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Poetry in the Day-to-Day

Laura Davis
Linfield College

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Poetry in the

Poet Shane McCrae '02 received a 2011 Whiting Writers' Award, along with $50,000, honoring young writers for extraordinary talent and promise.

Photo by Benjamin Roberts/Iowa City Press-Citizen.

It's Friday morning and Shane McCrae's 18-month-old daughter has a 101-degree fever.

Class and other plans for the day will wait as McCrae patiently comforts his toddler, while juggling phone calls and flipping between Sponge Bob Squarepants and Mickey Mouse. Someday, this hectic morning may find its way into a poem.

McCrae '02, a poet, received a 2011 Whiting Writers' Award. This prestigious $50,000 award recognizes 10 young writers annually for extraordinary talent and promise. It is one of the most coveted prizes in the nation, and evidence that day-to-day life, and the occasional fever, hasn't stopped McCrae from making a splash in the literary world.

"My first daughter was born when I was 18, so I had to figure out how to write in small corners of the day rather than blocking out a time," said McCrae, who carries a small notebook and pen in his wallet. "I like being available to write at any time."

McCrae's debut collection of poetry, *Mule*, "has the rhythms of the ocean," said the Whiting selectors.

McCrae is also the author of two chapbooks: *One Neither One* and *In Canaan*. His poems have appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *The Best American Poetry 2010*, *Fence*, *Esque* and others. In addition to Linfield, he holds degrees from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop and Harvard Law School.

Now a doctoral student in English at the University of Iowa, McCrae was in class when he saw a New York phone number come in on his phone. He later learned it was the president of the Whiting Foundation calling to tell him of his honor.

> *"Really, what the Whiting Foundation gives its winners is time – time to hold in mind one's ambitions and projects without having to also juggle the multiple demands of a work life," Runciman said. "Such an opportunity is rare."*

"It didn't seem possible," said McCrae, who immediately called his wife, also a writer in the Ph.D. program. "I don't have much of a history of winning awards so I didn't expect it at all. At all. It was a really big shock."

McCrae began writing poetry at age 15, and was serious from the start, continuing to write even after dropping out of high school. With some community college classes to his credit, he came to Linfield at 24 for the creative writing major, one of the few schools in the region to offer it at the time.

"It was the only thing I was interested in doing," McCrae said.

At Linfield, McCrae figured out how to become a writer. He set his sights on graduate school, and ultimately, teaching. Even small details from his Linfield classes

day-to-day

have proved memorable, for example tips for strengthening sentence structure. Using state of being verbs such as *there is* and *there are*, rather than verbs of action, weakens the writing. "That's something I've never forgotten and think about all the time," he said.

Lex Runciman, professor of English and a former Oregon Book Award winner, encouraged McCrae to apply to the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop and said he wasn't surprised by McCrae's honor. According to Runciman, McCrae has joined select company in winning the Whiting award. Former Whiting Fellows have gone on to win Pulitzer Prizes and Guggenheim Foundation grants, and they've been published by some of the most prestigious houses in the U.S. But perhaps the best thing about such an award is the freedom it offers recipients.

"Really, what the Whiting Foundation gives its winners is time – time to hold in mind one's ambitions and projects without having to also juggle the multiple demands of a work life," Runciman said. "Such an opportunity is rare."

McCrae weaves themes of history, politics and injustice into his writing. But he is most inspired by loved ones – his family and life. He finds poetry in the day-to-day details of living, fevers and all.

–Laura Davis

Crows

Dear Lord-And-Spring and spring the trees / Are raw with birds are Lord green

hearts on trunks / Beating and Lord

giant hearts the spring is

Lord / That season

and an animal

all heart and bone / And nothing Lord and Lord You fill

the nothing in / And spring is most like You

and black / Birds in the trees black

arteries / The color of the thing beneath the skin / Is not the color of the skin

the color of the birds / In the trees

is not the color of the leaves / And Lord the sound of their wings

is the sound of the leaves / The living thing

in the heart is not the heart

The crows in the heart

Scavenge in the heart / Lord which was full

and welcomed them

"Crows" originally appeared in Mule, *published by Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 2011.*