

Colette Inez – about A MEASURE OF CONDUCT:

Barry Wallenstein's restless vision, and nearly flawless ear for phrasing record the muchness of our world with a seductive music and unexpected turns of language. Whether he is meditating on sleep states, ghost-souls, earwigs, feuds, or probing the dark forces of an alter ego--his "Tony: A Sequence" is not to be missed --there are offbeat insights and narratives that reverberate in memory. Praises. Here we have a poet with heart and imagination who is writing at the top of his form.

*"A collection of poems about lonely lemons, elephants, grievances, cracked walls, insects, ghosts, peach pie and invisible survivors. Barry Wallenstein has a wonderful interest in the poetically sharpening the details of his real and imaginary encounters."*

- Jayne Cortez

Excerpt from a review published in the Woodstock Times

*Barry Wallenstein, whose new book is A Measure of Conduct, is a guide who shows us things of the world around him and talks about them. He likes to say, "here's what is, and here's what's important about it," and he finds engaging ways of doing it.... He also provides a world that's not there—a deer without a meadow without the deer; a jungle beast that doesn't show up, although he leaves traces of how he might have; the creatures of a puppet master who may have had an existence prior to the one the puppet master gave them, but they can't be sure. These worlds, fittingly, are given to us with very little comment, and little is needed.*

### **Barry Wallenstein**

Ridgeway Press (\$12.50)

*by Stephanie Rauschenbusch*

Sly, wry, ironic, pitch-perfect for off-rhymes, these new poems in Barry Wallenstein's fifth book play with and tease out happy and unhappy endings. In the poem "A Measure of Conduct," a log-borne earwig is, after much thought, not consigned to a fireplace fire, though "in an absent state, I confused / action with inaction, smallness with / next to nothing."

Georgia O'Keeffe's giant painted versions of tiny things tell it no better:

The green spadix is back-dropped  
against the lightly striped spathe,  
a flower canopy for Jack  
the erect her of the piece, on his pulpit,  
a kind of throne.

(Jack-in-the-Pulpit: Song and Flower)

This miniature man seems to be the same fellow we meet in "Small" who asks the doctor to make him small "and a little calmer than before." He uses his small size to creep into his love's pocket book and sit on her lipstick "in a desirous trance."

Then we have the ending of the "famed aviator" whose parachute falls and whom we see as though the wrong end of a pair of binoculars:

A dull opening up of everything human  
onto water—  
so hard he failed his form  
on impact  
and the churning, schussing heavy  
waters—never soft except in cups—  
partitioned him further..."

(A Famed Aviator Meets His Death)

The tone of these poems is light, amused, witty, observant, ready to change and turn at a moment's notice, possessed of a dancer's grace. A fine example of this dexterity is "Apostrophe to Dr. Trope, Anesthesiologist." In this fictive letter to the doctor of poetic images—"tropes"—we have an operation, real or virtual, and then a dream:

Dr. Trope, I've dreamed of you  
standing here at my bedside—in white,  
a gauze mask dangling from white thread.  
I ask you about the laws of poetry, probabilities,  
the range of tropes.  
Do you know how many there are of you?  
I'm a devil to ask:  
are there little Tropes at home?  
Mamma and Poppa Trope still alive?

"I'm a devil to ask" signals the poet's playful teasing and could be the epigraph to the Tony poems—a portrait finely and imaginatively assembled from the many *personae* of a "street artist," con man, pothead, resident of the Hotel Splendide. A man living in "the backlands of blank" ("Happy Birthday Tony") where "Some oblivious are brightly lit / and dappled with spasmodic action . . ." ("Tony's Brain"), Tony goes invisible ("Anonymous Tony"), dyes his hair red ("Tony the Pothead"), reassures his dead mother that jail time is like floating on an iceberg ("Tony to His Mother") recites his numbers-running past ("Tony Hears the Music") and hides in a tunnel ("Tony the Trader"):

He swishes, spins, stops, sits down  
cross-legged on a carpet, 4 by 6  
and signed in the weave;  
he stacks his goods with soft precision,  
fooling himself with false division  
for practice, he practices  
until  
a cloud break in a thunder clap  
shakes him to the derelict day; erect,  
he jots a note and a name  
a column of names.

Two of the Tony poems cut deep. One ("Tony's Blade") starts: "Blade imagines it has memories . . ." This speaking knife ominously feels it needs sharpening. It is, and isn't the butcher's knife in "Tony's Dad" the butcher who carries Tony "across a river of blood." The memories here are exact and terrifying, when we begin to see Tony as the poet's mask, or *doppelganger*:

The fat in the slaughterhouse,  
in the stone room  
adjacent to the killing rooms,  
would clog in the drain  
and the steers' blood puddled  
high enough for a young Tony  
to need either hip boots  
or a lift onto father's difficult shoulders.

At times this Tony sequence seems novelistic in its complexity and subtlety. Wallenstein, a professor at City College, New York, "performs" these poems with a jazz combo, the music putting extra pressure on the words. These poems have the earned seriousness and humor of Yeats' Crazy Jane poems. They and the rest of the poems in *A Measure of Conduct* are built around the knowledge of "love in its practical conjurings" ("Salvation").