

*THE SHORT LIFE OF THE FIVE MINUTE DANCER*

Ridgeway, MI, 1993.

Wallenstein's new book of poems develops an interesting voice in contemporary poetry. It is a voice that combines a street-wise vernacular with an unpretentiousness refreshingly uncommon these days. Additionally, many of these poems have been written to be read with accompanying music; these poems generally work less well on the page than the others, relying as they do on syncopated rhythms and simplicity. The collection is worthwhile for the poem "Mother," which one hopes will find a place in the anthologies. Wallenstein is also quite effective in his narrative pieces like "The Teacher and the Prostitute," where his distillation of reality rings true and echoes. Some of the poems strike this reader as too casual, almost tossed off, but even in these poems the quirky cleverness is interesting. This book is recommended for collections of contemporary American poetry.

- L. Berk, Ulster County Community College

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By Barbara Fisher

Barry Wallenstein's latest book of poems--agile, experimental, sometimes terrifying--is divided into three sections: "Dark Speck Drifting," "With Our Language and Power," and "A Scream for Charles Tyler." These poems "drift" into a terrain that seems familiar and at the same time hauntingly alien. The first section in particular is concerned with the problem of otherness--the prospect of an alien consciousness. What is it like to inhabit the universe of a wood-worm? a mole? a virus? a duck? The opening poem ironically comments on the metaphysics of "You are what you eat"--from the point of view of the tree worm:

Earlier I was a tree.  
In fretful old age  
troublesome insects worried my branches.  
My roots were deep,  
but the leaves were drying.  
When I was a tree I said  
here comes trouble to my boughs.  
Now I'm a wood worm; my mind is a pin--  
and though my life be brief,  
I'm ageless and gay in the woods.

The Yeatsian excursion into "tragic joy," the meditation on the relativity of life-spans, and the notion of the parasitic organism interacting remains cool and remote. The disease and its host are equals and neither requires pity. The homeless bridge-burners of "They Say" are not asking for sympathy; in the face of apocalypse the primitive community is reversing an existence that has increasingly become a technological nightmare--though not without a certain nostalgia on the part of the narrator: "Gone are the great and graceful spans of light."

Wallenstein is engaged with various kinds of metamorphoses, in this book, with radical transformations in form and structure, with changes of perspective and attitude. He plays virtuoso variations on the experience of mortality, sometimes with graveyard humor ("The Life of a Mole"), sometimes with the cool intensity of a film director requiring another "take" of the suicide scene ("In Case You Missed It"). And at times with extraordinary pathos:

Through some towns  
Death the faded jockey  
presses more tightly  
on his spurs.  
The horse literally flies.  
Eyes shut rattier than behold  
such misrule.  
Children become matches.  
little sulphur heads  
struck by a design.

The holocaust is grimly present in a number of these poems. perhaps most horrifyingly surreal in "A Lonely Tree": "There are twelve men in the toaster/don't you know/there are twelve men near broiling". Finally, the meditation on death becomes a jazz elegy in "A Scream for Charles Tyler," the saxophonist Wallenstein worked with closely for many years. Together with poems of becoming and un-becoming. THE SHORT LIFE OF THE FIVE NIIJTE DANCER is engaged with the play of dialogue. and with embedded narrative--tales within tales.

"Snowfire" presents a dialogue between Misery and Picturesque, an interrogation of aesthetics by poverty. In another dialectical experiment, a conversation takes place between a teacher (who listens) and a prostitute (who tells); in yet another, a flea becomes third party to a love affair. A narrative inversion has a "changeling duck" tell a story about a swan who tells a story about a "gentle flood," a fugal riff on the tale of the ugly duckling. In these poems one finds humor and vision and the rare eloquence of understatement. The drifting speck that breaks into its short-lived dance suggests the reflecting, refracting consciousness that energizes Wallenstein's poetry. Each poem exists as a "speculum" or mirror of the way things are--or a shard of that mirror. There is no redemption in the world of these poems, other than the redeeming insistence that conscious perception is a miracle in its own right.