

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  
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USA ISBN-13: 978-1-60226-022-1

USA ISBN-10: 1-60226-022-2

Printed in the United States of America

Cover Design: Andrew Craft

First Edition: 2019

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Poch, John, 1966- author.

Title: Texas / John Poch.

Description: First edition. | Seattle, Washington : WordFarm, [2019] | Identifiers: LCCN 2018055905 (print) | LCCN 2019000596 (ebook) | ISBN 9781602264298 (ebook) | ISBN 1602264295 (ebook) | ISBN 9781602260221 (pbk.) | ISBN 1602260222 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Texas--Poetry.

Classification: LCC PS3616.O28 (ebook) | LCC PS3616.O28 T49 2019 (print) | DDC 811/.6--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018055905>

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P 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Y 24 23 22 21 20 19

# CONTENTS

Texas	15
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## I.

---

God in the Shape of Texas	19
The Dallas Cowboys Cheerleader	21
Cowboys vs. Texans	22
Don't Mess	23
Our Flesh	24
Off the Grid	25
Sugar Land Barbecue	26
Texas, Apostrophe	27
Texas Hollywood	29
The Llano Estacado	30
Great-tailed Grackles	31
Ransom Canyon	32
The Neighbor	35
Windy Day in Flower Mound	37
Horse Crippler ( <i>Echinocactus Texensis</i> )	39
Central Texas	41
Good Year	42
In Corpus Christi	43

## II.

---

Crush, Texas	47
Late Afternoon at the Junction Rodeo	48
Hill Country Drought	50
In the Backyard After the Dust Storm, Meditating on Paradise	51
Playing Hello Kitty Bingo Before the Merit Committee Meeting	52
Watching a Train Pass, Denton, Texas, 1:35 A.M.	54
The Brazos	55

The County Seat of Presidio County	56
Psalm in a Desert Place	58
Lark Sparrow	59
Loving and Goodnight, Goodnight and Loving	60
The Llano River	61
Horses and Sawhorses	62
Pegasus	63
Big Bend	64
Love Creek	65
Evening	66

### III.

---

A River	69
The Rio Grande (South)	70
Escape on the Sabinal	71
Invasive Species	72
Punctuation on the Devils River	73
Independence Creek	75
The Colorado River (Texas)	76
Invisible Fish	77
Metaphors of Lubbock	79
Lubbock, 1955	80
Lubbock Urology	81
Song of Texas	82
Mason Mountain	83
The Gate	84
Amarillo Ramp	86
Birthday	87
About the Author	89

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).