

Overfilling the Hourglass

Melinda Thomsen

It's About Time

Barry Wallenstein

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The cover of Barry Wallenstein's *It's About Time* shows an hourglass overfilled with sand, and Wallenstein's poems work together like moving grains of sand. They drop from the upper globe through a narrow passageway to land in a new place outside of themselves. This collection, as a whole, concludes with a feeling that time has an endless quality through the rich language Wallenstein combines with his humor, irony, and memories. Readers are almost drawn into another dimension where time no longer operates by the physics of this ancient timepiece.

When turning the first page, the hourglass turns upside down, and sands of time begin to fall, as the opening poems consider time in respect to yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Next, in the six middle sections, sand slows to pass through the narrow tube where the poet examines a range of source material from desire to Covid where wind often functions as a metaphor for the uncertainty connecting these topics. In the last two sections, sand gathers in the bottom glass globe where poems about end-of-life themes overflow the hourglass. This sand clock progression contains rich poems filled with heartbreaking understanding from a variety of viewpoints and unexpected connections.

The opening poems set up Wallenstein's perspective on time, as the speaker says, "Remember, we never wasted a moment – / not a jot in the rush – / your backroom, an hourglass on its side" (16). The poems in the midsection of the

journey focus on the way time is consumed by various speakers who have patched themselves together. Of course, these speakers make good and bad choices, but that is part of the ride, so as readers, this collection encourages us to accept the natural riff of our own time, which will lead to, if not a happy ending, at least a peaceful one.

When a poem steps into time, sometimes there is an “I” or a “he” speaking, but inanimate objects contribute their views, too, like the perspective of an autumn leaf in the poem “Autumn Leaf” (19). However, the “I” and “He” voices consistently appear throughout the collection. These viewpoints add a dimension to “time,” which takes readers out of the sequential role of time, and puts them in one resonating moment. In “Twins,” the “he” gives some clues to this pronoun’s active role in many poems, and why a variety of personas reverberate through the collection:

Twins

He was born a twin
but solitary – brotherless, sisterless
an odd number, a one.

Soon he twinned
with every breathing being:
the mother, the father,
a sleepy neighbor stopping by,
the family cat,
and as soon as they exchanged glances,
they gained his look,
his features, his budding frame,
his attitude

At four, when they sat him down for dinner,
cleaned up and perky,
all his twins imagined aging –
but with their ages somehow on hold.
One took on his lack of doubt.
another – his bounding health,
and the last, the cat,

his bristling, burgeoning capacity
to lick and to love (34).

Wind works as an ongoing metaphor, disrupting the idea that people can actually control most aspects of their lives. In the poem, "Wind Advisory," the speaker prefers the sure thing, when he says, "Even one leaf blown from the heap / would jinx the arrangement / and jitter his nerves" (45). Life rarely offers certainty or orderly progression like having every leaf in its place, and this unsettling poem illustrates the speaker's extreme response to events out of his control.

Wind also appears within nature like flying creatures, or in a man-made construct like a drug-induced trip. In "High Flier," the speaker becomes the wind image himself, and by testing the heights, he risks those he most wants in his life:

High Flyer

From out the bay window,
they could see me rise
then ride off on a thermal
higher than ever.

From this height
I cannot read their faces.
Are they amazed yet fearful
that I might drift the way of high-flying birds
hawks or falcons?

After performing a tail whip,
delighted in mid-air, I descend
to attend to my hunger.
The soft landing settles my system
ahead of the meal.

Now I walk in the door
and see the arrangement:
three deadpan faces,
no bright hugs or celebration.
It's as if I'd never taken flight (59).

Wallenstein's irony and wordplay balance the difficult topics where the family suffers from the speaker's actions. In turn, he becomes frustrated by his inability to see (or read) the expressions on his family's faces while he is tripping. After he sobers up, He sees their "deadpan" faces and that surprises him because he believes he's done something marvelous.

As the collection progresses, the speakers ultimately accept uncertainty as the backbone to their lives where attaining the "sure thing" rarely if ever happens. As noted in "Wind Advisory," no matter how hard the speaker tries to set up the perfect "leaf pile," something blows in to undo the arrangement. These middle poems create the foundational structure for the closing elegies, remembrances, and performance pieces depicting the end time. The closing poems offer gratitude for those good but broken souls.

The poet draws from a diverse group of topics and characters, for example, a stomach ache, Covid the Cobra, a walker, a street named Paradise Lane, an imp, an elf, a swamp girl, a dishwasher, and an anxious 105 year old mother. In "Wanderer," we meet a person who speaks to the uncertainty that the poet frequently considers. Faced with risk or security, the wanderer chooses the "For Sure" road to take, but he discovers his pockets still hold chances he can use:

Wanderer

Facing two paths, one named Maybe,
the other one called For Sure,
he selects the best bet and steps forth.

Maybe leads somewhere, not everywhere,
but it's on a tilt and he's the marble
moving on a table in the aftershocks of a quake.

His stomach unsettles; yet his reddened eyes
see well-enough to find a match
to light the smoke waiting to be sparked.

For Sure leads everywhere he steps;
and he strides with fresh assurance
up the path to grab a ring
and down the road to hand it over.
He has chances in his pockets,
enough to spend or give away (58).

In this excerpt from “On Shifting Sand,” the poem considers why uncertainties are so threatening. A man walks on “fluid sands,” but knows that he’d rather stay with the chaos he knows than get thrown into the unknown:

This man walks on fluid sands
and embraces the weather,
all weather as it happens
except for the cyclone
that could spin him off the earth

and away from his friends,
pockets of quiet and
the earth’s havoc;
he’d rather not leave again
and maybe never return (62).

With every uncertain step, these different speakers close in on the end of time like sands moving through the pinched center of the hourglass. In a normal hourglass, the sand drops very quickly towards the end of its measured time and is gone. These poems never let time drop its last grain because this hourglass is $\frac{3}{4}$ full. Every time the hourglass is flipped, its sand never runs out. As a result, *It’s About Time* ends with poems of celebration and gratitude to friends who have gone before or still remain on this side of the hourglass. Once through the narrow middle

section, we find heartening poems that close the book. In “Nick Johnson— A Remembrance,” the poem opens with the following stanza:

His voice, infectious, inimitable
catches in my throat:
“Vodka martinis straight up
and a plate of unsalted fries” (109).

In his elegiac poems, Wallenstein gathers bits and pieces of the leftover memories, which will resonate with today’s readers and future ones, too. In the poem, “Five Chairs in the Twilight Zone,” he observes, “We are the ones who tweak time. / who sit around, talk and clink glasses. We putter about in our penultimate pages” (111).

These closing poems extend an invitation to overfill our own hourglasses. *It’s About Time* stitches those moments together, so we can weave ourselves into the lives of those who went before and those who come after us. Before our time runs out, we should place an hourglass on its side and make a toast to time well spent, for *It’s About Time*.