

Q: Where did you grow up?

A: I was born in Riverside, California, but I grew up all over the world. My father was an Air Force pilot, so our family homes were on military bases. I was too young to remember details about the bases in California and Alabama, but I do remember tidbits from Japan and Okinawa. My formative years, second through sixth grade, were spent in England, of which I have many fond memories—a fish-and-chips truck (like our ice cream trucks) selling vinegar-soaked offerings wrapped in newspaper, playing on WWII air raid bunkers while jets screamed by in treetop level passes, collecting and trading decorative tea cards instead of baseball cards.

Dad's last station was Langley Air Force Base in Hampton Roads Virginia. My parents bought a home in nearby Poquoson and that is where he retired and the place I have considered "home" ever since.

Q: How would you define a "poet?"

A: A poet is someone who sets ideas dancing to the music of words. To a poet, backbeat and melody is just as important as text in the refrain.

Q: How did you become a poet?

A: I consider myself more of an accidental poet. I'd always read poetry and dabbled at verse, but for years I spent most of my writing effort on fiction, essays, and articles. Poetry was an escape for me, something I would resort to when an idea overtook me that I didn't think I could spin into a story or an assignment. It was also a cathartic means to explore painful subjects. I did so privately, writing and revising my poems but never showing them to anybody else. I felt like a poseur. After a while I found I had built up quite a collection and started sharing them with my writer friends. They encouraged me to read them at open mics, and it was the playground all over again. The coffeehouse crowds let me know what worked and what didn't. I edited viciously, cutting, when possible, to the bones. My body of work grew, as did my credits with literary journals, but I still didn't feel like a "poet" until my first book, *The Human Touch*, was published in 2007.

Q: Was it difficult to write about your military experiences in HALF A MAN?

A: For ten years after the Gulf War, I didn't talk about my experiences with anyone. My girlfriend kept pestering me to share what was going on in my head and I'd blow up instead. I'd go on long runs to cool off and ask myself why I was so angry. When I had no answers, I started writing poems as a means of examining my feelings—a sort-of self-imposed therapy. I began with a distant perspective and slowly worked my way closer to the core of my experience. It was painful, but cathartic. The poems gathered in my drawers, and after several more years I began to share them with others. Twenty years after the war, my collection was published.

Q: What was your publishing experience like for HALF A MAN?

A: Over a two-year period, I submitted *Half a Man* to 17 different publishers. I received many favorable comments and even some pleasant surprises. When I submitted the manuscript to Copper Canyon Press, the editor said he loved my work but regretted he was unable to take the manuscript because they were overcommitted at the moment. He then went on to say that he was the poetry editor at *Narrative Magazine*, and he wanted to publish four of my poems in their pages. Great exposure and a decent paycheck, and I didn't have to go through the multi-layered reading process.

On the negative side, several publishers were lackadaisical in their responses. Six months for some; ten months for others. After one year without hearing from a publisher, I would write "no reply" in their row on my submission tracker. Some still haven't replied. McSweeney's Books surprised me by rejecting my manuscript 1½ years after I'd submitted it to them. I was not too broken up, though, since FutureCycle Press had published the book a couple of weeks before I received that notice.

FutureCycle Press has been wonderful. Editor and publisher Diane Kistner is responsive and author friendly. She spearheaded marketing campaigns, wrote press releases, and sent copies to numerous reviewers prior to publication. She's made the experience wonderful.

Q: Did you always have this book in mind or did it start out as individual poems?

A: This book began as individual poems. It wasn't until six years after my first collection was published that I gathered my war poems and realized I had enough work for a second book. I culled material that wasn't emotionally engaging and put together a manuscript of poems that still make me smile or tremble even after all these years.

Q: What was the first poem you wrote from this collection?

A: The first poem I wrote from this collection was "Chemical Defense." It's a perfect example of using the distant perspective on my earlier work. There is no "I" in this poem; there are "soldiers," "we," and "he." The genesis for this poem was an absurd incident that occurred just before the outset of the air war (Desert Storm). We were staging in a defensive perimeter just south of Iraq's border when one of our chemical alarms shrieked and sent us all into panic mode. Saddam Hussein had not only used chemical weapons on Iran during their ten-year war, he had used them on his own people. This poem describes the steps we took to learn whether it was safe or not for us to remove our masks and breathe the air. What it does not mention—the absurdity I alluded to—was that the alarm had gone off due to a wayward goat urinating on it.

Q: What was the most difficult poem to write and the circumstances behind it?

A: The most difficult poem for me was “Half a Man.” That poem describes one of the many shattered and shredded bodies we came across. Its bleak tone is meant to convey the emotional void within soldiers who must operate in those situations. To remain sane, we must carve out a part of ourselves. Hence the not-so-subtle double meaning of the poem’s (and book’s) title.

Q: What is your favorite poem from this collection and why?

A: My favorite poem from this collection is probably “Get Some” because of the way it connects with either kids considering life in the military or parents of those kids. The focus is on kids enamored of first-person-shooter video games who think their skill with a joystick and love of videogame violence will inure them to war’s effects. The poem is actually a mournful denunciation of that view.

Q: Do you ever get writer's block? If so, how do you conquer it?

A: I believe in writer’s block, but it doesn’t scare me because I know the cure: sit down and write crap. Writing crap gets my brain into the creative process and removes the blocks that are holding me up. Masterpieces are never born on the first draft; neither is any writing worth reading. Knowing that I will have to edit sometime later is liberating. I don’t have to fret over every word. I simply need to get words down on the page. The fretting comes later when I have a completed first draft. If the draft is embarrassingly bad, so what? After I scrape away the crap I might find something artful underneath. Diamonds are born from coal. Memorable writing is born out of pap.

Q: Can you describe your process for creating a poem?

A: Most of my poems begin on pads of paper when I am away from home. When I don’t have a pad with me—a rarity—I scribble my thoughts on napkins, envelopes, or whatever shreds of paper I can find. For some reason, driving is very conducive to my creative process. Ideas will often come while I am in the car and I will bounce the idea around in my head until I can stop and write it down. When it gets to be too full and I’m worried that I’ll lose something, I pull over and write on one of my pads. If I don’t have time to pull over, I’ll scrawl furiously while stopped at red lights. Most of the poems began their lives while I was sitting in my silver Hyundai Sonata in some parking lot. I’d write with the pad flat against the steering wheel and pour out my thoughts.

The second step for me is taking those scraps of poems home so I can hammer them into something workable. I’ve tried to make my home as conducive as possible to writing without distraction. I converted the dining room into a writing nook. I usually write in silence, but sometimes I’ll have Enya or some other soothing music playing in the background. A green globe that I made in a glassblower’s studio dangles in the window. On the walls are inspirational art and a couple of posters from events where I’ve spoken. Bookshelves line three of the walls, forming a U around my dining room table.

Seated at the table, I can reach out with my right hand to the shelves of military books, Virginia books, and books in my to-read list. Reaching out with my left hand, I can reach the shelves holding all my reference books. Attached to the front of one bookshelf is a board listing assignment dates, pitches to make, and stories to work on. This is the environment where I spend the vast majority of my writing time.

Sitting down with my poetry scraps, I'll transfer what I've written into a Word document. The words on the handwritten page will often circle back to earlier thoughts or jump ahead to something else. Gathering these thoughts on the computer allows me to assemble them in a more sensible order. At this point, I'll often find that the germ of the idea has been lost and that the poem has spun into a new direction. It's great when happens. Long ago, I would force the poem back into the box I had originally created for it. Many bad poems taught me there was probably a reason it wanted out of the box. I learned that if I let it roam free, the poem could pleasantly surprise me. And if it didn't work out, it would still make for a good mental exercise. There is no such thing as wasted writing.

Once I do have a complete poem that I like, then I begin to trim the fat. My poems will often go through many iterations. Early drafts give birth to passion, and later drafts provide thematic framing and artistic flourishes.

Q: What writers have influenced you?

A: My biggest influence has come from my writing mentor, Bill Walsh. A self-educated genius, Bill was the harsh taskmaster who always demanded more and better, the antithesis of what I found in well-meaning, full-of-nothing-but-praise critique groups. When I brought Bill weak writing, he eviscerated me. Knowing how he would respond, I edited longer and euthanized lazy words. I would compare what I had thought was ready to submit with my updated version and it was always better. Then I would bring it to Bill and he would show me how to make it better yet.

Plenty of authors have also influenced me in various genres. My fiction has been influenced by Tim Gautreaux's fault-ridden yet lovable characters, Richard Russo's vivid incorporation of place, Sheri Reynolds' introspection, David Schickler's muscular prose and sexual undertones, and Stephen King's narrative drive and tension-building techniques. My non-fiction has been influenced by Sebastian Junger's gritty reportage, Jeannette Walls' unflinching revelation of painful truths, Barbara Ehrenreich's immersion into her subjects, and Bill Bryson's use of humor to make complex subject matter more interesting. My poetry has been influenced by Jon Pineda's examination of family, Billy Collins' whimsy, Mary Oliver's scrutiny of nature, Ted Kooser's ability to make the profound accessible, and Natasha Trethewey's exploration of culpability.

Q: In 1998 you walked away from a manufacturing job to start writing. How did you come to this decision?

A: After I got out of the Army in 1995, I worked for 2½ years as a line supervisor at a bag factory in Chicago. I left there to take over as the production manager at another factory (Laminated Papers, aka “LP”) in Holyoke, Massachusetts. My base work schedule at LP was 66 hours per week, 12 hours each day Monday through Friday plus 6 hours on Saturday, although I usually worked closer to 80 hours each with week with scheduled overtime. The turning point came when I put in 100 hours in a week. That was the proverbial straw.

Although I was dissatisfied with factory life, I could escape into a world of my own creation when I returned home. I would sit at my desk writing stories, and all the knots that had tied together in my stomach during the day would untangle. This being America, I knew it was possible to make a living doing something you actually enjoyed, so in 1998 I walked away from my production career to become a full-time writer. The work has been just as hard, the pay significantly less, but I no longer dread “going to work” in the morning. I feel fulfilled.

Q: What changes did you make to become a writer? Do you make your living through writing?

A: My college degree is in civil engineering, so I had to spend considerable time honing my craft. I amassed a library of books on writing and became a regular at the library. I followed Ernest J. Gaines’s six words of advice to writers: “Read, read, read, write, write, write.”

After I learned how to properly turn a phrase, it still took me a while to build relationships with editors who could provide me with regular assignments. Money was tight. I traded in my shiny red sports car for a beat-up Tercel and moved in with my parents until I could afford my own apartment. To earn a living, I did supplemental work as a writing coach for business executives, NASA scientists, and high school students trying to master the SAT essay. I also worked short-term contracts as a technical writer for the military, for OSHA, and for SunTrust Banks.

Q: You are a writer in every genre—fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. What benefit does each genre give you?

A: Fiction lets me stretch my legs, take an idea out for a long walk and just explore. Non-fiction forces me to put more thought into the construct and the elements of a piece. There are often outside demands that I have to take into consideration, such as the market slant of the assigning magazine or the page space and accompanying art. Poetry forces me to not only try using the best possible word, but to also seek out the best possible combination of words to lyrically convey thoughts.

Writing poetry has altered the way I write non-fiction and fiction. Now I sound out sentences in my head and will alter the structure depending on how it sounds to my ear. Because of this, my stories flow better than they had before. Writing non-fiction has made me a much better editor. In working with magazine editors, I am constantly getting feedback on my work and learning how to deliver a message with precision. Writing fiction teaches me how to set up a scene so that it will accomplish something by its end. By asking “What am I trying to achieve here?” when I edit, I have better learned how to incorporate themes into my non-fiction and poetry.

Q: What is your daily routine, especially when it comes to writing?

A: My best writing hours are in the quiet and dark stillness of early morning before the waking world intrudes. I usually get up, grab a diet Dr Pepper, boot up the computer, and check my email. Reading those, replying, and deleting wakes my mind up. Then it’s time to write. My goal is always to work on one of my “big projects” first, writing bad first drafts until I’m weary and need a break. I’ll make breakfast (or lunch if it’s been a productive morning) and do some reading. Then I’ll either convince myself to go for a walk or take care of chores. After that, it’s time to take care of “business matters”: sending submissions, conducting phone interviews, composing queries, calling editors, prepping lecture notes for an upcoming writers’ conference. I’ll usually take another break after concluding the day’s business matters (or midway through if I’m deluged) to get some human contact. I’ll chat with friends on the phone or drive fifteen minutes to visit with my writing mentor, Bill Walsh. After that, it’s back to the computer to edit. I can do minor edits on numerous pieces or get lost in a lengthy story and lose track of time; but basically I edit until dinnertime.

Q: What is your first memory of reading poetry?

A: My first memory of reading poetry would be the rhyming doggerel of children’s books. I was an early and voracious reader and quickly moved on to Hardy Boys mysteries, J. R. R. Tolkien’s fantasies, Mark Twain’s adventures, and Ray Bradbury’s science fiction mindbenders. It wasn’t until high school English class reintroduced me to poetry that I started reading adult poetry. These days my favorite poems are about human relationships—with each other, with nature, with community—and examinations of problems in our modern world.

Q: What is your first memory of writing poetry?

A: I was the class clown throughout much of school, and I created raunchy limericks and other poems describing teachers and students in compromising positions. In some ways, my classmates were the best teachers at school. Kids don’t sugarcoat their bad reviews. I learned my first lessons of “less is more” on the playground as I sharpened my naughty verse, and that lesson has stayed with me through the years.

Q: What was the first thing you published and when?

A: In 1998, an online fan site called HokieCentral (now TechSideLine) was the first to ever publish any of my work. As a Virginia Tech graduate and a fan of the football team, I wrote 39 articles for them over the next seven years. Mostly it was unpaid work, but it gave me the opportunity to get feedback from hundreds of site users. Later on, the website included paid content for subscribers and I was paid for a handful of articles.

Although it wasn't my first or largest, my most memorable paycheck was the \$5 I earned for a short story ("Burnt Offerings") published in *Mystery Time Magazine* in 2000. Just enough money to buy a six-pack of beer to celebrate.

Q: What other projects are you working on now?

A: A few years back I walked 1,500 miles along a zig-zagging route across Virginia to explore the land and connect with fellow Virginians. Now I am writing a book about that great adventure.