



Wick to Wick

Selected Poems of
Barney Warren

WICK TO WICK

SELECTED POEMS OF BARNEY WARREN

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Second Shore
 Publishing

**DEDICATED TO
KRISTOFFER VAN TATENHOVE**

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AS IF SHE MEANT BIRMINGHAM, ENGLAND

THE TEACHER STOOD AT THE BLACKBOARD.
HER POINTER TOUCHED THE B IN BOOKER T WASHINGTON,
THE M IN MARIAN ANDERSON,
THE S IN SHIRLEY CHISHOLM.

IN THE CHALK RAIL, LEANING AGAINST
THE BOTTOM OF THE BOARD,
WAS A PHOTO OF JACK JOHNSON
STANDING OVER JIM JEFFRIES.

THE POINTER MOVED DOWNWARD:
BROWN VERSUS BOARD. MONTGOMERY. BIRMINGHAM.

JUST WHEN YOU WERE TURNING A PAGE
IN THE COMIC BOOK IN YOUR LAP
THE TEACHER CALLED YOUR NAME.
“DEREK, TELL US ABOUT THE LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL”.

THAT’S WHY YOU WERE NOW IN THE PRINCIPAL’S OFFICE;
THAT’S WHY MRS CHAUVIN
WAS ON HER WAY OVER TO SCHOOL.

CAN YOU STILL FEEL YOUR WET PALMS,
THE INVOLUNTARY LEG SHAKE,
THE SENSATION OF EVERY BREATH
BEING YOUR LAST?

BLAZING ORANGE

SOME PEOPLE
ARE LIKE THE FIRST LIGHT OF DAWN
FOR A PRISONER ON HIS RELEASE DAY.
TEN MINUTES—IS THAT ALL I'VE KNOWN YOU FOR?
LET ME INTRODUCE YOU
TO MY WIFE AS MY LONGTIME FRIEND,
AND HAVE YOU TELL HER
WE'VE KNOWN EACH OTHER
AS LONG AS YOU CAN REMEMBER.

OR WILL YOU LEAVE AS QUICKLY AS YOU CAME--
A BLAZING ORANGE SUNSET,
AN OUT-OF-CONTROL BURN
EXTINGUISHED
BY NIGHTFALL?

CHRISTMAS AERONAUTICS

IT HAD BEEN A LONG NIGHT
MOVING AT A FURIOUS CLIP
TO FILL A BILLION STOCKINGS
BEFORE DAYBREAK.

NEVER MIND
THAT REINDEER COULDN'T FLY
HAVING NO WINGS OR PROPULSION.
NEVER MIND
THAT MOST OF THE WORLD
DIDN'T HAVE CHIMNEYS,
THAT HIS SUIT
WAS SOOT BLACK
FROM THOSE THAT DID.

NEVER MIND THAT MOST OF THE WORLD
HAD THEIR OWN MYTHIC BENEFACTORS.

HE'D BEEN ASKED MANY TIMES:
HOW DO YOU FLY AROUND UNDETECTED?
WHAT DOCTRINE DECIDES
WHO IS GIFT-ELIGIBLE?
HOW DO YOU STORE ALL THOSE TOYS
IN A TWENTY-FOOT SLEIGH?

AND THE RAW MATERIALS FOR A FACTORY
IN SUCH MINERAL-POOR REMOTENESS--
WHERE DO THEY COME FROM?

BUT NOW HE RESTED,
LOOKING UP AT THE ASTRAL BIG TOP.
HE TOOK IN HIS SURROUNDINGS
THE VACANT LOT,
THE ABANDONED SET,
THE CLOSED CANTEEN;

AND IN ONE OF THESE DARKENED BUILDINGS
A NEVER-OPENED ROOM
WHERE OLD MOVIE-MAKING STUFF
WAS MOTH-BALLED.

BUT FOR THE REINDEER DRINKING
FROM COLLAPSIBLE WATER BOTTLES,
HE HEARD NOTHING.

HE THOUGHT OF HIS HELPERS
EATING BUTTERED POPCORN,
WATCHING LADY COLUMBIA
IN ALL HER INCANDESCENCE
BEFORE THE OPENING CREDITS
OF A FEATURE FILM.
HE WAS TIRED OF SPRUCE TREES
AND THEIR TIRED GARLANDS
AND THEIR TIRED COLORED LIGHTS.
HIS BEARD ITCHED.
HIS BOOTS FELT CONFINING.

HE CHECKED HIS WATCH;
IT WAS TIME.
HE GRABBED HOLD OF THE REINS,
AND A SMALL VECTOR
WATCHED UNCOMPREHENDINGLY
THE MIRACLE OF FLIGHT.

DEVOTION

EACH THING ABOUT YOU
IS A VITAL STATISTIC,
EACH THING A SLIDE
TO BE HELD UP TO LIGHT.

I WANT TO FORM AN INQUEST
INTO EVERYTHING ABOUT YOU,
ASK EVERYONE WHO KNOWS YOU
SENSITIVE, POINTED QUESTIONS.

I WANT TO POUR YOU IN A GRADED RETORT
AND MEASURE YOU IN MILLILITERS,
PUT YOU ON A LAB SCALE
AND RECORD YOUR WEIGHT IN MICROGRAMS.

I WANT TO DRILL DEEP INSIDE YOU
FOR A CORE SAMPLE,
LAND A SPACE ROVER
ON YOUR OUTERMOST PLANET.

I WANT TO WALK EVERY INCH
OF YOUR EIGHTFOLD PATH,
MISS NO ANGLE
OF YOUR FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS.

I WANT TO DEVOUR IT ALL—BUT SLOWLY,
LIKE A PRISONER'S LAST MEAL,
LIKE THE FINAL PUFF
OF HIS LAST CIGARETTE.

ENOUGH

A POND IS NOTHING BUT A SCUMHOLE,
MY FATHER USED TO SAY,
FINDING NO USE FOR ALGAE AND MUCK,
AND SEEING NO BEAUTY IN THE LICHEN SPOTS
ON THE CAROLINA ASHES.

A POND IS JUST WATER UNFIT TO DRINK,
MY FATHER USED TO SAY,
PLEGGED ONLY TO FILTERED TAPS,
AND WANTING NOTHING TO DO
WITH GRASS THAT WASN'T UNIFORM GREEN.

THIS POND STONE, NOT GOOD ENOUGH
FOR A GARDEN ACCENT, HE WOULD SAY,
IS PERFECT—TOO PERFECT FOR A GARDEN ACCENT.
THE LARVAE AND SPORES I CAN'T SEE
ARE JUST AS PERFECT.

ESTUARY

For Judy Garland

BEHIND HER, THE ORCHESTRA PLAYS THE INTRODUCTION.
RELEASED LIKE A DOLPHIN FROM A SEINE NET,
IT IS NOWHERE AND EVERYWHERE.
SHE MOVES DOWNSTAGE, SINUOUS
AND STRAIGHT AT THE SAME TIME.
HER GAZE AT THE AUDIENCE
ANNEXES THEM, OWNS THEM,
GIVES THEM OWNERSHIP OVER HER, TOO.
THEY ARE THE BOULDER PUSHED INTO THE RIVER
TO HOLD BACK ITS BRUTE FORCE
BEFORE IT PULLS HER UNDER.
THE MICROPHONE CORD
DOES A MATING DANCE AROUND HER.
FLOURISHES OF HER TORSO, ELBOWS AND HANDS
SPICE THE LYRICS.
THE VOICE HAS MASS—IT CAN FLOAT A GALLEON.
HER FRESH WATER MIXES WITH OUR SALT WATER
UNTIL THERE IS ONLY WATER.

FAREWELL

for Susan and Ruby

MERE DECIMAL POINTS,
THEY STOOD AT THE BAY'S EDGE,
A TEN-MINUTE WALK AWAY
OVER COMPACTED SAND, AND POOLS
LEFT BY THE DEPARTED TIDE.
BEHIND THEM WAS THE DAY'S FAREWELL
AIRBRUSHED IN ORANGE, GOLD AND BLUE--
A POTPOURRI OF EYELASHES,
GUSHERS, TENTACLES, SAILOR'S KNOTS,
ICE SHEETS, DANCERS WITH HAND SCARVES.
WHATEVER THEY WERE SAYING OR DOING,
THEY WERE A FRACTIONAL PART OF THIS OPULENCE
BEING STOLEN BEFORE MY EYES.

FESTIVAL

A DEATHWISH
IS WHAT WE SAY SOMEONE HAS
AS THEY RIP ACROSS THE ROADWAY
IN FESTIVE REBUKE OF THE SPEED LIMIT.
WE, OF COURSE, HEAR THE RIPPING
WITH EARS THAT'VE LISTENED TO ADVICE
ON MODERATE EATING AND MODERATE EXERCISE
AND SAFE DRIVING—THE LOGIC OF LIFE EXTENSION.
SOME PEOPLE GO TO THE MOTORCROSS TRACK
JUST TO WATCH.
THEY GO TO THE SOAP BOX DERBY
AND NEVER BRING A GO-KART.
HERS WAS THE LOGIC OF A JOUSTER
NOT AFRAID TO GET KNOCKED TO THE GROUND.
WHAT WE HEARD AS A DEATH WISH
SHE EXPERIENCED AS LIFE.

**FOR THE WOMAN IN GROUP THERAPY WHO SAYS
SHE DOESN'T KNOW WHO SHE IS ANYMORE**

WHEN YOU CHEW ON A PENCIL
YOUR TEETH LEAVE MARKS
THAT NO TEETH BUT YOURS
HAS LEFT OR EVER WILL LEAVE.
THIS IS WHO YOU ARE.

WHEN YOU WRITE A POEM
THE COMBINATION OF WORDS
IS BEING WRITTEN FOR THE FIRST TIME
AND NEVER THAT WAY BY ANYONE AGAIN.
THIS IS WHO YOU ARE.

YOUR BARE FEET ON A WET FLOOR
LEAVE IMPRESSIONS
THAT NOBODY'S FEET BUT YOURS
CAN POSSIBLY LEAVE.
THIS IS WHO YOU ARE.

FOUR PILGRIMS

FOUR PILGRIMS LEFT
THE SAME PLACE
AT THE SAME TIME
FOR THE SAME PURPOSE

ONE TOOK THE DIRT ROAD
ONE THE STONE PATH
ONE THE WOODEN BRIDGE
ONE THE PAVED HIGHWAY

THEY ALL ARRIVED
AT THE SAME PLACE
AT THE SAME TIME
AND SAW THE SAME THING

TO THE FIRST PILGRIM
IT WAS A BEARDED, SANDALED MAN
WITH A SHEPHARD'S STAFF

TO THE SECOND PILGRIM
IT WAS A MEDITATIVE, SMILING MAN
SITTING CROSS-LEGGED

TO THE THIRD PILGRIM
IT WAS A BEJEWELED, BLUE-SKINNED WOMAN
WITH TEN ARMS

TO THE FOURTH PILGRIM
IT WAS A MOON AND A STAR
AND INFINITE SYMMETRY

AND THE ONE THING
THAT EACH PILGRIM SAW DIFFERENTLY
SPOKE ONE WORD
THAT EACH PILGRIM
HEARD DIFFERENTLY

THE FOUR PILGRIMS RETURNED
AT THE SAME TIME
TO THE SAME PLACE
WITH THE SAME PURPOSE

TO BOW BEFORE
TO BE BLESSED BY
TO LIVE FOR
TO DIE FOR

THE ONE THING
THAT BECAME MANY
AND SPOKE ONE WORD
THAT BECAME MANY

GLASS BLOWER

SAFETY GLASSES COVER EYES,
PROTECTIVE GLOVES THE HANDS;
BEAR THE HEAT THAT LIQUIFIES,
AND BLOW SO GLASS EXPANDS.

TAKE THE ORANGE, GLOWING END,
AND SET IT ON THE SLAB;
ROLL THE TUBE—THE GLOB WILL BEND,
BUT LEAVE NO MARK OR SCAB.

CUT A PIECE OFF, PINCH AN EDGE,
AND USE THE BLOWTORCH HERE;
SEE THE OVOID PEACOCK FLEDGE,
CONTROLLED, YET FREE TO VEER.

IN THE CRYSTALS DIP THE MASS,
AND SEE THE COLOR CAUGHT;
TAP THE PIPE TO FREE THE GLASS--
AND HOLD THE SPLENDOR WROUGHT:

HERE'S THE HEDGE TURNED INTO ART,
THE QUILT THAT HOLDS A GAZE;
HERE'S THE DANCE THAT SPEARS THE HEART,
THE NOCTURNE CRITICS PRAISE.

SOME ARE NOTICED, PRAISED, UPHELD,
DEFERRED TO, FAWNED UPON;
NO-ONE KNOWS HOW YOU'VE EXCELLED
WHERE THEY HAVE NEVER GONE.

HIDDEN FACES

ON MANHATTAN SIDEWALK ELEVATORS,
ON TOPEKA MASONS' SCAFFOLDS,
EXPRESSIONS ARE UNREADABLE.

AT TELLER'S WINDOWS IN NICE,
IN NATAL WARDS IN JAKARTA,
CLOTH CITIDELS FILTER SPEECH.

IN STALIN'S GEORGIA, IN NEHRU'S INDIA,
PEASANTS AT VILLAGE WATER HOLES
WRING OUT WASHED BANDANAS.

IN A KOBE SHOWROOM
SPARKLING CHROME
IS INVISIBLY TARNISHED BY THE SLIGHTEST BREATH.

WHEN A CLERIC COUGHS IN BEIRUIT
BURMESE INCENSE BURNERS
TURN AROUND.

HOWARD

I WAS A SEAMAN DOING THE NAVY'S BIDDING,
WHEN HE APPROACHED HER IN THE HALLWAY.
"HOWARD, I'LL BREAK YOUR FACE!!"

SHE WAS LOCKED OUT OF THEIR BASE APARTMENT,
LATE FOR WORK, AND LIEUTENANT HOWARD SOMETHING
COULD ONLY SWALLOW HER RANCOR.

THE CLEANING RAG IN MY HAND
BECAME A TICKET THAT SAID, "ADMIT ONE"--
BUT THIS WAS A PERFORMANCE I WANTED
TO WALK OUT OF.

DOES INTIMACY END
WHEN YOU REACH FOR YOUR SOCKS IN THE MORNING?

IS RESPECT A FITTING
THAT SNAPS ON AND OFF?

I WAS TWENTY-THREE,
AND LOVE WAS NOT THE LIME
THAT MAKES CORROSION DISAPPEAR, AFTER ALL.

HYDROGEN BALL

JUST DAYS 'TIL SUMMER
I KEYED THE FRONT DOOR OPEN
AND WAS MET BY AGGRIEVED FACES.
MY ODDLY SOLEMN FATHER
ESCORTED ME TO THE BEDROOM
FOR A CLOSED-DOOR SESSION.
WE WERE SEATED KNEE TO KNEE,
AND DAD'S CRAFTED STATEMENT
BLURTED OUT FROM ME AS A QUESTION.
I DEPARTED THE BEDROOM
AND HURRIED THROUGH THE GAUNTLET
OF LOST AND HOPELESS VISAGES.
I WALKED OUT OF OUR APARTMENT
WITH MY DIME STORE PINK RUBBER BALL
POCKETED LIKE A PATRON SAINT.
AGAINST THE BRICK FACADE OF OUR BUILDING
I THREW MY DIME STORE PINK RUBBER BALL.
IT REBOUNDED, BOUNCED ONCE, AND I CAUGHT IT.
I THREW IT, IT BOUNCED, I CAUGHT IT.
EVERY PLAYMATE PASSING
WAS MET WITH CHEERINESS,
AND THE OFFHAND NEWS
OF A MOTHER'S DEATH.
THROW BOUNCE CATCH
THROW BOUNCE CATCH
AS THE HUGE HYDROGEN BALL BLAZED ABOVE
THROW BOUNCE CATCH

IF IN EXCITEMENT WE GO BLIND

IF IN EXCITEMENT WE GO BLIND
INSTEAD OF WATCHING TV
WE MIGHT FEEL THE DUST
ON THE SCREEN

A GAMBLING EXCURSION
MIGHT BE ASKING STRANGERS
TO TELL US IF A BILL
IS A TWENTY OR A FIFTY.

IF IN EXCITEMENT WE GO BLIND
THE INDUSTRIAL SMELL
OF TRASH CAN LINERS
MIGHT ALTER OUR STATES

WE MIGHT HOLD PARTIES
FOR OUR BLIND FRIENDS
WITH AROMATIC HERBS
AS ENTERTAINMENT

IF IN EXCITEMENT WE GO BLIND
SIX-POUND ROCKS
AND FIVE-POUND ROCKS
MIGHT MAKE DIFFERENT THUDS

WE MIGHT HEAR THE AGONY
OF FLOWER POTS
AS ROOT-BOUND PLANTS
SLOWLY SPLIT THEM.

IF IN EXCITEMENT WE GO BLIND
WE MIGHT RUN WILD
IN THE HEARST CASTLE
AND CAUSE MILLIONS IN DAMAGE

WE MIGHT REASON
THAT IF EXCITEMENT CAUSES BLINDNESS
ONLY WITH MORE EXCITEMENT
WILL WE REGAIN OUR VISION

IMPOSSIBLE LOVE

MY LOVE STANDS IN OPPOSITION TO THE POSSIBLE:
IT WILL SETTLE THE ROOTS
THAT HAVE BROKEN UP THE SIDEWALK,
THEN REPAIR THE CONCRETE.

STICK MY LOVE ON A BEACHED WHALE,
AND WATER WILL ERUPT
FROM ITS BLOWHOLE.
POINT MY LOVE AT THE SEA,
AND THE TIDE WILL TAKE THE WHALE HOME.

PLANT MY LOVE
IN A CROWDED BALLROOM,
AND IT WILL EXPLODE IN AMITY.

THROW MY LOVE AS FAR AS YOU CAN--
AND WHERE IT LANDS
AVARICE WILL SCATTER.
LAY MY LOVE AS A CORNERSTONE--
AND WITHIN THE COMPLETED WALLS
ALL WILL MOVE ABOUT IN CONCERT.

WHEN THE LOW-LYING DESERT HEAT
BLURS EVERY IMAGE
MY LOVE'S BRISK MOUNTAIN AIR
WILL SHARPEN THEM,
BLOWING THROUGH THE BACK CHANNELS
OF THE MEMORIES MY LOVE WILL GIVE YOU.

INCIDENT ON HOOVER STREET

THE UNIVERSE IS A LONELY PLACE.
I COULD TELL THE CAT
WHO RUBBED HER FACE AGAINST ME
AS I SAT ON THE CURB COULD SENSE THAT.
SHE KNEW, LIKE I DID, THAT THE ONLY PLACE
IN THIS WITHERING BLACKNESS
WITH BREATHABLE AIR AND TEMPERATURES
CREATURES AND CROPS COULD TOLERATE
IS RIGHT HERE ON THIS LITTLE OUTPOST
WHERE LIFE COULD NEVERTHELESS BE SNUFFED OUT
AS EASILY AS MILDEW IN SUNLIGHT.
SOMEHOW IT KNEW, THIS COMPANIONLESS CAT,
THAT THE STARS WE COME TO
LIKE ANCIENTS BEFORE A STONE GOD
ARE NOTHING MORE THAN INSENSIBLE GLOBS OF FIRE.
AND SO WE SAT TOGETHER COMPANIONABLY,
ON A SIDE STREET TUCKED AWAY IN THE BOISE BENCH,
UNDER THE LIGHT OF A SOLITARY STREETLAMP.
NO-ONE WAS AWAKE BUT A CAT AND A MAN
IN A UNIVERSE
THAT WASN'T QUITE SO LONELY ANYMORE.

ITCHING

AFTER SIX WEEKS IN COUNTRY
I STILL DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU CALL THESE THINGS,
BUT THEY CRAWL ALL OVER YOU,
ATTACKING YOUR MOIST PLACES.
IT'S ALWAYS WET HERE;
YOUR NETHER REGIONS ARE ALWAYS MOIST.
NO-ONE'S AWAKE BUT ME:
SAMSON IS QUIET AND STILL, LIKE AN AMMO BOX,
BUT HIS BUDDY PHILLIPS TURNS OVER
MORE OFTEN THAN THE TOP CARD IN A POKER DECK.
SAMSON NEVER LIKED ME, EVEN BACK IN BASIC—
USED TO STEP ON MY HEELS WHILE WE MARCHED.
PHILLIPS DIDN'T LIKE ME EITHER,
NOR DID THE DRILL SERGEANT, NOR ANYONE ELSE,
FROM MY UNCLE WHO THOUGHT I WASN'T TOUGH ENOUGH
TO THE WAITRESSES AT BURGER BOB'S
WHO WOULDN'T SHARE THEIR TIPS WITH ME.
BUT CHARLIE KNOWS NONE OF THIS.
WHAT HE DOES KNOW IS THAT MY M16
FIRES 800 ROUNDS A MINUTE,
AND SO HE'S VERY QUIET, TENSE IN HIS NEED
TO NOT GIVE HIMSELF AWAY.
I HAD TO GO HALFWAY AROUND THE WORLD
TO GET SOME GODDAMN RESPECT.

LAST SLICE OF PIZZA

I LIE HERE AND ONLY BREATHE—
THROUGH MY NOSE, THEN MY MOUTH; SHALLOW, THEN DEEPLY.
FALLEN WOODLAND MATTER PRICKLES MY BACK,
BUT THE DISCOMFORT WILL SOON BE LEFT BEHIND.
TREES RISE ALL AROUND ME, A CIRCLE OF SPEARS AIMED AT A SKY
SHRUNKEN TO A SMALL BLUE PATCH
SLIGHTLY ECLIPSED BY UPPER STORY FOLIAGE.
SOON THIS TOO WILL BE LEFT BEHIND.
I LEFT MY LAST SLICE OF PIZZA BEHIND TWO HOURS AGO,
A BLEND OF MOZZARELLA AND RED SAUCE
BALANCED PERFECTLY LIKE THE TWO SIDES
OF A TIGHTROPE WALKER'S BODY.
THE CRUST, THOUGH FIRM TO THE TOUCH AND BLACK TO THE EYE
WAS SOFT AND CHEWY.
AT A NEARBY TABLE SAT A TRIO OF LONGTIME FRIENDS
ENJOYING THEIR SHARED INNUENDOS AS MUCH AS THE PIZZA.
FRIENDS. THEY CHIRP IN THE SILENCE, THEY BLINK IN THE DARK.
I HAVE JUST ENOUGH THAT ONE OF THEM
MIGHT LOOK UNDER THE DOORMAT
AND SEE THE LETTER I LEFT BEHIND.

MORNING REVELATIONS

DAWN REVEALS US
AS OIL-ON-CANVAS NUDES,
INTERMESHED,
NOT MOVING FOR ANYONE'S REVEILLE.

ALL IS QUIET;
ALL IS RE-EXPERIENCED:
HOW MY RESISTANCE
CRUMBLED AND SHOOK
IN YOUR PULVERIZER;
HOW MY CAPITOL BUILDING
WAS SWAMPED BY YOUR RIVER,
WITH NO WATER DAMAGE,
NO NEED FOR RESTORATION.

WHEN THEY BLOW TAPS
WE'LL BE HIDDEN ONCE AGAIN
TO BE ROLLER-PAINTED BY NIGHT.

NAPKINS

IT'S 1956. A FORTY YEAR-OLD WOMAN
SITS IN A LUNCHONETTE
AND WATCHES THE WAITRESS REFILL HER TEACUP.
THE MUSIC SHE HATES CREEPS INTO THE DINING ROOM
AND SPREADS EVERYWHERE
LIKE AN ODORLESS, INVISIBLE GAS.
THIS FIGURES, BECAUSE TO HER
A RADON DETECTION ALARM WOULDN'T SOUND ANY WORSE.
SHE IMAGINES CONFEDERATES IN A BOOTH,
AND A TABLE NAPKIN FILLED
WITH WORDS AND COMPUTATIONS
CROSSED OUT, RE-WRITTEN, AND CROSSED OUT AGAIN--
A PLAN TO TAKE OUR PATRIMONY,
FROM PERRY COMO TO DINAH SHORE,
AND FEED IT TO THE DOGS.
HOW DID WE LET THIS HAPPEN?
MADAM, THERE WERE NO CONFEDERATES AND NO NAPKIN--
JUST YOUR TEA,
A HOLLOW IN THE WORLD YOU CREATED,
AND YOUR CHILDREN WHO'VE BEEN FILLING IT.

NOTHING TO DO

THERE IS NOTHING TO DO IN THIS ROOM
BUT LOOK AT THE DOCTOR'S SHOES
AS IF THEY WERE SILK MOTHS,
AND I AN ENTOMOLOGIST;
MAYBE LOOK AT THE SLIT IN HIS COAT
AS IF IT WERE A WOOD THRUSH,
AND I AN ORNITHOLOGIST;
OR LISTEN TO HIS PATTERN
AS IF IT WERE A PIANO
I COULD TUNE.

THERE IS NOTHING TO DO IN THIS ROOM
BUT ADJUST MY PILLOW AND BLANKET
AS IF THEY WERE GLADIOLAS,
AND I A FLORAL DESIGNER;
MAYBE STARE AT THE IV BOTTLE
AS IF IT WERE A STALAGMITE,
AND I A SPELEOLOGIST;
OR LOOK OUT THE WINDOW
AS IF IT WERE A MEADOW
I COULD CROSS.

AT NIGHT, WHEN THE NURSES COME IN
THE SOUND OF SLIDING CURTAIN HOOKS
ESCAPES FROM THE ROOM.
IT RUNS FOR ITS LIFE.

ON IMPACT

THE LITTLE GIR'S CRYING, FLUSHED FACE
WAS A LARGE GROWTH ON HER FATHER'S CHEST.
ONE RAINBOW-STREAMERED HANDLEBAR
POINTED AT THE SKY.
SHOCKING PINK SETS OF TIRES AND PEDALS
STILL SPUN WITH RESIDUAL ENERGY.

FUNNY TO HAVE THOUGHT OF THIS
AS THE ACCORD'S OWNER KNELT BEFORE ME IN TEARS,
WANTING MY BROKEN BODY
TO CRADLE HER WHOLE ONE.
RED AMBULANCE LIGHTS
CROSSED HER FACE AT THREE-SECOND INTERVALS.

NO HARMFUL INTENT.
NO RECKLESSNESS.
ONLY MISJUDGEMENT.

HOW OFTEN HAD I TOO MISJUDGED?

THROUGH MY PAIN AND IMMOBILITY
I SMILED UP AT HER:
"I FORGAVE YOU ON IMPACT".

PASSING THE SCENE OF AN ACCIDENT

IN TIME, THE ATOMIZED GLASS
FROM THE TWO-CAR COLLISION
WILL BE SWEEPED UP,
AS YOU SWEEPED ME UP
AS ONE WOULD LEFTOVER FOOD
KNOCKED OFF AN OVERFILLED BUS TUB.
AND IF I LOOK ANEMIC,
IT MUST BE THE SPECIALLY-PRICED GYRO YOU MADE ME
THAT TURNED INTO GROUND GLASS
IN MY DIGESTIVE TRACT.
AS YOU PLACED THE GYRO ON THE SERVING TRAY,
THOSE EYES FRESH TUNA COULD BE FISHED FROM
LOCKED WITH-- NO, *ABSORBED*—MINE,
AND I TOLD YOU WHAT NICE EYES YOU HAD,
EVEN AS I PEEKED BELOW EYE LEVEL.
SOMETIMES, WHEN I PLOT THE ARC
OF OUR FABLED LIVES TOGETHER
I THINK OF BROKEN GLASS
FLYING BACK INTO WHOLENESS;
AND SOMETIMES,
WHEN THE PAUCITY OF MY REMAINING YEARS
ENTERS MY MIND, I THINK OF A WEDDING
THAT WILL NEVER HAVE A SILVER ANNIVERSARY;
AND SOMETIMES, TOO,
THE CARRIAGE TURNS INTO A PUMPKIN,
AND THE AWAKENING KISS
ONLY ANNOYS CINDERELLA.

PRESERVATIONIST

I WORK IN SUBLIME SILENCE;
THE BREATHING OF A PATIENT
WITH A STETHOSCOPE ON HER CHEST
WOULD SOUND LIKE A DOG'S BARK.

FAR BEYOND THESE WALLS
A FORMER PRESIDENT
WAITS AT THE AIRPORT FOR HIS LIMO,
BUT THE ONLY CLINTON I CARE ABOUT
WAS A YANKEES OUTFIELDER.

FAMILY COMES FIRST,
AND MY FAMILY LIVES HERE.
MANY ARE RETIRED,
MANY ARE DEAD,
BUT TO ME THEY'VE NEVER STOPPED PLAYING.

MY FAMILY IS IN OLD LINEUP CARDS
I SPEND LONG DAYS INDEXING,
IN BATS I RESTORE WITH SAND PAPER,
IN SOUVENIR CHIPS
OF EACH MEMBER OF AN ALL-STAR TEAM.

WHEN I GRAB MY JACKET TO LEAVE
THE CLOTHES HANGER
SWINGS BACK AND FORTH
LIKE THE HANGERS IN A LOCKER
IN A BALLPARK TORN DOWN YEARS AGO.

PURE AND FINE

For Lizzie

WHEN YOU LOOK FOR HER YOU'LL FIND HER SLEEPING NEAR YOU;
WHEN YOU GRIND YOUR TEETH YOU KNOW SOMEHOW SHE'LL HEAR YOU;
OF YOUR WRONGDOING YOU KNOW SHE'LL ALWAYS CLEAR YOU.

THAT YOU'RE FAMOUS IN YOUR FIELD DOES NOT IMPRESS HER;
WHEN THE POLAR CAP MELTS DOWN IT WON'T DISTRESS HER;
THOUGH IT'S GIBBERISH TO HER SHE'S YOUR CONFESSOR.

SHE CAN'T HEAR THE UNDERCURRENTS IN YOUR PATTERN;
SHE CAN'T TELL WHEN YOU'VE BEEN DUPED OR DUCKED THE MATTER;
SHE IS GUILTESS, HAS NO DEFENSE TO SHATTER.

SHE OWNS NOTHING, NOT A HEARING AID OR RAZOR;
SHE WEARS NOTHING, NOT A GARTER BELT OR BLAZER;
SHE PAYS NOTHING TO THE GUY WHO CLIPS OR SPAYS HER.

WHAT IS UGLY TO YOUR EYE AND MAKES YOU SHUDDER
IS AROMA TO HER NOSE AND MAKES IT FLUTTER;
IT'S HER UTMOST JOY TO EAT WHAT'S IN THE GUTTER.

SHE WILL MESS A BED YOU SPENT A LONG TIME MAKING;
SHE WILL SCATTER LEAVES YOU SPENT A LONG TIME RAKING;
SHE WILL BARK NONSTOP, DISTURB THE NAP YOU'RE TAKING.

SHE WILL GLADLY BRING THE LEASH JUST LIKE YOU TAUGHT HER,
BUT WILL ONLY SNIFF THE RAWHIDE BONE YOU BOUGHT HER;
SHE'S A VANDAL, THIEF—AND YOUR DEVOTED DAUGHTER.

IF SHE COULD SHE'D CLIMB RIGHT WITH YOU UP THAT TOWER;
SHE'LL DEFEND YOU, THOUGH HER INSTINCT IS TO COWER;
IT'S A LOVE MORE PURE, MORE FINE THAN SIFTED FLOUR.

REFLECTIONS ON A MEMORIAL SLIDESHOW

I.

HER RIGHT EYE PEEKS
OVER HER SUNGLASSES
LIKE A CAT PEEKS
THROUGH A CRACKED-OPEN DOOR.
THE WIND PLAYS WITH HER HAIR,
AND A FEW COHERING STRANDS
STRAY ACROSS HER LIPS,
ASKING YOU TO KEEP A SECRET.
SHE'S A SHUTTERBUG'S MUSE,
DARING APERTURE TO SWALLOW HER,
FLASH TO ENGULF HER.

II.

THE TWO OF THEM
HAD A LIFE OF COVALENCE,
IONS IN RAPID TRANSIT
RISING IN A CLOUD
OF ATOMIC DUST,
FECUND AS A TIDE POOL
WHIRLING IN MANIC SUFI DANCE.

III.

THE FORGOTTEN PAST
LIVES TO SEE
THE FARAWAY FUTURE,
FOR MATTER IS NOT DESTROYED:
EACH CONSTITUENT
JOINS ANOTHER REASSEMBLY--
A PIECE OF HER LIVES
IN A POPPY STAMEN,
IN A FLORAL SHRINE,
BY A RURAL STATE HIGHWAY;
AND SPIRIT, FREED

FROM ITS MORTAL YOKE,
ALIGHTS, BOUND FOR PLACES IT COULD NEVER GO BEFORE.

SHE ZIPS THROUGH MERIDIANS,
CONQUERS OXYGEN LOSS
FROM THE SEA FLOOR'S BLACKOUT
TO MCKINLEY'S APEX.
SHE'S A CROP DUSTER
SEEDING THE WORLD WITH HER SPIRIT.

IV.
HER SCRAPBOOK ABOUNDS
WITH RECOGNIZED FIGURES'
OFT-REPEATED QUOTES
THAT TURN TO FLUFF AND FOAM
BESIDE HER ORDINARY WORDS
SPOKEN IN THE MOST PROSAIC MOMENTS.

V.
HER JOURNAL ENTRIES
WILL STIR YOUR EMOTIONS
LIKE THE HOMELESS MAN
WITH HIS HANDWRITTEN SIGN,
STANDING MERE FEET AWAY
WHILE YOU TRY NOT TO SEE HIM.

YOU WILL FLIP THE WALL CALENDAR EVERY MONTH,
AND SHE'LL BE THERE
ON THE PHOTO PAGE,
WITH THE RED ROCK VISTAS
AND THE ELK HERDS IN SNOW.

SHE'LL BE A HOT BURNER
IN A COLD MORNING KITCHEN;
HOLD YOUR HAND OVER THE HEATING ELEMEN
TO TOUCH HER.

REPLACEMENTS

THERE IS THE COVERED DRY DOCK,
AND *THERE* IS THE SUPPLY STORE,
AND *THERE* IS THE MECHANIC SHOP
WHERE YOU'D SEE SUN-BAKED BILLY
SHAKING HIS HAIR OUT OF HIS EYS.
THE DUMPSTER IS *STILL* IN THE PARKING LOT,
AND THE MASTED BOATS IN THE HARBOR
STILL REMIND ME OF POPSICLE STICKS
STICKING OUT FROM CHEAP SEEDLING POTS.
EVERYTHING IS SO FAMILIAR—BUT EVERYONE SO UNFAMILIAR:
A MAN WHO ISN'T KIP IS WEARING KIP'S WORK SHIRT,
AND HIS BLANK EXPRESSION TELLS ME
HE'S NEVER HEARD OF KIP.
HE'S ASKS WHO DAVE IS, WHO SCOTT IS.
BUT I CAN *STILL* SEE DAVE PUTTING?
HIS LUNCHBAG IN THE COOLER,
AND *STILL* HEAR SCOTT'S OLD NAVY STORIES.
THE FIFTYISH WOMAN WITH THE SUDS BUCKET
ISN'T ZITA, THE TEENAGER WITH THE TOOLBELT
ISN'T KELLY, AND THE GENERAL MANAGER
WHO ISN'T DAN
IS ASKING ME TO LEAVE THE PREMISES.

SABINO CANYON

For Anne

WITH MESSIANIC FURY,
WITH MONASTIC CALM
WIND, WATER, HEAT AND ICE
MIXED MINERALS AND ELEMENTS,
PRESSED THEM IN LAYERS
AND MUTED THEIR COLORS,
MADE ARROWHEAD PEAKS,
MADE ONE RAVINE
AND SET IT DOWN IN A HALL OF MIRRORS.

UP ON THE HILLSIDE,
DOWN ON THE FLATS,
ARE HORDES OF CACTI
WITH STIFF FINGERS
THAT COULD BALANCE TELSTAR.
BUSHES, PLANTS AND SHRUBS
COMPETE FOR SPACE,
WAITING TO BECOME
BASKETS, BLANKETS, AND MEDICINE.

HAWKS DIVE AT JACKAL CUBS,
JACKAL PACKS HUNT HARES,
HARES EAT SEEDS,
SEEDS WIND UP IN SCAT.
A GILA MONSTER DRAGS ITS TAIL
THROUGH A DRY CREEK
THAT WAS AN INLAND SEA
OR A SAVANNA OR AN ICE FLOE
AND COULD BE AGAIN.

SAN FRANCISCO EARTHQUAKE, 1906

SOMETIMES WE DON'T SEE THE EVENT,
ONLY WHAT FOLLOWS—THE UNEXRESSIVE FACES
AND ROOTED LEGS OF A POPULACE,
HANDS ON HIPS,
ELBOWS POINTED OUT,
TAKING IN MASS SILENCE
A SURVEY OF WHAT THEY'LL NEED TO REBUILD.
THEY THOUGHT IT IMPOSSIBLE.
WE KNOW IT WASN'T.
WE KNOW, TOO, THAT IT WASN'T WHAT WE SEE HERE.
AFTERMATH EYES CAN'T GIVE US
THE SCREAMS AND CRASHES,
THE ACRID, OILY SMELLS,
THE TASTE OF ONE'S OWN BLOOD,
THE SENSATION OF FALLING.

SOLAR FLARE

AS HOT AS IT IS IN GHOST RANCH
IT'S EVEN HOTTER IN DURO CANYON
WHERE GEORGIA'S FAILING EYESIGHT
GRABS TENUOUS HOLD OF A NATIVE FLOWER.
A SHAKY HAND STEADIES,
AND YELLOW MIXED WITH ORANGE INCHES ALONG THE CANVAS—
A SMUDGE BECOMING A LINE.
WHAT ART LOVER WOULDN'T WANT TO BE HERE,
IF ONLY TO SEE THE CENTIPEDE LABOR
THAT ENDS IN A REALIZED WORK?
GEORGIA TAKES A MOMENT
TO REWRAP AND RETIE HER SCARF.
HER FACE IS WEATHER-BEATEN, SPARTAN:
FLESH WEBS UNDER HER CHIN;
HER CHEEKS ARE A RUTTED ROAD.
YET HER EYEBROWS ARE STILL BLACK, STILL INQUISITIVE,
THE EYEBROWS OF A WOMAN
WHO GAVE EXPRESSION TO EXPRESSIONLESS SKULLS,
AND PASSION TO DISPASSIONATE TOWERS.
ALFRED STEIGLITZ BROUGHT HER TO US
SENSUOUS AND NAKED.
AGE PILFERED THAT BEAUTY
BUT LEFT UNTOUCHED THE WILL
TO SHOOT OUT FROM CONVENTION
LIKE A FLARE FROM THE SUN.

SPANISH GRAPES

EVERY DAY IS FEAST DAY IN YOUR HOUSE.
DONDE QUIERA LAS UVAS! UVAS PARA LOS SANTOS!

GRAPES IN THE GRAVY BOWL FOR SAN JOSE!
GRAPES ON THE WINE RACK FOR SAN TOMAS!
GRAPES ON THE CANDY DISH FOR SAN PABLO!
GRAPES IN THE MEAT TRAY FOR SAN PEDRO!!

TANTAS UVAS! MORE GRAPES
THAN THERE ARE MARES IN ANDALUSIA;
MORE GRAPES THAN THERE ARE NOTES
IN SEGOVIA'S GUITAR.
GRAPES THICKEN THE AIR; I INHALE GRAPES.

GRAPES ON THE CURTAINS FOR SANTA LUCIA!
GRAPES ON THE STAINED GLASS FOR SANTA TERESA!
GRAPES ON THE LIGHT SWITCH FOR SANTA MARIA!
PLATOS, PLATILLOS, TAZAS DECKED IN GRAPES!

Y LOS TRES GATOS QUE MIRAN POR LA VENTANA?
THE THREE MAGI HERE TO JOIN THE FEAST!

THAT WAS ME, MARA

I LOCKED UP YOUR PERSONAL EFFECTS
AND HANDED YOU A HOSPITAL GOWN;
I WHEELED THE GURNEY, HELD THE IV BAG
WITH THE SOLUTION THAT SPED
LIKE A BARRACUDA THROUGH YOUR BLOODSTREAM.
THAT WAS ME, PUTTING YOU TO SLEEP, KEEPING
YOU ALSEEP, WATCHING YOUR VITAL SIGNS.
MY RIGHT HAND HELD THE SCALPEL, THEN CUT;
MY LEFT ONE BLOTTED THE UPWELLING BLOOD.
WHEN THE TIME CAME, I PLACED THE ROD WHERE IT SHOULD GO,
AND WARNED YOUR ANTIBODIES
TO CEASE AND DESIST.
AND MARA, WHENEVER YOU GET UNDRESSED
YOU'LL SEE WHERE I SUTURED YOU.
I'M THE OMNIPOTENCE AND THE BENEVOLENCE.
I'M THE KARMIC LAW, THE URANIUM CORE.
BUT NOT EVEN I CAN COUNT EVERYONE
WHO CALLED ON ME TO PULL YOU THROUGH.
EVERY DAY IS A POEM THAT'S NEVER BEEN WRITTEN--
AND YOU ARE LIVING, YOU ARE WALKING
SO THAT YOU CAN WRITE IT.

THE CITY BUS

THE FOLDING DOUBLE DOORS OF THE BUS
CLOSE BEHIND HIM
AS HIS FARE GOES CLINKING DOWN INTO THE COIN BOX.
WITH SHARPENED CLAWS
HE SHAMBLES DOWN THE AISLE
TO THE WINDOW SEAT IN THE LAST ROW,
LEAVING NO RIDER UNHARMED.

HE WATCHES,
SMACKING HIS CHEWING GUM,
AS WATER BOTTLES IRRIGATE WOUNDS,
AND ARBY'S TABLE NAPKINS STAUNCH BLEEDING.

IN A WALGREEN'S BAG HE HIDES
A BOTTLE OF HYDROGEN PEROXIDE,
A TUBE OF ANTISEPTIC CREAM,
AND A PACKET OF STERILE GAUZE.

THE BUS CONTINUES ON TO THE NEXT STOP,
CLOSER TO THE ROILING CROWD
REPORTEDLY IN THE THOUSANDS.

SUDDENLY, HE YANKS THE STOP CORD.
THE DOORS OPEN AND CLOSE.
HE TAKES OFF RUNNING
AS IF FROM A FUNNEL CLOUD.

WITH THE VOICE OF SOMEONE
HIDING IN A STORM CELLAR
THE DRIVER SAYS:
WE'RE BLOCKED IN; I DON'T KNOW
HOW LONG WE'LL BE HERE.

OUTSIDE, THE TALONED MOB RENDS THE CITY.

THE END OF BAND-AIDS

WATCHING THE TEMPTATIONS AT THE MAJESTIC THEATRE

THE CLOTHES OF THE FIRST GIRL YOU EVER TOUCHED
FALL TO THE FOOR ALL OVER AGAIN.
THE TEMPTATIONS ENTRANCE THE WAY SHE DID
AS THEY SHUFFLE AND SWAY AND STEP LIVELY,
THEIR PRECISION TIGHT, THEIR MOVEMENTS A FLUID
YOUR FONDEST DESIRES ARE STIRRED INTO.
THOUGH YOU SIT QUIETLY ALONE IN THE LAST ROW,
ON THE STAGE INSIDE YOUR HEAD
THE CROWD GOES WILD FOR YOU.
YOUR ARTHRITIS IS BEING OUSTED,
YOUR SHINGLES DISBARRED.
THE CUTS ON YOUR THINNING SKIN
DRAW NO MORE BLOOD, AND
THE RELEASE IS ALMOST SEMINAL
WHEN THE BAND-AIDS ARE RIPPED OFF.

THE FORUM

--FOR MY FRIEND, EATING DISORDER

HOW ALMOST WEIGHTLESS THEY FEEL NOW,
THE SUNDERED BOXES, PACKAGES AND BAGS
THAT MINUTES AGO WERE FACTORY-SEALED.
PICKING THROUGH THE WRECKAGE
I CAN STILL FEEL THE FURY OF THE STORM
THAT STRUCK UNANNOUNCED.

NOW MY THOUGHTS TURN MEDITATIVE;
THEY COALESCE AROUND INGREDIENT LABELS,
QUALITY ASSURANCES, DISTRIBUTOR LOCATIONS.
THE SILVER INSIDES OF CRINKLED WRAPPERS
ARE A PHILOSOPHY BOOK
WHEREIN LIES THE ANSWER TO MY PERSONAL KOAN.

BUT THE ANSWER DUCKS BEHIND THE IMMINENT:

ANY MOMENT, I'LL SIT UP ON THE TRAINER'S TABLE;
IN MINUTES I'LL SURFACE FROM THE RUNWAY,
TO BE LED THROUGH A PACKED FORUM TO THE RING;
AND WHILE I SHADOW BOX IN MY CORNER,
THE FORUM WILL ROCK WHEN I'M INTRODUCED
AS BOTH CHALLENGER AND TITLE-HOLDER;
THE TRAINER WILL LOOSEN ME UP,
AND THEN I'LL HEAR THE BELL;
AND AS I POUND MYSELF AGAINST THE ROPES,
OUT OF THE CORNER OF MY SWOLLEN AND NEARLY SHUT EYE,
I'LL SEE ED AT RINGSIDE
COLLECTING ON HIS BETS.

THE GIVING UP

FOR MY FRIEND, JAY BONIN, WITH LOVE

WE'RE ON STATE HIGHWAY 151,
AND SEA WORLD'S ROLLER COASTER TRACKS
CAN BE SEEN IN THE DISTANCE, ARCING ABOVE THE ROAD
LIKE A TRAINED WHALE DOING A STUNT.
I THINK OF A CLOISTERED WOMAN, HER RENUNCIATIONS,
THE CAR SHE'LL NEVER AFFORD
OR THE SPOUSE AND CHILDREN
TO SIT BESIDE HER IN IT,
THE ROLLER COASTER AND THE CYCLONE
SHE'LL NEVER RIDE,
THE RASPBERRY LEMONADE SHE'LL NEVER DRINK.
HER SEA WORLD IS IDENTIFICATION WITH GOD.
HER HIGHWAY 151 IS WASHING BY HAND
ALL HER SISTERS' UNDERGARMENTS,
AND WRINGING THEM OUT EXHAUSTIVELY.
NOT UNTIL SHE'S JOINED WITH THE HEAVENLY FATHER
WILL SHE SEE A SPERM WHALE CLOSE UP,
AND DRINK ALL THE LEMONADE SHE WANTS,
AND GO ON ALL THE RIDES SHE WANTS.
IS SHE SO DIFFERENT FROM THE CHESSMASTER
IN HIS BLAND, PASSED-DOWN SWEATER
WHO DECOYS AND LIES IN WAIT, THEN ATTACKS
AND BLOCKS THE COUNTERTHRUST?
HE HAS NOTHING AND NEEDS NOTHING
BUT A SQUARE ARENA
UNFOLDED, UNROLLED OR SET IN A STONE TABLETOP.
THE INTELLIGENCE THAT BONDS
SPECKS OF COSMIC DUST TO GARGANTUAN PLANETS
AND THE LOWLIEST BEGGAR TO THE RICHEST MAGNATE
TAKES HIM FURTHER FROM SWEATER FASHION
AND CLOSER TO ITSELF WITH EVERY MOVE.

THE HUMAN TOUCH

BECAUSE I'M HUMAN I'M FALLIBLE.
WITHOUT MEANING TO I THROW A BATTING PRACTICE PITCH.
BUT TO THE HITTER IN A SLUMP
IT'S AS SMALL AS A MARBLE AND AS FAST
AS A RACING TOBOGGAN.
HE BARELY NICKS IT.

BECAUSE I'M HUMAN I'M CAPABLE.
THE PITCH I RELEASE HAS A WICKED SNAP AND A TIGHT SPIN.
BUT TO THE BATTER ON A TEAR
IT'S A BEACH BALL CREEPING IN
ON A LISTLESS TIDE.
HE MEETS IT SQUARELY.

BECAUSE I'M HUMAN I FEAR.
FROM THE BOTTOM OF THE FISHBOWL I PLAY IN
EVERYTHING LOOKS LIKE A CAT'S PAW.
EVERY TIME I TOUCH THE BALL MY RATING CHANGES,
BUT THE RECORD IT LEAVES
IS TAMPER-PROOF.

BECAUSE I'M HUMAN I HAVE WILL.
BECAUSE THE CROWD IS HUMAN THEY HAVE WILL.
WHEN THEY SOUND LIKE AN OVERREVVING ENGINE
THEY HELP ME PLAY THE CAROM;
TOGETHER WE THROW THE BATTER
OUT AT SECOND.

THE LUNCH UNEATEN

AS THE GLASS DOOR CLOSED BEHIND ME
THEY PULLED INTO A PARKING SPACE.
AS I BUSTLED UP TO THE COUNTER
THEY GOT OUT AND STRETCHED THEIR LEGS.
AS I LOOKED OVER THE BATCH
THEY LAID OUT THEIR PICNIC SPREAD.
AS I RATTLED OFF MY ORDER
SHE EMBARKED ON A SHORT WALK.
AS I KIDDED WITH THE CASHIER
SHE STEPPED BEYOND THE PARKING LOT.
AS I SET MY TRAY ON A TABLE
SOMETHING CAUGHT HER ATTENTION.
AS I STRIPPED OFF MY TURTLENECK
SHE STEPPED ONTO A SIDE TRAIL.
AS I CUT THE BAGEL IN HALF
SHE FOLLOWED A ROCKY TRAIL.
AS I SPREAD A SLATHER OF BUTTER
SHE HELD A CAVE IN REGARD.
AS MY TEETH CLAMPED DOWN ON DOUGH
SHE EDGED CLOSER TO THE DROP OFF.
AS I MASTICATED MY FOOD
SOMETHING UPSET HER BALANCE.
AS MY ADAM'S APPLE BOBBED
SHE COULDN'T COUNTER HER WEIGHT SHIFT.
AS I SECRETED STOMACH ACID
SHE WAS SUCKED OVER THE BRINK.
AS I WIPED CRUMBS ONTO THE FLOOR
SHE WENT REELING THROUGH THE VOID.
AS DOUGH LODGED BETWEEN TWO TEETH
SHE HIT THE GROUND CONVINCINGLY,
AS I OPENED THE IDAHO STATESMAN
SHE LAY THERE COLD AND EXPOSED.
AS I READ DAVE BARRY'S COLUMN
SHE EVACUATED BLOOD.

AS I GLANCED AT A OVERDRESSED PASSERBY
HER BRAIN SWELLED AGAINST HER SKULL.
AS I ABSENTLY TWIRLED A HAIRLOCK
HER BRAIN CELLS SUFFOCATED.
AS I PUT MY TURTLENECK BACK ON
HER UNEATEN LUNCH SAT SPOILING.
AS I EXITED THROUGH THE GLASS DOOR
HER PULSE WEAKENED
LIKE THE FADING HOOFBEATS
OF AN APOCALYPTIC HORSE.

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMAN I'VE EVER SEEN
YELLS AT ME TO STAY AWAKE.
IN A TURBULENT VOICE
SHE TELLS ME TO STAY CALM.

AND I AM CALM,
CALM AND SEDATE,
EVEN AS I TASTE THE BLOOD
TRICKLING OUT THE CORNER OF MY MOUTH.

THE MOON'S CORONA
SPLINTERS THE CLOUDS
INTO THE MOST BEAUTIFUL PIECES;
THEY GATHER 'ROUND THE MOON
LIKE MEDICAL STUDENTS LEARNING ANATOMY.

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL MAN I'VE EVER SEEN
DIRECTS THE JAWS OF LIFE INTO PLACE.
THE SMELL OF SPILLED COOLANT
WEAKENS.
THE SOUND OF A STUCK HORN
WEAKENS.
LITTLE BY LITTLE
THE AMBER OF SLEEP STEALS OVER ME.

THE SECONDS

A BAR MAGNET, A RAMROD, A PILLAR,
A MAN SET AGLOW BY LADY LIBERTY'S LANTERN--
HE'S ALL OF THESE.
THAT'S HIM IN THE DEPRESSION-ERA POSTER,
UNITING AMERICA'S IRON WORKERS
BY BEATING IN AN ARM WRESTLE
A LEVER TWICE HIS SIZE,
HE'S HERE. HE'S REAL. HE'S ABOUT TO PICK UP A BARBELL
ALMOST EQUAL TO HIM IN WEIGHT.
HIS SWEAT GLANDS ARE ON ALERT.
WATCH HIM. HIS SKIN SHRINK-WRAPPS AROUND HIS DELTOIDS,
BECOMES WATER, THEN WASHES OVER
THE ROCKS OF HIS ABDOMEN.
FOR GOD'S SAKE, THROW HIM OUT IN A LIGHTNING STORM,
LET IT STRIKE HIM
BEFORE THE CURSE OF TIME DOES.
YOU'LL HAVE ONLY THE STATIC,
ELECTRICAL SECONDS
BETWEEN THE PHOSPHORESCENT SKY
AND THE PINPOINT STRIKE.

TRUNK

THOUGH I'M NOT THE BOSTON STRANGLER,
THE ZODIAC KILLER,
OR THE CLOCKTOWER SHOOTER,
MY PENALTY IS TO CROSS THIS LIVE MINEFIELD.
THERE GOES MY LEFT ARM-- AND MOST OF MY RIGHT--
LANDING MUCH TOO CLOSE TO THOSE
WHO SQUIRM WHEN TOUCHED.
THERE GOES MY RIGHT LEG-- AND MOST OF MY LEFT--
CAUSING SHARPLY INDRAWN BREATH
AMONG THOSE WHO PRIZE RESTRAINT.
THERE GO MY TESTES-- AND MOST OF MY MANHOOD--
LANDING NEARLY IN THE LAPS
OF SOCIAL BOUNDARY GUARDIANS.
WHO SAYS A GOOD JOB CAN'T BE DONE
IN A FUN WORKPLACE?
DON'T YOU KNOW ZERO TOLERANCE
LIVES NEXT DOOR TO INTOLERANCE?
BUT I SAY NO MORE--
FOR THERE GOES MY HEAD.

UNDER THE WATERLINE

for the Mello-tones

IT DIDN'T STOP PERSONNEL DIRECTORS
FROM SAYING SORRY, WE'RE NOT HIRING;
IT DIDN'T STOP SLUMLORDING
OR HAIR STRAIGHTENING;

BUT, FOR A TWO-AND-A-HALF MINUTE INFINITY
THE PEOPLE WHO HAD LITTLE
AND WERE NEVER HEARD
GAVE ALL THEY HAD LEFT —
SLEEP-SHATTERING HANDCLAPS, LEVITATING VOWELS,
A MELODY THAT BROKE, HOWEVER BRIEFLY,
THE RESTRAINTS THEY WORE FROM BIRTH TO DEATH.

IN TWO-AND-HALF MINUTES
CELLS FOLLOWED INSTRUCTIONS,
BECAME GANGLIA,
BECAME GREY MATTER,
BECAME HOMO ERECTUS—
ROSIE-LEE, A WOMAN WHOSE LOVE
COULD NEVER BE REPAYED.

THE ALTO SAX ROLLICKED,
AND THE SCREWS TURNED
UNDER AMERICA'S SHIP OF STATE.

WATCHING THE SKATEBOARDERS

PIROUETTING ON TWO WHEELS,
GRABBING THE BOARD MID-FLIGHT,
SLIDING SIDEWAYS ON A BENCH--
JUST WHO ARE THESE GUYS, ANYWAY?

THROWING THE BOARD DOWN,
JUMPING ON, GAINING SPEED
WITH A BOOSTER ROCKET HEEL KICK--
WHO DO THESE GUYS THINK THEY ARE?

ROLLING IN THE HALF-PIKE
LIKE A MARBLE,
POSING ON THE RIM
LIKE AN ACTION FIGURE--
JUST WHO DO THESE GUYS THINK THEY ARE?

PITY THEIR SHADOWS-- CONCEIVED IN SUN AND LAMPLIGHT,
PUSHED AND PULLED UNSPARINGLY,
JUDO-THROWN BY THIS RABID PACK
WHEN THEY AND THEIR BOARDS DIVERGE.

SKATEBOARDERS: CAESAR GIVES HIS THUMBS UP

BARGE INTO NECK TIE SANCTUARIES,
AND SPRAY PAINT *YOUR* CORPORATE VALUES
ON POWER POINT PULL-DOWN SCREENS!

MARCH INTO THE LOUVRE AND THE GUGGENHEIM,
AND DRAW INDELIBLE SKATEBOARD WHEELS
UNDER BOTTICELLI'S VENUS CLAMSHELL!

TAKE TONY HAWK TRADING CARDS
INTO HAUGHTY 5TH AVENUE STORES,
AND EXCHANGE THEM FOR FINE JEWELRY!

FLAUNT IMAGES OF MUHAMMAD AND ALLAH
IN RADICAL CELL HIDEAWAYS,
AND WITH INSOLENT FACE MARTYRDOM!

CITY-BRED ZULUS WEAVING ALONG
ON YOUR STICKERED WAR SHIELDS--
LET IT RIP!

WEDDING DAY

YOU ARE LOOKING AT A NURSE
WHO'S AS TOUGH AS SAMSONITE
YET AS SOFT AND ULTRA-LIGHT
AS THE KLEENEX IN HER PURSE

WITH SUCH FLUENCY, SUCH ART
DID SHE SET MY BROKEN BONES
AND BREAK UP MY KIDNEY STONES
AND MASSAGE MY AILING HEART

NOW I TAKE HER FOR MY WIFE,
FOR THIS WOMAN CAN CONDENSE
CUPS OF MEANING, PINTS OF SENSE
FROM THE BEDLAM BREW OF LIFE

AND SHE LOVES THE SINKING SUN,
LOVES ITS EARLY MORNING CLIMB,
BRILLIANT COLORS HALTING TIME--
FROM THEIR MEDLEY SHE WAS SPUN

SPIN A ROCK ALIVE AND SPRY
SPIN A RAINBOW ON THE LAWN
SPIN A BAT THAT WAKES AT DAWN
SPIN A MOLE THAT'S LEARNED TO FLY

WHATEVER I WAS YESTERDAY

LAST NIGHT I WENT TO BED ACCOMPLISHED;
THIS MORNING I WOKE UP PRIVILEGED.
WHEN I GOT UNDER THE COVERS
I WAS GOOD-NATURED;
COME MORNING I WAS INSENSITIVE.
SOMETHING HAPPENED OVERNIGHT,
AND MY INSPIRATION BECAME THEFT,
THE STANDARDS I THOUGHT UNIVERSAL
AN IMPOSITION.

THIS MORNING THE STREETS WERE AS DANGEROUS AT NOON
AS THEY WERE AT MIDNIGHT.
MODERN DAY RED GUARDS METED OUT JUDGEMENT:
I WAS MICROAGGRESIVE WHEN I LOOKED AT THEM,
MICROAGGRESIVE WHEN I DIDN'T.
THEY YELLED AT ME, SPIT AT ME, GOADED ME—
THEN ACCUSED ME OF INSTIGATION.

WHATEVER I WAS YESTERDAY,
TODAY I WAS THE MONGER OF WHIPS,
THE MAKER OF A NIGHTRIDER'S SADDLE,
THE SHIPWRIGHT WHOSE BOATS
CARRIED HUMAN CARGO,
THE AGRONOMIST WHOSE SEEDS
BURST INTO COTTON.

THIS MORNING I WOKE UP
TO FIND EVERY DEED I HAD DONE WELL
WAS DONE WITH UNFAIR ADVANTAGE,
AND ONLY TO CONTROL OTHERS.
AND IF I DIDN'T AGREE I WAS FRAGILE—

AS FRAGILE AS SAM COOKE'S MEASURE-LONG HUM
GIVING LIKE A KICKED-IN DOOR,

ITS LOVE AND HOPE RANSACKED AND LOOTED
BY UNMELODIC MALICE.

WICK TO WICK

THE ORANGE SUNSET HANGS BEHIND
THE KNOCKABOUT IN CAP AND CLOAK.
HE FIGHTS THE WIND THAT TRIES TO FIND
THE HANDHELD FLAME THAT LIGHTS HIS SMOKE.

THE HERMIT PICKS UP OFF THE GROUND
A BRANCH TO SNAP ACROSS HIS THIGH;
AND RUBBING, BLOWING, SOON HE'S FOUND
THE HEAT TO WARM A WEEK-OLD PIE.

THE ROADSIDE FLARE PROTECTS THE CAR;
THE PILOT LIGHT BURNS BLUE AND FREE;
THE SMITHY POUNDS HIS RED-HOT BAR;
THE RELAY TORCH WE CROWD TO SEE.

BUT BURNING STEADY AT THE SOURCE,
ITS MANY NAMES SCORCHED ON THE AIR,
A CANDLE WORKS, APPLYING FORCE
WHEN FIRE'S NEEDED ANYWHERE.

THE WATER TOSSER FILLS HIS PAIL,
AND BLOWING MOUTH DRAWS IN HER BREATH;
THEY STRIKE, BUT THROUGH THE FEARSOME GALE
THE FLAME ENFEEBLED FOILS DEATH.

IT NEEDS NO LIGHTER, NOR A MATCH;
A SECOND CANDLE FINDS THE HEAT;
THE FIRE TRANSFERS, STARTS TO CATCH,
AS GOD'S AND ADAM'S FINGERS MEET.

SO POUR THE WAX, AND LET IT FILL
THE SHALLOW, FRETFUL MORTAL MOLD;
THEN LET IT HARDEN, AND THERE WILL
TO STRONG AND LASTING LIGHT TO HOLD.

WE GATHER HERE FROM DISPARATE LANDS
AROUND ONE STAR, ONE BURNING STICK,
BECOME A STARLIT SKY OF HANDS--
THE FIRE PASSING WICK TO WICK.

WILDFLOWERS

THEIR GYM SNEAKERS HANG OVER THEIR SHOULDERS,
ROTORING ON TIED LACES
AS THEY COME TO THE CROSSWALK AT A DEAD RUN,
SHOES SLAPPING THE SIDEWALK, THEN STOMPING
TO A RAUCOUS HALT.
PAGES DROP OUT OF BINDERS WHOSE RINGS HAVE COME APART.
GUMMY ERASERS DROP OUT OF POCKETS
AND LAND LIKE ROLLING PARACHUTISTS.
THEY ARE SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION.
THEY ARE ATOMIC FISSION.
AS FOR FORMING A STRAIGHT LINE, FORGET IT.
THEY'RE NOT LIKE US—POTTED, PLANTED, AMENDED,
WATERED, PRUNED, ARRANGED.
THEY'RE UNCULTIVATED, POPPING UP EVERYWHERE,
AS WILD AS THE BLACK-EYED SUSAN BEFORE IT WAS NAMED.
AND THEN THEY'RE GONE, TO THE NEXT CROSS-STREET,
A SINGLE MITTEN ON THE WHITE-LINED CROSSWALK
THE ONLY THING LEFT TO MARK THEIR PASSAGE.

Barney Warren is a native Brooklynite whose urge to write poetry grew out of an abiding love for the New York Yankees of the era in which he was raised. Barney has outgrown neither his urge to write nor his love for the Yankees of that bygone era; however, his subject matter now includes everything that reaches his very city-honed sense receptors. His mind is a fully-actuated urban development master plan, and he doesn't expect to be nominated for Cowboy Poet of the Year.