

The Complexity of Simple Poetry

Feathering Deep

by David M. Parsons

Huntsville: Texas Review Press, 2011.
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Reviewed by
Colin Pope

It's a sad truth that Texas poetry is often overlooked by the national arts community. Something about the rusticity, directness, and foreignness of the work seems off-putting to outsiders, forcing them to reconsider their notions of what constitutes "good poetry." However, the Texas Poet Laureate Committee has, in recent years, become known for its unerringly precise selections of our state's ambassador of the art. Their most recent selection of David Parsons continues this trend, and his subsequent volume, *Feathering Deep*, makes the case both for his appointment and for the relevance of Texas poetry.

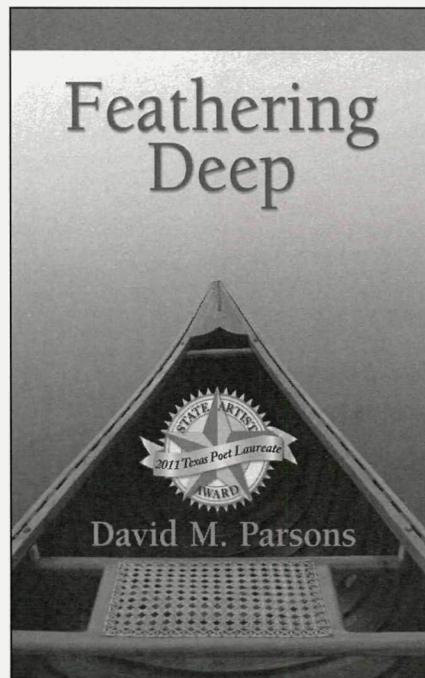
Parsons weaves his personal life into the wild and checkered background of the state by using the varied landscape, history, and folklore that has become so widely known. In "Texian," for example, Parsons begins by recounting how the state got its now-eponymous symbol:

Colonel Juan Alamonte, Santa
Anna's aide, was the first
To call his attention to the herald
ing of two golden stars
Floating in the familiar field of
green, white and red
Over that unlikely mission fort
Alamo, small stars
That foreshadowed the larger
single searing symbol
Emblazoning our ultimate flag of
Texas independence

The poem ruminates on the Texians' history while the narrator stands in the shadow of the present-day capitol. The recollections and insights of this voice are made obvious by its sense of pride, but this is what gives the poem so much power. Rarely does a writer attempt such bald-faced patriotism. It's fitting when, later in the piece, Parsons quotes

Whitman as stating "They were the glory/Of the race of rangers, matchless/With a horse, a rifle, a song, a supper."

In contrast to this loyalist fervor, Parsons presents the reader with moments of extraordinary insight into the difficult terrain of multiculturalism. On topics like war, Native American rights, and integration, the poet finds a way to speak plainly and honestly about his experiences in perhaps the most



diverse state in America. In "Integration 1964," the narrator's uncertainty about the racial context in which he's placed becomes evident:

When James Brown's band
or most any Motown Group,
hits one of those ecstatically high
shrilling passionate sax notes,
sweaty
Phil, tie loose, is swimming *The
Gator*
on the gritty dance floor at
Charlie's
Playhouse in after hours' deep
East Austin,
when it was the "bad part of
town"
and we were like giddy young
tourists.

and I can taste wee-hour fried
chicken
from nearby Ernie's Chicken
Shack
and recall how we were always
too high
to worry about the rumor of
sleepy cooks
spitting into our honky customers'
gravy
& mash potatoes, we were flying
our lives
through the sixties and we didn't
have a clue
that we were like the Ugly
Americans.

There's a history here that many Texans know, but to non-natives there's a particular liveliness in this passage that is often associated with other cities. Poems like this give weight to their places by skipping contextual cues and providing readers inside information; certainly, with such precise detail and earnest remembrance, Parsons opens the door for more poems about Austin's undocumented history.

While Texas affords the poet a vast landscape, the art of writing remains Parsons' central focus. Many of the pieces in this collection are about writing itself. Parsons understands poetry's breadth and usage, and he often makes striking comparisons, as in "Kites":

Death is such an awesome
experience that it takes
your breath totally away.

I wish for this poem
to be the antithesis, under
stated, even modest

The plainness of the language has an almost unsettling quality. The underscored beauty of Parsons' writing seems to match the very ideals for which the state is known: passion, pride, and strength through solitude. There is a complexity to this collection that arises from its natural simplicity, much like the region it describes. And like Texas, the poems carry an air of mystery, as in "Lake Lady Dancing on

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staidness of spirit to withstand hard, hot Plains winds,” her main character doubts if she has those qualities. Do you? ★

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an opportunity to discuss the ways blacks and Tejanos resisted violence. Smallwood, Moneyhon, Kosary, and Tijerna mention resistance, but their discussion is not extensive. Was black and Tejano armed resistance, flight, or protest to the federal government common? Were certain regions more prone to resistance than others? A section on resistance to terrorist violence would have provided the book some balance.

When taken as a whole, the compilation provides a nuanced understanding of various parties involved in the Reconstruction drama. Although spared from large campaigns during the Civil War, Texans waged bloody battles against the federal government during the War of Reconstruction and were ultimately successful. Texans’ fight continued until 1874, when conservatives reclaimed the state legislature and continued the oppression of blacks well into the 20th century. Despite Texas’ unique characteristics, Howell’s compilation provides a framework applicable to future studies of Reconstruction in other Southern states.★

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are only real people who battle real problems and injuries, both spiritual and physical. For any fan of books with the smell of blood on them, *Men in the Making* will make a welcome addition. ★

William Jensen is a writer and teacher. He lives in central Texas.

the Hill”:

Above the south shores of Lake
Travis
she moves in the dawn that is
breaking
over the railings of the house
that clings
to the ancient limestone cliffs—
she is the deep
and complex aroma of a dark, rich
coffee held
in both hands against the gusts of
wind that have carried
a chill across the water, a body so
deep and blue
that it captures all the light
intense morning sun...

Clearly poetry is one of the driving forces in Parsons’ life. He is one of those rare poets with the ability to apply his art to anything he desires. Fortunately, for all of us, his artistic gaze is pointed at Texas. ★

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ordinary accomplishments and disappointments, the death of children, neighbors, relatives coexisting with the promise that nothing would change.”

Furman has said in interviews that she found similar diaries in the attic of her own house. Like Furman, Dinah wonders about this woman whose “ephemeral activities occupied every minute of her life.” Dinah, who never finds out why her mother left, longs for a connection to “the mother who stayed.” Regretting not having had children, Dinah tries to nurture Amber, an artist, but her good intentions become interference, and the results are disastrous.

Mother-daughter relationships remain Furman’s most obvious theme, but time is her real subject. Besides the diary entries, historical reports and research discoveries, *The Mother Who Stayed* ends with Dinah uncovering the remains of Mary Ann’s house. Like an archaeologist, Dinah finds broken steps, a stone wall, an old brick marked *Troy*, and “a blue canning jar broken and half-buried in the earth floor.” Gradually, the distance between the narrator and reader expands, and time collapses until we see a picture of both women simultaneously: the one for whom nothing is left “but the diaries and the witness they bear” and the one left “standing alone at the edge of a ruin.” ★

Nan Cuba is the co-editor of *Art at our Doorstep: San Antonio Writers and Artists* (Trinity University Press, 2008) and has published work in *Quarterly West*, *Columbia*, and *Harvard Review*. Her novel, *Body and Bread*, is forthcoming from Engine Books. She is the founder and executive director emeritus of the nonprofit literary center, Gemini Ink (www.geminiink.org), and an associate professor of English at Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio.

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