Border Poems

Waiting for an Etcher
by Chip Dameron

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Reviewed by
Dorothy Lawrenson

Writers have frequently observed that foreign travel teaches a paradoxical truth. In the words of G. K. Chesterton, “The whole object of travel is not to set foot on foreign land; it is at last to set foot on one’s own country as a foreign land.” Ultimately the traveler learns not just to see his home with new eyes, but also to understand himself better as well.

This must be a familiar lesson to a poet as well-traveled as Chip Dameron, whose collection Waiting for an Etcher seems to play out this realization. “Across the river is another version of your life,” begins the first poem (“Across”), immediately drawing attention to the proximity of Dameron’s Brownsville home to Matamoros, Mexico—but it also hints at the seductive and adventurous “other life” that hypothetically exists for the reader who decides to cross the river, board a plane, or book passage on an ocean liner. In this new, alternative life:

A man drinking coffee in a corner café
has been waiting, still waits,
for you
to open the door and say
what you
have often felt the need to
say,
however halting and inexact
it may be.

Dameron is keenly aware of the stark contrast between the Texan and Mexican side of the border: “El Calaboz: Fences and Neighbors,” a poem concerning the construction of the border fence, riffs on Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall.” Here, as in other poems, the free flight of birds is contrasted with the divisive behavior of humans:

Early morning, small birds cross
the river from mesquite to mesquite,
singing the day awake. A hawk
drops to the top rail and commands
silence across this failed dichotomy.

Most of the other poems in the collection concern the experience of travel along the Texas border and within the U.S. and Europe. Themes of grief and loss, however, are also explored, but with the poet’s memories of family and friends grounded in specific places.

His taut treatment of the natural, the human, and the political within his local environment is where Dameron’s short poems are at their most effective. When he starts to roam further abroad he sometimes loses this sense of restraint as his poems become travelogues of various countries and cities. The aptly titled “Rambling Stories,” for example, takes place in Ireland, Greece, Turkey, and Mexico in a little over thirty lines. Far more memorable are the haiku-like poems in the section “Postcards.” Here, in its entirety, is “In Sligo”:

I’ve come here to remember Yeats
and spotted a poem on the Garavogue
a mute swan
carving blue sounds.

This poem, in asserting the importance of direct observation rather than literary allusion, highlights another potential pitfall for the tourist of famous and especially of literary cities; here, Dameron must first acknowledge before he can put to one side the shade of Yeats. Similarly, he name-drops Joyce in Dublin, Brunelleschi in Florence, and Hitler in Munich. In Paris (“Giacometti Park”), he treads a fine line between irony—watching “youths / pretending to play boules”—and cliché, as he confesses to being “absorbed by the city / of lights, still in love.”

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One can only admire Dameron’s aspiration to forge original poetry from such iconic locations. Conversely, and somewhat more convincingly, certain poems describe places seen for the first time, but rendered familiar through skillful observation of specific details. “Hot Night Tale in Little Rock” is one such poem, recounting how the narrator and his companions decided to abscond from a conference to go to the Texas League ball game taking place across the street, “and cheered on the home team // as if we knew the shortstop’s / shortcomings, the pitcher’s best / pitch […]” Although the city is not his own, he feels at home at the ballgame because he identifies so strongly with its familiar narrative:

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In seeking to navigate this emotional landscape, Dameron returns to his opening impetus to write—in the version of life “across the river.” But like a traveler returning from abroad, his literal, literary, and emotional journeys have given him new eyes to see this unfamiliar and yet familiar country.

Dorothea Lawrence is a graduate student at Texas State University.

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NFL Hall of Fame along with teammate (Johnny Unitas). He was a quarterback for A&M, and did go to war. As a coach, and with no prompting from anyone, he demanded simple human decency (often, no more than a hot meal) for players with last names such as Gonzales, Mendoza, and Olivas.

There is another element to this fine book: a peek at time long passed, when the football coach could enforce a curfew more rigorous than his own, and when star running backs could be humbled by multiple swats from the head coach’s “Board of Education” for non-football infractions (such as mouthing off to a teacher), and when a local sportswriter might refer to the Bowie Bears as the “Bruins,” just to mix it up. (Ray Sanchez’s coverage of the Bears, excerpted generously by Gaines Baty, is a marvel of 1950s journalistic patois.) That era is gone, even today, Odessa residents will tell you that the Permian Panthers become life and death only when oil drops below thirty dollars a barrel and the town’s folk need something to hang onto.

Burl Baty died at the age of thirty, and that is a shame. But with his name on the Bowie High football stadium (along with that of Jerry Simmang, an assistant coach who died in the same accident), his legacy is secure. This book adds to the legend.

James Wright is Houston regional editor for Texas Books in Review. He teaches composition and literature at Houston Community College.