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## Review of Chitwood's "From Whence"

William Jolliff

George Fox University, [wjolliff@georgefox.edu](mailto:wjolliff@georgefox.edu)

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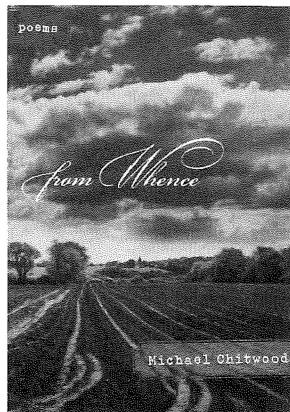
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**From Whence.** By Michael Chitwood.  
(Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University  
Press, 2007) \$15.95, paper. ISBN:  
9780807132241, 62 pp.



If we too seldom take delight in a book of poems today, it's not due to the lack of competent work. Just as likely, it seems to me, we're overwhelmed by the riches of decades of poetry proliferation fueled by literary journals and e-zines, MFA programs and independent presses, and by lots of voices that want to be heard. Really good poems, along with their lesser cousins, abound.

Thousands of them wait on our shelves or in the air of any coffee house with decent wi-fi. In a sky so full of stars, it's difficult for a poet to dazzle.

So it would be easy to let Michael Chitwood's *From Whence* pass through with slight notice. His method is, for the most part, a non-revolutionary kind of free verse (interspersed with a handful of prose poems), creating a surface that does not set his work apart from what is published regularly in any of the top journals.

The pieces are expertly executed, but occasionally his narratives are not *quite* compelling, and I find myself thinking, "That's really good, but I need a little more...." His lyrics rely largely on the success of his metaphors, and while his metaphors always work well (his craft is beyond reproach), at times they don't dazzle sufficiently to outshine the other stars elbowing for their place in the current constellation.

But there are other times, more than a few, when everything falls exactly right. In the book's opening lines, for example, in the beginning of the poem "Chalk," Chitwood tunes his near-perfect ear to details that recall the despair of an elementary classroom:

Cartridge of thought,  
stick of screech  
  
in our unlearned pinch.  
Arithmetic's cigarette,  
  
the answers vanishing  
in the giggle at our backs.... (3)

Another equally successful lyric, this one a loose sonnet, is "Threshold." William Stafford's justifiably famous "Traveling Through the Dark" has almost made the "dead deer along the road" image unusable, but Chitwood dedicates some of his best lines to its revivification. "This time of year they don't decay so much as deflate," he writes, "the rawhide bag leaking until it's flat, / the hair matted and sodden with cinder-pocked snow" (20). His descriptions are dead on,

bringing to mind every collapsing carcass we've ever driven by. In fact, the poem would justify its paper space with that picture alone, but his turn introduces a stone on a frozen pond, tossed there by a boy who will be gone when "the ice softens just enough for the rock / to ease through and plunge to the pond's dark bottom." This abrupt shift, along with that closing image, moves the poem from Stafford-like irony into the imagistic power of James Wright, a miracle that happens far too infrequently in contemporary poetry.

Chitwood also includes many successful narratives. "Grammar," like "Chalk," is set in a schoolroom, but this time the boys are a little older. It recounts the speaker's experience of a much admired high school teacher, Miss Knox, who explains to her students that their essays should be "Like a girl's skirt," "long enough to cover the subject / but short enough to make it interesting" (13). These boys, all at "the riotous threshold of manhood," find the skirt of their "Fort Knox" to be just right. He continues the grammatical-sexual word play in his classroom account, and even takes pleasure in the teacher's method of class discipline: "with both hands gripping the paddle" she "would take a legs-spread stance and swing." The piece concludes with a lovely but suggestive tribute to adolescence: "We had everything to learn, / everything between noun and verb."

The book's most memorable poem, however, may be "Telling It," a piece of storytelling in which a booze-inspired adventure unfolds into a metaphor of the human condition. Two drunken men, a mother's uncle and a friend, have devised the plan—"Oh, the beautiful logic of alcohol"—of getting the uncle to drive them around in their car while they fight in the back seat (28). The lush absurdity of the context puts us at a distance; but simultaneously, our carefully coerced identification with the tradition of family storytelling brings the events closer to our own personal absurdities. As Chitwood suggests, "It's told and implicates us all ...," certainly an *all* that reaches beyond the speaker's family to our own. It's just the kind of pathetically ridiculous story that must be and will always be recounted, for all its "sad grand stupidity." We need only to pick up a family photo album or the morning newspaper to know that "it is such a good story / when the dead want to fight" (29).

If *From Whence* lacks the immediately compelling gratifications of shocking psychological accounts or the technical innovation that commands some temporary interest, it has its compensations—not only in its occasional brilliance, but in the overall warmth that pervades even the lesser poems. It is a book that comes across the desk like a warm handshake that seems to say, "Here it is, some of what it's meant for me to be in this world." The art is strong enough to entice the reader's hand out as well. So we join Michael Chitwood in this shared human impulse, and we feel the things we care about affirmed in his finely crafted telling.

## **WILLIAM JOLLIFF**

Bill Joliff teaches English at George Fox University. His chapbook, *Searching for a White Crow*, has recently been published by Pudding House Publications.