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*What My Father Believed* by Robert Wrigley

Martha Elizabeth

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What My Father Believed
Robert Wrigley
$11.95; paper.
Reviewed by Martha Elizabeth

In his fifth book, *What My Father Believed*, Robert Wrigley continues to write poems of reckoning and recognition, but within a more focused range of subject matter. The book contains more straightforward “personal” narrative than his previous full collection, *Moon in a Mason Jar*, which had many persona poems and episodes in the not-quite-real, such as “Moonlight: Chickens on the Road” or “The Glow.” The new book emphasizes personal history, the social/political context often complicating the narrator’s decisions and relationships. The stories he tells are rich with language. Wrigley’s voice is natural as an actor’s—more music, more control than the ordinary, but not enough to distract from the words. Craft and content balance.

Wrigley has a strong and varied sense of structure. The poems are full of surreptitious form. The most formal-sounding or arranged-looking poem might require a scavenger hunt for pattern, while a poem that is downright conversational might be a solid chunk of quatrains. Of the thirty-three poems, about ten are near-rhymed quatrains or couplets, though not in four- or two-line stanzas. The ten poems that are arranged in stanzas of equal length (varying between six and 36 lines) seldom have a recognizable rhyme-pattern, though a pattern may seem about to suggest itself any moment, or the lines may be predominantly iambic—but the same is true of the rest of the poems. In other words, form is part of the poet’s repertoire, not an end in itself.

The book is dedicated “for my father & for my children,” and many of the poems are written from the perspective of the center generation, facing both directions—looking back at himself
through watching his son, beginning to arrive at his father. For example, in “Night Rising,” the speaker, camping with his son, has to get up in the dark to urinate:

Before I awakened, at the dim edge of urgency,
I dreamed my own father groaning in the night,
easing from the door of the station wagon
we slept in, the cool heft of night air
hitting me, the dome light momentarily on
then off, on again, then off for good.

Now groggy with sleep, I can't recall
what is memory and what is dream.
If such a night ever happened—the minute
of solitary half-sleep, darkness tattooed
with the dome light's blue afterimages—
I can't say. Nor can I say for sure when I finish
which way I've come from the tent.

Wrigley captures the precise and dreamy sequence, as he follows the thought so far he literally becomes lost—and we become aware of his disorientation at the same rate he does.

Some of the poems are deeply layered. One that combines individual experience with political awareness is “For the Last Summer.” The poem clearly echoes “Fern Hill,” by Dylan Thomas. Wrigley's poem is not as long or as lush, but it moves with the same logic, lots of singing and light and wonder in the commonplace—the lost world described with exaggerated believeable lyricism. However, instead of a rural retreat, the setting is urban; instead of a boy running innocently wild on a farm, a young man drives around with his girl (probably just before being drafted);
and war, not time, is the force behind change.

The young man in Wrigley’s poem has much less richness around him, but he doesn’t know that. What’s there is intensified by his age and by knowledge of the war, which, like the inevitabilities of time, is somewhere else. The present seems magnified. Even the dust of the foundry town is beautiful, even his mundane job at a gas station seems full of grace.

Wrigley writes about his nameless young man from the outside—he could be anyone, himself or a generation. Thomas suggests a fairytale (“And once below a time . . .”); Wrigley invokes the all-American-boy mythology: Fourth of July, baseball, an everyday sort of guy in the car with his girl, music on the radio.

The effect is ironic, doubly so with the weight of Thomas’ poem behind it for contrast. The poem insists that there’s more to grieve than youth’s passing. In “Fern Hill,” the speaker knows already that the magic is gone, but the memory remains a gift. We don’t know what will happen to the young man in the middle of “the only hours of his life he ever knew / as his own.” The war isn’t named, and at one level doesn’t need to be, as it’s a repeating theme. However, from the context of the book, the war is most likely Vietnam, and the young man’s impending disillusionment mirrors the nation’s.

Overall, the book would work better divided into sections, probably three. The first eleven poems, the last of which is the title poem, are all permutations on son/father, coming-of-age in a troubled time; with the title poem there’s a sense of closure—the poet now finds himself arguing with his students the same way his father once argued with him. But there’s no pause before more poems, and, in spite of their fine quality, the book seems to drift a while. There are epiphanic moments in landscape, family
stories, a graceful love poem. "The Big Dipper" and "Body and Soul" work less well, possibly because the father/son block of poems earlier seems so strong in comparison. "The Big Dipper" feels too small, lacking the turn to knowledge we usually see in Wrigley's best work. "Body and Soul" seems talky, relying on echoes from earlier poems—the boy's sense of aloneness from "American Manhood" and the father's record collection in "Sinatra." Even so, there are moments that make the poems worth reading, for example, from "Body and Soul": "From dozens of great, cloth-covered hooks / hung an orchestra of silence, / saxophones of every pitch and size . . ."

About two-thirds of the way through, the book picks up momentum again: several consecutive poems of the imagined other or the self made imaginary, the almost magical stance Wrigley does so well. For example, "Night Calls" contains five titled sections about an unnamed "he," each encapsulating the feel of a different stage of his life, united by his response to night sounds. Earlier subject matter eases back in—boyhood-manhood, politically-tinged stories. "Shrapnel" feels a little self-conscious, and—one of those unaccountable quirks of taste—I don't like "Camping," perhaps because it seems too much like well-written exposition; however, it sets up the excellent last poem so well that I can't quibble too much.

"The Wishing Tree" does all a final poem should do, touching back on earlier themes and finishing with an opening to larger awarenesss. The speaker is camping with his son, enjoying the landscape and a solitary moment looking through the pictures and stories in his son's notebook, including "an old Indian man who found a tree for wishes." After the stanza break, the mood changes. "And now I wish I had stopped looking . . . / wish I'd
risen and wrestled on my waders." While his son is down at the river with the trout he's caught, the speaker discovers a disturbing picture, rockets and destruction "everywhere / but a white sphere at peace, a circle at the bottom of the page / in which two people played catch," not smiling, "as though everything / depended on them, everything— / and in the picture, it did, it did." The wishing tree parallels the Tree of Knowledge. Had he joined his son at the river, he would have seen the boy "hold up a lunker trout, gingerly, by the jaw— / the way I'd taught him"; instead, he has the pain of fuller understanding.

What My Father Believed is a book worth returning to time and again. What I like best is how longing pervades the poems, the longing we all feel throughout our lives but do not often admit or examine. Wrigley brings a sympathetic tone to every subject, himself or the imagined—not dispassionate, not empathic, but sympathetic—just enough distance to understand as well as feel.