

Eulogizing the Simple Life

Some Recognition of the Joshua Lizard: New and Selected Poems by Robert Burlingame. (Houston: Mutabilis Press, 2009. 158 pp. \$14 paper)

Texas has produced only a few poets who have achieved national renown and, so far as I know, none who has attracted an international readership. Certainly Texas cannot claim a single poet who readers outside the state would compare with such master wordsmiths as Frost, Eliot, Stevens, Williams, or any number of other perennially-anthologized poets. But this fact does not mean that some of the poetry that the state has inspired hasn't been worthy of the land and its people. Poets like William Barney and Walt McDonald have certainly paid tribute to the state's flora, fauna, and folk in highly artistic form, and this is true as well of Robert Burlingame, whose *Some Recognition of the Joshua Lizard: New and Selected Poems* offers up some of the most moving and artful poetry based on the region that I have ever read. Indeed, Burlingame's book contains work that merits the widest audience, but it should especially be welcomed by anyone in Texas who seeks an authentic and penetrating appreciation for the state's natural features and historical figures.

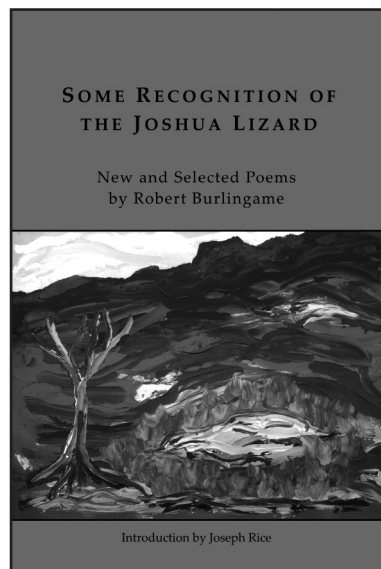
Divided into four sections that deal with "Personal Histories," "Others," "The Desert Southwest," and "A Poet's Journey," *Some Recognition of the Joshua Lizard* is most impressive for its third section, in which the poet celebrates the life that he has found surviving in the harsh West Texas landscape near his home in the Guadalupe Mountains. But this is not to say that the other three sections of the book are lacking in poems of great interest and artistry. Personal Histories, the first section, is important in establishing the poet's early awareness of the peculiar beauty of the arid Southwest, as in his poem entitled "The Yellowwood," where he declares that "Others said/it was ugly. It was, I suppose, but not when/it blazed in the Panhandle fall—yellow,/like an Indian fire rooted down, or a low star." Even though this first section focuses on the poet's early memories of growing up in Kansas, where he was born in 1925, such personal family poems prepare the reader for the poet's later writings once he moved to Texas in 1954 to teach at the University of Texas in El Paso. Also, in "Thinking of Fairy Tales," the poet reveals that his own reading of such stories would lead him in years to come "to stoop down to the littleness of the polliwog," thus laying the groundwork for the concern in his poetry for the small and often overlooked within his adopted Desert Southwest.

The book's first section focuses, then, on the poet's early appreciation of the value of "ordinary things," a phrase crucial

to the poem entitled "Tuesday." Burlingame's "recognition" of such a creature as the Joshua lizard, "this sleek saurian, this less than finger shape" of the book's title, is fundamental to his West Texas poetry, which time and again eulogizes the simpler forms of life. The book's first section also pays homage to his mother's knowledge of the names of plants and insects, of which "to spare" and which to "spray...stiff." In turn, the poet himself would learn the names of local West Texas flora and fauna, understanding in "Desert Ironwood" that such a tree "demands/fixed attention" and in "No Song Here" that a thoughtless boy's shooting of a cougar had deprived us of the lessons of that "Old teacher," a "creature at one with the world, she'd/walked in beauty, always in beauty," "her once heroic tail now bones/rattling in the wind."

Burlingame's poems can at times allude to other writers, as he does in "No Song Here" through his use of Lord Byron's famous phrase, "She walked in beauty." His readings in world literature are surveyed in the second section of *Some Recognition of the Joshua Lizard*, which is devoted to some of the writers obviously vital to the poet, among them Frost, Yeats, Joyce, Melville, Dickinson, Poe, Chekhov, D.H. Lawrence, Thoreau, Ovid, Saint-Exupéry, Cabeza de Vaca, Li Po, Lu Yu, and Basho. In this section the poet touches on central images and themes in each writer's work, such as Frost's "neither out far nor in deep" and of a life ended by either fire or ice; Yeats' gyres and "Crazy Jane"; Lawrence's coal miners, his "old song of passion," and his "man who will incorporate beast"; Thoreau as a "half-Indian Yankee" who "praised our radiant earth"; Saint-Exupéry, who "calibrated man's essence/with an engineer's precision"; and Cabeza de Vaca, who knew "this immense Southwest" as "a tender-minded/conquistador, doubting healer/daring yet to dip/into the bloody meat of an Indian's breast" to extract the embedded arrow point.

Throughout the book, the poet's erudition is fully evident but in no way intrusive. One example appears in the very fine poem entitled "Felix McKittrick/Lifelines," in which Burlingame describes the sheriff-soldier-explorer's death by means of an allusion to Euripides: "tangled like a grizzled Hippolytus in your horse's reins." The poet can also allude to the work of painters like Utrillo, Monet, and Marsden Hartley, the latter's poetry and paintings the subject of Burlingame's doctoral dissertation. Of Hartley the poet says that he "never trashed the park of the imagination," and in recalling Monet's "seas of mist, mists of meadows," he contrasts these with the "chemical sores" of Chernobyl and other modern catastrophes. Another literary allusion appears in the aforementioned poem on the dead cougar, in which the speaker says that "He imagines Gawain, green,/full of juice,/libidinous and polite,"



contrasting the scene of the heroic animal's "winter/heart missing beats" to the Middle English hero's temptations and harmless wound.

"A Poet's Journey," the fourth section of the *Some Recognition of the Joshua Lizard*, takes up a favorite theme of poets: the poet's own life and his/her making of poetry. One key piece in this section is entitled "small poems," which may recall for many Texas readers the work of Naomi Shihab Nye, to whom Burlingame has in fact dedicated another, related poem in this same section, the one entitled "The Immensity of Not Much." Of small poems, the poet says that "in their lostness/they drift down like the floating/seeds of dandelions/tenacious, hopeful//so they catch in the high grass/or in the purely private/crevice of a city/gutter." In another key poem, entitled "The Red Herd," the poet comes to one of his frequent confessional conclusions, addressing himself as he ends the piece with the assertion that "You know you have not made sense of anything," a statement that his poetry would seem to contradict. Earlier, in section three's "A Dream of Time," a lovely poem to the poet's artist wife Linda, whose beautiful painting graces the cover of the poet's attractive book, he declares that "we realize no way can be truly learned." Even so, it is clear that the poet has learned the way to create affective poems, such as "A Dream of Time," and another love poem entitled "A Clean, White Handkerchief," also dedicated to his wife, who "washed/and ironed it/for me." On seeing the sweet, quiet morning that "shows itself at [his] window," the poet praises both it and his wife's "clean, white/handkerchief." Through such a "small," everyday object, the poet reveals the life of a man and woman together and still in love after sixty years of marriage.

Despite the many telling poems in the other three sections, it is the "Desert Southwest" section that contains for me the most powerful poetry in Burlingame's high quality selection. Among the finest offerings in this third section are those that treat of the natural world of the poet's immediate surroundings: "Blue Milkwort," "Words for Wild Cherries," "Netleaf Hackberry," "The Woodrat," "Obit for Pebble," "A Death in West Texas," "No Song Here," "After Bird Watching

near the Mexican Border," "Sandhill Cranes," "Words of a Sort on the Mountain Laurel," "Sycamore," and "At Nickel Creek" (the last of these dedicated to Burlingame's former student, Joseph Rice, who contributed the book's introduction and shepherded the selection into print but who sadly did not live to see its publication). Other poems in the third section, such as "Elizabeth Garrett" and "West," are marvelous portraits of Southwesterners the poet knew from books or encountered in person. Each desert poem discovers for the reader insights that arise naturally from the plant or creature on which the poet has focused his "fixed attention."

The philosophy behind Burlingame's creation of his outstanding poems in the Southwest section is encapsulated in the poem entitled "Desert, not Wasteland," in which the poet infers that his poetics derive from his region's own "hard, curt, unpretentious poetry," its "half-claw, half-flower." For this reason, poem after poem in the Southwest section has as its object one phrase that appears in "Words on the Tree Named Madrone": "I extend my esteem." Likewise, in "Blue Milkwort," the poet informs us that because Pliny recommended the plant of the poem's title, he will through "this simple Texas flower" always praise the "Old/Taoist of Rome, scholar of love/and snowy sex." A particularly central poem in the Southwest section is "Netleaf Hackberry," and this is apparent from the fact that Burlingame has included at the back of the book an explication of his thinking and writing about this "committed desert tree." Although the poet acknowledges that the netleaf is "vague" and "unimpressive/doomed to be infested," he yet calls it "noble" and testifies to its being "loved by desert birds/and small animals." To the poet this "simple tree" deserves respect, and belongs among the great trees of literature, for "stung by parasites" and bent like a "crucifixion" it shares its "berries that float/into the next life of a common glory."

Like William Barney's "The Cranes at Muleshoe," Burlingame's "Sandhill Cranes" is a magnificent poem, though in almost no way similar in style, conception, or meaning to Barney's equally wonderful celebration of "these noble crea-

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had put up a corny painting of Texas bluebonnets, a horrible painting of a happy dog romping in an endless field of cheerful blue flowers in the spring sunshine, a painting so ugly and bad it was actually kind of cool." A similar problem appears in one of the stories' title: "G-U-T-S-☹" (it appears just that way in the book). When originally published in *Mosaic Mind*, the story was titled "Bad Guts," which fit the tale of a reporter with indigestion at a chitlins cook-off. The revised title is cutesy and overwrought, but that's not the only problem: one of the most popular literary stories of the past decade is Chuck Palahniuk's "Guts" (*Playboy*, March 2004). Given

all these issues, White would have better served the story—one of the most authentic in the collection—by leaving the original title alone.

Regardless, *Long Time Ago Good* is an excellent read, and it deserves praise from a wide audience, including those beyond Texas' borders. White's follow-up, *That Demon Life: A Novel*, is a strong sophomore effort as well. We can hope to see much more of his work in the years to come—and we can hope Austin will continue to receive the literary attention White has shined upon it.

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Respectful Vignettes from Yesteryear

And Grace Will Lead Me Home: African American Freedmen Communities of Austin, Texas, 1865-1928 by Michelle Mears. (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2009. 256 pp. \$45 cloth)

In 1928 the Austin City Council passed an ordinance to draw African Americans across town to settle on the east side, declaring they would provide all the necessary “facilities and conveniences” as an incentive. This action was taken after the city dignitaries recognized that alternative means of racial segregation had been “proven unconstitutional.” Although their new surroundings were by no means equal to their former neighborhoods, the move allowed the new settlers to rationalize the affront by claiming it allowed them to maintain a distance from the whites and have their own community.

In all this, the sadness was not simply the humiliation and upheaval, but they had to leave the 15 freedmen communities that had evolved on the periphery of the city since enfranchisement at the end of the Civil War. Michelle Mears has recreated the decades, describing the foundation and growth, the hope and success, of the communities that developed and stabilized over a period of 60 years. To say that her study is painstaking suggests her work was taxing. In fact, the book is far better described as a labor of love.

Mears sets the stage with her plan of action, and it is evident within a couple of pages that there will be no shortcuts. The introductory narrative identifies the sources from which she drew. They include published and unpublished materials and numerous maps gleaned from library archives. It is, however, the vignettes, the voices she has retrieved from the past in letters and diaries and personal accounts, that make the book compelling.

After outlining the situation that pertained for freedmen, both in Austin and elsewhere, Mears moves to the rural areas to the east, north, and south of Austin where the former slaves had lived and labored. She never falls into the trap of identifying the freedmen as victims, giving the families respect rather than pity. Although their lives did not match up economically to the status of contemporary white middle-class residents, the age of choice and plenty had yet to arrive for anyone. Yes, the freedmen grew their own food, but then the matron of the Texas School for the Blind was only one Austinite who raised sheep in order to sell the wool to buy edibles for the students and staff. Growing household food crops was not uncommon, and Mears invariably finds the silver lining, while not ignoring the darker side.

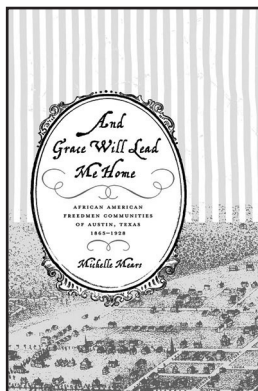
The commercial and political surroundings are explained in close detail, but her story of the communities, which were residential (rather than business-based as in other cities) focuses primarily on daily life. Her chapter on the essentials

of life in the fifteen communities looks at the work, food, clothing, medicine, housing, and—not least—safety.

Safety was a significant issue in the aftermath of enfranchisement. Freedmen ingenuously left farms and plantations to come to the city. Their optimism took a sharp downward turn when a vagrant ordinance passed in June 1865 stating that “all able-bodied Negroes found loitering or rambling” would be arrested, whipped, and returned to former masters or fined. It was in part a consequence of this law that the freedmen communities developed independent lifestyles, each differing from the next in origin and practice but with the same motivation to provide for their families.

Mears also addresses the culture and amenities of life for the freedmen, and here the schools and churches loom large. Austin was distinctive in having African American leaders and state legislators, and it also had the distinction of two colleges of higher learning, colleges that later merged and still welcome students today.

The Austin skyline has become crowded with high rises, more of the old neighborhoods are gentrified, and the creeks that served to divide the city are crossed easily now by bridges disguised as roads. Vestiges of the early freedmen communities remain; *And Grace Will Lead Us Home* allows us more than a glimpse of this other era.



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tures,” as Burlingame calls the cranes, which “For millions of years,/before the Platte was the Platte even,/have lived near the stars...their wingbeats toward love.” Again, in poem after poem, Burlingame renders obeisance the flora and fauna of his landscape, saying of the mountain laurel, “Let us kneel to it and praise its lunar/blossoms,” and of the sycamore, let us “give thanks to this/tree on the narrow shelf of this cataract world.” Of the birds that cross from Texas to Mexico, the poet notes that they are “elegant trespassers of man’s ignorance” as they “irreverently” fly “across the uniformed border.” Looking closely about him, the poet has observed not only the beauty, endurance, and “common glory” of simple sights and sounds but has comprehended the lessons inherent in the natural and human worlds that he inhabits, as did the writers he has admired and emulated, from Cabeza de Vaca to Henry David Thoreau. The result of Robert Burlingame’s attentive life as a poet is a book of which Texans can be ardently proud and to which readers in other places will surely respond with gratitude.

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