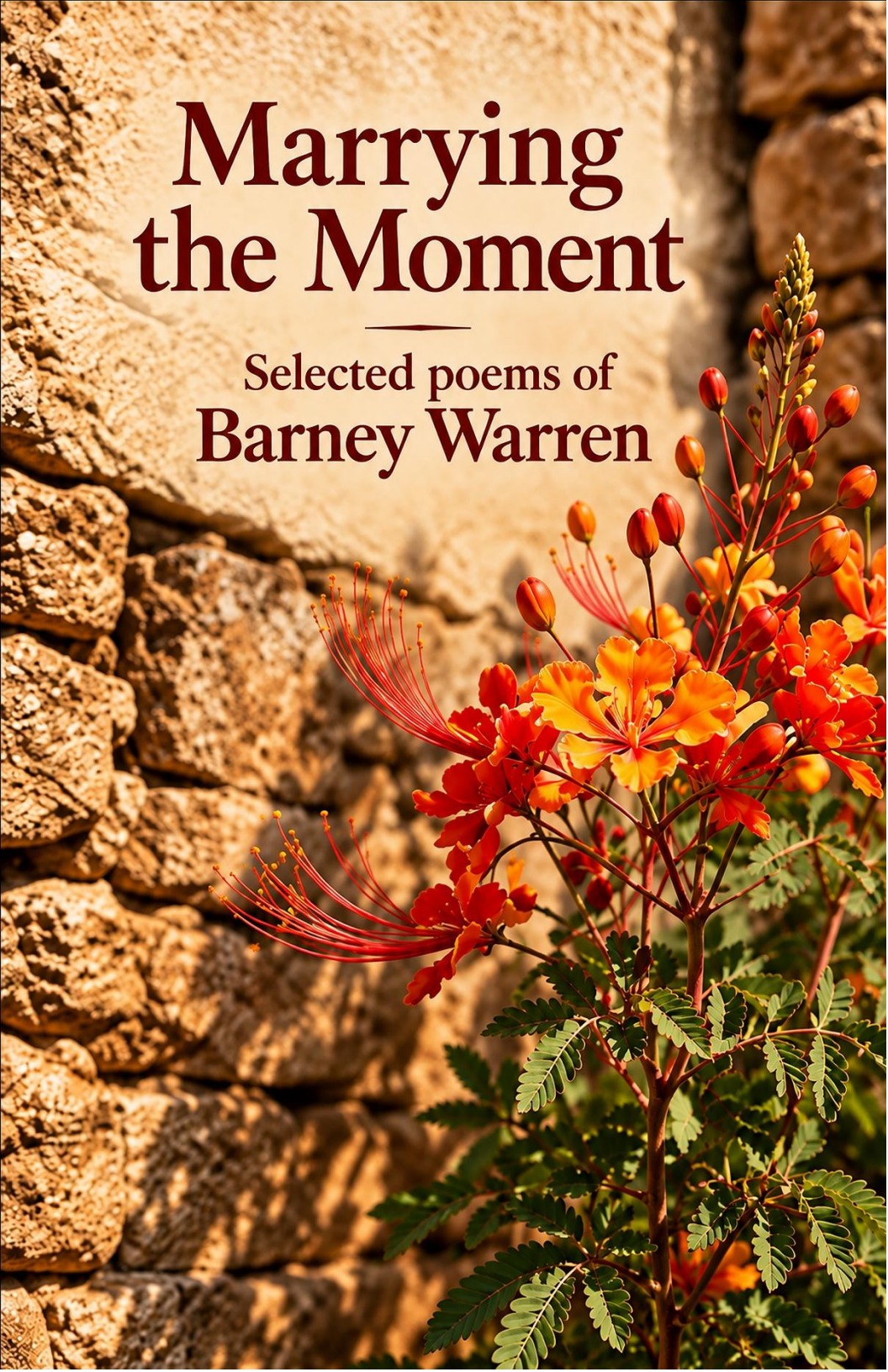
Marrying the Moment

Selected poems of Barney Warren



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Experience is communicated by small details intimately observed. — Ernest Hemingway

Despite The Rain

Despite rain and trusty irrigators
there's another side to being a grass root:
the very blade growing out of you
steals your water by the pint.
Topsoil takes a quart, weeds a gallon,
sun and heat enough to be charged with grand theft.
People take nothing—but some of them
will put you in the ground with care
and pull you out with caprice.

Father's Love

Dawn broke about an hour ago,
its benign light canvassing the city,
knocking on doors, pulling the covers off sleepers.
It's the kind of morning
that makes a man with no children
want to fly over the swamps of Georgia
and look at the hanging cypress boughs,
hover above the piedmont slopes
to check on the nesting falcons,
swoop down over Lake Champlain
tallying rainbow trout—
flying, hovering, swooping with a father's love.

Spirits

Inside this mountain's circumference
live the spirits of the dead,
spirits we're told we shouldn't disturb.
Has anyone heard these spirits sneeze,
whiffed their odor, tripped over them,
or caught them in a state of undress?
We're told this mountain is their home.
Of what use is a home to the disembodied,
who own nothing, and are immune
to cold, heat, snow, rain and wind?
I think I'll stand beside this mountain--
a mountain not of the spirit world
but of mine--
and see if one of the spirits,
yes, one of these spirits itself
tells me not to walk on it.

April In San Antonio

Every quarter acre is a testament
that bluebonnets are blooming.
Every April someone who's never seen bluebonnets
sees them in bloom,
and someone who passed through town last April
wishes they were back here.

Esperanza

Our flaming Esperanza
has wide-mouthed narrow-stemmed flowers
in deli mustard yellow and lava flow orange.
They fill their bush
as congregants fill a cathedral at mass.
The Esperanza is drought-tolerant--
and then there's me, who drinks enough water
to flood Saint Patrick's Cathedral.

Clouds

I've been looking at clouds all day
and not seen two that are identical,
as no two birches are identical,
and no two bobcats have hairs
identical in number.

Thinking of New York

Our state flower, the bluebonnet,
has a short open window of life.
They wait to die in the fields, ignoring us
as we admire their blue season's greeting.
I look at them, and think of New York, not Texas.
The fields are subway stations,
the flowers living people
with their own open windows,
hoping the train to Manhattan comes
before those windows close.

Checking The Mail

This morning I checked the mail,
and sorted through it as I went home,
making one handful for myself,
another for my wife.
How many growing things did I pass
on the way back to my house?
How many of their common names did I know?
I knew none, but they all continued to grow
according to their natures, not their names.

Indian Hawthorns

Our Indian hawthorns
are mere feet from our crepe myrtles.
If the myrtles were chopped down
would the hawthorns even care?
A couple living two doors down just sold their house.
We never said goodbye to them.
We never even said hello.
Did we learn this from the hawthorns?

Sanctuary

Despite yesterday and tomorrow,
despite my colliding needs,
right now there's only this salt marsh
and the boardwalk of this sanctuary;
only the cry of herons and egrets
among the mangroves and cordgrass;
only small fish jetting in and out
of underwater sand;
only the windshield crack
of a spider web in full sun;
only a turtle hiding its head in its shell.
A squinting photographer zooms in on a piper.
I want to ask her about her tripod—
but isn't that just like a human?

Little Flowers

They don't understand self-punishment,
these little flowers with eyelash petals
popping up at whim among the Bermuda grass.
Where the lawn inclines they resemble
a neighborhood of hillside homes.
These flowers don't know I've sullied myself
by snatching a dollar from my wife's purse.
They have no acerbic wit.
They have no cat o' nine tails.
They can't punish me, so I'll just have to
do it myself.

Wading In The Stream

A barefoot man walks along a stream
on a steaming hot day.
For relief, he wades into the water
and dunks his head in.
He tells no-one, and no-one sees.
The water flows on
with whatever was on his hair and feet.

One Leaf

A neighbor a few doors down has a lateral vine.
It spreads out from her plant bed
with nothing to cling to.
The leaves are light green on one side,
dark green on the other,
and shaped like playing card spades.
Every time I pass by
it's larger than the last time I saw it.
And it all began with one leaf,
as a new world begins with one person
buying a beggar hot coffee on a cold day.

Gnats

The grass that flanks the river sways in the wind.
A whippoorwill's trilling flushes out chipmunks,
but a fighter jet's decibels saw through the air
and scares them back underground.
The July heat wet-vacs my energy,
brings with it a host of gnats
that buzz in my ear incessantly,
and remind me that again
I've forgotten to bring repellant.

Ram

A ram looks down at us from its mountain haunt
as we drive past it on our way home.
The ram insignia on the tailgate of our Charger
means nothing to it,
nor do the LA Rams, nor paintings of rams
on thin-aired elevations,
heads held high and ready for anything.
It doesn't care that to a billion Chinese
this is the year of the ram.
When it looks up at the night sky
it doesn't see a constellation of itself.
It isn't even glad to know
we no longer practice ritual slaughter.

Topography

This backcountry trail has been mapped
with irregular rings
referring to altitude changes.
As we move from one ring to the next
we get further from the theatrics
of hourly wage hearings
and closer to the fir trees, and the free labor
of their plainspoken, hardworking bark.

Tomato Plants

In this unfiltered sunlight
a harsh glare reflects off the sidewalk,
so I seek the eye-soothing greenery of lawns—
but nothing soothes the tomato plants
on the lawn of one homeowner
who's staked, tied and caged them,
and left them out in the heartless sun
to wait for rain and tomatoes.

At the Arboretum

In a bonsai pot in the greenhouse
cords grow out of the soil
to tie down a banyan tree's limbs.
In the next room the foliage
on a small tree for sale
is shaved to look like a spiral staircase.
Outside there's a desert specimen
with peeling fibers
almost too thin to see or feel.
And then there's the blossoms
they call summer snowflakes,
but I call large white handkerchiefs.
Down a narrow flight of steps
there's a bowl large enough to grind maize in,
with a microscope even larger
looking down on it--
one turn of the lens dial,
and the flowers fragment
into a close order drill of color.
Next to the wall with the names of private donors
water rolls down a chute
and into the finger-deep river
on the edge of a lilliputian town,
where a model train going in circles
bypasses its only station.

Butterflies

In a dense Everglades undergrowth
I saw a black and white butterfly
draw nectar from an orange-yellow flower
amidst the greys and greens of the forest.
It was doing what butterflies have done
since there were butterflies.
I was doing what people have done
since there were people—
watch in envy and admiration
something that doesn't fret
when there's no nectar
or sigh relief when there is.

The Nest

The black feathers that keep her airborne
are stiffened, pointing to the rear
as she guards a nest
built on three inches of pipe
sticking out from an entryway wall.
Her neck and crest are the color
of coffee with cream,
and don't move as she cocks her head
to look down at me.
She's high enough that a man
standing on another man's shoulders
might not reach her.
A recent storm has vandalized her nest;
pieces lie at my feet, needing to be swept up.
She sits on what's left of it,
her face unreadable as I begin sweeping.

Vernal Falls, Yosemite

Vernal Falls goes over the edge
like a jumper whose canopy didn't open,
and drops three-hundred roaring feet
past the ponderosa pines
and the granite steps of the Mist Trail
slamming into the Merced River headwaters
with a belly whop.
No longer a waterfall, it melts into the river,
swelling the Merced with added cubic feet.
It both sweeps away and leaves behind
jasper, schist, sand, and grit
on its way downstream to a promontory
that can't be anything but a mirage.
I divorce myself from god, from gratitude,
from speculation on the hereafter,
and marry this moment.

A Bird

A bird flies past,
losing a feather so lightweight
it moves only at the air's pleasure.
It finally lands miles
from where the bird lost it.
What have I been but a feather
on whom the air enacts its will?

Walking Without A Map

Though it's northern California,
the front yards of the homes
scrolled around this steep hillside
are filled with tropical color
and permutations of white.
Branches densely packed with leaves
have been allowed to grow
until they cover the names on the street signs.
Only with a map would I know I'm on Ethel Avenue.

Ownership

Lost somewhere on Emma Creek road
I came upon a neat stack of firewood
set against the wide trunk of an aged tree.
Nearby, a brown horse
with a white patch on its chest
stood alone in a well-tended pasture.
The horse owned the pasture
and the lime green hills behind it
and the ashen clouds above it.

Cloudburst

Raindrops strike the asphalt
with the numbers and force
of an Irish Riverdance,
kicking up enough water
to make sensible people stay home.
The rain batters bushes,
puddles around trunks,
then sinks below to roots
with as wide a reach
as the branches above them.
All are glad that even in hot weather
rain isn't hot.

Grackles

It's market day in Asheville.
Grackles barge in on the earthbound crowd,
unfazed by the size of these spillers
of cashews, banana chips and cheese cubes.
They mingle closely with these four-limbed creatures,
yet dodge their sandals and sneakers with ease.
The creatures spend their money,
and leave with loaves of Italian bread
poking out of canvas bags,
while the grackles eat for free.

Acknowledgement

I spend all day walking,
exploring trails and their spurs,
sweating under my backpack.
I talk to the hills, they don't respond.
I talk to the trees, they ignore me.
I sing for the flowers, my reward is silence.
I'll be so glad to get home to you
just to have some conversation.

The Great Wall

Before there were superhighways
that ate everything in their path,
that drove snakes
from their mating grounds
and cut off deer
from their water holes,
a great wall
rode up and down hills in ancient China.
It was borrowed from the earth
and belonged to the earth,
and took longer to build
than all superhighways together.
To imagine those hills without the wall
would be to imagine a coral snake
without its rings.

Pink Magnolia

The petal is a wide and shallow cup
that curls outward, then downward at the tip,
with veins that stand out
like those in a human embryo.
My mother was fond of pink magnolias,
but when a truck rollover took her husband
her passion for the sweet magnolia
was struck down by her bitterness.

In The Bright Light Of Day

In the bright light of day
a fern frond lies in pieces,
surely the work of a night-prowler
not evolved enough to know
that a leaf can't live apart from its plant.
Was there a struggle? Pain I could never imagine?
The bright light of day
clarifies the dead
and makes philosophers of the living.

About the Author

Barney Warren grew up in Brooklyn, New York. Peripatetic for most of his adulthood, on the cusp of middle age he finally settled in Boise, Idaho, where he lived for twenty-five years while pursuing the craft of writing. Barney now lives in San Antonio, where he continues to write, and where he produced the poems in this collection.