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Poetic Diversity Column
San Antonio Express-News

Some Recognition of the Joshua Lizard
New and Selected Poems by Robert Burlingame
Mutabilis Press, \$14.

Poet Robert Burlingame transforms experience into genuine awe in more than 100 subtly shaped poems from this shrewdly organized collection. His intense wonder weaves humbly into the fabric of his West Texas habitat (specifically, the Guadalupe Mountains and Chihuahuan Desert region) – but never once stooping to mere gloss or landscape tourism. While best known as a nature poet, Burlingame’s subjects are quite varied, including splendid homages to a pantheon of artists and thinkers from ancient China and Greece all the way to 20th century, a lovely gathering of tender memories about family and friends, plus a sheaf of the most lucid lyrics on the art of poetry.

The title poem of *Some Recognition of the Joshua Lizard* suggests identification with that “sleek saurian” of “stealth gemmed inside that tense/Sanctuary” in “an Old Testament stance” // this chameleon faith solemn/ At the foot of a desert king with God-shaggy head.” In fact, he celebrates solidarity with all life-forms “in harmlessness” and with profound respect. Several stunning hymns praise trees: Plato’s “Sycamore” for the “half-beneficent, half-tutorial, shade it casts./ /Shade we don’t/wish to waste since it recalls/the broad-shouldered philosopher,/ prophet of the changeless unseen.” And the inglorious “Netleaf Hackberry” – “vague unimpressive tree/ doomed to be infested/ as it holds to stingy soil” – stands as “noble” and from the bird’s viewpoint “loved for its berries that float/ into the next life of a common glory.”

His homages bear tints of lament—in “Marsden Hartley (1877-1943)” he thinks of how the painter’s hands “moved in spasms of color,/how they praised the roughness of sea cliffs.” Later, he writes: “We need you still, wise spokesman of the cliffs.” Near the end of “Late Twentieth Century Remarks on an Early Painting by Monet,” he writes: “Your world’s ease, its joys, will not come again.//We used to be rich. What has happened?/Where, graceless and unspent, will we journey?” These explorations constitute an edifying anthology of literary insights into the works we once studied: Yeats and D.H. Lawrence; Thoreau, Melville, Dickinson, Frost and Poe; Dostoevsky, Pushkin and Chekov; César Vallejo and James Wright; Basho and Li Po. A long, varied list of approaches to literature read by a clarifying intelligence.

Divided into four sections, the book begins with personal histories. Among the loveliest yet simplest poems in the first part (for wife Linda, who painted the vibrant cover art), “A Clean, White Handkerchief” begins: “I sit in my study/writing these/ words. Not for-/ever will I do/this.” The folded handkerchief is in a pocket: “Linda washed/and ironed it/for me.//Not forever will/she do/this.” The mantra laments our mortality, extending to the embrace of an imaginary couple: “They won’t/have forever to do this.” Imagining their kisses, he unfolds this symbol of his love for Linda.

The final poems compile an exquisite poetics. After “Stalking the poem,/the half-wing fear of failure/plunging like a beak bright/through innocent sky,” the poet reaches near mystical meditation in “That Stillness Which Pleases the Mind” — his final poem. There, “he’s decided to give up on traveling anywhere/he’s gathered up and burned his gaudy maps/he has stopped gazing beyond the tufted furrow.” Instead, “he sits and listens in his one friendly chair/& rinses out the glistening bright thought.”

This volume appears in the poet's 88th year, recalling the authenticity, intensity and depth of the poetry by Vassar Miller (1924-1998), though their styles and subjects are entirely different. Both have influenced generations of poets, editors and students. He has such admirers as Naomi Shihab Nye, Pat Mora, Howard McCord, Del Marie Rogers, Ray Gonzalez, Bert Almon, Billy Bob Hill, and Dave Oliphant, who included Burlingame's poems in several Texas anthologies. The collection includes an excellent introduction by Joseph Rice (1944-2009), the poet-professor's most devoted student. Mutabilis Press of Houston, a non-profit literary imprint, has produced a handsome trade paperback (160 pages), which amounts to a cultural service to former and new readers of this astounding and too-long-overlooked poet.

Like the *Collected Poems* of Vassar Miller, Robert Burlingame's *Some Recognition of the Joshua Lizard* soars beyond our borders to settle on a high shelf in the library of our national poetry.