To really get to know the author, read this interview with Jim Daniels, by Jim Daniels, on poetry and his new collection Birth Marks.

Q1. How did you get started writing?

I attended remedial speech class from kindergarten through eighth grade. Some kids used to tease me by imitating how I talked, so I’d developed this distrust of speaking freely at school and around people I didn’t know well. I started writing things down at night as a kind of release from holding things in. When I wrote, no one could tease me like that. By the time I “graduated” from speech class, writing had become an ingrained part of me, and I just kept on writing.

Q2. What’s the highlight of your career as a writer?

When my first book Places/Everyone came out in 1985, my father was still working at the Ford’s Sterling Axle Plant. Every year they had an open house in the plant over the holidays, and people would set up tables and sell craft items and things like that. My father got a table and created this hand-made poster that said, “Sterling Plant’s Own Poet” (it was the same factory I had worked in) and got a stack of my books from the publisher and sold them there. My brother took a picture of my father standing there, and he looks pretty proud.

Q3. How did one of your poems end up on the roof of a race car?

I got an email out of the blue from this race car owner named Alex Grabau asking me if he could put my poem “Factory Love” on the roof of his race car. The poem is about a factory worker in love with his machine, and Alex said he wanted to put it on his car because all of the race car guys are in love with their machines too. Somebody asked him, after he had the poem put on the car, whether he thought people could actually read the poem as he was racing, and he said something like, I hope not—he’d have to be driving pretty slow for that to happen.

Q4. What was your first published poem?

The first two poems I published were in my high school literary magazine. Only one of them was a real poem, however. The other was this sappy, self-pitying teen angst rhymer: “I who am about to cry/I who weep but cannot cry/I am losing my mind, you say/perhaps I think it went astray.” Etcetera. The keeper was called “Growing Up in a Party Store.” I worked in a local party store (corner store that sold liquor) all through high school. What made it a real poem was that it was about something I knew about and cared about and had images that came out of that world. I juxtaposed the names of penny candy with the names of liquor (our store had a penny candy counter right next to the liquor counter). Two very different kinds of customers, two very different kinds of needs. My first real poem, and it was a work poem.

Q5. Why do you still write about Detroit so much when you haven’t lived there in many, many years?

The writer Richard Price said that where you’re from is like “the zip code of your heart,” and for me, that’s true. I carry Detroit around with me in my heart no matter where I’m at—it’s my permanent address. It haunts me and sustains me and affects how I live my life. It’s a state of mind and a state of grace. I can’t help but return over and over again. I write in part for all those I grew up with that did not appear in any of the books I read in school. I write for and because of them to say, hey, listen up—these lives are important.