

The Meditative South—by Wayne Miller, *American Book Review*

Joshua Poteat's debut collection of poems, *Ornithologies*, which won the Anhinga Poetry Prize, is a decidedly ambitious book—especially for a first one. When Poteat is at his best, his ambition pays off in powerful, often longish, poems that beautifully and complexly engage the nature (and Nature) of the contemporary American South.

As one might guess from the book's title, Poteat is fascinated with birds. (At the book's end there's an "Index of Birds" which playfully highlights Poteat's preoccupation). This is because Poteat is a Romantic at heart whose interests are largely in the natural world, and who throughout *Ornithologies* depicts nature in conflict with the manmade intrusions of modernity. For example, in "Documenting the Birds: Office Park," Poteat catalogues a series of destroyed birds—first several that have collided with the glass windows of office building, then a group burned up in a tree by a farmer, then a canary whose feet have been cut off by a weed eater, such that "the Canary couldn't understand why its feet were no longer tucked below, and so it hovered above them until its wings gave out." Elsewhere, when Poteat describes a city reflected in a river, the reflection doesn't neutrally float on the surface, but instead intrusively "carves through." And yet, for Poteat, Nature isn't perpetually humanity's victim; in "Damnatio Memoriae" Poteat asserts, "The light that is with us, here, now, will ruin us one day." Ultimately, *Ornithologies* suggests a natural world that's complex and always in flux—one in which the most we can assert is that Nature is irretrievably entangled with humanity.

Poteat's stance toward contemporary culture is also a Romantic one. Again in "Damnatio Memoriae" Poteat beseeches the reader (contemporary poets? America?), "Let's be sentimental for once, let's return to the authentic." Later on, he's less sanguine in his desire for transcendence and authenticity; in "Letter to Allison with Musical Notation of Hawk," the speaker finds a hawk's severed wing, which he darkly claims is "the truest version of a soul" as he holds it "to his face to see the ants drift among the feathers."

Poteat's more direct subject matter is the contemporary South, which appears as a mix of bucolic fields and suburban sprawl, ruined barns and passing freight cars, kudzu vines and Civil War reenactments. In "Fahrenheit Meditation," Poteat writes:

Ask me and I will tell you of the flowering tobacco leaves of my youth on fire in the night, lit by lightning, the sweet wind pushing the flames toward the tree-break and into the stables where my father at on a three-legged stool birthing a foal. To see night burning is to see God...."

In those burning tobacco fields, Poteat has struck upon a lovely evocation of the South and, simultaneously, the speaker's youth; he then joins this image to a hint of narrative and an assertive metaphysical leap. It's in such combinations that Poteat is often at his best. Similarly, in the lovely "Nocturne: For the Aviaries," Poteat writes: "Then the rain came...through the cottonwoods and along the river, which is no longer a river but an apparition under the sand." Here, that apt description of a dry riverbed, when considered in context, also metaphorically evokes the old South lying ghostly beneath the present moment. The poem ultimately and effectively arrives at a James Wright-like leap when the speaker asserts, "Nothing in this world is ours."

Though he is clearly a Sothern poet, and though narrative is surely a part of his poetic strategy, Poteat is not a "Southern narrative poet" in the classic sense. In fact, he's really a meditative poet, with threads of narrative woven through his meditations. And Poteat clearly wants to be seen this way, since all the poems in the second section of the book (there are five) are identified as meditations in their titles; the majority of the poems in *Ornithologies* are just as interested in tracking the poet's arriving thoughts as they are in telling a story or constructing a landscape. In this way, there's nearly as much Ashberry in Poteat's work as there is James Dickey. And though Charles Wright might immediately come to mind (since Poteat's meditations are often triggered by landscape), the way Poteat uses narrative in his poems is different enough from Wright as to avoid being derivative.

Unfortunately, it's this mix of influences that occasionally causes Poteat to falter. At times, the poems' meanderings become distractingly digressive. And sometimes Poteat's earnest Romanticism requires a certain confidence that his attempt to capture the mind "in motion" belie. For example, when Poteat claims, "Representation is all we are in the end, I guess, and then some," his hedging undercuts the potential lyric force of the assertion—though such hedging is well in line with the poem's meditative nature. Additionally, when Poteat ventures from the physical world into ekphrasis, primarily in the book's third section, the results are somewhat less convincing, since the poems feel a bit less personally urgent.

Despite such occasional shortcomings, Poteat is clearly a talented, insightful, and moving poet who is involved in extending and diversifying the aesthetics of contemporary

Southern poetry. What's more, *Ornithologies* consistently works to engage large philosophical and historical issues—something, I sometimes worry, not enough of Poteat's (and my) contemporaries do. Given the accomplishments of *Ornithologies* and the ambition of his work, I look forward to seeing where Poteat goes from here.