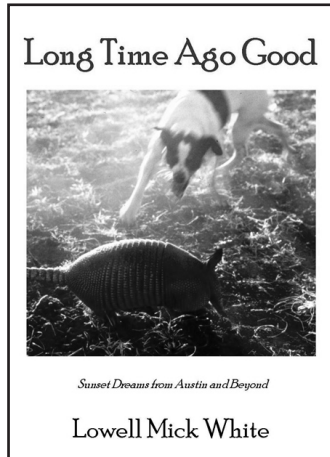


## Casting Magic-Hour Light on the State Capital

*Long Time Ago Good: Sunset Dreams from Austin and Beyond*  
by Lowell Mick White. (College Station: Slough Press, 2009.  
178 pp. \$14.95 paper)

As a backdrop for Texas fiction, the state's capital city has often been ignored by writers in favor of more populous—or popular—boomtowns, like Dallas and Houston. It seems that even Austin's own legendary scribes, including the late Bud Shrake, avoided the city as a setting. So, the burgeoning metropolis, in flux and rapidly growing, perhaps toward a hipster corporatism that may be painting over the elements of "old Austin," has seen large holes in its representation in literature. That trend, however, may be changing. Newer writers like Scott Blackwood and Lowell Mick White have made Austin a prominent part of their work—and both of them have published works named finalists for the Texas Institute of Letters' 2009 awards.



White has published two major works in the past six months, the first of which is his debut story collection, *Long Time Ago Good: Sunset Dreams from Austin and Beyond*. (The other book, *That Demon Life: A Novel* is also reviewed in this issue.) A former Austin-area taxi driver and IRS lackey, White held the Dobie-Paisano Fellowship in 1998 and honed his fiction-writing skills while working on a Ph.D. at Texas A&M, a degree he will complete in Spring 2010. *Long Time Ago Good* is a culmination of his work in short fiction, including stories previously featured in *Callaloo*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *Short Story*, *Mosaic Mind*, and *Southwestern American Literature*, as well as heretofore unpublished works.

The collection's title comes from a quote by Ernest Hemingway, which White includes as an epigraph: "Long time ago good. Now no good." One can apply this notion of broken idealism to any number of White's down-on-their-luck characters, ranging from a bureaucrat to a bookstore clerk, a wounded (metaphorically and literally) reporter to neighbors with more than just boundary issues. However, the Hemingway's words also fit Austin itself, a city with the following unofficial slogan: "This place used to be so great—before you got here" (which can be taken several ways, none of which bodes well for newcomers).

The story "Mexican Brick" deals with Austin's diversity and division while also hinting at the loss of the city's recent history/identity in the form of a vaporous female ghost that haunts protagonist John Garza and his dog, Soldier, and makes

him happy. But not everything that summer is happy. For example, readers will see racial tension that Garza brushes off as inconsequential:

"That building of yours is made of Mexican brick," Rand said to Garza one night. "I don't know if they brought those bricks up from Mexico or not—they probably made 'em in Elgin or someplace close—but we always call that red-brown brick Mexican brick, you know what I mean?"

"I guess," Garza said.

"It's weak brick," Rand said.... "I could probably get out my deer rifle and take one shot and knock your whole goddamn wall down."

"Please don't," Garza said quickly.

Like many stories in *Long Time Ago Good*, "Mexican Brick" features a climactic moment in which an animal dies. White seems to have a knack for putting animals in harm's way—sometimes brutally so—when human characters become irresponsible.

That motif of innocent-animal tragedy is never more poignant than in "Wildlife Rehabilitation," a story in which a lonely man's companion cat meanders into the strike zone of a reckless neighbor's injured bird of prey. The result is heartbreaking and violent, and retribution—though carefully considered—is quick.

"Reliction," another story with an animal in trouble, considers two different kinds of moments: those tortured times in which we reflect on missed opportunities in our lives and those tortured seconds of stark terror in which we recognize that all possible outcomes—exciting and awful alike—are products of the decisions we make right now.

"Five Things" returns readers to John Garza and to White's own life experience: the IRS. Garza tries to escape his bureaucratic existence through writing lists, an idea he gets from a book titled *Growth through Self-Criticism: A New Paradigm for Personal Development*. He decides to write a list of five things each day, but even the first list is difficult:

Garza thought for a moment. Five things suddenly seemed like a lot.... Garza read over his list and smiled. Jesus, he thought, maybe I am depressed. I'll put in number five tomorrow.

Like Garza and many other characters, Austin seems to be dealing with historical/cultural amnesia and traumatic stress as it searches for an identity. The collection is replete with the sensation of fading light, and White delivers an authentic vision of an Austin that used to be, if only a few years ago. The book's subtitle, *Sunset Dreams from Austin and Beyond*, is (sadly) poetic and fitting.

As good as this collection is, however, it has drawbacks. White's prose sometimes suffers from an inconsistent syntax that sometimes slips into verbosity, where fewer, better words would suffice. Take, for example, this line: "In its place she

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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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