

**Melanie Almeder**

*Texases*, John Poch. WordFarm Press, 2019.

John Poch's fifth collection of poetry, *Texases*, is a stunning and important book. While the poems sing in Texas images, violent and tender, there's nothing simply provincial here: this is a book about what it means to inhabit America now. The poems, hewn in artistic integrity, are full of reckoning and fierce beauty.

As the prefatory prose poem of the book, "Texas," makes clear, what we and the poet must reckon with in this landscape is individual *and* collective. The poem, an anti-pastoral, begins with a declamation that a "they" made us "come out to the country to this ranch." The speaker makes it clear that individuals on this trip are expected to express wonder at the rising of the moon, whose light is so monopolizing the very stars disappear. But the speaker reporting the event to us is as wary of easy admiration as he is of metaphor untethered from context: the moon, the speaker first declares, "was a wheel of cheese, more moldy as it aged to its great height." The metaphor is deft in its humor. However, in the next stanza the speaker pivots and revises as he reports his story to us: the moon was an "old god"; it was a "nonchalant white nightmare"— and then "this awful silver coin hanging itself."

"Texas" makes a few promises about the book to come: there'll be no misplaced metaphor unless it's there to be toppled for something truer or in service of some tender mockery. There'll be no reckless, untethered beauty, separate from coyote's "ache of hunger" that howls about the periphery of our consciousness (or the bullets that recur in these poems, the problematic whiteness and nationalisms that surround us, or the very knife that ends the book). There'll be no poetry separate from the binaries gone quotidian we find ourselves inhabiting. This book resists summarizing collective experience without (thank God) the wary, *listening*, ruminating poet-as-witness offering counterpoint, invoking a better world.

*Texases* delivers and delivers on the promises the first poem makes. The poems of the book are about the "old gods" of land, nation, love, and the imagination itself. However, it is not until the second poem that the sense of the formal range and dizzying virtuosity arrives. "God in the Shape of Texas" is as great a poem as any lyric poem anywhere. Furthermore, Poch proves to be as much a brilliant formalist as he is a narrative and lyric poet within this one poem and those to come. "God in the Shape of Texas"

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risers into a virtuosic crescendo when “*Texas*” repeated becomes a line of trochaic pentameter. Poem after poem that follows in *Texas* are an argument for what poetry can do. In “A River,” Poch intones:

God knows the law of life is death  
and you can feel it in your warbler neck,  
your river-quick high-stick wrist,  
at the end of the day  
But the trophies:  
a goldfinch tearing up a pink thistle.”

And, in “Psalm in a Desert Place”:

My voice would move a mountain  
to where there are no mountains  
and would not cast it into the sea.

“The distillate music of “Good Year” wills the evolution of images in the poem, insisting that even a “feather” is muse enough:

January. I pluck it,  
this feather flapping  
in the bare mesquite  
only head-high, caught  
by the down. Iridescent,  
turkey. Another feather  
in the bleached Texas  
grama and another. . .

*Texas* is unflinching in its vision but it is neither relentless nor hopeless. It hits as many emotional registers as brilliantly crafted moments, finally insisting that there is more to this world than that ‘nonchalant whiteness,’ that “old coin” hanging itself all night that began the book. Praise poems keep company with the elegies and absurdities. The praise poems themselves are kinds of *Ars Poeticae*: in “Lark Sparrow,” an ode, the poet intones, “Let me be drawn to you”; in “Hill County Drought,” the speaker asks of the “reluctant cuckoo who brings / his three big gulps of water” to “Please pour it in my ear.” In “Punctuation on the Devils River,” the speaker declares, finally, “And like a psalm God

swallows, I know / what light knows the Devil doesn't." Other poems are equally defiant in their formal joy. In the brilliantly end-rhymed "Crush Texas," the poet woos his wife:

Come here. Perplex us  
with swallows, voracious with your reflexes,  
with the crush of you in the terrible state of Texas  
that like a staged train wreck (in a good way) wrecks us."

Compellingly, while *Texas* argues for love, for faith, and for a joy as against absurdity and violence, it offers no easy resolutions. Even the final poems of the book maintain the sense that, as we are faced with old gods, urgent and crucial, the truths *must* be sung, must be, to lift a phrase from one of the poems, "prophesied good."