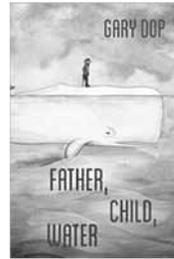


Beyond Coincidence

By Robert Stewart

Book Review:

Father, Child, Water, by Gary Dop,
Red Hen Press, 2015.



Gary Dop uses words sparingly, but his poems are not cryptic, little word puzzles; they give us all the story needed yet whisk readers into complex relationships with events and images, as in a particularly surprising poem from the opening section, “Bin Laden’s Rug.” Most poets know that coincidence (the speaker owns the exact rug seen in news videos of Bin Laden’s room, after he was shot and killed by American troops) is a dangerous compositional strategy. A lesser poet might rely too much on the coincidence, thinking it enough structural basis for a poem; but Dop uses the identical rugs as a way of stepping into an emotional dilemma any reader could share:

My daughter, born into the white noise
of terror, scurries past us to pounce
from the old imported rug to the unmade bed.
I hold her back, not knowing why.

The poet here leaves himself and us in the intermediate world of doubt and self-examination. He doesn’t know. In that, each word needs to work for all it’s worth for the speaker to see clearly and yet not assume too much. That exactness with language is really a study of the poet’s character, generous—giving the reader vivid details—yet humble.

Those qualities drive this book.

In the first section’s final poem, “On Swearing,” the speaker stands with his father at Pointe du Hoc, France—on the coast, midway between Utah and Omaha beaches—where, in 1944, at least 130 U.S. Army Rangers died taking the position from the Germans.

About 90 Rangers survived. Most of that is not in the poem. What is in the poem is a second older man, as the speaker says, "20 feet closer to the edge than us," holding a medal and loudly swearing.

"I turned away," the speaker says, "but my shoulder was held still / by my father's hand." The poem lasts 16 lines, in which the essential drama of the Allied invasion replays itself in the firm and determined hand of the speaker's father, who might be one of those 90 survivors, or a survivor of the larger invasion—interpret this as you will—who, in the simplest, most profound terms, will not allow his son to turn away.

The son, the speaker of the poem, perhaps the poet, himself, acquiesces to the will of the father: That, too, is an act of respect. Humility and clarity translated into language result in clean, uncluttered verse. The poet eschews overt statements of truth, or expository deliberations. He allows these poems to surprise us.

The book contains three sections—Child, Father, Watershed—echoing the title poem and first poem of the book, "Father, Child, Water," which first appeared in *New Letters*. From any perspective, these are poems of experience and growth. In the middle section, the speaker seems overtly to be seeking some kind of guidance, as in "Amish Man in the Andy Warhol Museum," where the speaker looks to the museum's perky volunteer, or to other students, or he remembers his artsy teacher in high school. The poet admits, finally, to fabricating events here, not knowing everything, so the poem, itself, could move forward. We are left with the Amish man, who might or might not have been in the museum, and Andy Warhol's great head, in a painting, both of whom become, perhaps, the fathers for whom he was searching.

Such moments come to us in scenes made evident, as in the coincidence of the rugs, then turn crazy or crazy serious. Dop places much of the final section in the voices of characters, such as one Bill Bitner, an ordinary guy but a bit of an outsider who dreams, he says, of selling hot dogs, "from a / corner of the / city where / everyone says / I'll have the / works. . . ." Bitner doesn't quite know what that means, to have the works, but he wants to be the guy who provides it. One must admire how the poet, Dop, provides us with just enough information, then lets us live inside the mystery that remains.