

dismembered corpse is replaced, or redeemed, almost as quickly as it was presented, “the bright air / full again.”

Perhaps most striking in this poem and throughout the book is this young poet’s ease with the declarative, the quiet, almost offhand assertion, “To live at all is to grieve.” Poteat reminds us that, at its best, poetry must also tell. When is the last time a contemporary poet awakened readers with declarations as weighty as “Habit is the devil’s glorious invention, like I heard war could be,” or “Love leaves us dull with nothing to say”?

In “Our Memory, The Shining Leaves (Waterford Fair Civil War Reenactment),” the poet takes on the granddaddy of subjects—war itself—and makes a case for the poet’s conscious mind in the modern world:

And as the light carries us to the hill as though
we are flying into ourselves, shouldn’t we finally,
after all of this, understand our lives?
Shouldn’t we say what we meant to say?

Like Walt Whitman, that other singer-explicator of the Civil War, Poteat reaches through and beyond the songs of self to examine the responsibilities of one man in a social, conflicted world. While the indebtedness to Whitman is obvious in both the book’s pseudo-ornithological structure (including index!) and the epigraph from Roethke, “Be with me, Whitman, maker of catalogues: / For the world invades me again,” the poet’s deeper debt to Whitman lies in the post-Romantic, peculiarly American impulse to sing and speculate simultaneously—to praise self-knowledge and self-expression in the same breath which asks “shouldn’t we . . . understand our lives? . . . say what we meant to say?” These questions are and are not rhetorical; the very asking points to the possibility—or probability—that we can neither understand our lives nor say what we meant, but that impending failure is no reason not to try, as limitation is no reason not to sing.

And sing the poet does—this is a writer with a great ear and an even greater range. Although the most of the poems are long meditations composed of the languid, sprawling lines characteristic of both Levis and Whitman, Poteat’s shorter-lined lyrics, such as “Meditation for Everything We Have Loved,” are equally if not more powerful, and perhaps even more beautiful for their brevity:

What do you love the most?
Say the reddish work of death
as it strolls through the fields:
The peaks of the sky

between the reeds and stream.

The opening lines of the poem reveal a poet as skilled in song as he is in story, as deft with apostrophe as he is with the third person. It’s not an overstatement to say that this a poet who will be able to do almost anything.

If there is one flaw to be observed in this rich work, it's this: There are moments when the poet seems too aware of his power—too sure that he can pull off anything. In rare instances the poet seems to reach too far, to go for the “look-Ma-no-hands” move, as in “Damnatio Memoriae,” where a description of an old woman, a fellow passenger on a plane, flies off into the fantastical:

Watching her decide whether to leave
 the tiny plastic window shade up or down
was enough to convince me that one day long ago

a man gathered a crown of lilacs from a ditch
 to put in her hair

and she looked at them so closely and full of wonder,
 the man knew he had it made, already
owned the pearl buttons on her blouse . . .

The old woman's play with the window shade may have been enough to convince the poet of the scenario that follows, but the reader has no basis for trusting the story. But this is perhaps a matter of taste, a question of tact; regardless, the poet's occasional flight into fancy is a small matter in such a stunning collection.

If the excerpts from *Ornithologies* have not yet convinced you to order this book, browse back through the *Blackbird* archives and spend a little time with Poteat's poems. Finishing *Ornithologies* for a second time left me feeling grateful that Joshua Poteat is young (in poet years), and I am eager for the work to come from this gifted writer. ●