



Texas Poet Laureate: A Conversation with Larry D. Thomas

Paul Ruffin

Ruffin: In April 2007, you were appointed by the Texas Legislature as the 2008 Texas Poet Laureate. In a nutshell, how are Texas poets laureate selected?

Thomas: The nomination and selection process occurs in every even-numbered year, and the appointments are made in every odd-numbered year when the Texas Legislature is in session. In April 2007, the legislature appointed both the 2007 and 2008 honorees, each of whom serves a term of one year. Any Texas citizen may nominate up to three fellow Texas citizens who meet the necessary qualifications for the poet laureate, state musician, and state artist positions. (The state artist positions include the state two-dimensional artist and the state three-dimensional artist.) The nominations are made through the Texas Commission on the Arts, which convenes panels of experts in each discipline to screen and evaluate the nominees. The TCOA then selects ten finalists in each category and forwards their names to the Texas Poet Laureate, State Musician, and State Artist Committee for final evaluation and selection. This committee is comprised of private citizens who are appointed by the Texas governor, lieutenant governor, and speaker of the house. The committee then forwards one name in each of the four categories to the legislature for the appointment.

Ruffin: Do you know how many nominations were received by the Texas Commission on the Arts for the current positions?

Thomas: As I recall, approximately four hundred nominations were received.

Ruffin: You have won a number of other awards and prizes for your poetry. Of these many awards, which do you consider to be among the most significant?

Thomas: The first major poetry prize I was privileged to win was the 2001 *Texas Review* Poetry Prize sponsored by *Texas Review* Press of Sam Houston State University. I received the prize for my first book-length collection, *Amazing Grace*, which subsequently also received the

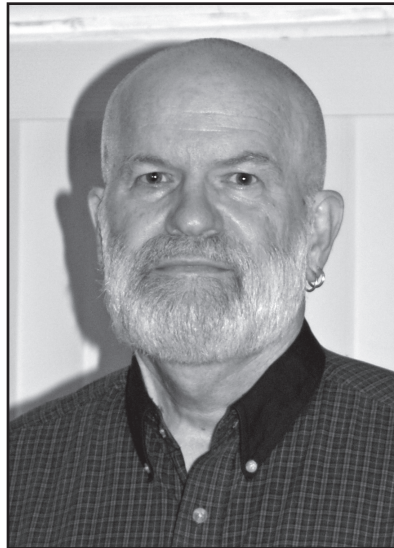
2003 Western Heritage Award sponsored by the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum. The Western Heritage Award is one of the most prestigious literary awards in the United States granted annually for a book of poems that celebrates the historical or contemporary American West. My third major award was the 2004 *Texas Review* Poetry Prize (*Texas Review* Press) for my collection, *Where Skulls Speak Wind*. That book also subsequently won the 2004 Violet Crown Book Award sponsored by the Writers' League of Texas and Barnes and Noble Booksellers, one of the top literary prizes in Texas granted annually for a book of poems published within a twelve-month period. Another significant literary honor I was privileged to receive was my selection by Barnes and Noble Booksellers as the June 2002 Houston Area Author of the Month.

Ruffin: Many of the poems in your published books are set in Texas, predominantly in far West Texas where you were born and reared. What is it about Texas that inspires so much of your poetry?

Thomas: Since the early 1990s, when I started to write many of the poems which ended up in *Amazing Grace*, I have been intrigued by the vast and variegated Texas landscape, especially its far Western reaches. Far West Texas is a stark and inhospitable place, yet a place of rare natural beauty. All four of my grandparents came to West Texas from Tennessee in covered wagons

in the late 1880s, and eked out their hardscrabble existence as tenant farmers. Three of them died at the age of eighty-five, and the fourth at seventy-nine, and I don't know that a single one of them ever went to a physician for an annual physical exam. I attribute their strength and endurance in no small part to their lives on that harsh, alien, yet starkly beautiful landscape. I readily acknowledge the importance of place to much of my poetry and honestly believe that the regional is merely a vehicle through which the universal may become manifest.

Ruffin: Much of your poetry is written in free verse, but you also write occasionally in form. Which poets have influenced the development of your poetic voice?



Larry D. Thomas

Thomas: That is an excellent question, but one which I am always somewhat reluctant to answer. So many wonderful poets have influenced my writing, many of whom I am sure to overlook when I answer this kind of question. I enjoy writing about the natural world, and the names of Ted Hughes, James Dickey, and Mary Oliver come immediately to mind when I think of “nature poets” whose poems I have long admired. I love the power and dispassionate clarity of Hughes when he writes about animals, especially raptors and other birds. He never romanticizes his creatures but captures them in language exactly as they are in the world, completely indifferent to human beings. I love Dickey’s remarkable verbal artistry, especially that of his early and mid-life work. And I love Oliver’s ease of existence alongside the creatures she writes about as if she herself were one of them; the way, through the natural world, she infuses her writing with spiritual yearning and fulfillment. I strongly admire the work of William Carlos Williams, especially his economy of language, and the percussive power of Sylvia Plath in her masterful use of slant rhyme, alliteration, and assonance. And I am also extremely fond of the work of Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, and Robert Lowell. These are but a few of the poets whose work I return to again and again.

Ruffin: What is your writing ritual, if you have one?

Thomas: Since my retirement from the adult criminal justice field in 1998, I have written poetry on a full-time basis, four to five days per week, from ten in the morning until two or three in the afternoon without a break for lunch. I work in what I call my “writing studio,” a small garage apartment located behind my house, which has no phone or doorbell. I sit on an antique oaken rocker which has no cushion, and I write in longhand with a fountain pen on a clipboard of discarded computer paper. For over thirty years, I have written to the music of Beethoven, which I play at a rather loud but not uncomfortable volume. I like the rhythm and power of his music, which I believe in some strange way influences my own writing. I play selections at random from his entire recorded oeuvre, and I have become quite familiar with his music over the years. I revise extensively as I compose my poetry and attempt to complete a good first draft, from which I think I can work, each writing day before I leave my studio. I revisit the poem several times for days after I complete the first draft, until I get it where I think it should be. I rarely have any idea of what I will write about on any given day and just sit until an image, etc., comes along around which I think I can build a poem.

Ruffin: You earned a B.A. degree in English literature from the University of Houston in 1970 and completed

a thirty-one year career in social service and adult criminal justice. How and when did you start writing poetry?

Thomas: I didn’t start writing poetry seriously until shortly after I earned my degree. At the time, I was serving a four-year tour of duty in the U.S. Navy, in Norfolk, Virginia, where I was assigned as a correctional counselor in the Navy prison. One early fall evening, just before sundown, while playing with my two-year-old daughter on a blanket I’d spread beneath a tree, I saw huge flocks of birds soaring to their roosting places beneath cumulus clouds radiant with the pinks and oranges of the setting sun. I was mysteriously compelled to get a pencil and tablet and quickly wrote: “a dusk sky studded / with cotton candy clouds / where myriads of birds / swift in flight / race a fleeting sun / toward infinity.” Granted, that certainly doesn’t hold up as good poetry, but I began writing seriously from that moment on and never stopped. During my thirty-one year career in social service and criminal justice, I wrote consistently on weekends and didn’t write full time until I retired in 1998.

Ruffin: You are widely published in national literary journals, have published seven collections of poems, and have two additional collections currently in press: *The Fraternity of Oblivion* (inspired by the outlaw biker counterculture), scheduled for release by Timberline Press in fall 2007, and *New and Selected Poems*, scheduled for release by Texas Christian University Press in spring 2008. If you were asked to identify a “pivotal moment” in your publication career, what would it be?

Thomas: Unquestionably, it would be the publication of *Amazing Grace* in 2001 by *Texas Review* Press. Prior to the publication of *Amazing Grace*, I had become a regular contributor of poetry to the *Texas Review*, which first published my poetry in 1989. After that, I became a regular contributor of poetry to a number of other distinguished literary journals, including *descant: Fort Worth’s Journal of Poetry and Fiction*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, *Sulphur River Literary Review*, *Poetry Depth Quarterly* (California), *Louisiana Literature*, *Concho River Review*, *Southwestern American Literature*, *RE:AL: The Journal of Liberal Arts*, and *Windhover*.

Ruffin: What advice, if any, would you give to aspiring poets?

Thomas: Read voraciously the literature of the past as well as the present; study the craft of poetry as if your very life depended upon it; polish your poetry as if you were a jeweler polishing a stone; and never, under any circumstances, stop believing in its worth. ✨