

Review by Gerald Huml / **ORNITHOLOGIES** by Joshua Poteat

I might pigeonhole a poet who fills his debut collection with flatbed trucks, sweet potatoes, and J.E.B. Stuart as a Southern writer, but this regionalism does a grave disservice to Joshua Poteat and his remarkable book *Ornithologies*. These fine-feathered poems cannot be so easily caged. The Southern content is ultimately ancillary to existential concerns such as "To live at all is to grieve" and to Poteat's technical abilities and mesmerism.

Winner of the 2004 Anhinga Prize for Poetry, *Ornithologies* is a good value weighing in at 106 pages. Designed to resemble a 19th century field guide for bird enthusiasts, the cover appears worn and water stained. Inside, there is even a clever index of birds.

The quintessential *Ornithologies* poem is free verse, at least three pages in length, and employs a Whitmanesque long line in a three to six line stanza. Poteat's stanzas are often indented in patterns that evoke the feeling that the stanzas are resisting the urge to fall apart. It is as if the speakers in these poems feel a sense of urgency and alternately tighten and loosen their grip. The indented stanzas also remind me of footprints in wet sand or perhaps, more aptly, of the flapping of wings.

Had I five hummingbirds,
 I would make a love charm
and string them from the tongue
 of a small copper bell in those branches,
 necks hovered together, broken.

Poteat's main mode is the meditative-lyrical poem. The predominant tone is pensive with a sad beauty redolent of nostalgia. Where there are silences in the poems, they feel like intense Trakl-like silences: "On the side of a desert road / a headless dove, / its body a basket of ants, / basket of creosote stems."

The poems in *Ornithologies* unfold by using associations. While a loose narrative is present, the poems progress more by using a stream of consciousness, dreamlike weaving: "The light that is with us, here, now, / will ruin us one day— / angelic among the whitened orchards of cloud." Poteat's poems work like shimmering spider webs in a way that remind me of Charles Wright and the later work of his teacher Larry Levis.

This is a book of obsessions. In Rilkean fashion Poteat wants to impress the angels with the things of this world, "To go from disorder to order / in moments with the glorious naming." Instead of just a tree, we have the Whitmanesque savoring of sweet oak, cottonwood, and long leaf pine. Instead of just dune grass the speaker in "Grass Meditation" gives us the scientific name *Festuca Mollis* and revels in its many common names: " *Pintongue, repose, sandhair, sweet / thumbs, angel bed, pillow grass, lissome.*" While there are foxes, deer, and cows in these poems, there are also "spotted moth larva" and the exhaustive appearances of North American avian life from doves and crows to the more exotic cactus wren and corncrake. Interestingly, it's not just birds in this collection but also winged creatures such as bats, moths, wasps, and angels. In these mournful poems, Poteat insists on specificity both to celebrate the world and as an organizing stay against despair. All of these winged creatures suggest Poteat's desire for flight and escape from the world, an almost spiritual longing or desire for a greater reality as in "...dear god I picked up that

hawk's wing, / high in the haymow, and I swear / it was the truest version of light I had ever seen."

Perhaps the most striking aspect of *Ornithologies* is the juxtaposition of the beautiful and the ugly. Poteat uses the device throughout the collection as in "...staring at a beautiful girl's naked ribcage / that had been woven into a bag by tuberculosis" and "...lost among the tourniquets, the amputated legs of night graceful / in the wind and in the flesh and in the porous dawn." His repeated use of this technique suggests a complex worldview rife with observed examples of the horrible and the sublime existing side-by-side.

These are not always sad or wistful poems. At turns great humor can be found, albeit the self-deprecating humor of an underdog. In "The Stigmata Rather than a Punch on the Nose," the poet meditates on how his presumed real father would bloody the nose of any teasing boy, "...making whoever it was pay / for the blood of his good name. / *Little Bo Peep. Poteat.*" In "Self-portrait as the Autumn I Have Lost," the speaker admits to derailing a train when he was a boy by using "...the rotted ties / lying on the tracks, the ones the track-layers / would take shits on." Then there is my personal favorite in "Nocturne: For the Night Workers of the South" in which the speaker's job is to catch and kill owls: "No one ever gets tired of the moon. / No one ever said, *Fuck the moon, let's get out of here.*" For each instance of humor in this collection, you get the distinct impression that the speakers "...laugh at it in order not to die from it)" as one speaker admits in "From the 1941 Catalogue of Dover Books."

Though this is a strong collection of poems, a few issues bothered me. The poems overall are melancholic, which may put some readers off. There is the daunting length of these poems, some of them stretching eight or nine pages that require the sustained but worthwhile attention of readers. I found myself wondering if the longer poems could be shortened in places but still deliver the same goods. Further, when the briefer poems appear, they are a welcomed respite. Then there is fact that there are obviously different speakers in these poems separated by time and place, but they all sound the same. Though this gives the collection a consistent feel and unity, it runs contrary to expectations about the tone and locution of different characters. Finally, there are the scattered "Huh?" moments, strange contextual non sequiturs such as "assassin's snores on the roof" or "I'll give you hands to breathe again, lads" that I glossed over during a first reading but gave me pause during a second or third. After reflecting on this phenomenon, I realized Poteat has a curious power to get away with saying almost anything. He enchants or mesmerizes you to the point that you really do not care what he says and if it makes complete sense. The flights of his poems feel more important than their meanings or destinations.

Ornithologies is a very impressive debut collection. All of the poems come up to a high bar of accomplishment with spikes into exquisiteness. More importantly, many of these poems stayed with me and resonated long after I put the book down. The tone and mixture of beauty and ugliness is both intellectually honest and hauntingly addictive. In the final analysis, with all of their cataloguing of the ten thousand things of the world, these poems are affirmative and urge us with the Buddhist proverb to "*Participate joyfully in the sorrows of the world.*" Poteat is definitely a poet to keep your binoculars trained on and see how high he soars.