

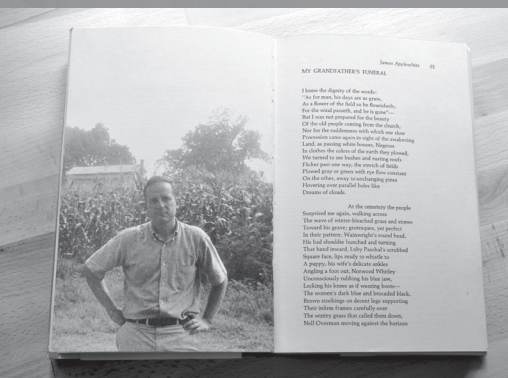
Imprinted with Place:

A Conversation at Home

with James Applewhite

Interview and photographs **by Rob McDonald**

notes contributed by the *NCLR* staff



ABOVE James Applewhite, Durham, NC, June 2015 (The photographs throughout this interview were taken by Rob McDonald when he visited the home of James and Jan Applewhite for this interview.)

Like Thomas Wolfe or Eudora Welty, Peter Taylor or Ernest Gaines, James Applewhite is a writer so closely associated with his birthplace that most discussions of his work begin with a rehearsal of his biography. A note in one of his earliest publications calls attention to an ethereal photograph of the author, taken by his brother (and mentioned later in the following interview): “Mr. Applewhite was born in 1935 in Eastern North Carolina. The farmhouse behind him in the photograph is the birthplace of his grandfather; his father now manages the farm. Currently he teaches the Romantic Poets at UNC Greensboro.”¹ The photograph was taken in rural Stantonsburg sometime around 1968, not long before Applewhite returned to join the English Department at Duke University, where he had been an undergraduate, did his graduate work, and would spend a long and distinguished career as an award-winning teacher, scholar, and poet. The image depicts Applewhite as a kind of Whitman for the age: no hat, his figure low in the frame beneath a bright blown-out sky, hands parked confidently on his hips. His steady gaze at the camera conveys an aspect of connection, engagement, and insight that is more than fulfilled by his poems that follow.

Because of the primacy of place in his poems, Applewhite’s name was among the first I penciled on a wish list of subjects for a photographic project I have been developing since 2007, titled *Native Ground*. For reasons purely logistical, he is among the last I have visited with my camera. Meeting him at his home in Durham in June 2015 to talk about his work and make photographs of the space where he spends his days still pondering cosmic questions and continuing to write was a deeply affecting experience.

I began *Native Ground* with a goal of exploring what I have come to call writers’ personal landscapes – certain places that may be imagined to have influenced them. I have focused on writers from the South because of the presumed prevalence of “place” in their work, and I have been both challenged and affirmed in my expectation to discover visible threads connecting artistic voice and location, outlook and foundation. As I have developed the project, however, my view of place has grown malleable. My original focus was on landscapes of origins, whether the fields of Eatonton, Georgia,

¹ Paul Carroll, ed., *The Young American Poets*, Big Table Books series (Chicago: Follett, 1968).