

## Robert Morgan



Robert Morgan, photo by Randi Anglin

### Firecrackers at Christmas

In the Southern mountains, our big  
serenade was not the Fourth but  
always Christmas Eve and Christmas.  
Starting at midnight the valleys  
and branch coves fairly shook with barks  
of crackers, boom of shotguns, jolt  
even of sticks of dynamite.  
You would have thought a new hunting  
season had begun in the big-star  
night, or that a war had broken  
out in the scattered hollows: all  
the feuds and land disputes come to  
a magnum finale. The sparks  
everywhere of match and fuse  
and burst were like giant lightning bugs.  
Thunder doomed the ridges though  
the sky shone clear and frost sugared  
the meadows. Yankees were astonished  
at the violence and racket  
on the sacred day, they said, as  
cherrybombs were hurled into yards  
and placed expanding mailboxes  
same as Halloween. Perhaps the custom  
had its origins in peasant-pagan  
times of honoring the solstice  
around a burning tree, or in  
the mystery centuries of  
saluting the miraculous

with loudest brag and syllable.  
Certainly the pioneer had  
no more valuable gift to bring  
than lead and powder to offer  
in the hush of hills, the long rifles  
their best tongues for saying the peace  
they claimed to carry to the still  
unchapeled wilderness, just as  
cannon had been lit in the Old  
World to announce the birth of kings.  
They fired into the virgin skies  
a ceremony we repeated  
ignorantly. But what delight  
I felt listening in the unheated  
bedroom dark, not believing in  
Santa Claus or expensive gifts,  
to the terrible cracks along  
the creek road and up on Olivet,  
as though great rivers of ice were  
breaking on the horizon and  
trees were bursting at the heart  
and new elements were being born  
in whip-stings and distant booms  
and the toy chatter of the littlest  
powder grace notes. That was our  
roughest and best caroling.

*Born and raised in the North Carolina mountains and educated at UNC-CH and UNC-G, Robert Morgan has been a professor of creative writing at Cornell University since 1971. Over the years he has received a number of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation. In 1991, he received the North Carolina Award for Literature and the James G. Hanes Poetry Prize from the Fellowship of Southern Writers. Mr. Morgan is the author of a number of collections of poetry and short fiction. His novel, Gap Creek (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 1999), received the Southern Book Critics Circle Award for 2000 and was chosen as a "Notable Book" by The New York Times. It was also an Oprah Book Club selection. In 2004, Louisiana State University Press published The Strange Attractor: New and Selected Poems, from which "Firecrackers at Christmas" is drawn. We reproduce it here with Mr. Morgan's permission.*