

# Meditations for the Night Shift

The background image shows two construction workers from behind, standing in a dark, industrial environment. They are wearing bright yellow hard hats and dark, heavy jackets. The scene is dimly lit, with some light coming from a window or opening in the distance, creating a somber and quiet atmosphere. The workers are positioned in the center of the frame, looking towards the background.

Selected Poems of  
Barney Warren

# **Meditations for the Night Shift**

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Krin Van Tatenhove**

*I'm an insomniac, my mind works the night shift. –*  
Pete Wentz

## **TAKE A STEP**

Take a step and don't turn around.  
Take another step and don't turn around.  
Take a step every minute for a year,  
and when you turn around  
what you were walking away from  
will be too far away to see.

## **DREAMS**

Dreams are seismic events in the subconscious.  
Everyone and everything we've ever known  
is a house of well-laid, well-arranged bricks  
that in sleep becomes rubble  
we spend all night tripping over.

## **MOVING TO CLEVELAND**

That you moved doesn't matter.  
What matters is why Cleveland  
and not Richmond or Rapid Falls.  
What matters  
is what the Roadway Inns were like,  
how clean the Chevron stations were,  
how many train tracks you crossed.

## **IF GIVEN**

A stillborn child, given a full life,  
could've been as great as Catherine;  
a brain dead man, had his rickshaw not overturned,  
could've scaled Everest before Hillary;  
an earlier poet could've had Rumi's canon  
had he not chosen the priesthood instead;  
what if Newton had been a child of famine,  
with a swollen belly and flies on his forehead?

## **FOREKNOWLEDGE**

If you had foreknowledge  
that this ride to the airport would be your last,  
every exit sign,  
every road stripe,  
the license plate of every car  
would be as thrilling  
as any space launch or image from the Mars rover.

## **TOLL**

If you have to pay a toll  
to cross a bridge that raises up  
for every passing boat  
maybe you should instead  
go somewhere you can cross  
hopping from stone to stone.

## **WET SPOT**

If you return from the restroom  
with a big wet spot on the front of your pants  
others may smirk or trade knowing smiles,  
but by the time they're walking out the door  
they'll have forgotten your spot,  
and be thinking about their own--  
the one that looks dry but feels wet.

## **HILLTOP**

If you stand on a hilltop early on a moonless night  
the town below looks like a sky full of stars.  
If you look up at night far from human habitation  
the sky looks like a town  
before the people have gone to bed.

## **ADULTS**

When a boy and girl undress together  
they think they've become adults.  
But if they skip school to get high  
the day before they undress  
they'll skip school to get high the day after.

## **LOSS OF INNOCENCE**

We consider our first time  
a loss of innocence,  
but it's each subsequent time  
that pecks away at innocence  
until the cupid valentine heart  
is just a pounding four-chambered muscle.

## **INBORN LIGHT**

Each one of us has an inborn light,  
but like many lights  
it's hard to see until it's dark.  
Could that be why, when there's a power failure,  
neighbors see each other for the first time?

## **SOD**

One section of sod  
is no different from all the others;  
and, as we all know, the sections grow together  
until it's impossible to tell  
there were once sections.

## **ADVANCEMENT**

It wasn't the alphabet or electricity or the plow--  
it was the woman who rocked to sleep  
another woman's baby;  
and if we folded a stranger's laundry  
instead of throwing it on the floor  
we'd go further than any future  
Westinghouse or Marconi could take us.

## **TOUCHING**

Instead of touching each other  
they're touching the eighteen month-old  
they created by touching each other;  
and the little unsteady feet  
and little uncontrolled arms  
and loud unself-conscious voice  
give them the feeling  
of being lifted off the ground  
by all the red balloons in Paris.

## **CARNALITY**

In his prurience  
a man will peel a woman's bark  
to see her grain;  
then he'll want to cut her down to a stump  
to see her rings.

## **COSTUMES**

The Elizabethan collar  
on a costume shop mannequin  
was once everyday wear for an Englishman;  
and the wrangler jeans of a working cowboy  
and the formal vest of a litigator  
are each other's costume.

## **GRAMMAR**

Some of us  
can only find enjoyment  
in correct punctuation  
and careful pronunciation,  
while for others pleasure  
has no commas or periods  
or moving lips.

## **PHOTO FINISH**

We would rather believe the photos  
the realtor supplies  
of green and untroubled frontage  
than see for ourselves  
the medusa hair weeds  
and the insects that devour each other's young.

## **AMPLE SUPPLY**

Stupid people are rare.  
What's more common is the meat packer  
who's never had a chance  
to chair a committee,  
or whose consciousness  
is the image  
in a pregnant woman's ultrasound.

## **CONSTITUENTS**

They listen to their constituents  
as if a verdict was being read,  
and talk to their constituents  
as if uttering a verdict,  
and shake hands with their constituents  
as if agreeing with a verdict.

## **ISN'T IT ENOUGH?**

Why bother dissecting the tenets of her faith?  
Isn't it enough that whatever the untruths  
it's making her a better mother, wife and citizen.  
It's making her stay up late studying  
and wake up early to deliver newspapers.

## **HIS ONLY SON**

When you're so moved by a son's ultimate sacrifice  
that you want to repay him  
with uncompensated sacrifice  
heaven is Ed McMahon at your door  
with a check for winning the sweepstakes  
you never entered.

## **THINGS THAT DON'T SINK**

Some things just won't sink,  
so why try to hold them under?  
A foul-weather vest in a bucket of sudsy water  
follows its nature when it floats--  
and there's so much you can learn  
from just the side facing up.

## **CLOTHES**

They say the clothes make the man,  
but they might also hide  
a character defect that would unmake him,  
and they might also make the layer cakes  
he bakes for the overworked  
and the long hugs he gives the overwhelmed  
go unnoticed.

## **LAST ACT**

His last living act  
was as a missile  
neutralizing its target.  
His last thoughts  
were of the aftereffects  
only others would live to see.

## **ONE CITY BLOCK**

We're surrounded by foreign countries.  
No, not the ones we need to book passage to.  
Walk one city block, and you pass people at work  
speaking specialized languages  
as hard to decipher as any Tibetan dialect,  
using tools and equipment as unusual  
as the palace of Lhasa.

## **HARD OR LAZY**

Some of us work hard, and some of us are lazy;  
and a hard worker will work hard  
for five or fifty dollars an hour,  
and a lazy worker will be lazy  
for five or fifty dollars an hour.

## **MISDIAGNOSIS**

The doctor who misdiagnosed you  
has made five thousand correct diagnoses.  
Do you really need to ruin her reputation and career  
because it was you  
and not that lady across the street  
who got ensnared in the law of averages?

## **A SECOND OF PAIN**

If you're willing to kill for my wallet  
just remember---  
I'll feel a second of pain,  
but after you're caught  
and sentenced to life  
you'll feel pain for the next sixty years.

## **CORONATION**

The king's coronation was today--  
not one homeless person was housed as a result.  
A money manager made the cover of Forbes--  
the literacy rate didn't change at all.  
A golfer put on the green jacket--  
effluent continued to flow into the Danube.

## **DOLL HOUSE**

You find your newest romantic interest  
Intoxicating,  
the root word of which is toxic;  
and once she gets into your bloodstream  
she'll tower over you  
like a little girl towers over her doll house,  
where you'll find yourself stuck inside,  
having shrunk to the size of a doll.

## **ADHERENTS**

Don't judge a belief system by its adherents:  
People will use anything  
for their own purposes.  
They'll reverse roles with guiding principles,  
and force those principles  
to follow them wherever they choose to go.

## **WATER GUN FIGHT**

I saw five children today  
having a water gun fight.

I spent an hour watching their pop-up microverse.  
When they get older they might remember  
that they once had water gun fights.  
But only I will remember the one they had today.

## **CONVICTION**

You believe things because you were raised to,  
which means the way someone else found the world  
has become your feeding tube.  
They don't want you to eat solid food,  
which would mean looking in front of,  
on top of, behind, underneath and inside  
the world as *you* find it.

## **FAVORITE**

It makes perfect sense  
that your favorite magician  
gets upset when you try to get his attention.  
He needs to give all his attention  
to the new trick he's working on,  
so he'll stay your favorite magician.

## **UNTAMED**

Your strait-laced, dignified professor  
can be as untamed  
as a leopard overtaking a zebra.  
Without this side he couldn't keep up  
the demeanor and countenance he needs  
to prepare you for a law career.

## **EARLY THANKSGIVING**

Maybe this will be the year  
Thanksgiving comes early.  
All it takes is summer serenity,  
and a chance meeting  
with someone whose nondescript face  
can't hide a ravishing soul.

## **JOYSTICKS**

Video screen characters  
decapitate each other,  
yet grow new heads instantly  
so the action can go on without abatement.  
And the two gamers—one in Turkey, one in Armenia--  
care only about points, not grudges.

## **BACK FROM ABROAD**

Everyone comes back from abroad  
with pictures and stories and objects.  
Why don't you come back with something  
light can't make a shadow of,  
or an untransferable impression,  
or an ineffable tale?

## **VISUAL DELIGHT**

Yes, some people have grit, brains, high ideals—  
and some people just look good,  
while having none of these things.  
But looking good is as admirable  
as toughness, intellect, seeing a better future.  
A pleasing human body brings visual delight,  
just as a waterfall brings snowmelt to the flatlands.

## **PRINCIPLES**

When a street protester blocks the way  
of a man going about his business  
that protester is standing up for her principles.  
When that man blinds her with bear spray  
he is standing up for his principles.

## **LUCKY ANIMALS**

We get angry over trifles, though we know better.  
We take second helpings, though we know better.  
We peep through the curtains, though we know better.  
We judge by appearance, though we know better.  
Our habits are as strong as the instincts of animals.  
But those lucky animals—they aren't badgered  
by guilt and misgivings.

## **SOLE EVIDENCE**

To you, you're just another working stiff  
dragging yourself through life  
doing nothing out of the ordinary.  
But to archeologists twelve centuries from now  
you'll be an amazing find, the sole evidence  
of a society long theorized and now proven.

## **LIBRARY BOOKS**

We live in a giant library.  
Everyone we pass by or see from a distance  
is a book on a shelf,  
but with a blank spine and a blank jacket.  
Doesn't it drive you crazy—  
all these people whose field-picked knowledge  
and vine-ripened wisdom will never be shared with us?

## **THE DAY MIGHT COME**

The day might come  
when every femme fatale  
finds herself with a soup ladle  
serving chipped beef to the unwashed,  
and every matronly, bewhiskered woman  
with a double chin and sagging earlobes  
leaves a matinee idol lovesick.

## **COLORED PENCILS**

Religion is a box of colored pencils  
all made of wood and graphite.  
Each pencil has a different color--  
the rites and articles of faith  
of your religion or mine.  
We refuse to recognize that regardless of color  
the pencils are all made of the same lead and graphite.

## **WASTED TIME**

One of these days you might realize  
the ten minutes you spent detailing  
how helpful you could be  
were wasted, as they only heard  
the one thing that could prove troublesome.

## **BEARD EDICT**

The Universe is so big--  
so many galaxies, so many suns, so many planets,  
so much space between them all...  
and on earth--so much order to keep,  
so many life forms, so much variety.  
Hasn't God got enough to do  
besides worry who is or isn't wearing a beard?

## **CAPTORS**

Behind the front lines  
in a place so filled with shell holes  
you wouldn't know it was once fertile cropland  
the prisoner of war says to his captor,  
"Tomorrow the front lines will move,  
and then I'll be *your* captor".

## **DYING DOESN'T MEAN DEAD**

A flashlight with a dying battery  
still elucidates.  
A rusty, long-pronged fork  
still turns over a steak.  
A pencil with a rounded, nubby tip  
still passes on momentous thoughts.

## **HOW EASY**

How easy it is to think  
that the woman or man  
who brings your primal drives  
to a screaming crescendo  
that blows out your eardrums  
is immune to one-way desire.

## **SELF-DESTRUCTION**

Sometimes our self-destruction is dramatic—  
a head through a windshield, a curtain combusting.  
Mostly, though, we destroy ourselves imperceptibly,  
like managers who short the till a dollar a day  
right up to the time everyone's paycheck bounces.

## **NO RECOGNITION**

She spent an hour  
fixing a baked Alaska for you  
in honor of your winning a scholarship.  
Even if you don't eat sweets,  
even if it's burnt,  
even if you have to throw it out,  
even if it makes you sick,  
won't you at least thank her?

## **SOUND BITE**

An on-the-scene reporter  
is getting a sound bite  
from an outraged woman  
speaking truth to power,  
as if the powerful speak but lies,  
as if only the truth comes out  
of a powerless person's mouth.

## **THE HEAT**

There's the heat of burning trash cans,  
the crash as cars are flipped over,  
the honking against blocked traffic,  
the epithets on barricaded buildings.  
It won't be long before people  
who take over buildings and block traffic  
take over and block each other.

## **BETRAYED**

Sticks knock together in the faceoff circle.  
A woman turns to her best friend since childhood  
and says, "I can't believe you voted for him".  
There's a pass. There's a slapshot.  
There's a goalie looking behind him at the puck.  
She stares at her friend with building disbelief  
as fans scream like Tonga warriors.

## **TIME TRAVELERS**

Two women  
from different points on the human timeline  
met somewhere on a seldom-traveled open road.  
They were alien to each other  
in language, in culture, in historical memory.  
Each was perplexed, wondering what to do.  
As for their dogs, they just chased each other  
and rolled in the dirt.

## **A SAFE PLACE**

Right now it's too much to bear  
to admit you're wrong.  
Right now it's easier  
to look someone else in the eye  
than to look yourself in the eye.  
Time is the only distance safe enough  
for you to see who you are now.

## **MANNERS**

She doesn't sign petitions or join marches  
or lie in front of bulldozers.

She doesn't hold vigils or hunger strikes  
or handcuff herself to gates.

Iniquity flourishes  
while she does nothing  
but teach her children manners.

## **OFFENDERS**

Every day we hear about lifelong offenders  
who steal and rob  
because there are no jobs in their neighborhood  
or decent schools to educate them.

A lot of that ill-gotten money  
could start a small business.

A lot of those gold chains and rings  
could fund a learning lab.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barney Warren is a native Brooklynite who now lives in San Antonio. He has two precious collections of his work available through Second Shore Publishing—*Wick to Wick* and *Zero Mass*. You can find them at [2ndshore.org](http://2ndshore.org).