

Border Poems

Waiting for an Etcher

by Chip Dameron

Beaumont: Lamar University Press, 2015.
112pp. \$15.00 cloth.

Reviewed by
Dorothy Lawrenson

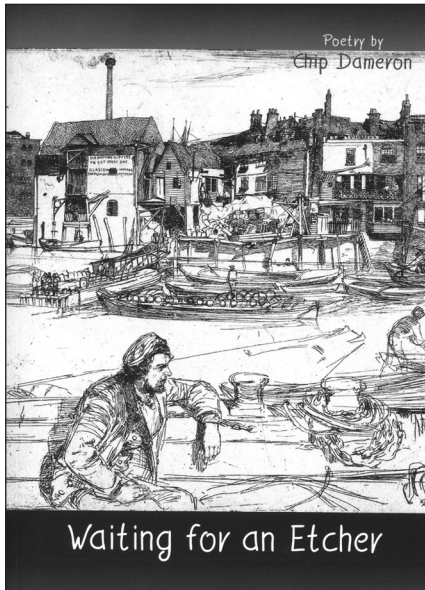
Writers have frequently observed that foreign travel teaches a paradoxical truth. In the words of G. K. Chesterton, “The whole object of travel is not to set foot on foreign land; it is at last to set foot on one’s own country as a foreign land.” Ultimately the traveler learns not just to see his home 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 sides 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 short-stop’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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traditional subject that, like the sands along the Rio Grande where Frank Jones was killed in an 1893 gunfight, is also changing with the currents of time.★

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the story we've known
by heart since we were kids,

sitting in the stands with our
dads,
damp with humid hope, will-
ing
for the game to go on as long
as it took to come to the right
ending.

"Visit to Wolf House," describes a trip to see the "glorious ruin" of Jack London's California mansion. The first half of the poem sets the scene—the overgrown pool, the "stones stacked / around imagined rooms"—but the narrator soon realizes that "the real story of the walk" is the woman he sees coming down the hill with her family, "grinning in the sunlight," determined to finish the journey to the house with the aid of her walking stick, "her palsy no bar / to her joy and the day of her joy."

It is this attention to "the real story"—the human story, set against which most "travel" poetry becomes so much background scenery—that draws Dameron's work ultimately towards richer explorations of loss and grief. In "Aftershock," he inhabits "the gorgeous landscape / of the heart," where "there is no sound / that can astonish like that absent / echo." In this landscape,

I know as much as I can
ever know, the view almost
familiar,
but who can put a finger on
the thing
that changes everything [...]?

being victimized by his own body, the purported acrimonious relationship between Richard and the Astros shows up from time to time in his account until the very end.

J.R. Richard pitched his last professional game "for the Daytona Beach Astros in rookie ball in 1983." The Houston Astros released Richard in the spring of 1984. Understandably unmoored in the years following his stroke, Richard writes with stalwart frankness of his refusal "to acknowledge what the stroke had done to [him]" as he labored through year after year of modestly effective rehabilitation assignments; of anger and disappointment at being "cheated out of [his] baseball career"; of profound depression; of chronic unemployment; of the desperation that led to several months of homelessness in the mid-1990s. Eventually, with the help of friends and former colleagues, an MLB assistance fund, his current wife Lula, and his rekindled religious faith, Richard surmounted his problems and forged a stouthearted post-baseball identity for himself. And after being inducted into the Astros Walk of Fame in 2012, Richard's feelings toward the Astros have softened to the point where he even attends the occasional game at Minute Maid Park.★

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In seeking to navigate this emotional landscape, Dameron returns to his opening impetus to write 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.★

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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 players' parents', 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 where we might think it isn't: 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 townsfolk need *something* to hang onto.

Buryl 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.★

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