

Concho River Review — Fall 2012

FEATHERING DEEP

by *David Parsons*

(*Texas Review Press, 2011. 56pages. \$12.95. ISBN 978-1-933896-79-3*)

A review by *Janet McCann*

F *eathering Deep*, the newest collection by 2011 Texas Poet

Laureate Dave Parsons, shares a Texas and a Western life that are a joy to experience. This is not to say that the poems are merely pleasant—they are sometimes critical or elegiac. Sometimes the highly visual and tactile world they represent no longer exists. But their message about the role of poetry as discovery, even as redemption, is clear and consoling.

It is instructive to read a poet's books sequentially and see how it changes as he or she ages; the poems may become more formal or less, more precise or less, more optimistic or less. Yet Parsons's work seems to channel the same sort of energy from his earliest book. This collection has some powerful metapoetry in it, poems about the meditations of others looking at the same phenomena of aging in different times, and they are rich with echoes. The past—personal, historical, and literary—inhabits the present of these poems. Even the geography seems to contain ghosts of its former self We are here, and yet we are all the places we have ever been. Time and experience layer sentience, and the poet seems to say, like Tennyson's Ulysses, "I am a part of all that I have met"; and like the old explorer, he is still moving on to new things.

The poems are full of people—past poets and artists, Walt Whitman, of course, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, Gustav Courbet, Philip Larkin, and many others. They are rich with Texas history, including Native American lore, and personal experiences—the Marines, sixties music. Boy Scouts, romance, the deaths of old friends. The speaker inhabits the work as a poet, so that the reader can visualize him both living his life and thinking about it. The cool distance between observer and object, seen in much contemporary poetry, is not present. The lines are warm and vibrant with life. The style is a relaxed free verse that creates its own music through sound-echoes and rising and falling rhythms. Lines tend to be long and flexible. The sense of personality is strong.

This is muscular poetry. Discovery does not just happen; it demands full and energetic seeking. The title and the poem by the same name illustrate the task of moving toward epiphany as a canoe trip at midnight. The poem cites poet Edward Hirsch, who in an essay takes Lorca's idea of the *duende* as his starting point, the *duende* being the power and inspiration behind *poesis*. "The *duende* is a force not a labor, a struggle not a thought," Lorca said. The canoe and the rower's effort carry the craft in

upon its own silence
the way an idea drifts
into the grey divide
where we find ourselves
in that sacred state—easing
quietly into the dark *duende*
to unconscious understanding
a lone canoe at midnight—
blades paddling deep—smoothly
and deftly feathering
that largest of bodies

The title poem serves as a poetics for the rest, which is much more textured, presenting a series of explorations of exterior and interior landscapes that bring to life a focused yet wide-ranging field of vision, with creativity always at its center.

Scenes of Texas landscapes and customs interweave with philosophical reflections and memories of other places, often in poems that are serious and witty at once. "Kites" looks at the meaning of poetry in the face of death, and begins

Death is such an awesome
Experience that it takes
Your breath totally away

The reader may think: where could the poem go after that? It goes lots of places, into winds and kite-flyings, aspiration, inspiration, the flight of a poem. "Evening after Eating Rainbows (Caught on Mystic Lake)" approaches the subject of creativity differently, through allusions and quotations linked with visual experience:

Rimbaud wrote that the battle of the spirit
is as terrible as any armed conflict
and Kierkegaard said you cannot separate
the slimy from the golden fish

(without killing the fish)—
in a polluted river running
through stretches of factories
a beautiful fish may sometimes
be found sparkling like an eye—

What adds to the pleasure of these poems is that they can be appreciated differently by different readers. Their surface is richly textured, and there are levels of meaning beneath it—but the reader need not access all their implications to enjoy them. They can also be experienced differently when read aloud and on the page. The poems have a generosity to them. Listening or reading, we weave our own experiences on his, go on both his journey and our own at the same time. And we hope to find our own point of arrival similar to his: after years spent in energetically seeking the truth, it finds you.

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