

Dislocate is a literary journal founded and operated by Creative Writing MFA students at the
[University Of Minnesota.](#)

Ornithologies, winner of the 2004 Anhinga Prize for Poetry, is hands-down one of the best books of 2006. Just ask the folks at *Blackbird*, who say some pretty swell things. And why shouldn't they? [Joshua Poteat's](#) work deserves all sorts of kind words. Some that I would use are *twilit, gently close to perfect, dearest whisper, a gathering*. *Ornithologies* is truly, truly a beautiful catalogue of that which is close and o so real. Do yourself a favor, and tell your friends:

[Read and listen at Blackbird](#)

And a [new one](#) at *VQR*.

Maybe even think about getting yourself a copy of the [Spring 2006 issue of VQR](#). You'll find 3 new poems there. If you're around these parts, I'll even let you borrow my copy.

Preview/Hint: Our next writerly interview subject is also in that issue, so it's probably in your best interests to just get it now.

Enough arm-twisting. On to the fun.

What are you working on these days? Any work coming out in the near or semi-near future?

Right now, I'm working on a whole manuscript of appropriated titles, all taken from *J. G. Heck's 1851 Pictorial Archive of Nature and Science*. Some I made up, but for the most part, I took them from Herr Heck's scientific steel engravings. Titles such as: "Apparatus to show the amount of dew on trees and shrubs," "Illustrating the theory of twilight," "Illustrating the echo in arched rooms," "Apparatus for determining the specific heat of bodies," that kind of thing. The poems are not ekphrastics...they're just riffing off of the titles, in an antiquated, PBS sort of way. Some of them have appeared/will appear in *Virginia Quarterly Review, Ninth Letter, Indiana Review, Hunger Mountain, American Letters & Commentary, Copper Nickel*, and perhaps other places. I should also have work appearing in millions of mailboxes across the country, i.e., I edit junk mail for a large credit card company.

What sorts of things have you been reading?

Oh, all kinds of great things. I just finished Karen Russell's book of stories, *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*, and despite all the hype she's been getting because she is so young and cute, it's a damn good book. The best version of magic realism I've seen in quite a while. And in a similar vein, Samantha Hunt's *The Seas*, a beautifully strange and short novel.

Coincidentally, from the U of M press: *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects*, by Peter Schwenger. It's a bit over my head, but I need to be challenged.

David Wojahn's selected poems *Interrogation Palace*. Richmond can now claim him, as he is teaching at Virginia Commonwealth University. He's great.

And another member of VCU's writing faculty, Susann Cokal. I read both her novels recently: *Mirabilis* and *Breath & Bones*. Both are lovely, historically based crazinesses. (I should say that I do not teach at VCU, or anywhere else.)

Also, there's a magazine/journal that I love called *Cabinet*, filled with the randomness of the world. Each issue has a theme. I highly recommend it.

Regarding your own work, do you have a favorite and/or most-representative piece?

Nope. They all pretty much sound the same. I'm like the triangle player in the marching band.

Which writer would you say has had the biggest influence on your writing style?

Larry Levis was/is a big influence, especially on the longer pieces in *Ornithologies*. I had the chance to study with him for two years at VCU before he died. For a long time, he has been my main source. After several years of floundering around after grad school, working lame jobs, and writing nothing, reading his poems was the reason I started writing again. I think I am finally growing away from his influence, which saddens me in a way.

How important is the specificity of place in your work?

Important and not important. In my newer work, place is not so important. There's more of a blur. In *Ornithologies*, there seemed to be a concentration on landscape, mostly a southern one. I enjoy writing about/including landscape, and what is contained in landscapes, and what I know best is a southern landscape, the landscape of my childhood.

If your work were to be made into a film, who would direct it?

I would say...David Gordon Green, in the style of his *George Washington*...or even *All the Real Girls*.

Editor's note: I would say, too. And it would be awesome.

What contemporary writer would make the best President?

David Sedaris!

If you were a character from Shakespeare, which one would you be?

Most definitely the bear that chases Antigonus offstage in *Winter's Tale*. "This is the chase: I am gone for ever." Or a prop of some sort. A broom. A skull. A handful of sand. In kindergarten, I was asked to be the emperor in *The Emperor's New Clothes*, but I refused, as I would have had to wear only my underwear (the long thermal kind). I was quite Victorian back then. I just wanted to be one of the palace guards, because there were guns involved.

Are there any "words of wisdom" that linger in your head when you're writing? Any advice that has stayed with you?

Someone once told me to write as if a train was bearing down upon me, i.e., with urgency. That seems like good advice.

What word do never tire of seeing in poem? What word could you live without ever seeing again? (Billy Collins said he hates poems with the word "locust"...what a joker. Locusts are always cool.)

Oh, dear sweet innocent Billy. What were you thinking? Locusts are definitely cool. Most insects are. The Locust is also the name of a crazy band from San Diego. They sound just like a locust would if a locust could play electric instruments very fast. I think people in general are tired of seeing "heron(s)" everywhere, but I don't mind herons at all. There are a few phrases I could do without, mainly office-speak, like "cool beans," "T.G.I.F.," "LOL," and "Adding more complexity into this particular strategic initiative would put too much pressure on the various points of leverage, and our goals would be unattainable in an accelerated time horizon."

You meet someone for the first time and they ask you the proverbial, "So, Joshua, what is it that you do?" What do you tell them?

It's easier to say "I edit junk mail," because it's funny and true. Saying you're a poet takes a lot of guts. Those are fightin' words in some parts of certain towns. Occasionally I'll say "I edit junk mail so I can write poems," but that's not as funny.

What does the phrase "Southern poetry" mean to you, if anything?

I can only speak for myself on this, but I'm not so sure it applies anymore, at least to the generation I belong to. I mean, on the surface, I'm mostly a poet, who happens to have poems about/set in the south and who happens at the moment to live in the former capital of the Confederacy. Still, I'm not sure I subscribe to such genre-based grouping by region. Perhaps I'm uncomfortable speaking for a whole region. It does have a nice ring to it, though, doesn't it? If I don't have to pay any fees, I wouldn't mind being in the club.

Favorite poetic form?

The nap.

Wallace Stevens said, "In poetry at least the imagination must not detach itself from reality." What does that mean to you?

I'm sure he doesn't mean what it sounds like he means, because he sure didn't follow his own advice, eh?

What is the "Great American Poem"?

The Great American Poem is being written right now, in another country, by a non-American.