resurgence, and resistance to oppression, preparing us for
the professor’s discovery of long-buried evidence of violent
contact between Cherokee and marauding conquistadors
searching for gold.
Undeterred by the “madman’s” prophecies, the archaeology
professor persists in his exploration until he unearths a
cave entrance that leads down two hundred feet into the
heart of the mountain, what he quickly assumes to have been
a gold mine from the age of de Soto. The professor proceeds
through the tunnel by way of stone steps he presumes to
have been carved by Cherokee enslaved by Spanish prospectors
in the sixteenth century. As he descends those steps into sub-
terraneous, suffocating vapors, toward a terrifying revelation of retribu-
tion reminiscent of Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado,” the profes-
sor is overcome by childhood terror and mankind’s abject
suffering. Although these communities tend to remain in
backstory, or otherwise on the stories’ peripheries, they are felt in the consciousness of the
protagonists. In “Devil’s Court-
house,” for example, we share the professor’s memories of
teens years hunting deer with his father in the Pisgah National Forest near Devil’s Court-
house, and also of the “hardscrabble,” “one-horse” farm where he’d grown up, a farm he’d been
“happy to escape to attend col-
lege” but that now seems to
draw to the man’s neurologi-

cy professor preserves his
full-time interest and desire
for perfection, just as his profes-
sor’s memories of it helped him to arrive
at this choice of self-restraint. At a thicket of briars at the base of Devil’s Courthouse, the
professor proceeds to make his
discovery. At the mouth of the
tunnel entrance, he is faced with inscrutable mystery. “Won-
der” is the word many scholars would use to describe the wide
range of Morgan’s work – from the cosmic poetry of
The Oratorio of Time: Fourteen Poems (2019) to the break-
through novel Gap Creek (1999)
to the speedy poetry of Dark
In the preface, West lays claim to the collection’s primary goal, that “the greatest praise” readers and scholars can offer a writer is “their repeated, sustained atten-
tion” (2). As the first essay collec-
tion devoted solely to Morgan’s
writing, the book certainly achieves its ambition. In four
distinct sections, readers move contrapuntally between Mor-
gan’s work and his life, from the opening essays “On the Poetry” to a photo gallery in “People and Places” to studies “On the
Prose” and, finally, to Morgan’s own thoughts about place and
writing in “In His Own Words.” This collection assembles some of the best writing on Morgan’s work over the years and includes
insightful new essays that provide
constructive approaches to seeing even deeper into Mor-
gan’s imagined world.
Since Morgan began his career as a poet, the collec-
tion rightfully begins with a
focus on his verse that includes four foundational essays previously published by fellow poets Fred Chappell (1976), William Harmon (1981), Rita Sims Quillen (1989), and Michael McFee (1990). These essays form the groundwork for the study of Morgan's poetic sensibilities and signature aesthetics. Chappell's "appreciation" anoints Morgan as a poet of the first order and offers a catalogue of thematic material essential to Morgan's view: "the outlines of this landscape are primitive; they consist of the enormous and imperious operations of nature, of a society of poor, narrow, and embittered people." (7). Harmon's essay on "Pelagian Georgics" shows how Morgan refutes "the easy explanations between grief and doom" (15) in poems that "may be the last dwelling place of old-time agriculture and country life in general." (22). Harmon's essay is essential reading for understanding Morgan's distinct craft and his use of difficult and unusual poetic forms, especially the feuverish "three hundred and fifty roughly decaasyllabic" line "Mockingbird" (18).

Recent essays from Bhisham Bherwani (2015), Jim Clark (2022), and West (2022) provide important new perspectives on Morgan's poetic work. Bherwani's analysis of the "elegant strain" examines how Morgan's "intimacy with perennial decay and renewal seems to underlie his urge to revolve in poems what is in other ways irretrievable (his childhood, its people, the past in general)" (65). Clark's look at the "music speculativa," the "medieval music theory... mathematics, and mysticism, underpinned by Pythagorean notions" (53), considers how "music is the 'master metaphor' that synthesizes and unifies Morgan's 'quadrivium of music, writing, history, and nature into a harmonious whole'" (61). West's concluding essay on "The Missing as Muse" explores the role of absence, arguing that some of Morgan's "best poems treat disappearances as sources of wonder and even inspiration" (82).

Section Three, "On the Prose," features eight essays that address Morgan's work in short fiction, four that focus on the novels, and one that examines his nonfiction work. In examining the stories in The Mountains Won't Remember Us (1992), Paul Linn. Bosay points to the "dramatic duality" in Morgan's work, describing the writer as "a poet of nature whose fiction contains an unusually complex view of social history, which is also a kind of geology — a record of the endurance and decay of the earth as well as humans and their products" (114). Suzanne Booker-Canfield connects Morgan's poetry to the stories in The Balm of Gilead Tree (1999), placing him in the Emersonian tradition of American Romanticism, and showing how his attraction "to patterns of reduplication, linkage, and chiarsur in formal poems" is "used to create some of the same effects" in the fiction (127). In examining Morgan's novellas, George Hovis argues for The Truest Pleasure (1994) and This Rock (2003) as companion pieces, or "two parts of a whole" (174), because the two protagonists' "exploration of faith are in dialogue" with each other regarding "the timeless questions of faith and work and body and spirit" (175). In similar fashion, Martha Greene Eads and Thomsen as Alan Holmes discuss the connective patterns of "love" and "faith" between Morgan's bestselling novel Gap Creek and its companion The Road from Gap Creek (2013). Rebecca Godwin's look at "storytellers" in The Hinterlands (1994) and Harriette C. Braham's examination of the "madrigal of time" in Morgan's Revolutionary War novel Brave Enemies (2003) offer productive readings of these less celebrated, but important, works.

Sections Two and Four focus on Morgan's "life," beginning with Graves's essay and a gallery of twenty-three photographs of Morgan's ancestors and family, many of whom appear as avatars in the poetry and fiction. In Morgan's work, Graves argues, regardless of genre, "three elements emerge as constant presences... family, landscape, and history" (98). Section Four offers readers Morgan's personal thoughts in "A Sense of Place" and his recent interactions with West and concludes with an extensive bibliography that readers and scholars alike will find indispensable. Robert Morgan: Essays on the Life and Work is a seminal achievement for the study of this North Carolina writer and scholar — from his award-winning fiction and poetry. Coming in the footsteps of Conversations with Robert Morgan, edited by Randall Wilmeth and Jesse Graves (2019), West's and Graves's collection offers a range of voices that reveal more insightful gems into the wonders of Robert Morgan's mountain world. As Chappell knew so well, Morgan's work is a "fearsome accomplishment" (10).