

Drastic Dislocations

New and Selected Poems

Barry Wallenstein

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Tony's Dad

carried him across a river of blood.

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.

Tony loves to tell the story:

“As a small boy I hugged a white butcher's coat
blotted red. By the end of the day
slick and greasy, more red than white
already, during the ride, foul and smelly
and I was right in it, almost joyful
and afraid especially of the butchers' eyes
as they turned from the knives and hooks
to my position on the boss's back.

“He was their boss
not mine exactly, but
blame him not now for my imagination
then about bosses and papas and
different kinds of muscle than my own.
And what did I own really,
other than the lift and carry?

“They bled the cattle
but clubbed the calves—
all to do with the taste of the meat
and young as I was, I studied it.”

Drastic Dislocations

He's alive, but barely;
the fall from space
was a long way down
and the sound of the impact
astounding.

It's a miracle really
to see/hear him breathing, even sighing
out of his twisted parts
and drastic dislocations.
—he sighs, they say, for us all—

No blood.
The mystery of his flight and landing
is taking attention off the war,
and has drawn the world to wonder:
Who goes there? What's the look?

TV crews, foreign and domestic, circle the amazement,
set up camp; food and drink are flown in,
enough to keep us full and salty for a year,
enough to take our minds off the boxes stacking,
while this fellow, out of nowhere, extenuates his sighing.

What's Now

She didn't think she'd love it
just that way and so very much
and in view of the others, but she did
and then demanded—
in a feathery, slowly halting
but clear voice—
that the performance be extended
beyond the original hour and intention
and that what's now last forever
but with time-spaces in which to travel
to India, to Asia,
to the deep and humid South.

“We could take what's now and stage it
before a small group of friends at first
and then maybe at a club
triangular tables—mirrored tops—
three chairs per table;
and the onlookers, silent and restrained,
would remain dressed for such a club
always,”

and should someone call out “swamp girl,
sale bête,” she'd hear nothing but
the band playing in the background
and her heart's rhythmic pounding.
She'd know—every touch from childhood on
has told her so—that this moment now,
rippling beyond borders,
might prove her very best chance.