

# Homeward Bound

## *Improbable Worlds: An Anthology of Texas and Louisiana Poets*

edited by Martha Serpas

Houston: Mutabilis Press, 2011.  
224 pp. \$18.95 paper.

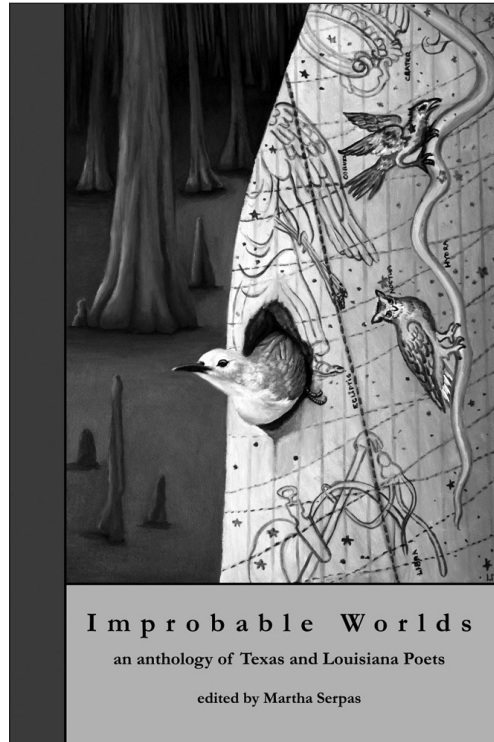
Reviewed by  
Jessica Martin

**I**mprobable Worlds: An Anthology of Texas and Louisiana Poets, edited by Martha Serpas, promises a spiritual window into the cultures of Texas and Louisiana. This book leads the reader on a cultural journey through the eyes of people from these two states, people who have strong Southern roots yet who maintain their own individual identities. Through the local language and flavor, the reader learns what it means to be not only from the South but to have roots in the Southern world, specifically in both of these states. Since it is the biggest state in the region, Texas is highlighted as the king of the South.

Spirituality is not forced on you in this book but is shown in glimpses. God shows up a few times, which is to be expected, but *Improbable Worlds* does not center on Christianity or any specific religion. Instead, it focuses on the specific cultures and various religions of people who reside here. It is refreshing to reverse the common prejudiced view of the South as strictly homogenous and be reminded of its diversity, especially that of Texas. Most of the major religions are included in this quest for spirituality, and there is even some science added to the mix. Here, less common Southern traditions are described:

And hung on the wall where we  
ate breakfast an autographed photo  
of Muhammad Ali. O father  
who worshipped him and with  
a clenched fist pretended to be:  
*Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee.*  
O you loved being Muslim then.  
Even when you drank whiskey.

Each major city has its own unique voice that can be easily discovered. The ability to embrace my hometown of Houston in a friendly “hi, y’all” while traveling to other cities and getting to know them was my favorite part of the book. Places are personified in a close hug with this modern take on the South:



Farms and small towns  
shrugged as we passed.  
The big cities didn't even notice.  
Suburbs noticed but pretended  
not to.  
Suburbs can be that way.

Strong themes of the sea appear throughout the poetry, which is to be expected because of the effect the Gulf of Mexico has had on these states' cultures. By the end of the book, the Gulf has become a welcome member of the reader's family. The Gulf is embraced and missed like an old friend who comes and goes as she pleases. The Gulf has a mind of its own and is not afraid to turn on you when the season

is right, but it remains a beloved friend nonetheless.

Some welcome humor lightens the general seriousness of the spiritual themes. I found myself laughing out loud at the silly, subtle, and often bold truths conveyed in this book. The author shows us a South that enjoys a good joke and does not mind poking fun at itself:

Because it is Houston the  
tight little blond talking on her  
cell phone  
while backing her SUV at high  
speed through the parking lot  
is a respected citizen  
and the gnarled, serpentine,  
stretched-out limbs of oaks  
above certain shady boulevards  
suggest that even ugly can be  
beautiful.  
Because it is Houston,  
a moist wind blowing from the  
south at dawn  
carries the faint, petrochemical  
bouquet

In the introduction, the reader is advised to read a few poems each night before bedtime. This is ideal. This book needs to be savored and inhaled slowly in a calm space. Each poet has something separate and beautiful to say about where home is and what it means to him or her. The poets paint empathetic pictures of what their homelands entail. They shine in their diversity and what they have taken from their homeland. If you're already from the South, this anthology will welcome you home, but if you're not, this book invites you to consider the South a home away from home. I highly recommend *Improbable Worlds* for anyone from the region or for anyone who has ever been captivated by its mysteriousness.★

**Jessica Martin** graduated from Texas State University-San Marcos with a dual degree in psychology and creative writing in December 2009. She is currently pursuing an MFA in poetry from Texas State University. She is a native Texan who was born in Houston.