

Interview with students from University of Arkansas graduate poetry workshop:

- 1) We're all writing first books and so we're always interested in hearing about publishing experiences. How long did you spend writing the poems in *Ornithologies*? Was getting the book published a long process?**

Don't assume this will happen to you, but I finished grad school in '97, so it took quite a while to get that book out. Probably because I gave up on writing poems for a few years. Not to get too Dr. Phil on you guys, but my father had died in '93, and my professor/mentor died during my last year of grad school, so I wasn't too happy after school was over. Those were bleak years for me. For example, and I don't admit this very often, after selling many of my most treasured limited edition hardcore/punk records and still not having enough money to live on, I actually took a temp job out of desperation at the infamous Philip Morris (tobacco company) for a couple of months, where they have numerous signs that read "Please enjoy smoking." But, like a good American, I pulled myself up by my bootstraps, starting writing again, and whammo. Or something like that. I started working on the book in 2001 or so, gradually weeding out the poems I wrote in school with newer ones and/or revising older ones. The next couple of years I began sending it to contests, got a few runner-ups, finalists, that sort of thing. During those two years, I had the opportunity to win a few residencies/fellowships that really helped me move the book forward. I also had a job at a marketing firm copy editing text, and I had my own office with my own door that could open and close (emphasis on close), so I got some work done that way as well. I even thanked the company in my book. I felt (a little) guilty using company time to write and to print off so many poems. Anyway, Anhinga told me about the prize in November 2004, and it took them until January 2006 to get it out. Since I had already waited a while to get this far, I figured an extra year didn't matter so much.

Anhinga is great, by the way. Even on a limited budget, they really look after their poets. They sent me on a week-long book tour, all expenses paid, as well as an honorarium for each reading, a decent sized prize check, complete control over the book's design, and countless other amazing things. Send them your first book!

- 2) What is the best advice you can give us at this stage in our careers? What would you consider bad advice?**

Be more like Jesus: try to keep people in your life from dying.

Sorry, that was supposed to be funny. I'm so horrible at giving advice...perhaps because I'm mostly a pessimist. Maybe you could try not to view this thing we do as a "career." At least not in the American capitalist sense of the word. If it matters to you, you'll do it, regardless of how many appendages you have, what job you happen to have, etc. Even if you take a few years off from it. "Career" makes it seem more like a form of commerce. Our art is beyond commerce.

As I write this in my company cafeteria, there is a group of men at the table next to me discussing project management and their 12,000 square foot vacation homes on the Chesapeake Bay. Perhaps we should all become project managers. That might be the best advice I could give you.

3) We talked a lot about the poem "Nocturne: For the Night Workers of the South" and we marveled at its incredibly wide frame of reference (from Christ to birds to flowers to General Lee). We know that poets often don't like to discuss these things, but we wondered if you might talk us through the process by which a poem like this was written. We wondered also about its basis, if any, in autobiography.

[I should say that I'm never asked questions like these, so if I happen to ramble on too long, that's why. I appreciate you humoring/indulging me.]

This is a piece I wrote mostly in Tucson, AZ, during my stay at U of A's Poetry Center. If I recall correctly, it started as an ode to the last living daughters of the Confederacy, based on a series of photographs by Thomas Daniels that I had seen at a show in Richmond before I left for AZ. While in Tucson, I spent a lot of time at U of A's Photography Center, which has wonderful galleries, an extensive library, and an amazing collection of rare prints by thousands of photographers, including Richard Avedon and Matthew Brady, who made their respective ways into this poem. After seeing Avedon's early grainy photos of asylum inmates, I decided to scrap the Confederate daughters (who needs them?!), throw in a somewhat antiquated/Southern version of Avedon's asylum complete with owls, along with a narrator based loosely on a story my grandfather told me long ago about a (girl-)crazy, odd-job-working cousin from Yanceyville, NC. (The cousin's nickname was Lightnin' because he walked so slowly. His family found out much later he had a heart condition.) None of it is directly autobiographical, fortunately, except for the landscape and items within the landscape (long-leaf pines, white oaks, sweet potatoes, kudzu, the Bible, et al.). I've had weird jobs, but not that weird, although editing junk mail can be similar to frying owls at times.

My process usually goes like this, especially in this book: collect notes on most anything, amass a large amount of random items, then try to cram a bunch of it into a piece by removing its context and make it all work together. Not very scientific, I guess. More like collage. Or mixed media. I like it when language is lush with nouns, with ruin, with ruined nouns. Most of all, I wanted this poem to be "cinematic," to mimic film, no matter how slight and amateur.

Christ to birds to flowers to General Lee is actually a great description of the south. Almost a mathematical equation, where all things are equal. Christ = birds = flowers = General Lee. And almost better than James Dickey's version: "superstition & bloodshed & murder & liquor & hookworm & ghosts & early death."

Oh, I wanted to mention that I actually offended a kid with this poem at a reading in Orlando, Florida. He was of college age, and did not like the line where I referred to Christ as not having any truth left in him. He said, "I find that offensive." I asked him if he liked the fuck the moon line, which is my personal favorite, and he did not like that one, either.

4). We wondered about the very detailed section of notes that you include with the poems. Did you struggle with the question of adding notes or did you feel that they were an essential part of the manuscript?

Were the notes annoying? Damn, I didn't consider that. Too much information can be annoying, I guess. I didn't struggle at all, though. It fit with the idea of "cataloging" which begins with the title of the book, the epigraph from Roethke, and of course from Whitman, my favorite cataloger, and the silly bird index. I also wanted to give credit where credit was

due, especially to the folks who(m) I dedicated certain poems, to the artists/writers I borrowed lines from, which turned out to be quite often, and to the judges who chose certain poems for prizes. It was important for me to thank as many as possible. Maybe it's the southern gentleman in me. I also love liner notes on records/cds. In the old days, my favorite bands would list every single band they played shows with in the liner notes. I didn't, however, submit the book to contests with the Notes. They came long after the book was chosen. And were edited down by me in the end. It could have been much worse.

5) What poets do you consider mentors or influences. We thought that perhaps Charles Wright was a source for you.

Charles Wright is definitely an influence, especially in my shorter pieces. That guy can do no wrong in my opinion. Did you guys read Joel Brouwer's review in the NY Times of Wright's most recent book *Scar Tissue*? I could have killed the guy. "Sometimes it seems Wright's project is to find ever more convincing ways to tell us he doesn't have anything to tell us." Whatever, dude.

Also, Larry Levis was/is a big influence, especially on the longer pieces in the book. He was the teacher I mentioned earlier who died my last year of school. For a long time, he has been my main source. He's the reason I started writing again. I think I am finally growing away from his influence, which saddens me in a way. And Phil Levine, Larry's teacher.

Whitman, of course. Eliot & Stevens, although you probably can't tell.

The other Wright: James. Roethke. Plath. Julio Cortazar, Borges, Calvino, Kundera, Nabokov, Bohumil Hrabal...Some of those aren't officially poets, but they are to me. And more recent peeps like Mary Ruefle, David Wojahn, Bridgit Kelly, Robert Hass, Jack Gilbert, Kim Addonizio, Denis Johnson...I could go on. There are so many to love. I'm also greatly influenced by contemporary artists, sometimes more so than poets. Not sure how it works, but it does. Folks like Alice Aycock, Rebecca Horn, Amy Cutler, Leonardo Drew, Kara Walker, Cindy Sherman, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Sally Mann, Christian Boltanski, and the list goes on.

6) Did you give a lot of thought to the ordering of the book? This is one of the longest first books we've ever seen. Did the length of the ms present any special challenges in terms of publication?

I swear in Microsoft Word it was under 70 pages (without the notes and index). I don't know what happened. So it just seems long. Like the Sears Catalog seems long. It really isn't. Seriously.

Ordering the book was tough for me. I really didn't know how to do it. I did the ol' spread-out-the-poems-on-the-floor trick, read through tons of books just for structure, thematically arranged them (by father poems, south poems, etc.)...nothing seemed to work. The long poems kept screwing things up.

I had planned on working with Larry on such ideas for my thesis, but he skipped town (Poteat said, selfishly). Ellen Voigt and Gerald Stern graciously filled in for Larry my last year of school. They were good friends with him and felt sorry for the third-years who didn't have their teacher to work with. Although Ellen ended up not liking me very much for

various reasons (that's another story...if you guys had asked me the question "how many famous poets do not like you at all for various reasons?" I could have answered it...), she gave me the best advice on ordering the poems in my thesis. Thematic issues aside, she suggested I order the poems in each section by length, in an arc: from short to medium to long to medium to short. Or as close as I could get to that. It seemed to make sense for plain reading pleasure (if anything I do can be considered "pleasurable")...and pacing. No one really wants to read 4 long-ass poems in a row, was the reasoning. So, years later, I applied this same technique to my newer version of the manuscript. It was somewhat easier to order them after finding a structure. Even though I kept replacing and revising, the same idea of the arc remained.

7) Do you consider yourself a Southern poet?

On the surface, with my non-regional dialect, dark-rimmed glasses and distressed jeans, I could be perceived as being from anywhere (my mother is from Albany, NY, so I didn't pick up the accent. I can fake a good one, though), but I'm mostly Southern, grew up in the woods of eastern NC, and 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, so I guess that makes me....

It's not something I consciously set out to be. Since I concern myself with more "narrative" issues, it's easier to pin down. If I was more of a Neo-Surrealist/Abstractionist, it wouldn't matter where I was from. Rather, you probably couldn't tell. I don't mind being considered a Southern poet, though. I could think of much worse things to be known as. Like a Northern poet!

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. I do find myself giving disclaimers at readings if I end up reading a "southern" poem...especially if someone like General Lee or Jeb Stuart is mentioned. I feel that I should remove myself from the political weight of such historical figures, and remind folks that I'm just the messenger, the filter, just to avoid any confrontation. I hate confrontation.

8) Obviously, you're interested in history. Would you mind talking a bit about the role of history in your work--the ways in which you use it as a source and inspiration for poems? How free do you feel to invent around historical facts?

Not that this is what you asked, but just to set the record straight, I don't consider myself a historian. I have neither the authority nor the ability. On an abstract level, what I end up doing is making guesses or imaginary statements about the past. (I've tried to avoid quoting others throughout these questions, but I think I have to turn to a smarter source in this case) Roland Barthes, who I'm quite interested in but not quite sure I understand most of the time, says "History has a limitation: we recount what has been, not what has not been, or what has been uncertain." Nevertheless, what most pleases me is the "what has not been," the "uncertain."

I also don't base my work on any theory, or have any sort of agenda, nor am I an apologist. It is what it is. At my most base level, I use history, making up facts as I go along, even about my own past, my own daily life. I feel completely free to invent, and this does not bother me in the least. Truth is thrown out of the window. Most of the time, though, I do end up telling the truth. The option is what is important.

History is physical for me as well, which is where the inspiration comes in. The idea of “history” is almost an object, itself something to hold. I love old, crumbling things. Richmond conveniently happens to be a huge crumbling thing. I live in a very old neighborhood here. Down the street is the church where Patrick Henry gave his “Give me liberty or give me death speech.” All my life I have explored ruined houses, barns, sheds, warehouses, silos, anything on the verge of disappearing. Those places are my places of worship, my monuments. I recently figured out that I collect old photographs (mostly snapshots from the beginning of the 20th century) because it is like collecting death.

9) Does the poem "People Who'd Kill Me" have anything to do with Lorca? Given the subject, the place and the time, we thought that perhaps it did. Are we way off track?

Nothing directly to do with Lorca, though I do love the guy. I'm sure he was in the back of my mind, but the poem occurred mainly because of Erice's film Spirit of the Beehive (not a direct take on the film...more like “in the spirit of” or in honor of...it is such a beautifully strange and secretly political film) and from putting my ear to my uncle's box hives. Have you ever done that before? It is unlike any ocean you have heard. A precise, well-oiled, Marxist ocean.

10) Do you find it difficult to balance your job outside of academia (you don't teach, right?) with your life as a writer?

Right. I don't teach. I taught as a grad student and as an adjunct for a semester or two after school and realized I couldn't live on such a mediocre salary or get a decent full-time teaching job without a lot of publications, so I'm not sure I even know what it's like to be inside academia. I imagine it to be like the old board game Candyland, where the pencils are peppermint sticks and the tweed blazers are black licorice. Yum.

It is pretty hard, I admit. I'm no Bob-Hicok-three-poems-a-day guy, that's for sure. I do what I can. However, if you look up "underachiever" I think you'll find a nice shot of me taking a nap under my desk. One thing I've found is that residencies really help. Vermont Studio Center, Millay Colony, that sort of thing. If I could do one residency a year, for one month at a time, I would be set. My current job is loose, but not that loose.

Keeping each life separate helps. I never bring work home, and I rarely talk about poems with my work colleagues. Some of them have bought my book and are supportive. They think of me as a novelty, and that's not too bad, considering other options. I do end up doing a lot of poem-oriented activities at work. Lots of printing, mailing/submitting, researching. I figure it's a good trade-off. I'll edit your lame copy if you let me print 7 copies of my new manuscript on 7 different printers. We use each other. Dual parasites. Except I'm a microscopic one. Also, I was hoping I could be the next Spenser Reece...The Clerk's Tale guy who works for Brooks Brothers and writes poems, except I would be the junk mail guy who works for companies that put people in debt.

Soon, though, I may try the academic route. I do love candy.

11) We admired your experimentation with and invention of forms for your poems. At what stage in the writing process does the form of a poem happen?

Thank you very much. Those nocturnes/meditations/self-portraits aren't so much forms as they are self-assignments. I need something to get me going, or else I'll never get anywhere. Titles help me a lot. So does working in series. Lately, I've been appropriating titles (like the Irish curses, the Dover books) just to give myself something to riff off of...an improvisation. Kind of like jazz, but a much less talented version. The "form" happens, then, with the finding of a title, which is the beginning of the process for me. First the title, then the poem. I've never considered if this is strange.

12) What are you writing now? Would you mind sending us a new poem?

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 Mr. 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.

I'll give you this one (attached), a short one, along with its "appendix" which appears with other appendices at the end of the book in a section conveniently entitled "Appendices." It involves foxes, and includes a quote from Goddard's film *My Life to Live*.

Thank you so much for asking me so many great questions. I truly appreciate it. I'm not sure I answered them quite in the way you would have liked, so if you want to follow up on anything, feel free to email me again. As a class or individually. I don't mind at all.