

Review from Michelle Lewis, Blog of Poetry and Poetics:

Poteat & Traversing Time and Space

In Joshua Poteat's poem "Hitchhiking in the Dying South" from *Ornithologies*, the poet is reminded of an accident along the road. Without veering too far from the matrix of the poem, Poteat constructs a landscape that both enlarges and compresses, as an accordion; he travels through time and space, covering a sweep of ground in the process.

The poem begins by naming the poet's surroundings, a counterpoint to those who enter a town they "could not at first even name." With lines that begin "I have seen" and "I have felt," the poem may bring to mind Ginsberg's "Howl", but it has more in common with Frost's "Acquainted with the Night", where naming is not just testimony, but heraldic badge:

*I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain - and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.*

In Poteat's poetry, his memories are often malleable. Other lines in "Hitchhiking in the Dying South" begin, "Or was it...", "It's difficult to get this straight...", and "Now that I think of it..." This porosity of memory and reality that allows the poet to travel through time is central to his memory-driven poems where truth and fiction merge and become indiscernible, achieving what Billy Collins calls a "poetic plasticity of time and space." The resulting voice is often slightly removed from the material world. It gracefully, almost angelically, eases leaps and helps manage appropriated voices that materialize from others times and places.

Night absorbs the accident's chaos, and in this memory, the poet says he "had come to love the sparks." Later, in the sponginess of retrospect, both the night and the speaker receive the body of the cow as part of this communion. The speaker posits that "maybe even / a beauty" is there. Written as memory, anything is possible, as nostalgia creates a seductive pull toward a buffet of palatable morsels that have the potential to redeem.

Larry Levis is a master at traversing time and space, and his associative images are constantly escaping the confines of his poems. Poteat names Levis as mentor and earns the entitlement. (Poteat's southern landscapes also make him Levis' successor.) Consider this passage from the poem "South" by Levis. In it, the poet in his youth passes a southern landscape by train:

...

Past junkyards embracing swamps;
Past towns so poor they were not
There, except for some grief that
Made them swell a moment beside
Those tracks, only to vanish—
A few lights slipping backward—
That was my time, or no one's

...

While some of Poteat's images are anchors – they halt the motion of the poem to mine a new theme (the bloody snouts of the pigs alive in the moonlight), some are windows, which unfold into

variations on the theme and time at hand (the crows' noise reminds the poet of the slant sympathy of his old foreman). Space, too, is traversed, as miniature worlds bank much greater ones — an entire countryside is the backdrop for a moth that confuses flame for the image of flame reflected in the cow's eye. It is a dizzying spiral inward. This facility is pure Levis, whose images take off, to draw on "South" again, from a trembling flower, a moth, and the eye of a chicken, in a characteristic journey of discovery in which diverse figures challenge but rarely break theme's gravitational pull.

Levis and Poteat are linked by sensibility, particularly in these two poems. In "South," Levis claims the moth's markings as a "beautiful truth" and the poem ends with the smoke of the train scrawled on "A sky that stays there, above / Any reason for a sky." Here is Poteat's "Hitchhiking in the Dying South" entire:

Hitchhiking in the Dying South
by Joshua Poteat

I have seen the morning spread over the fields
 and I have walked on, trying to forget
how it seemed as if daybreak was founded
 on the most fragile web of breath,
and I had blown it.

 Then I thought it might not exist at all,
nor had it ever. That it was only the idea of breath
 and the egrets asleep in sourgrass were the idea
of flight, and if I was to breathe in,
 it would all just disappear.

I have seen the spotted toads at dusk
 come up from the ditches after a rainstorm
and into the asphalt's steam and I have seen them
 crushed by lumber trucks, then lifted away
into the pines by the gathering crows.

 I have felt the night quiver with heron's wing
over the swamps, over wild pigs in a blackberry patch,
 their snouts bloody & alive in the moonlight,
and I have walked on, dirty, alone, kicking to the grasses
 the swollen bodies of possum, squirrel, rabbit, raccoon,
giving them no prayer, no peace-filled silence.

 But that was long ago, when work was scarce
and I thumbed my way to the tobacco plant
 or the slaughterhouse, north up Highway 17
to Holly Ridge or down to Bulltail on 210,
 either way I would be shoveling something until dusk,
something soft and warm and beyond me.
 And I would be glad for it.

Walking with that forgotten gesture wavering
 in the morning air, I felt that people
could come into the world in a place

they could not at first even name,
and move through it finally, like the dawn,
naming each thing until filled with a buoyancy,
a mist from the river's empty rooms.

Thumb of autumn, thumb of locust, thumb of every kissed lip.

I have seen a cow die under the wheels
of a Cadillac going sixty, and who's to say
what the cow got from this?
Some would say a dignity, perhaps,
past the slaughterhouse
and the carcasses swimming the eaves.

Or was it a punishment for nudging open
the gate-latch, the driver of the car
in shock, mouthing *com, com,*
and the crows in the pines answering
with the kind of sympathy my foreman used
when one of his line-workers
cut off another finger in the shredder.
Son, at least you still got your arm.

It's difficult to get this straight,
but there was a beauty to the sparks
that spread out under the car, under the cow,
as they went from flesh to asphalt to flesh again:
fireflies in the hollow of the hills:
a blanket of white petals from the tree of moon.

A brief and miniature dawn began,
there on a summer night in the South
I had come to love as part of myself,
the sparks clinging in the grass for a moment,
unbearably bright, a confused moth nuzzling up
to the reflection of a flame shining in
the cow's one open eye.

Now that I think of it, there was maybe even
a beauty in the cow's fat, white body, a peace
I would never know, as it took in the car,
lay down with it: *calf-soft: morning breath.*

This peace had a body, it was caught up in the night,
made from night, there on the shoulder of a road
so endless even the stars shrugged it off
and took the sparks as one of their own.

Used with permission from [Anhinga Press](#).