

# A Love of Language

Assistant Professor of English Jennifer Kwon Dobbs is sharing her experience and love of writing with St. Olaf students.

By Anna Stevens '10 PHOTOGRAPHED BY BILL KELLEY

St. Olaf Assistant Professor of English Jennifer Kwon Dobbs describes her first introduction to poetry as “falling in love with the language the way one can’t shake a song.”

It is now Dobbs’s own poetry that is sticking in people’s minds. Her collection of poetry, *Paper Pavilion*, received the 2008 Sheila Motton Book Award from the New England Poetry Club. The New England Poetry Club, founded by renowned American poets Amy Lowell, Robert Frost, and Conrad Aiken, is the oldest reading series in the United States.

“Reading previous prize winners is like reciting a long list of touchstone poets, many of whom have been important to my own development as a poet,” Dobbs says. “It’s an honor to be included.”

Before joining the St. Olaf English faculty this past fall, Dobbs taught at the City University of New York and Loyola Marymount College. She was founding director of the SummerTIME Writing Program in Los Angeles, a college access program for inner-city high school students, and she has a background in music collaboration. Her song *Among Joshua Trees*, written with Steven Gates, won the New York Youth Symphony’s First Music Series and made its debut at Carnegie Hall.

**How did you become interested in poetry?** Growing up in Oklahoma, I read whatever I could get my hands on. By sheer circumstance, my first books were *The World Book Encyclopedia* (1964 edition), *Trixie Potter* mysteries, Edith Hamilton’s *Mythology*, and *Best Loved Poems of the American People* because they sat on the living room shelves. I remember reading John Keats’s “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Christabel” and falling in love with the language the way one can’t shake a song.

Oddly enough, I began writing as a young formalist with an internalized metronome, probably due to playing the flute and taking ballet lessons, and imitated the poems I liked from that anthology. Yet I didn’t begin to study poetry seriously until I reached college, and even then I was reticent to give in. When someone asked me, “So what are you going to do with that?” I shrugged. I tried doing other things — studying for the LSAT, for instance — but poetry would not let me go. Encouraged by my thesis director, I applied to MFA and Ph.D. in literature programs, got into both, but decided to pursue creative writing first.

**What inspires your poetry?** My subjects tend toward diaspora, history, and geography — the stuff of epic. Yet I am drawn to

the single voice that can reach across an auditorium to the back of the room. Through voice, a set of questions usually triggers the book. One that persists and that I’ve not quite imagined to my satisfaction is, “What is home/land?” I love questions for what they make possible — the process as much as the insight matter. Within the question is a quest, a search. I write in search of what can only occur and be felt in lines.

**Has your time at St. Olaf thus far shaped your poetry in any way?**

Though I’m still new at St. Olaf College, I find that place affects language. Of course it does. There are poems that I wrote in Los Angeles that could only take place in Los Angeles — the quality of the light, immigrants, migrants, a nomenclature of dreams, the Interstate 10 dead ending at the ocean. At St. Olaf, I’m reminded of our relationships with the land through the college’s green initiatives such as Regents Hall and the wetlands project and how these initiatives shape our internal landscapes. The natural world has rhythms and syntaxes of its own. I’m taking a lot of walks and doing a lot of listening right now.

**How would you describe *Paper Pavilion* to someone who has yet to read your work?** *Paper Pavilion* turns to Korean literature in translation, opera, and mythology to construct a space, a pavilion, where a conversation about origins and search might take place. The book begins and begins again at the Korean Demilitarized Zone, which is the motion of an overseas Korean diaspora attempting to see and see again its history. So there are poems about materialism, mater, maternus, and poems about Pinocchio and other orphans.

**What can we expect from your poetry in the future?**

I’m working on poems that are darker in tone. Maybe it’s the tenor of our current time? I’m not sure. It’s probably due to the questions I’m asking. I’m reading about labyrinths and ancient architecture. I want to know what a city that withstands war looks like. There are so many books at present that describe spectacles of destruction. For me, seeing what’s there is not enough. The imagination can envision possibilities, and that’s the harder language.

**If you could leave your students with one piece of advice, what would it be?**

If someone asks you, “You want to be a poet? What are you going to do with that?” you might say, “It’s what poetry is going to do with me.” Or don’t bother answering at all. In fact, just read and write, feel and think, and let failure be your best company. After all, it’s going to be a longer and more interesting conversation. 🦋

ANNA STEVENS '10 is a student reporter in the St. Olaf marketing and communications office. She is an English major with a concentration in media studies.

EDITORS NOTE: Readers can learn more about *Paper Pavilion* (White Pine Press) by visiting [whitepine.org](http://whitepine.org).

