The Greatest Action is by the Wound

Joy is boring. Fulfillment and contentment—though sought after—are not very interesting once achieved. There's a reason why stories end at "happily ever after." What is left to say once all tension and conflict has been resolved?

In *At the Surprise Hotel and Other Poems*, Barry Wallenstein explores the small and inevitable ruptures of doubt, regret and loss that break through the surface of happiness and create a blemish. Despite his focus on flaws and ulcers, the collection isn't melancholy or morose. In Wallenstein's hands, joy isn't diminished by its wound; instead, the little sore or spot of blood makes the joy all the more palpable, and its vulnerability increases its value.

In "The Child," for example, Wallenstein evokes the bucolic scene of a child climbing a tree, "limb by limb ascending / into the highest leaves." It is a lovely and apt metaphor for a child growing, learning, and aging. However, the poem's gaze shifts suddenly to "where the lawn below resembles desire / to live like the grass – to love long, / to set down seed and die" (95). Wallenstein invites the reader to indulge in this idyllic image of a child in a tree and all its connotations: freedom, communion with nature, fearlessness, and the uncomplicated physical prowess of youth. Yet he does not allow us to linger there, quickly reminding us of the consequence of aging: dying. While the introduction of death could risk a depressive turn, it instead turns what could have been a pat – or even cliché – image into an emotionally and philosophically complex one. At the same time, by exposing childhood's impermanence, Wallenstein makes it more – not less – precious.

Wallenstein is also skilled at finding starkly beautiful moments in the shadow world of the transient, the lonely, and the maladjusted. The title poem is a 19-part narrative sequence describing the lives of the denizens "At the Surprise Hotel." In the first section, Wallenstein sets the scene with a brief description of its halls:

> Carpets, not new, not frayed,
> cover the ancient scars
> caused by somebody dragging
> something from somewhere
> no one remembers.
> Surely there are heroes here
> deserving prizes.
> Nevertheless – they are modest,

> restrained at their varied stages. (19)

The first part of the stanza hints at a macabre demimonde, where gruesome acts are so common that the particulars aren't even memorable. Yet, even here there are heroes, individuals who have conducted great acts but are, at the same time, "modest" and "restrained."

At the Surprise Hotel, not only can the heroic coexist with horror, it can exist within horror. In a place populated with louts and loafers and "sucker punch senders," a Jewish bridegroom can delay his wedding to make room for Palestinian taxi driver and his family. He asks his bride, "Might we change the date from the 12th to the 14th / and add four more place settings? / The family's name is Sanwar, Yehia Sanwar" (34).

Wallenstein is successful with these incongruities partly because of his focus on the messy, contradictory humanity of his characters. Nelly, for instance, is a staff regular with a soft heart who "prefers her woe / in thimble-sized glasses" (28). The other part of Wallenstein's success is his language and pacing. Wallenstein, a practiced performer of jazz-accompanied poetry and a composer of jazz lyrics, incorporates jazz elements into his writing. An urgent, syncopated rhythm drives these poems forward and lends itself to sharp transitions between images and tone. In the fourth section of the poem, Wallenstein begins, "A lout walked in / pressed a button / no one arrived" (22). The language is prosaic but the tone is clipped, omitting conjunctions that would smooth the sentence out. Seven lines later, in describing the staff's reaction to the guest, Wallenstein writes, "ears stopped / our cool looks set / and ready for his ilk" (22). The language becomes much more luxurious, but also complex and challenging. The varying "o" sounds layered on top of one another followed by the quick, short "I" sounds in "his ilk" slows both the tongue and the mind down. The melodic and tonal changes in the poem provide the aural and linguistic room for humanity's contradictions to co-exist.

The subsequent poems in the collection are loosely categorized in the sections "Events," "Encounters," and "Departures." Wallenstein grows more contemplative in these sections, slowing down to spend more time exploring an idea or memory or an experience. He also gives language a little more room, extending his metaphors rather than transitioning quickly through quick blasts of jazzy tropes. If Wallenstein's collection could be compared to a jazz composition, I would say that these slowed-down stretches of language are more sax, less trumpet. They stand out as moments where the reader can savor lush, sustained metaphors after chasing Wallenstein through the halls of his manic hotel.

"Hungry Boy" contains one of those moments. Playing with the conceit of "more," he writes,

> Twelve might be his number,
> but if thirteen were upstairs
> he'd leap two at a time
> to snatch the extra digit.
>
> He demands the plural on every shore,
> picks up everything rough or smooth
> sometimes twice – even thrice,
> when beach coming or anywhere. (48)

While Wallenstein continues to use a jazz-like, sudden transitions—this time between the images of stairs and the beach—the metaphor itself extends like a bridge between the two stanzas. In the first stanza, the idea of wanting that "extra digit" is carried into the second stanza where the young boy "demands the plural." Wallenstein expands the metaphor in addition to extending it; the boy's desire grows beyond quantity to include repetition and diversity. He handles "everything rough or smooth" multiple times – not to possess or to acquire or to compound, but to experience.

The human experience is an important subject for Wallenstein in the last three sections of the collection. He writes of friendship, sex, violence, music, sickness and writing. It is in the final section, "Departures," where he tackles the experience of aging, that Wallenstein is at his most compelling. While aging is a predominant theme throughout the book, in this last group of poems Wallenstein confronts it directly and does not flinch.

In the poem "Tomorrow," Wallenstein explores how the meaningfulness of life depends on its continuation. Without even the idea of a tomorrow, the objects and accomplishments of today cease to endure. And if they do not continue, then any significance they have today also ceases. Even "failed memory"—that part of the self that is reliant on the past—no longer exists. A past cannot exist without the progress of time, without a future. Yet Wallenstein can find humor—albeit dark—in the anticipation of death. Without tomorrow, he writes, there is "no failed memory – but to become one" (96).

While this could be read as melancholy, the final line of the poem betrays Wallenstein's cheekiness: "advancing age supports the pretense of wisdom" (96). Wallenstein undercuts the skillfully created somber mood by poking fun at his own contemplation of aging. While the poem has strong existential underpinnings and reflects a complex philosophical view of time, the poet does not allow the poem to take itself too seriously. Just as Wallenstein finds the wound in happiness, he finds the glitch in sadness, refusing the reader easy access to simple constructions of emotion. Thankfully, Wallenstein suggests over and over again, it's all much more complex than that.

At the Surprise Hotel is full of surprises, but the biggest one isn't that "the greatest action is by the wound" (98). The big surprise is that the wound doesn't hurt much, and it's fascinating to examine once you wipe away your tears.

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Reviews

Barry Wallenstein's *At The Surprise Hotel and other poems*

Reviewed by Ronnie Norpel

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Barry Wallenstein's At The Surprise Hotel and other poems is a jazz-inflected collection of character sketches and world-weary experience. Wallenstein's status as a veteran of the jazz-poetry scene shines through them all.

In "The Sommelier Says," we are reminded how a glass of "best red" can quell a riot, if only for a moment. In that same vein, Wallenstein's poems smoothly distract his reader from ever-present day concerns and transport her to the Surprise Hotel for some choice sipping.

The hotel denizens are a colorful pack: the sexy-decrepit mountain climber Francoise, still lost in the clouds of high altitude; Nelly's guest in Room 508, evincing polite propriety while radiating persistent funk; Lizard Loungers with their "off-season aerial acts;" and the "crafty fellow" from

403 and his “profusion of rats.” The exact location of the Surprise Hotel is indeterminate–which echo-location might remind a hometown New Yorker of the Hotel Chelsea in its heyday, but could just as easily be that crazy pension where you stayed with your caballero in Barcelona that one year. (Barflies will be barflies, and so will some poets.)

The “and other poems” are equally on point and dishy, offering short stories in snapshots. “Street Signs” reminds us to watch where we are going and that we are always being surveilled, yet ends in humor “with a zip in his step and a zap in his pocket that the camera hadn’t caught earlier.” “Love, The Telemarketer and the Janitor” is a perfectly short tale of modern romance gone awry, while Wallenstein’s juxtaposition of “Poetry Writer” and “Poetry Reader” finds us holding hands with Winnie the Pooh and Marianne Moore.

Alas, we are called back to all that trump-petting jazz swirling around us, side-eyeing the epigraph for “Climbing Ambition”: “He knows only the sins of children, of wanting more and to be first.” A Freudian slip turns it into an epitaph. Then there is the final line of “What Was, Was:” “For every *was* in time’s fast memory, an *is* trumps the *was* every time.” The reader ponders “Murder In The Ranks,” and wonders whether, as the poet claims, “the revolution’s caught fire.”

I’ll meet you at the Surprise Hotel for an adult beverage, and we can discuss it across the aisle.

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