I am Fred Booth Dodson, Jr. from Ridgeway, Virginia. Population around 700. To be even more precise I am from Chestnut Knob. A mountain populated by a few families who never moved too far from the plantation after being emancipated. My great grandfather Reed Dodson was born into slavery in 1855. He married Mariah Whitico whose family, as far as I can tell, were landowners and never slaves. I was raised in a small home on land that Mariah gave to my father.

Chestnut Knob was once covered by giant Chestnut Trees that were all killed by a blight in the 1930s and 40s. I spent a great deal of my childhood in the forest and I remember seeing the hollowed-out trunks of those trees. I follow the work of scientists working to bring back that species and recently I read that a blight-resistant Chestnut tree has been created using genetic engineering. I really hope that one day I will plant such a tree on Chestnut Knob. It will be quite a homecoming.

I am the youngest of eight children. I have 5 brothers and two sisters. I had two wonderful parents who loved us completely. We struggled financially but we were fortunate to own our home. It wasn’t much. Less than a 1000 square feet and mostly constructed by my father. I think about that every day as I work to provide homes to others. Of course, I am known here for my work in affordable housing. This year will mark 30 years since I first walked into a homeless shelter in Boone and started working. It didn’t take me long to get promoted from managing the soup kitchen to directing the shelter. I was only 22 years old and far too young to be doing such important work but I worked hard to help as many people as I could. There I met a young volunteer who was absolutely fearless and beautiful. One day I watched her wrestle a knife out of a psychotic resident’s hand after he threatened others. How could I not marry a woman like that? Lesha and I will celebrate our 28th anniversary this year. We have one son named Malcolm and he is a remarkable chef in training and I am so proud of him.

I was an odd child. I’m sure that’s no surprise. I was a football player who read works by Sylvia Plath and Ann Sexton after practice and after games. I would later develop a love for the poetry of Etheridge Knight, Galway Kinnell, and of course Billy Collins to name a few. My father who never learned to read just didn’t know what to think of me but he loved me anyway and encouraged me to do whatever it was I was doing. My mother, Beatrice also supported her weird baby and she worked hard to keep me from following my brothers into a military career. So, I was the first in my family to attend college.

My love of poetry was supplemented and enhanced by music. One of my brothers loved the Beatles and he tried to convince me of their greatness. It really didn’t work for me because I had already discovered Stevie Wonder at a very early age. I judged every musician and songwriter against that high standard. Just listen to his album entitled “Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants” and you will hear the brilliance of that man.

***But who am I to doubt***

***Or question the inevitable being***

***For these are but a few discoveries***

***we find inside the secret life of plants.***

All of my brothers joined the military shortly after high school graduation. They would come back home with music and I would just soak it up. Parliament Funkadelic, Curtis Mayfield, Miles Davis and this strange little man named Prince who was unlike anyone else. He quickly became my gateway to discover many other musicians because he too was a true fan of all music. I remember reading what was perhaps his first interview in Rolling Stone in which he stated that Joni Mitchell’s album, “The Hissing of Summer Lawns” was his favorite. I bought it immediately and I’ve never stopped listening to it. The Boho Dance, Don’t Interrupt the sorrow. It goes on and on.

I tend to get a little obsessed when I find something I really like. That was the case with Otis Redding, Jimi Hendrix, and Prince. However, there is one musician who stands head and shoulders above the rest in my eyes. I think it was 1985 after a camping trip with my friends Mark and Tom that I discovered Bob Dylan. You have to really understand my childhood to comprehend the fact that I had never heard of him. We were in a record store in Chapel Hill when I came across “The Times They Are A-Changing.” I dropped the needle on that vinyl for the first time and it was like someone unlocked a door in my head. Every song was a masterpiece and every word was so well crafted. The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carol just took my breath away and by now those words have been encoding into my DNA.

***You who philosophize disgrace***

***and criticize all fears***

***Take the rag away from your face***

***Now ain’t the time for your tears***

I quickly fell into the grip of Dylan and started accumulating his music. That has never stopped. I love everything he’s ever recorded and released. I saw him in concert last year. It was quite a performance. Halfway through the set, he starts crooning a Frank Sinatra song. His voice was clear and he sounded great. I have a theory that he has played a cruel joke on the world for decades by pretending that he couldn’t sing.

I have developed a couple new musical obsessions that I will share with you. I first heard the Green Hill, Alabama musician Jason Isbell (pronounced Is Bull) when he was a member of The Drive-By Truckers. At the age of 16, he wrote a brilliant song called “Outfit.” Think of it as advice from a father to his young son.

***Don’t call what you’re wearing an outfit***

***Don’t ever say your car is broke***

***Don’t worry about losing your accent***

***A southern man tells better jokes***

***Have fun and stay clear of the needle***

***Call home on your sister’s birthday***

***Don’t tell them you’re bigger than Jesus***

***Don’t give it away!***

His career was nearly derailed early due to alcoholism. Now sober Jason is producing his best work and the Grammys will soon start piling up. I recommend you listen to his new song called “If We Were Vampires” and you will hear why I think he’s special.

***If we were vampires and death was a joke***

***We'd go out on the sidewalk and smoke***

***And Laugh at all the lovers and their plans***

***I wouldn't feel the need to hold your hand***

***Maybe time running out is a gift***

***I'll work hard 'til the end of my shift***

***And give you every second I can find***

***And hope it isn't me who's left behind***

I also think the 32-year-old English hip-hop artist, poet, and playwright Kate Tempest is phenomenal. Her words speak to me and her most recent album called “Let Them Eat Chaos” is a remarkable commentary on the state of the world from the perspective of several people who all happen to be awake at 4:18 a.m. The prelude to the song “Europe is Lost” is a poem about a nurse named Esther. I have met many women like Ester in the work that I do. Women who struggle to make it from one day to the next.

***In the basement flat, by the garages***

***Where people dump their mattresses***

***Esther's in her kitchen, making sandwiches***

***The slats on her blinds are all wonky and skewed***

***You can see HER from the street BEFORE she moves out of view***

***To kick boots off tired feet***

***She wipes her forehead with her wrist***

***She's just back from a double shift***

***Esther's a nurse, doing nights***

***Behind her, on the kitchen wall***

***Is a black and white picture of swallows in flight***

***Her eyes are sore, her muscles ache***

***She cracks a beer and swigs it***

***She holds it to her thirsty lips***

***And necks it till it's finished***

***It's 04:18 AM again***

***Her brain is full from all she's done that day***

***She knows that she won't sleep a wink***

***Before the Sun is on its way***

***She's worried 'bout the world tonight***

***She's worried all the time***

***She don't know how she's supposed***

***To put it from her mind***

I work hard every day to help people like Esther. In a recent conversation with a young politician, he described the work I do as charity work. I didn’t correct him but I wanted to. My passion and my calling are to empower people like Esther. Charity is like providing someone with candy when they need a nourishing meal. It is about easing suffering, preserving and cultivating dignity and providing the tools needed so that Esther can live her life and raise her family in a safe, decent and affordable home. I think about those homes all the time and I hope there is an odd child in his room reading Kerouac or listening to Dylan. I certainly hope so and to this, I give my heart.

Fred Dodson, Jr.