Book review

DEADBEAT BY JAY BARON NICORVO
FOUR WAY BOOKS, 2012, $15.95

In the first poem of his debut book, Jay Baron Nicorvo introduces us to the title character, Deadbeat, “without a toupee, / shirt unbuttoned to his navel, a gold V dangling / the Patron Saint of Audited Tax Evaders.” At a child-support hearing, Deadbeat’s son looks at his father and catches a glimpse of the future: “the veteran asleep on the subway” and “an unstarred urban night / like a leather hood drawn over his face by an older man.” In a move characteristic of Nicorvo’s book, the poet subverts the quirky, comedic beat, redefining the sleazy loser as a tragic figure who poses inadvertent but serious danger to himself and those he loves.

This dichotomy between tragedy and comedy is a great part of the energy in Deadbeat, a book embodying a mature, nervous masculinity that is not driven by sexual energy or self-deprecating wit. Deadbeat is a character stranded in the aftermath of loss, a man marked by his inability to do right. Here, a boy cannot grow up and into his place in the world. Instead, Deadbeat discovers himself floundering where the old codes of manhood have failed. His recipe for lamb is more conscientious dismemberment of a carcass than construction of a tasty dish. He butchers a dead bird on the side of the highway to find a talisman that reminds him of carving a holiday turkey. Deadbeat lingers among strangers on barstools and sits alone in the back row of movie theaters. He lives on the margins until he eventually ventures underground in search of other folks who swim through darkness like he does.

We get to know Deadbeat across the five sections that make up the book. While he begins as a “Deadbeat Dad,” the character’s failed relationships with his wife and son are just the start. Consider “Deadbeat in Dear Immerse,” in which our hero meets a woman who seems to be a kindred spirit. They are “singles at a date movie / the sorriest of the lot.” When Deadbeat makes an effort to connect, he sees himself in her gaze, an indistinct desire for both companionship and solitude. Deadbeat becomes the heartbeat yearning to go to her and say, “Don’t be afraid! I live that way too!” Nicorvo weaves these moments of alienation with lateral moves that explore the nature of Deadbeat’s name. In “Deadbeat Takes a Job in the Service Industry,” we see Deadbeat stuck in his dead-end job, and in “First Weather,” we witness Deadbeat’s failing hometown, its death throes resembling a cataclysmic end of days.

Later in the book, Deadbeat transcends his physical self to become Odysseus rebuked by Telemachus and become the president confronted with the ruins left in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. He is at once a man and the world reflected in his tarnished image, a broken likeness so real that birds crash into his body in “Mistake the Window for the World.” Ultimately, we learn that even God is a version of Deadbeat, a “blind voyeur” who neglects the world he has created, a place where disregard and negligence are the natural order of the universe.

In “Hot Knives,” Son of Deadbeat follows his father’s pattern of drug use. By the end of the book, the boy has a wife and son of his own, but he also has Deadbeat’s desire to abandon them. This might be the greatest tragedy of the book: Son of Deadbeat has inherited his father’s curse, and all Deadbeat can offer in response are the last thoughts in “Deadbeat’s World Ends with a Whimper”—“Oops.”
Throughout the book, Nicorvo touches on images of impotence, estrangement, and rupture. A man’s regret is always tempered with the inevitability of what passes, his decisions with the consequences of his actions. *Deadbeat* masterfully creates this portrait of bungling, negligent masculinity, not as a critique but as an acknowledgement of all our shortcomings regardless of gender. We all run the risk of becoming Deadbeat. “Last Poem” declares “Deadbeat is alive and well” shortly after eulogizing his death in previous pages:

By the time you read this,

he might be dead, hell,
you may be just as dead.