



Interview with Georgia's Poet Laureate David Bottoms

by Jack Hayes

David Bottoms is a Georgia native, and is Georgia's Poet Laureate. Born in Canton, about 30 miles north of Atlanta, in 1949, Bottoms encountered the beauty of language in the psalms and hymns while a young boy attending Baptist Sunday school. As a teenager, he felt strongly that reading a poem could lead to what Yeats had called "ultimate reality." Today he helps students understand poetry as the best way to approach life's mysteries. His first book, *Shooting Rats at the Bibb County Dump*, was chosen by Robert Penn Warren as winner of the prestigious Walt Whitman Award of the Academy of American Poets. He is the author of eight other books, most recently *Waltzing through the Endtime*. Bottoms holds the Amos Distinguished Chair in English Letters at Georgia State University. Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* has been a required text in his classes.

JACK HAYES: Can you talk about how you came to know words, language, poetry?

DAVID BOTTOMS: My first experience with poetry—what I call *language as art*—was in Sunday school, learning psalms and hymns at Canton First Baptist Church. It was the

Jack Hayes is a poet and a journalist for more than three decades. A collection of his poems won the 1992 Georgia Poetry Circuit award and in 1993, he was a recipient of the Rainmaker Award. Jack recently became Georgia's first Certified Poetry Therapist.

mid-1950s, so I was maybe seven or eight years old. Anyway, this was where I began to see the figurative and metaphorical side of language. The psalms especially impressed me, and I loved the language of the King James. And I loved those old hymns too. I was very much drawn to the ones about crossing over water, a wonderful metaphor. Eventually, I came to think of language as a way of approaching the mysteries.

JH: In your 2002 essay, "Articulating the Spirit: Poetry, Community and the Metaphysical Shortwave," which addresses the question of how poetry provides "the most natural vehicle for the spirit," you say that poetry for you "has always involved an element of the other-worldly." Is this what you mean by the *mysteries*?

DB: When I think of mysteries, I think of Robert Penn Warren and his wonderful poem "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas: the Natural History of a Vision," where he talks about the poet trying to find the logic of "the original dream." We're not going to find it, of course, because we didn't dream the original dream. We're only a part of it. Nevertheless, Warren saw himself as someone who yearns after that ultimate meaning. Yeats had a similar notion. In a letter to Ezra Pound, he said art is the search for ultimate reality. So art and language are ways to approach the profound questions that are always hounding us, because when we tap art, we tap not only human potential but perhaps something deeper. Ed Hirsch has a wonderful poem called "The Sleepwalkers," which begins "Tonight I want to say something about the sleepwalkers/ who have so much faith in their legs." The poem leads to the line: "we have to learn to trust our hearts like that." Hirsch is talking about trusting the unconscious part of ourselves—the source of our creativity. I like that very much. I believe we have to learn to wallow around in there.

JH: As a boy, what did you discover in poetry?

DB: I remember being fourteen or fifteen, and sitting on our couch reading Yeats and maybe not really understanding it, but being taken by occasional images. But I remember most of all the feeling of consequence I had, the feeling that this poetry had something important about it, that there was an answer in it, that I might find in those lines the confirmation of *something big*. I remember reading Eliot early on too. Not understanding a lot, but feeling that sense of consequence.

JH: People sometimes speak of the way certain poems, like prayers, have helped them get through difficult times. Do you have any of those?

DB: There are so many poems I've come back to over the years. When I'm looking for something really good, or when it seems it's been a long time since I've read something good, I can always go back and read Robert Penn Warren's "Audubon." Another Warren poem called "After the Dinner Party" has probably kept my marriage together more than once. Warren has always been one of my favorites, as has Theodore Roethke and his nature poems. Wordsworth has also been a favorite, and Coleridge—anybody I guess who uses poetry as a tool for exploration of the mysteries. Wordsworth called it "seeing into the life of things." You just have to love that.

JH: What about your contemporaries?

DB: It's always dangerous to talk about that, because you'll certainly leave somebody out. I'll just go back to Ed Hirsch. I love his work. He wrote this wonderful book of essays called *How to Read a Poem: and Fall in Love with Poetry*. He has the right idea of what poetry does. He calls it the articulation of the

human spirit. Of course you have to have some sense of the human spirit before you can say that, right?

JH: What about Mary Oliver?

DB: I love Mary Oliver, especially her mid-career work. That book *American Primitive*. That's dynamite stuff.

JH: What about poems and writings of yours that continue to be meaningful?

DB: Among the older poems, my favorites are "Under the Vulture Tree," "Under the Boathouse," and "The Desk." Some favorites in my new book, *Waltzing Through the Endtime*, are "Homage to Buck Cline" and "Vigilance," a poem about whacky appearances of the deity in the 20th and 21st centuries—like that grilled cheese sandwich with the Virgin Mary's image for sale on eBay. I didn't have the \$14,000, so I wrote the poem.

JH: I'm always moved by the power of the father archetype when I think about your poem "The Desk" where you sneak at night into the old high school basement in search of the desk at which your father had sat and carved his name and dreamed about life. I see that poem as a metaphor for every son's journey back to his father—a journey filled with desire for emotional reconnection, empowerment, gratitude, forgiveness, and, of course, a blessing.

DB: I was going back to own my father's name. I remember that desk vividly from my years in the same high school. But if the truth be known, the desk wasn't there when I went back. They'd done some renovation on the building, and it was gone. Still, I didn't let the facts get in the way of a good story.

JH: What about your poem "Sign for My Father Who Stressed the Bunt?"

DB: During my childhood, my dad coached baseball. He was not much of a scholar, but a phenomenal athlete. He starred in football, as a halfback, and won a full scholarship to Mercer University. But he joined the Navy right after high school in 1942 and got shot up in the naval battle of Guadalcanal when the USS Atlanta went down. So his athletic career was finished. Anyway, we practiced baseball a couple of hours just about every day when I was growing up, and years later it came to me that his teaching wasn't so much about baseball as about principles of living. Stressing the bunt, the sacrifice, giving yourself up, the way one human being or one generation sacrifices itself for the next. That's where that poem came from.

JH: Can you say anything about "Under the Boathouse"—about its origin?

DB: That one actually came from Jung, an archetypal pattern he called, I believe, the Myth of the Night Journey. That is, descent under water, symbolic death, then ascent and resurrection. I think he pointed to the story of Jonah as one of the earliest examples of this in Western literature. I use that poem in a lot of my classes to teach the archetypal pattern of rebirth. I try to teach them that in the writing process you rub up against archetype and myth. In our culture we see this particular pattern mirrored most frequently in the rite of baptism.

JH: What about the places where your poems have taken you? Like "Under the Vulture Tree?"

DB: Robert Penn Warren said the world is always trying to tell the poet something, and he recommended making ourselves receptive. This is kind of ironic, because catching ideas is a passive experience, and some poets may think it's the other way around. I believe the world is trying to show us metaphorical possibilities. I talk about that in "Articulating the Spirit." Any-

way, my first idea for the vulture poem—being consumed with mercy—came from seeing the vultures as angels. It's strangely ironic, but transformational, to imagine vultures doing this kind of work. And that idea wound up as the poem's last line. The rest of the poem is simply narrative fill in.

JH: How did you come to know Jung?

DB: I have a ton of his books. Some of them, like *Answer to Job*, have been important to me. I have all my students read *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. I'm fascinated by the way dreams influence the creative process, the writing of poetry. It works well in the classroom. They get a sense of their inner strength and creativity. It also gives them a sense of the great spiritual mysteries they embody.

JH: You seem to have real care then for nurturing the souls of your students?

DB: I think it's the best thing I can do. If I can teach them how to use language to get at what's important in their lives, then I've done something. That they can tell me about iambic pentameter or the rhyme scheme of a sonnet is not so important as their being able to get at the big questions through language.

JH: Has poetry helped you discover where you're going?

DB: That can be a scary question at times, because the older I get the harder it is to figure things out. I haven't written a poem in more than a year, but I'm not worried. That dry period usually happens after I finish a book. But I love my latest book *Waltzing Through the Endtime*. Everything I'd done beforehand was building toward that. It's my best book. And yet, I'm still not sure I have a sense of where I'm going.

JH: What's your response to poetry's growing popularity?

DB: There certainly has been a poetry surge in the past ten years. But I'm not sure poetry is finding a larger audience. I was talking a few days ago to my editor at Copper Canyon Press. He said these days we have more of a *writership* than a readership. A lot more people seem to be writing poetry than reading it.

JH: Are more young men finding their way into your classes?

DB: There's a steady stream, but I haven't seen a change in the percentage. Men make up 25 to 30 percent of my classes today, as they have since I began teaching ■

Poetry by David Bottoms

THE DESK

Under the fire escape, crouched, one knee in cinders,
I pulled the ball-peen hammer from my belt,
cracked a square of window pane,
the gummed latch, and swung the window,
crawled through that stone hole into the boiler room
of Canton Elementary School, once Canton High,
where my father served three extra years
as star halfback and sprinter.
Behind a flashlight's
cane of light, I climbed a staircase almost a ladder

and found a door. On the second nudge of my shoulder,
it broke into a hallway dark as history,
at whose end lay the classroom I had studied
over and over in the deep obsession of memory.

I swept that room with light—an empty blackboard,
a metal table, a half-globe lying on the floor
like a punctured basketball—then followed
that beam across the rows of desks,
the various catalogs of lovers, the lists
of all those who would and would not do what,
until it stopped on the corner desk of the back row,
and I saw again, after many years the name
of my father, my name, carved deep into the oak top.

To gauge the depth I ran my finger across that scar,
and wondered at the dreams he must have lived
as his eyes ran back and forth
from the cinder yard below the window
to the empty practice field
to the blade of his pocket knife etching carefully
the long, angular lines of his name,
the dreams he must have laid out one behind another
like yard lines, in the dull, pre-practice afternoons
of geography and civics, before he ever dreamed
of Savo Sound or Guadalcanal.

In honor of dreams

I sank to my knees on the smooth, oiled floor,
and stood my flashlight on its end.
Half the yellow circle lit the underedge of the desk,
the other threw a half moon on the ceiling,
and in that split light I tapped the hammer
easy up the overhang of the desk top. Nothing gave
but the walls' sharp echo, so I swung again,
and again harder, and harder still in half anger
rising to anger at the stubborn joint, losing all fear
of my first crime against the city, the county,
the state, whatever government claimed dominion,
until I had hammered up in the ringing dark
a salvo of crossfire, and on a frantic recoil glanced
the flashlight, the classroom spinning black
as a coma.

I've often pictured the face of the teacher
whose student first pointed to that topless desk,
the shock of a slow hand rising from the back row,
their eyes meeting over the question of absence.
I've wondered too if some low authority of the system
discovered that shattered window,
and finding no typewriters, no business machines,
no audiovisual gear missing, failed to account for it,
so let it pass as minor vandalism.

I've heard nothing.

And rarely do I fret when I see that oak scar leaning
against my basement wall, though I wonder what it means
to own my father's name.

UNDER THE BOATHOUSE

Out of my clothes, I ran past the boathouse
to the edge of the dock
and stood there before the naked silence of the lake,
on the drive behind me, my wife
rattling keys, calling for help with the grill,
the groceries wedged into the trunk.
Near the tail end of her voice, I sprang
from the homemade board, bent body
like a hinge, and speared the surface,
cut through the water I would not open my eyes in,
to hear the junked depth pop in both ears
as my right hand dug into silt and mud,
my left clawed around a pain.
In a fog of rust I opened my eyes to see
what had me, and couldn't, but knew
the fire in my hand and the weight of the thing
holding me under, knew the shock of all
things caught by the unknown
as I kicked off the bottom like a frog,
my limbs doing fearfully strange strokes,
lungs collapsed in a confusion of bubbles,
all air rising back to its element.
I flailed after it, rose toward the bubbles
breaking on light, then felt down my arm
a tug running from a taut line.
Halfway between the bottom of the lake
and the bottom of the sky, I hung liked a buoy
on a short roped, an effigy
flown in an underwater parade,
and imagined myself hanging there forever,
a curiosity among fishes, a bait hanging up
instead of down. In the lung-ache,
in the loud pulsing of temples, what gave first
was something in my head, a burst
of colors like the blind see, and I saw
against the surface a shadow like an angel
quivering in a dead-man's float,
then a shower of plastic knives and forks
spilling past me in the lightened water, a can
of barbequed beans, a bottle of A. I., napkins
drifting down like white leaves,
heavenly litter from the world I struggled toward.
What gave then was something on the other end,
and my hand rose on its own and touched my face.
Into the splintered light under the boathouse,
the loved, suffocating air hovering over the lake,
the cry of my wife leaning dangerously
over the dock, empty grocery bags at her feet,
I bobbed with a hook through the palm of my hand.

"Under the Boathouse," "Under the Vulture Tree," and "The Desk"
are reprinted by permission of the author.