

URBAN SCENES

by Collette Inez

Love and Crush by Barry Wallenstein. Persea
Books, 1991

"The imperfect is our paradise," Wallace Stevens wrote, and in a collection of strong and musical poems, Barry Wallenstein takes the lore of human blight in tow, addressing the commonplace hurts of everyday with a nod towards the large disorders of the world. "Love and Crush," the title poem, is a valentine to this entropy.

All the life we love
leaves soon to feed
some other life
other love.
thus the vigilance of the dinner hour

An attentive ear is at work in these packed lines, and elsewhere one hears blues played in seductive chords and playful riffs as if on a jazz piano. "Personal Plea" is an apt sample:

You don't look like your daddy
You don't look like your daddy

You don't smell like fish
You don't smell like fish

Do you scare?
Were you scared?
Are you scared?

In fact, ghosts of the late and great haunt the poet's pantheon of Jazz. In "Blues I and 2," a brace of sexy double entendres seems to salute Bessie Smith: "no rest in my slumber/no sugar in my bowl," and "I'm dancing beneath your loving blow..." And, does the undertone of Miles Davis' flashing horn drift through "Hazard Heat" and "The Handsome Prince" several stylish poems which linger in memory?

Whether Wallenstein's writing takes a formal or streetwise stance, pivots in surreal dreamscapes, or hunkers down in a downhome conversational mode, he gets the pitch right; no false notes in his symphony of voices. Listen to the soft roar of the self-absorbed lover and the quizzical narrator in "Macho Mouth."

She had a splendid/fever
when I took her
says macho mouth.

The little he knows
she may have feigned fever
some bogus heat
to keep the grudge off.

An urban poet. Wallenstein identifies with civic mayhem, yet contends it is driven by the hum "of some hypothetical forward motion," by real life marching with varied cadences towards a seemingly destination shaped by hope. The forlorn are also recruited in this march, like the abused teenagers in a gray prison ward who are consoled by thoughts of fleeing to Canada or going fishing ("Two 14-year-Olds Talking from City Jail").

Wild and sensual, and startling in its abrupt turnings, the collection closes in a fitful exchange between a Turkish woman and her American lover. unfolding through journal entries over two seasons in the city. The story spins with rich metaphors that crackle and crackle and sigh with ardor and loss.

My seriousness may be worn in summer;
around her neck I'll sparkle dark
large garnets—a strand falling
half way to her waist
catching the light every which way.
I can see her touching them,
pretending absent mindedness,
my gift to her
in my own voice
fired by the lightning wheel
that spins above our doubled head.

("A Love Sequence. Summer and Fall")

In his forward to the book, M.L. Rosenthal observes:

"There's a little secret that Barry Wallenstein knows ... daily life is surreal; that the wildest imagination wells up casually out of common experience."

But certainly, it is no secret that Wallenstein, in his third book of poetry, continues as a writer of originality and intelligence, and is a poet whose paradisiacal notions of the imperfect is a paradox to be relished.