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FROM THIS PLACE I CAN REACH UP

Naomi Wallace's first book of poems, *To Dance a Stony Field*, begins with "Looking for Karl Marx's Apartment, 28 Dean Street," a deceptively doctrinaire title. She speaks to Marx as he gazes out at his "dream of revolution, the blackened city straining / and shifting under its own dead weight." This view—through the window—is the apartment's easiest. Should he turn, Marx would be faced with the despair of his own children, three of whom will die young, their poverty, "the phlegm so thick it could talk." Indeed, it is only "the last abrupt noise your eight year old son Edgar made" which shifts Marx's attention—momentarily—to his home.

To Dance a Stony Field is exceptional in its layering of sympathies and accusations. In Wallace's world, justice is often the question, but it has no dogmatic answer. Although she shares Marx's vision, she won't look past his neglect. Rather than dulling her poems to a worldly relativism or leading to the refuge of individual experience, her sense of complexity seeks out the voices—of soldiers, of priests, of the old, the powerless—which might express it. Formally, these poems offer little surprise. They tend to run in roughly five beat lines, broken in parallel stanzas. The language is fresh and cutting, but close to, and occasionally mimicking, speech. Nonetheless, Wallace has clearly found a form—original or not—in which humanity becomes tangible to her.

From Marx, we move to "Meat Strike," narrated by a scab who is trying to master slaughter-shop work.

I grew up in the city, never touched a cow alive.
Here I touch them in pieces. I stroke them from the inside
out, where they're wet; it's not right. The meat slaps me
hard when I lift it from the hooks. For balance, I lean my head
to the bone. Once I slipped on the guts . . .

To Dance a Stony Field by Naomi Wallace. Peterloo Poets, 1995. 63 pages.

Such lines are typical. Wallace is particularly interested in people performing tasks just beyond their ability, whether that means being a father or a butcher, making love or going to war. Rather than mastering the task, her voices are more concerned with rationalizing the situation in which they have found themselves. The speaker of "Meat Strike" is not so naive he fails to understand the anger of the striking workers, but when they spit at him as he leaves the factory, his instinct—or is it his guilty conscience—is to seek common ground, even if the only thing they share is the degradation of the moment.

If the meats laughs, I'd like to tell him, it's because it's how
it's no longer an animal, but flesh turned the wrong way,
turned inside out, as I am, as we both are now.

Wallace does not shy from voices we are likely to resist. In "Kentucky Soldier in the Saudi Desert on the Eve of War," the speaker remembers torturing a small black child back home and is haunted by a nightmare of the boy's revenge, but he's hardly repentant. Nonetheless, when we read through the bravado of "Behaving like a dog, / I feel more like a man. This time it's Arabs. First / *you hate 'em, then you kill 'em*" to "Urine pools at my thigh. Under my sheets, the smell / of cold piss is a comfort. Tomorrow we go to war," we are disarmed. Wallace does not allow justice the luxury of being blind.

The book's first section, "The Living Will," is entirely concerned with historical and/or imagined figures. The second, "The Rituals," is mostly comprised of autobiographical poems which begin with her first period and move—rather predictably—through sexual awakening, birth, the aging of her children and a death. Were they not placed beside such dramatic poems (or if my own attention were not more drawn to the historical and public), they might seem stronger. As it is, these poems feel moderate. When we talk about poems, we often ask "What is at stake?" In these poems, a great deal is—family, self-worth, love—and yet, it's that burden which makes them feel tentative. Wallace strives for the same difficult, often violent honesty, but the Wallace-narrator is always inching toward a kind of reconciliation neither Marx nor the Kentucky soldier could ever imagine. In "The Terminal" she writes:

whose 63 pages may easily be taken in a single sitting. We have come down from our look-outs and walked among others. Very little is resolved in *To Dance a Stony Field*, and yet, having touched confusions, having heard the confessions of the seemingly innocent and the justifications of those we would condemn, the reader does not feel damned, but blessed for having been allowed to fondle the dumb, blistered steps of mortals.