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What My Father Believed by Robert Wrigley (review)

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What My Father Believed. By Robert Wrigley. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991. 58 pages, \$11.95.)

The 33 poems that make up this book, Robert Wrigley's third full-length collection, move generally between memories of the poet's troubled relationship with his father during the time of the Vietnam War, which saw Wrigley himself serve briefly in the Air Force before declaring Conscientious Objector status, and recent reflections on his own role as a husband and father. In "C.O.," one of several poems in which Wrigley experiments with rhyme, while sustaining a free verse (non-metrical) line, he summarizes a dilemma which many felt during those years:

I was nineteen years old and could not tell
if I was a coward or a man of conviction,
didn't know if what I feared was a private hell
or the throes of our lovely, miserable nation.

In "Wishing Tree," the concluding poem, the poet (and the speaker we hear in these poems, including those written in the third person, remains Wrigley himself) finds pictures of rockets his son has drawn, and he regrets not having gone with him from their campsite to go fishing. But framed within the picture of "fire, everywhere flame and smoke," he discovers "a white sphere of peace, a circle at the bottom of the page, / in which two people play catch":

In their little space, they were all
out of proportion, as large as the rockets
that surrounded them, and their mouths
simple, straight, bold lines—not the usual smiles—
as though the game they played required the strictest
concentration,
as though for some reason they could never
let the ball not be caught, as though everything
depended on them, everything—
and in the picture, it did, it did.

Wrigley's voice is surest in this sort of poem, what Tess Gallagher calls "lyric-narrative." Those who have followed his work from *The Sinking of Clay City*, which appeared in 1979, soon after he began teaching at Lewis-Clark State College (Lewiston, Idaho), will find in this collection some of Wrigley's strongest poems.

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