the poet takes his readers through his development, from being that boy lighting candles to an adult with a job and home. Chitwood sometimes undermines himself with poorly-timed humor or one too many details, but the effect is honest. This is how stories are told, with enough defenses in place to get to the end. And in the endings of these poems, there is always a reward.

Chitwood has six previous books of poetry to his credit. He shares what he has learned with students at the University of North Carolina, as a visiting lecturer. Hopefully his students, as well as Chitwood himself, will continue to disprove Tate and write (and have) Southern conversations that go somewhere.

ERICA WRIGHT (April 10, 2007)

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