

**The David and Barbara Pryor Center
for
Arkansas Oral and Visual History**

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Arkansas Memories Project - Event

J. Chester Johnson
Poetry Reading
October 28, 2011
University of Arkansas
Fayetteville, Arkansas

Event Description

On October 28, 2011, J. Chester Johnson performed a poetry reading at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. Davis McCombs, associate professor and director of the creative writing program, introduced him. The reading highlighted poems from *St. Paul's Chapel & Selected Shorter Poems*. The title poem refers to a church that withstood the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center and became a base for rescue efforts. This work has earned acclaim for its message of endurance and hope. Other poems Johnson read include "Elegy to a Distant Son" and "Friday Nights at Hyatt Field."

Transcript:



[Introductory music]

[00:00:25] Peggy Boyles: I'm Peggy Boyles, director of development for the Division of Student Affairs here at the university. And on behalf of the division and the Vice Provost for Student Affairs Dean of Students, Danny Plig—Danny Pugh, I want to welcome you all to the first Chester Johnson poetry reading. I met Chester in 2007, and during our conversation the one thing that left—that I left with was, "Out of all the schools that I've attended, I've never had a poetry reading at the University of Arkansas." So I thought, "Hmm, I think he may want to have a poetry reading [*audience laughs*] at the University of Arkansas." It's been three years in the making, but it's here, and not before time. And without further ado, I actually want to introduce Cedric Kenner, who is director of the Multicultural Center—this wonderful space that they're allowing us to use—and he's going to talk to you just very briefly about the Multicultural Center. And then we'll have Davis McCombs come up and introduce Chester for you. Thank you all for coming. [*Applause*]

[00:01:27] Cedric Kenner: How's everyone doing?

Audience: Great.

CK: Great, great. On behalf of the Multicultural Center, again, welcome. This—this great place here. And let me back up for a second. Quite often, I am so passionate about diversity and what the University of Arkansas is doing. I almost had a Sarah Palin moment where I wanted to write some things on my hand.

[*Audience laughs*]

Unidentified woman: Oh, no! [*Audience laughs*]

CK: [*Laughs*] Well, I mean, quite honestly, we do—we do community outreach, scholarship, and mentoring are three of the thing—three of the key things that we really focus on and are really outreaching to the community to let them know what we want to focus on at the University of Arkansas. We try to enrich our culture, letting students know that this is a great place to learn. And through our programming we—we are—we are hopeful that students understand that—cla—the learning doesn't necessarily happen in the classroom. It also happens outside of the classroom. So I just want to welcome you and thank you and please utilize the space and enjoy. All right.

Thank you. [*Applause*]

[00:02:31] Davis McCombs: [*Shuffles papers*] It's my pleasure to introduce Chester Johnson here this afternoon. Chester has come back to the University of Arkansas this week to receive our

Distinguished Alumni Award. Chester earned his undergraduate degree here—in English, I might add—and after leaving Arkansas, Chester has gone on to have a long and distinguished career in finance. This is a poetry reading, so I won't go into all the details of that. [*Audience laughs*] But I will tell you that, in addition to his business career, Chester has also miraculously managed to have a career in the arts—a career in poetry. After 9/11, Chester was named the World Trade Center Memorial Poet. His beautiful poem, "St. Paul's Chapel," celebrates the Episcopal chapel next to the World Trade Center that managed to survive the collapse of the Twin Towers. [00:03:51] In Chester's poems, Elvis coexists with Mozart. [*Someone laughs*] Monticello, Arkansas, lives comfortably with Manhattan. A word like huh—*H-U-H* [*audience laughs*—bumps up a few pages later against a word like procrustean. These are poems of plain speak and verbal music, of erudition and common sense. They are learned poems, but they're also accessible poems. And most of all, they are deeply felt poems. In reading Chester's poetry, I never lose the sense that it grows out of a life lived, a life contemplated, and a life deeply loved. There is heat, a certain 98.6 degrees, that radiates off every page. Please join me in welcoming back to the University of Arkansas Chester Johnson.

[*Applause*]

[00:05:12] CJ: Hi. Let me get situated here. By the way, thank you all for coming. I—I know it's—everyone's very busy and think about poetry at three thirty in the afternoon when there's so much to get done—I know I—I really very much appreciate it, and I obviously thank [*taps podium*] Davis so very much. I'm sure all of you know that Davis is a—a wonderful young poet whose work is already very much widely appreciated. I also want to thank Peggy Boyles for helping to make this poetry reading possible. She knew I was, as she said, most inclined to do this. I've read my verse at the other two institutions where I studied, Harvard University and the University of Arkansas at Monticello. I certainly desire to present my poetry here where I graduated. Thank you, Peggy. [00:06:13] Since the circumstances surrounding this visit to the university by my wife Freda and me are so personal, involving my return here to accept an award, it would only be natural in the spirit of the nature of the trip for this poetry reading to focus on personal verse. Some critics say that all poetry, regardless of the topic, is personal. However, I've written historically centric poems, theoretic poems, imaginary poems, grammar-driven poems, structure-driven poems—but they won't be part of the group I'll

read today. Rather, the poems to be read will be based on experiences I've had or felt that are reflected in the poems or events that substantially impacted [*traffic noise*] me in a very individual way. [00:07:08] For example, as I contemplated over the last few months this time back to the university, a short quatrain I had written kept repeating itself to me. [Poem begins] When we are already worn and tried, / Steadfastly at peace, dismissing pride, / We will instead, for a more private concern, / Recall these hours which we will yet relearn. [Poem ends] That is the gift that this trip has given me—a moment to recall and, better still, to relearn distant hours. As I read various pieces this afternoon, I plan to interject here and there a quatrain I've written. I love quatrains. If you are familiar with my most recent book of verse, *St. Paul's Chapel and Selected Shorter Poems*, you'll note that there are two sections in the book devoted to quatrains and haiku. What can I say? I like short poems. When you can't say what you—when you can't say it in longer verse, you can frequently say it better in a very short poem. [00:08:18] Someone asked me about behavior as a listener at the poetry reading. Well, I just request that if you have cause to hiss, try to muffle it a bit. I'm sensitive [*audience laughs*] about that sort of thing. At the same time, if you

happen to want to express approval at some of the verse, I'd ask you to wait, please, until the end—the very end of the readings.

Thank you. All but one poem I'll read today are taken from my latest book of verse. Another little quatrain to get us started.

[Poem begins] Don't be so profound, / You're not the last one found. / To talk ever so serious / Makes one ever so delirious.

[Poem ends] [*Audience member laughs*] [00:09:03] Some fifty pounds heavier and some decades earlier, I was addicted to football. My self-image was reflected in the sport until my sophomore year in college, when an injury ended it. The injury was one of the best things ever to happen to me. The name of this poem is "Friday Nights On Hyatt Field." Most everyone who grew up in the South will recognize the irrefutable force of Friday night high school football. "Friday Nights On Hyatt Field."

[Poem begins] Someone kept Hyatt Field in shape / where we knocked each other around. / The Billies, very district champs, / and I have the high school scars to prove it. / Flair (or was it just flamboyance?), / a game (a roar?) by football in public contact . . . / Down into the grass we would grind our qualms / and mangle the grinding by the other side, / as pain fell by demand into place. / "Hammer it out a yard at a time," / the town prophet decreed by bark / and rolled us home bastards

even further: / "A split lip for first and ten, a broken nose for six
points more." . . . / We drove on surely to the sacrifice / for a
greater good of town and team. *What tempest gods goading
this pain do we gratify?* / By any name, there's nothing
reverential / gasping at liquid air in an airless meadow / among
smells of athletic steam in grassy rows, / a turf roughed by
flesh-flaying cleats. There's nothing notional or subtle about it /
(not as a work in progress or thin, lithe strokes below the
waist)—not the glare from multi-eyed lights, / band music in
cacophony / and cheers "to keep the lead out," / or a full
stadium to make it worthwhile. / *Even a little blood left on the
game can convince us we're heroes.* [Poem ends] [00:11:15]
[*Shuffles papers*] The next poem I'll read is entitled "Elegy To A
Distant Son." For some reason, I guess it is in the destiny of so
many families today—I'm frequently asked to recite this poem.
We obviously live at a time when a not-so-unusual fare is for
families to be fractured by divorce and for family members to be
separated as though they were in the midst of a diaspora of war.
As a personal comment, my relationship with my son has
improved by multiples since this poem was composed and
published. In fact, this verse is now one of his favorites. The
poem is written in a *terza rima* form, consisting of a series of

three-line stanzas with interlocking rhyme scheme. While the form was apparently invented by Dante for *The Divine Comedy*, it was used in Shelley in "Ode to the West Wind" and employed by many recent poets. [00:12:15] "Elegy To A Distant Son."
[Poem begins] You will not know by any telling, Son, // The thoughts that I have softly shared with you. / At once, you weren't there (from divorce they run!)— // And separate by place and unlike view, / We cracked apart as though we were the rot. / Myself for us was said to be untrue. // You have your toys, mild talcums, and low spot / Now at the ductile age of twenty-four, / And I have mine, now long in tooth and squat; // We share a little only, nothing more— / While even on our way to fluent ground. / What's done, these coupled traits we're to ignore. // You trekked into another side around, / Another side of scrubs and pits unbound. // We should forage by two to bear us best, / But you have gods among brambles and trees, / The gods you chose without my watchful test // Around the deeper bush, as I, by degrees, / Have learned to practice distance to survive. / We quicken sports news, spun as similes, // With pitchers, catchers, scores (as points alive / And hugs), for father-son things were denied / From which a verbal coven could derive. // And now from here? Just simply put aside, / For you'll

do yours, and I will go to mine. / Yet deep within the sleep of
foster-tide, // And maybe on a day of law or sign, / You will
discover something we define. // And maybe at the birth of any
child / Or moments moiling through the smoke of loss, / Or left
behind a pair of fools self-styled, // Will shed from us this tumid
albatross / Before, again, it madly perseveres. / (What makes
our mutual blood a double cross?) // And if the promise,
"Welcome back," appears, / We'd squinch badly for lines so
meant to save - / A flutter to both tongue and vow adheres // To
doubt reprised and restive words, but brave. / A safe distance
opens a safe landscape. / While musing on the slights that we
forgave, // I stalk your many secrets I'd reshape, / And you're
just moving faster to escape. [Poem ends] [00:14:47] The
next quatrain I'll read was published by *the New York Times* at
the height of the Clinton impeachment controversy. The
quatrain appeared with an associated cartoon that had some
shadowy character in the background secretly recording a
conversation between Monica Lewinsky and Linda Tripp, who
were having lunch within the cartoon. It's not one of my best,
but it was of the moment. [*Audience laughs*] [Poem begins] I
used to say a lot / before smarts I got. / Now I say a lot less /
and get into less mess. [Poem ends] [*Audience laughs*]

[00:15:20] And in July 1990, there was a fatal accident on South Main Street in Monticello, Arkansas, right in front of a Piggly Wiggly grocery store. A speeding pickup truck hit an elderly woman who was crossing the street with an armful of groceries. Mercifully, she died only a few hours later. Someone could question why I use near newspaper-type phraseology in much of this poem. Facts surrounding a wreck like this carry more than enough emotional clarity on their own, with [CJ edit: without] my having to resort—without my having to resort to an unnecessary load of language. You will obviously apprehend that this elderly woman has for me an extra gravity and pertinence. It's called "The Wreck." Oh, by the way, my son's coming in tonight, so that's over—if you're thinking back over the poem I read. "The Wreck." [00:16:20] [Poem begins] It took ten years to gather / the nerve to write this poem. / Shades on a mirror / scare timid words away. // It was like this: / *Opal toting groceries home after an extended trip to Phoenix, / As she crossed Main Street / with an armful of nothing much. / (now bear in mind, / she was eighty years old / and slight in size , very slight in size), / suddenly out of nowhere, / a pickup truck / (quicker than wind chill) / barreled through the old woman, spotting her some forty feet down the street / (before*

the two, tangled, came to rest.) She whispered to the check-out girl, / who came to tend, / "There isn't a place that doesn't hurt." / Opal passed away (as many hear paraphrase) / of internal injuries six hours later, / released from a resuscitator. /

It was like that. // There are some things about which / one cannot write / 'til the shades fall from reflection, / and passage transforms / her safely to the curb. [Poem ends] A light quatrain would be appropriate [*clunking sound*] appropriate at this point. [Poem begins] Do things halfway, / Don't forget to play;/ for completion imitates death, / and conclusions stop a breath. [Poem ends] [00:17:41] Are y'all familiar with Dietrich Bonhoeffer? I'll give you a little bit of background on it. Davis got it at lunch in full force like a—a fire hose. But I'll—I'll give a very short [*unclear word*]. Dietrich Bonhoeffer became a well-known theologian and acclaimed writer while he was in his twenties during the rise of Hitler. Ironically employed as an agent of the German military intelligence office, Bonhoeffer engaged in numerous antigovernment activities that included supplying of assistance to Jews and creating a network, both inside and outside of Germany, of clergy and others who sought peace. Arrested in April 1943, Bonhoeffer remained in prison for the rest of his life. The Nazis were so obsessed with his death

that they executed Bonhoeffer at the Flossenburg concentration camp located near the Czechoslovakian border only two weeks before American liberation of the camp. Stripped of clothing, tortured and lead naked to the gallows yard, he was then hanged from a tree. Bonhoeffer's final words to fellow prisoners conveyed an ultimate theological paradox. [00:18:59] "This is the end. For me, the beginning of life." All this, before the age of forty. Over the last two years, I've written a drama in verse on Bonhoeffer. My wife says that he's been living in our apartment for two years, [audience laughs] and she's sort of glad all this over, and he can—he can leave. But it's entitled *For—For Conduct and Innocence*. I'll read only a few—uh—I'll spend a few minutes reading excerpts from the piece. I'll read the drama's opening, the speaker being one of the voices of the condemned that are used extensively throughout the work. In addition, I'll read the first page of the drama. Richard N. is a role representing a collage of Bonhoeffer's friends and associates. Gertrude, Bonhoeffer's fiancée—I'll also read a part for Bonhoeffer. The drama is writ in ver—this drama in verse is written in a form I call elastic rhyme. If you're interested, after the reading you can come up. I've—I've sort of described it here, and you can pick up a sheet that'll go into exactly what is

entailed with elastic rhyme. [00:20:13] [Excerpt begins]

Opening. Voice of the condemned 659537: Small amounts of love contain a modest gift, but the larger parts of love speak prophecy. After all, we know that nothing gains quite without mystery, closely unbound and untamed. The thoughts to convey, the unfurling effects of mystery. We're daily solving to replay in our own peculiar way the undisclosed lure of unexplained times. But here, all order lies in an irreverent claim that we'll win some fake charm for a magical ride where many now think safety began. As blunt, desperate attempts to mock crudely, the mystery again gathers. As a wayward excuse to justify the narrow—two narrow forms. As the man-gods, once loose, start to work miracles to induce our desire to be remade. And, here, enough safe logic rounds to murder with ease and texture. And, now, inhumane, the quicker so many trivialize the unknown and unknowable. [Excerpt ends] [00:21:40] Act one begins in September 1940. This drama verse covers three years leading up to his arrest. [Excerpt begins] Richard N.: Blame the cold, for it takes the winter's loss better than we can on our short and loosely controlled wit, tolerating these regrettable times. [*Someone coughs*] Our own first rule is turning aside and in blood mutating into those outside approved decrees,

transgressions laying claim to what appears normal, flood to fill an empty and grim face. [Excerpt ends] Then begins a dialogue surrounding a clergy friend who had just been arrested.

[Excerpt begins] Dietrich: The sentenced, Brother K, more excessive, searched for his life again, seeing his death as the last best chore as the freedom to live. So he waited just to be caught as a victim who doesn't command an alternative. The fiancée Gerhud—Gertrude speaks: Still, I can understand a man who falls easily. The desire to contain this life in a context or brand becomes too haunting, both fate and death equal weights of the end. Their bodies creaked, they were so right. No one dares stop them, as it should last like a minor bleak burst or to lay—to be laid aside in only a lost time left. And he was taken away first, not like a blasphemed thug. And, of course, he would return after the mild phase of taunt hysteria ran down. Dietrich speaks once again: Then he had above trite plays, never supposed to vie an absurdity as his blinking smile reflected a larger laugh inside a higher view. To consider a moment unhinged of lonely principle, not in a little while he would be undone by the tracks of a false country. He called my ways too serious, that I don't rely on others while I yearn. You take them like a free lunch, and you're always full of conditions for your

own sake, even without working at it. Since you try that little game to be perfect, there's no doubt you've then learned no trick to keep from loving yourself mostly in the nature of your own thoughts, too steep for general loose—use. [Excerpt ends] I'll skip over fifty pages [*laughter*] of the drama to the final page of the final scene. The moment before Bonhoeffer's arrest at his parents' home in Berlin. Another voice of the condemned makes a comment about the exploding bombs nearby from Allied planes, and then Dietrich recites a monologue that supplies a clear echo—for those who are familiar with this sort of thing—supplies a clear echo from the Gospel of John 21. [Excerpt begins] Voice of the condemned 348127: Within view of the actual, we're publicly more afraid with each thunder of loose bombs combing and darting so near the zone of panic. We fought closer there for every life than these remitted winners who hunt us—these neighbors favored by air without voices to explain. [Excerpt ends] And then Dietrich ends the drama with these lines. [Excerpt begins] They step loudly, steps ricocheting against the center vital part of an inviting heart, pulse momentarily convinced. I feel no drift waiting to be struck by loud purpose once again. Do not stop them. The swift fever must have a chance to expire, though consumptive fire purges

all. I sense the heat of torment advance close now. Let it follow one intended course. At last, let my pain wash entirely in weakness. I hear marshal extended sounds. Unlock the doors. Free the house. This den of cold resistance—freedom comes. Don't wait for one more knock. Open the house. Open the doors. Do you love me? Then don't deny them this slaughterhouse. So do you love me? Then lead them by access. Do you love me? Do not refuse them. Do you love me? Feed them. [Excerpt ends] [00:26:23] I mentioned earlier that the poems I'll read today are personal vintage. As one ages and the effects on the body become more obvious, then the body itself in its—then the body itself in its immutable adjustments of all kinds—delays, stutters, surprises—occupy increasing attention. Thus, a good reason for the next poem, "Another Sultry Moment." [Poem begins] *Flesh is the thing*. Sere rough-hewn leather says / We've gotten old and baroque. / Fruit-flavored and spot-free, suppleness / Tells a much different story. // We knew the latter once / when sap rose daily, nightly, continually / not deciduously, no seasonal / To seasonal preservation, / No waiting upon a lambent pulse. / *Flesh was the thing*. // Now sap clogs / On its way, slow to surface / On the parch-high of thinner skin; / And yet we've learned the tricks /

Of trading guile for unction / And grit for sauce. / Wizedened in a grasp of sentient claims, // *Flesh is still the thing.* [Poem ends]

[00:27:42] I'm sort of smiling 'cause I—I just remembered something. A few—about two or three years ago, I was [laughs]—I was asked to speak at a suburban—at a suburban church in—outside of Philadelphia and read some of my verse. And so I read my verse as part of sort of the sermon. And I often will run what I'm going to say by Freda before—she's a—you know, she's a great barometer and she all—she steers me always in the right direction. And this time, I didn't. And so I don't know how you felt. I felt it was okay to read this "Another Sultry Moment." And so after I gave the poetry reading, which was actually a sermon, and I'd finished with "Another Sultry Moment"—you know, "Flesh is the thing" and whatever—I go to the—I go to the pew, and Freda looks at me. She's blanch. She says, "My God, what were you thinking of?" [Laughter] And then after we—we had a discussion with the priest, and he said, "Well, maybe you should have run it by [CJ edit: her]."

[Laughter] So, anyway, the following quatrain contributes to this theme. [Poem begins] So you like the contours of time, / Counting seconds and minutes in rhyme. / To grow older, you say, means a loss of power, / For you expect less from each

passing hour. [Poem ends] [00:29:15] Freda and I were in Paris. One night from jet lag, that extra glass of wine, or from some disagreeable food, I simply couldn't sleep—a rarity. I often nod off in the middle of my own sentences. [*Audience laughs*] So—so I walked. At about three a.m., I found myself in front of a school on Rue des Rosiers. A plaque hanging near the playground near the courtyard read, to quote, "165 Jewish children from this school were deported by Germany during the Second World War and were exterminated in Nazi camps. Never forget." The poem, "School On Rue des Rosiers." [Poem begins] *To lament is to warn . . . / No slaughterhouse / of innocence can be explained so. / A cosmic loss / can only be reached / by a cosmic soul. . . // what merciful eye / forgot to look their way? //* Sums of laughter / are disguised by honor / and drama tonight; / only a plaque / remains to remind me / children once resided / where echoes now control . . . // *what merciful eye / forgot to look their way? //* How can crimes and insanity / be so near so many / among balance and delight? / I know and do not know, / for fear of the answer / keeps me timid. / so be it, / monuments and plaques / to commemorate our failures, / not our heroes. //

This morning, / I hear a baby / cry above Rue des Rosiers, / suggesting once again / I yet turn away / the fortunes and

recourses / of loss and the designs / and progress of pain . . . //
what merciful eye / forgot to look their way? // The morning
light now / rises above / the school on Rue des Rosiers, / and
soon, the chatter / of children will again rule a courtyard. / Music
will be heard, / and a boy will / not notice one girl / predicts and
surveys / her own absence . . . // *To lament is to warn . . . /* Let
those who play here now / know (without despair or numbness)
/ that great accidents befall great people, / great evil befalls
great good, / and the greatest fall / always dances near the
greatest dancer. [Poem ends] The next two poems are not
personal in the sense of being event driven, like the—most of
the ones I've—I've read. Rather, the next two involved the
exploration of personal views on a couple of highlighted subjects.
"Genesis" conveys a simple point—oh, by the way, just a minute.
I—I only have about three or four more poems, and if anyone
has any questions, I'll take them after that. But just would—
but—"Genesis" conveys a simple point. It conveys the essence
of innocence, moving inevitably toward contact with a world
outside a Garden of Eden. "Genesis." [Poem begins] The
nature of things /—water that moves /—the bread of oxygen / —
such. / (before the latent loss / has taken root and blooms) / is
first naïve, / then harmed. [Poem ends] The second in this vein

of personal views without event is titled "The Other." Yes, there's something that causes fascination with the notion of celebrity. While most of us do not prefer it for ourselves, nevertheless, there can be something fleetingly or not so fleetingly seductive about it. I played with the idea in this poem, how it's not wanted, but once had, it's hard to let go.

[00:33:30] "The Other." [Poem begins] I whispered heresy: /
Be small and thankful / you're not popular, / for you don't need /
to recall sales nor nod at a vendor / nor pretend / not to see. //
They look lost there / with scrupulous grins / and an entourage /
extruding faith / in contrast. / Sure you envy their teeth / but
not the gross claims / they must eat for breakfast. // Yet / once
popular, / you'd hardly be / unpopular soon. [Poem ends]

[00:34:08] The next one is a little different. I looked at myself in a broken window, several shards at different angles and at different depths. My individual reflection was skewed—was askew in different ways each time I shifted from place to place in front of this broken glass, one way and then another. The eerie effect of doppelganger had seared my attention. The ghostly counterpart of a living person—that person being me, my face cut into various angles, often in a vacant space. So this poem, "Doppelganger—reflections at a broken window," as follows.

[Poem begins] I, am, I, and no one else . . . / Surprisingly at an angle. / I'd be someone else, really, // But I'm hampered . . . by in between; / For other folds and joints / Don't match, // Or I lay overheated / Or submerged under ice / To wet fog over glass. // I, am, I, and no one else . . . / But I can't smug it out / There worrying away // Between a half I have / and a half to someone else. [Poem ends] [00:35:31] A love poem never needs an introduction or shouldn't. The earth shook, went bad, and came 'round again. We caught an evening sky and put all disturbed objects and crooked things back together. And the earth coalesced around our love and slipped back into a smooth slumber. [00:35:56] Another quatrain of relevance. [Poem begins] Do not stop short, / Or choose to thwart; / Something has to have length / if it plans to have strength. [Poem ends] [00:36:07] This is the second marriage for both Freda and me. The attitudes and presum—presumptions that came to second marriage were discernibly at odds with those for a first marriage. Our own special flaws and our recognition of them ironically turn into special gifts this second time. Patience, the elimination of preconditions, the absence of torture caused by untried naïveté all are wonderfully available to the—the second time around, at least for us. [00:36:41] "The Marriage." [Poem begins] Now

we reach the point /of commitment, a stone on the ground, /
niche in the history of our condition, / a word across centuries of
casual disavowal; / We do exist and choose . . . // A marriage
day comes for everyone, conjugation of / a propelling and
allegoric trust, / one throw across a precipice / (code for past
failures); // after a hostile assault on ideals we have maintained
/ has fallen in turn limp and stale, our loss now unretained. //

Marriage lays a line across lines of twilight; / perhaps, without
amendment in sight . . . [Poem ends] [00:37:36] I would like
to end today's readings with September the eleventh and
September the twelfth poems. Freda and I worked for years
downtown in New York City until 9/11. Our offices were close to
the point of contact when the Twin Towers of the World Trade
Center were attacked. And the debris and jet fuel that came
through the vent and air circulation destroyed our offices, yet we
were fortunate indeed, of course, on many counts. I call these
the September the eleventh and September 12 poems. Before
sep—before "St. Paul's Chapel," the September twelfth poem,
there is necessarily the antecedent September the eleventh
poem, which is entitled, "Fear of Flying." In theological terms,
there must be a Good Friday before there's an Easter. "Fear of
Flying." [Poem begins] We're downtown on September

eleventh, / minding our business, tending fate. / There's one
moment, / Early in advance of the rest, / When birds don't sing
being in flight, / When they wend alongside many a parched
cornice; / No, they never sing without a grip. (*And we want to
be with God.*) // Around the corner, across from St. Paul's
Chapel, people take on air— / Some leap, while most degrade
into vapor / In one giant cough, dropping headlong / through
flames or debris, never landing. / (*God, save them and us.*) //
. . . Wait, we'd aerate effect to lighten the torque; / Balloons,
yes, balloons and footballs, kites, all / fly so high a loose
languor / As if ordained aloft in undiminishable space, retiring /
into well-stretched and elevated hands. / (*God meant for rare
things to happen, / but not for a man with a butcher knife / to
cut an airborne tether.*) // By hell's unchoked retch, / a gas-
blackened plume heatedly swells / a swatch of cellophane
heavenward, higher still. / How does it happen some things /
Rise air-tucked without ties, / Staves, or other fast catch-mes?
Atop / An attenuating breath, / The swatch should land but
when? // ("*. . . Wisdom comes once / We've taken place.*") // So
there. // Flying is good for business, we're told, / But is it good
for us? [Poem ends] [00:40:35] Before I read a September
twelfth poem, a minute about St. Paul's Chapel. I have to do

this every time, so just bear with me. I have to tell you about the chapel 'cause it's a wonderful place. The chapel is located directly across from the site of the World Trade Center. On 9/11, when so many buildings next to or across from the towers were destroyed or severely damaged, there was not a window broken or a stone dislodged at St. Paul's Chapel. And out of the dust, the chapel took its place as the 24/7 relief center for the recovery workers at Ground Zero. I volunteered there nights during the clean-up. The chapel served as a special sanctuary for grief, memory, and renewal. Immediately on its fences were memorabilia about those who were missing. The memorabilia had to be modified within days to become letters to and pictures of the dead, prayers, poems, pieces of commemorative clothing. Volunteers from all over the country—I know from here, too—came to help at St. Paul's during the succeeding eight months of clean-up. Now it is a place of pilgrimage, and the signature poem from my most recent book, *St. Paul's Chapel*, is on display there and is also printed as the memento card given to the twenty thousand to thirty thousand pilgrims and visitors who are there weekly. I've met so many at the chapel over the years, including students from this university, who want to experience the pilgrimage to St. Paul's Chapel. [00:42:18] This poem is

simply "St. Paul's Chapel." [Poem begins] It stood. Not a window broken. / Not a stone dislodged. / It stood / when nothing else did. / It stood when / terrorists brought September down. / It stood among myths. It stood among ruins. // To stand was its purpose, long lines prove that. / It stands, and around it now, a shrine of letters, poems, acrostics, litter of the heart. / It is the standing people want: / To grieve, serve and tend / celebrate the lasting stone of St. Paul's Chapel. // Deep into its thick breath, the largest banner fittingly from Oklahoma / climbs heavenward / with hands as stars, hands as stripes, hands as a flag; / And a rescuer reaches for a stuffed toy / to collect a touch / and George Washington's pew doesn't go unused. / Charity fills a hole or two. // It stood / in place of other sorts. / It stood / when nothing else could. / The great had fallen, / as the brute hardware came down. / It stood. [Poem ends] Thank you, and if you have any questions [*applause*]— [00:43:54] Thank you. [*Applause*] Any questions and—yes.

Unidentified female: Did you write poetry while [*high-pitched sound*] you were at the University of Arkansas?

CJ: Oh, yes. I started writing poetry when I was in high school. And I—but it—and I kept writing through—but it was a—through my college years—but I—I really started to really focus on it

when I was about twenty-three, twenty-four—soon after college.
But I wrote—definitely wrote [*unclear word*]. And I was
associated—at that time, the university didn't . . .

Scott Lunsford: If you could speak in front of the podium . . .

CJ: Oh, sorry.

SL: [*Unclear words*] podium. It'd be better for the . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: Thank you.

[00:44:41] CJ: No problem. Thank you. At that time, the Creative
Writing Department really wasn't rolling through in [19]66,
[19]68. Whitehead was here, whoever—Whitehead. And
Harrison was here, and Miller Williams had not come yet. I think
he came in the early [19]70s. I believe that's right. And I—I
was gone at that time, but—but the—there was the beginnings
of really focus on the spoken word as an important priority here
at the University of Arkansas. And, I mean, it's come so far. I
mean, the Creating Writing Department's one of the top five in
the country, so it's come a long—but mine was really more ad
hoc during that—during that time. I was [*unclear word*] working
my way through—any other—yeah.

[00:45:35] Unknown male: So how do you find time to do your
busy—regular business life to take the time to do this creative

writing?

CJ: Well, there—two or three things. One is that Freda and I work together in business. I mean, we—we have a small consulting firm—advises states, local governments, authorities on raising money—I mean, in terms of selling bonds. You know, we don't buy and sell, but we advise them on that. So we're—you know, we spend all day together. So at night, we don't necessarily have to say to each other, you know, "How was your day, honey?" 'Cause we [*audience laughs*]*—we—we—we know sort of what—and so—and Freda's very active in—in numerous organizations, and particularly in one where it takes her—she's out frequently at night. So I work at—I work on my poetry at night and also the weekends. I really spend a—and I'm pretty disciplined about it. I—the weekends are—are generally all day Saturday and then some of the afternoon on Sunday and Sunday night. But I'm—I'm . . .*

[00:46:48] Freda Johnson: And no vacations.

CJ: And no vacations. [*Laughter*] [*Unclear words*] That was one thing, when we got married—and she was used to vacations. And she married me, [*laughs*] and we don't have vacation. [*Laughter*] She always mentions that, but [*laughter*]*—this is Freda, if no one knows that and you haven't been able to tell.*

Any other questions? Thank you again for coming. Appreciate it. [*Applause*] And if you're interested in elastic rhyme, feel free.

[End of poetry reading 00:47:26]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]