

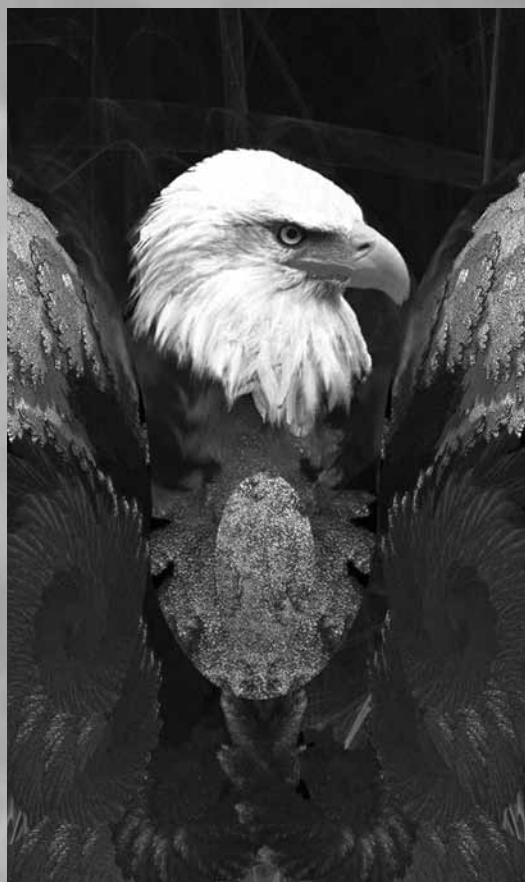
\$3.00

VOL. 10. NO. 2

SPRING-SUMMER 2010

CROSSTIMBERS

A MULTICULTURAL, INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL



THE UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND ARTS OF OKLAHOMA

C H I C K A S H A

Dad's Sled

Spare Parts by Ken Hada

(Norman: Mongrel Empire Press, 2010)

A REVIEW BY RACHEL C. JACKSON

In his latest book Ken Hada puts poetry to good use. His collection of poems presents highly regional, powerfully reflective narratives in short verse, each of which pound and peel away the chaff to get at the grain of lessons learned through the poet's experience and observation. Clearly autobiographical, the poems read as a sort of eco-memoir comprised of the stories of provocative moments enlivened in the poet's memory by the intersection of time and place. A lived landscape emerges from Hada's poetry, inhabited by a spirit of deep and sometimes dark appreciation for natural reality. The collection offers 71 poems biographically themed and arranged in a casual, organic manner that gives way in certain spots to a practical pattern and yet remains largely still wild. Primary among these are poems about work, family, love, nature, place, and the complex connections between them.

In the poem from which the title is taken, "Dad's Sled," Hada crafts a gentle tribute to his father's work and wisdom that is also an exquisite explanation of the ethic that imbued the moral example he set for his young son. The poem captures a scene in which Hada watches his dad construct a sled in mid-winter so that his boys can play in the snow on a nearby hill. The "marvel" for the poet is his father's ability to "make happiness/ out of things leftover, used/ and otherwise abandoned." This point of admiration becomes the spare-part heuristic with which Hada constructs his own poetry, taking disparate experiences and memories and making them work for good. From the very beginning, Hada grounds his poetry in the soil of his life, and his keen sense of placement orients the reader to the perspective Hada constructs throughout the book.

Hada's youth in rural Oklahoma and Arkansas provides a poetic foundation for the relationship with nature that arises again and again in the text. A holiday hunting excursion provides the rite-of-passage metaphor present in "New Year's Eve," a poem that exposes the vulnerability of young boys in the wilderness following their hounds through the dark wintery woods. Shivering and empty-handed, they return to their father's bonfire and warm reassurance. Hada balances the boys' youthful, blind urge to succeed in their chase with the humility they learn by failing.

From here the poems journey through the explorations of adolescence to the loss of a beloved grandfather. In two poems entitled "Grandpa Elmer" and "That Evening," Hada charts out lessons learned in mortality and immortality. At his grandfather's funeral, a pocket watch Hada inherits becomes a signpost that implores paradoxically from across the years that life is not endless and yet time marches on. Later in the evening, sitting at his grandmother's home, Hada confronts the profound change in family life that the loss of his grandfather brings, and the unending though eventually quieted grief that makes up the difference.

The collection continues to move as though chronological but loosely so. The driving energy of the poetry becomes increasingly the growing consciousness of the poet as he progresses through adulthood. "When I was a Texan," the longest poem in the book, catalogs the basic back-and-forth moves across the Red River

He built it with used two by fours
scrap metal for runners.
He always saved spare parts

and cast-off material.
We might use that someday
he would say - and sure enough,

one day when ice and snow came,
the Old Bailey Hill beckoned.
I stood beside him

in the cold basement as he framed
a sled from a design
tucked away in his memory.

I helped by holding the wood
in place as he nailed it tight,
then tacked on the runners.

We rode that sled every day
the cold lasted, screaming in delight
flying downhill in home-made ecstasy.

But today I remember the making
of the sled. It is in building
that his genius lay, and how I marvel

at his ability to make happiness
out of things left over, used
and otherwise abandoned.

KEN HADA



Hada has made in his life and the tenuous relationship the poet has developed with Texas as a result. In this poem, Texas teaches the poet about class and culture, marriage and divorce, fatherhood and economic struggle, perpetual motion and peace. Hada structures the poem so as to capture the uneven rhythm of his life in the midst of these lessons, a cadence measured by the unforeseeable, incremental shifts from expectant idealism to informed reality. Just as the reader adapts to life as the game Hada describes, the field and players change. The poem ends with the poet living and working in the chaos of the Dallas metroplex, where all the rules seem set against him from the outset.

Yet prevalent in *Spare Parts* is the feeling of strength and satisfaction that arise from thorough living and making the most of the barest essentials. For instance, "Front Porch People" chronicles an evening of communal merriment made possible by sweet tea, guitars, and a southern breeze. Hada speaks of the moment in meta-cultural terms, his voice saturated in an admiration that sees beyond the barefooted and primitive appearance to the transcendent joy of the scene.

Similar in use of irony, in "Symphony in Cordell" Hada arrives ultimately at an unlikely comparison of a Haydn symphony to the "rolling red prairies" outside of the western Oklahoma town. The three elemental vignettes with which Hada begins the poem, characterize the place first through a brief explanation of the town's layout, the two centers of which are the town square and the Dollar General, and then through a psychological exploration of a representative sampling of the townspeople. Like Haydn's symphony, Hada surmises that it may seem "odd at first," but that "One should not be so quick/ to make assumptions about Oklahoma." For Hada, simplicity is a sophisticated aesthetic and a necessary prerequisite for beauty so powerful it resides at the edges of perception.

The poetry in *Spare Parts* reveals the ethic of conservation that runs deep in both the poet's life and in the landscape presented in the book. Hada manages to sustain the power of his words through to the end by choosing the steady pace over the fevered pitch, the long haul over the short race, subtlety and silence over the obvious and verbose. The poems invite the reader to consider what might otherwise be discarded, to hold on to what is useful, and to let everything else go. □

House Of Grant

BY ALAN R. PROCTOR

The grinning faces of my great uncle Wilbur and great aunt Helen, hands linked in fondness, posed chiaroscuro against a new and polished 60s Chevy. In the background, a gabled Victorian homestead looked recently landscaped. "They live alone, never had children," my father said. "Haven't seen them in years. They'd probably love a visit." His thumbnail pried under the photo album's plastic sleeve as we sat on his sensible, scotch-guarded couch. "Three generations in that house. On the phone, Wilbur told me they don't use the front door anymore. You'll need to go around back under the porch."

"Will they know who I am?"

"Sure. And when they get past that beard, you might learn a thing or two about the Grant clan." He slapped me on the shoulder. "Blood is thicker than water, son."

My father made lots of pronouncements like that when I was growing up: "Find a penny, pick it up and all the day you'll have good luck"; and then, "find a penny, let it lie and all around you bad luck will fly." I've always picked up stray pennies from streets and parking lots. I'm a chip off the old block and, like Dad, an only child.

Over Budweiser, I had shared with Patty what I knew of my relatives' notorious marriage. "Wilbur and Helen got hitched when they were in their 50s," I said. "First marriage for both of them. He forgot it was his wedding day. The best man found him in the Queens public library. After the wedding, Wilbur told Helen to go home, get some rest and meet him next morning on the corner of 168th and Jamaica Avenue. Swear to God—" I tossed back my beer's last suds—"I'm not making this up. Helen told my mother it took six months to consummate the marriage. Sex gave Wilbur an upset stomach."

"Sounds like a required visit to the family eccentrics." Patty stroked my cheek.

Ragged privet – tall as our mastiff, Brutus, on her hind legs – bordered Wilbur and Helen's ramshackle house and grounds that occupied a half block. It was the perfect ghost McMansion: two rheumatic chimneys, roof shingles windswept like a badly scaled porgy. The front porch portico, undoubtedly grand in its day, slumped; its dejected banister leaned into space. Shuttered, eight-foot windows framed a front door of weathered plywood that was rimmed with rust-weeping nails. On the opposite side of the street, TV antennas and satellite dishes crowded the tops of flat-roofed, three-story brick apartments.

I'm a black belt in judo and can take care of myself in a scuffle, but I felt exposed on the quiet, late-October sidewalk.

Generations of weeds, splendorous in their tangle, stopped me from short-cutting through the yard. I followed the cracked walk along the threadbare hedge, rounded the corner along their side yard and turned onto an even gloomier street at the back of the house. The rear gate lagged open, its leading corner buried in silt. Did the rusting water pump in the weeds still work? I was stalling. Three scruffy cats ate in ravenous jerks from a shallow cookie tin at the top of the stairs.

Behind me, a car screeched around the corner and slowed. "*¡Ola, hombre! ¡Están locos allá!*" A black-haired man pushed his face and arm through the open window—"¡*Rocas a los locos!*"—and broke into wild, falsetto laughter. His rock thumped against the dry boards and bounced into the hedge. The car fish-tailed up the street, tires squealing.

A large calico cat glided between my calves and headed down concrete steps under the hood of the back porch; she vanished like fabric being yanked into the shadows. I glanced up at the looming house, descended into a dank bunker and rapped. The chain latch jerked taut. In the crack's chevron, I labored against a disbelieving voice. "Who? Who is it?"