

In *Texases* . . . the vision of his land is as real as mesquite debris or a governor who *jogs just down the road / with a pistol for coyotes*. At the same time, it is ethereal, entering poems visited by angels and biblical cadences and scriptural tones. Indeed, it is everywhere. Poch creates this landscape and its people with skill and beauty, in a voice that combines wisdom and humor, enlivening a book that is a joy to read.

—**GRACE SCHULMAN**, *Without a Claim*

Like the *staked plains, dry-land, long view man* he praises in one poem, John Poch knows the harsh beauty of Texas, and in this new collection he gives us a plural, abundant portrait of his beloved place. Here are prose poems, sonnets, villanelles, and all the enduring pleasures of formal verse, brought back down to earth by Poch's unflinching eye, and his hard-won knowledge of work, and people, and the past. *Texases* is a kind of psalter, full of graceful and moving love songs to the land.

—**PATRICK PHILLIPS**, *Elegy for a Broken Machine*

**TE
XAS
ES**

**POEMS
JOHN
POCH**



WordFarm
SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

WordFarm
334 Lakeside Ave S, #207
Seattle, WA 98144
www.wordfarm.net
info@wordfarm.net

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So I arose and went out into the plain, and behold, the glory of the LORD stood there, like the glory which I saw by the River Chebar; and I fell on my face.

—**EZEKIEL 3:23**

You are Texas, the old man said. I was Texas three year. He held up his hand. The forefinger was gone at the first joint and perhaps he was showing them what happened in Texas or perhaps he merely meant to count the years.

—**CORMAC McCARTHY**, *Blood Meridian*

TEXAS

They made us come out to the country to this ranch. The moon rose. Probably full, it was orange and squashed, some kind of optical illusion because you could see so far on these plains. The others were excited. They pointed at it, jabbing and saying, *Look. Look* is something we might say when we mean *listen*. Coyotes suddenly howled in the ditches a mile away. Everyone looked at each other, wide-eyed and smiling. And then another group of coyotes a mile in a different direction. I believed it had little to do with the moon and much more to do with the sandhill cranes that had alighted in the cotton fields nearby. The ache of hunger. The moon kept rising and lost its orange, and those around me couldn't get enough of it. The moon was a wheel of cheese, more moldy as it aged into its great height.

No, that moon was an old god occluding all those stars and satellites and planets. The others wanted the formidable plot, and I wanted the simplest verbs. The stars, as that nonchalant white nightmare rose, the stars were blotted out one by one, like angels God grew weary of. God doesn't tire of angels, but this is how I felt. I would compare the whole scenario to a video game against the work of a good day. What did I want out here in the great wastes of the plains? Stars were a sure thing, and I couldn't do a thing about their disappearance. Everyone was happy for the moon. The holy white buffalo of it, baffling the world. Whereas they felt it to be the coziest of comforters, I needed distance on it. I wanted the piercing diamonds sprawled across black velvet. Listen. Instead, because of winter, there would be a full twelve hours of this awful silver coin hanging itself.



GOD IN THE SHAPE OF TEXAS

Imagine something lifeless as a road
even makes meat for the crooked crow
or a necessary perpendicular walk on the caprock
without barbed wire might have made a man
a man from the expanse. And that man post-holing
could feel freedom's labor in his molars—
could see the cedar post would one day boast a meadowlark
like a trophy of Western flight.

Five strands strung hip-high help God help us,
and the triumph of the cowboy boot is up there
with the bullet. Don't holler till you shred your palm
on a twisted star or dig your heels into the real
of a stubborn bull. Iron in the hard times may rust
but waits, patient. No one around here talks of centuries.
In January, Esperanza sobs at the Texas Proud Coin Laundry.
In February, the cranes tend to settle on last year's cotton.
In March, the John Deere green erupts like a shout, by God.

Verily, who can resist the tiller we call sand fighter as wide
as the Second Baptist Church? With this sun, who could resist
buying a hat? Across the purblinding aluminum desolation
of the football bleachers of Paducah, Texas, the wind
howls, of course, and there goes the first big tumbleweed
to mar the new truck out front worth half the house.
You can't go far before you find some corrugated metal
leaning, leading to a brick downtown, the Masonic flourish
of God's compass hung on the one impressive building
near the stoplight. On the outskirts, some dream of a boxcar
in their own front yard, a walkway of cement pavers

in the shape of Texas leading to the porch around the side.

Texas. Texas. Texas. Texas. Texas.

When even children recognize the figure of an angel
rising from the Gulf of Mexico, panhandle-headed
in humility, they pledge allegiance to her flag,
the white star silver in their eager eyes, postures
simple and fixed as any town's water tower,
and as proud, and under God: Look up.

THE DALLAS COWBOYS CHEERLEADER

When the Cowboys cheerleader cheers
for a body, it is her own in blue and silver,
like a dove thrown into the sky fleeing gunshot
successfully, arcing her torso into a holy spirit.
Her athleticism is nearly unimportant.
She is the reason they make lipstick
into the shape of a bullet.

COWBOYS VS. TEXANS

Last century, like angels before the world was born,
Cowboys ruled the West. Now, like angels scorned,
come the Texans to lay the black on blue.
Partner, that's not face paint. That's a tattoo.
Houston's bigger when you measure earth;
but Dallas just might circumscribe Fort Worth
and then lay claim upon America besides.
Who can seize the year? a star? these bragging rights?
A cowboy often plays the lead, the hero, loner,
calling the shots, misread, in trouble with the owner.
And the symbol of a bull skull doesn't take college
to understand—they sacrifice the body. The knowledge
of good and evil goes down pretty ugly in this Western.
Arm-chaired, steady as a pump jack with that beer, Texan,
throwback-jerseyed, deep down you're old school—
deep down an Oiler, dualies in the backfield, diesel-fueled.
Or classic silver-blue the color of the propane hour.
Frack the whole state, and choose your power.
Know your basics, the chalk of X and O on slate.
If Emmitt Smith was free will, Earl Campbell is your fate.
Pick longevity of a consistent arm and the vain
over the new old running downhill on a level plain.
Or blitz the patriotic red, white, and black
over our Republic's model quarterback.
Have faith; the ruined knees are good for praying.
It's Sunday, after all. Who works? Who's playing?
How does the hour empowering us turn into three?
All three sides of the ball—the postgame trinity.
Michele Tafoya, tell us if you know the story
when the MVP gives God the glory:
the camera finds the other, the cloth upon his head
almost hiding the grown man crying, broken in our stead.

DON'T MESS

This Texas woman is a threat . . . or fun,
her little T-shirt tempting: COME AND TAKE IT.
The image of a cannon helps to make it,
black star between her breasts, her hair undone.
But is she packing heat, somewhere a gun?
Does she mean to mock you, make you see her naked?
She looks you in the eye and wouldn't fake it.
Her secret weapon isn't set to stun.

The both of you are married, so forsake it—
this independence—pluck out your eye and run,
remember Alamos or wars you've won.
The light that blinds undresses everyone.
Leave Texas lying; one misstep can wake it.
The diamond warns: you better (she can) shake it.

OUR FLESH

Boring as a vulture shadow, occasional and reliable,
maybe a blink which surprises, the flesh tries.
And here we are again sweating
by the buckets or by the pool, in the flesh.
Yet might we want a nice nest despite heaven
and, like the great crested flycatcher, weave
a sloughed snake skin in to make fun of sin?
Snag it from a cottonmouth whose head newly shed
waits like a god or a hood ornament, king of macadam,
pretend friend to Adam, hell to the pygmy mouse who
at night makes a little pile of pebbles and each morning
licks up the dew as some of us drink bitterly our coffee.
These days we are all connoisseurs of drought.

On a walk through the dust after breakfast, I imagined
a cottonmouth coiled and lost in thought like a pretty girl
curled up on a couch, awash in TV. But then the dream
turned, and I saw the snake levitate in the humid blue
of the Hill Country sky, hanging there, so I thought
I should destroy it, and then I thought of the scripture:
a cloud the size of a man's hand rising from the sea.
Was I imagining the end of days or the prescient end
of the year's drought here in the dull apocalypse
we call the flesh, the sad fact we call the world, 2020,
coming year of the hindsight?

Cheer up. We don't need nature's illustration.
The flesh is a fine hotel for love, if not a temple
where you can come and fall on your face
before a seemingly empty throne.

OFF THE GRID

While our governor jogs just down the road
with a pistol for coyotes, I like the outdoors
for the decorated meadowlark on the barbed wire
above three horse cripplers. He teaches me valor
in patience across the cirrus-strewn morning.
Sleep low needy needy moving, he tells me.
I have lost my wallet I know not where and may
yet find it, Lord willing and thieves be damned.
In a world of hurry's fistfuls, the thorn of money
obstructing nearly every ordinary path like mesquite
shoots waiting for a snag of feather, fur or flesh,
I'd like to bushwhack the clumpy field a mile
and, at worst, make a bird change direction.
I best appreciate the science of a parking lot
from here. In his famous way, death outlives us,
or so he thinks. Our governor, he must think of me
what deer think of the cows, compatriots of the pasture,
one group swifter, perhaps, though not a little daft below
the corn feeder, or what anyone ponders driving by
the Boston Terrier Museum, Floydada, TX.
Yet what can I do when God votes for me?
I must love the governor, my enemy of education.
The opposite of war is eating, so I will now cook
my dinner on a fire, while he awaits his pricey dinner,
and know he is nearly my poor father,
and both of us suffer, one perversely,
the frail imaginings of a country king.

SUGAR LAND BARBECUE

The Italian word for picnic is picnic.
The same in Spanish, in French, in Japanese.
What else would you call it?
In Texas we call it a barbecue
and spell it with three consonants.
The pot-bellied host shall provide a meat
and may just cook it in the ground.
Who wants cake when we've got cobbler?

Lulls will befall the barbecue, such as
the one after the argument about arguments
that hung between the husbands and the wives
precarious and flimsy as a badminton net.
Then a beer can cracks things back to bragging.

There is always a woman at the picnic,
though you may have missed her bear-brown eyes,
who sulks at the periphery, lonely as a picnic table
at a junkyard, balancing a bitter can of beer
in one hand (as it warms and is not drunk)
and a magazine somebody asked her to hold
in the other. Look how she so wistfully
looks at the house finch on the backyard wire
singing a tune like a string of hard candy.
Its voice and its color cheer her
like cherry cobbler does the others.
Nevertheless, she withdraws around the corner
of the garage to her car. She will escape, but first
she soaks up the heat and stillness of the dash.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Poch has taught in the creative writing program at Texas Tech University since 2001. He also serves as series editor for the Vassar Miller Poetry Prize at the University of North Texas. Born in Erie, Pennsylvania, he earned an M.F.A. from the University of Florida and a Ph.D. from the University of North Texas. He received a “Discovery”/ *The Nation* Prize in 1998, he was the inaugural Colgate University Creative Writing Fellow in 2000, and he was the Thornton Writer-in-Residence at Lynchburg College in 2007. During 2014 he was a Fulbright Core Scholar to the University of Barcelona.

His collections of poetry include *Poems* (2004), a finalist for the PEN/Osterweil Prize; *Two Men Fighting with a Knife* (2008), winner of the Donald Justice Award; *Dolls* (2009); and *Fix Quiet* (2015), winner of the 2014 *New Criterion* Poetry Prize.

His poems have appeared in journals such as *Agni*, *The Nation*, *New England Review*, *New Republic*, *Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Southwest Review*, and *Yale Review*. He is a founding editor of *32 Poems Magazine* and a co-editor (with Deborah Ager and Bill Beverly) of *Old Flame: From the First 10 Years of 32 Poems Magazine* (2013).