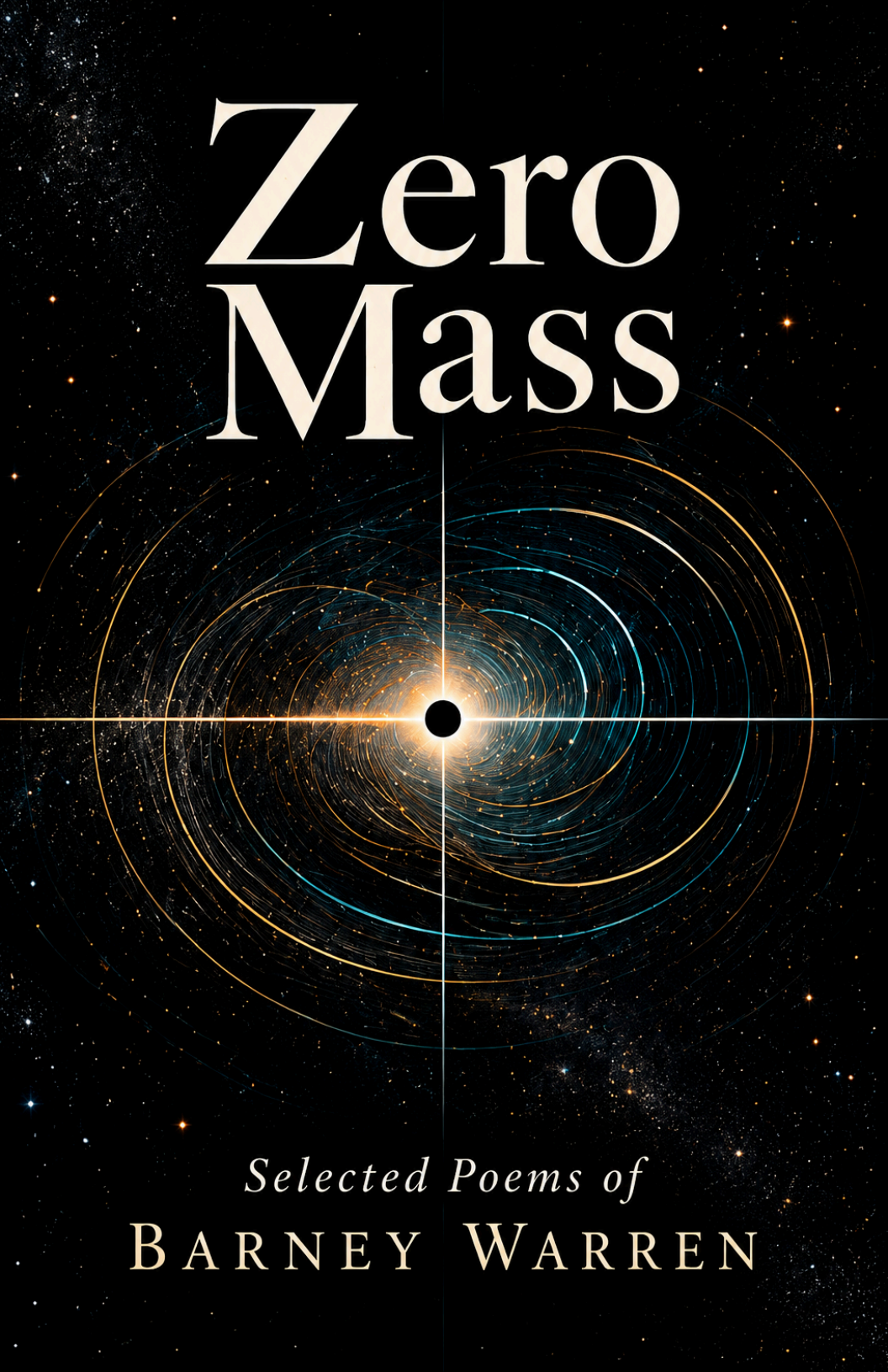
Zero Mass



Selected Poems of

BARNEY WARREN

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Collected Poems of Barney Warren

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Second Shore
Publishing

Dedicated to Dr. Italo Samano

To observe without evaluating is the highest form of intelligence. – Jiddu Krishnamurti.

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Check-in Paperwork

She walks with a four-year-old's
undeveloped coordination,
and jumps as if she's in a sack race.
She plays with the clipboard's clip
as her mother completes the intake forms.
Her mother ignores her,
so she talks to herself with quiet reverence,
as a wildlife watcher would talk
to an eagle riding on an airstream.
The chair is too big for her to sit down on,
so she scales it with an ease
that leaves me looking on
with quiet reverence.

Poets At The Beach

As night gives way to dawn
a bright orange lateral bolt
lights up a soft, dry sandscape
and its carpet of bare feet indentations.
Beach bums walk here, bar backs walk here,
Walmart greeters walk here.
They speak as they open striped umbrellas,
speak as they spot boats in the sea lanes,
speak as blowing sand clings to their hair.
There are metaphors and similes
and phrasemaking in their language,
enough to put an image
in every empty picture frame
up and down this coast.

Television News

Addie and I sit on the couch
she tore up as a puppy,
watching as floodwaters
tear up Kerrville, Texas.
Her head rests on my stomach.
Her eyeballs are lidding over.
Her legs are stretched to their maximum length.
Without even understanding what a flood is
Addie knows I'll keep her safe from it.

Papered Over

Crabgrass and porcelain are claiming my lawn;
I knock over a lamp
turning it on in the dark;
I put my hearing aids in
and they fall right back out;
justice miscarried sweeps me up
with every newsbreak.
When emotion is spent,
like blank wallpaper
what's left should be unremarkable.

Landing

We're coming into San Francisco.
The fog clouds are lapping the hills
as ocean waves lap a shore.
I'm pinching my nostrils
with thumb and forefinger
and blowing as hard as I can.
The seatback trays are upright.
The screens have gone blank;
I can no longer watch the movie
over the shoulder of the guy
one seat in front of me.

Snowballs, 1963

Children just home from school
drop their textbooks and run outside.
They grab handfuls of powdered snow
and pack them into coherent balls.
Fords and Pontiacs slide along the street,
their tire treads filled with white frosting.
Snowballs crash into windshields,
and harried men roll down their windows and yell,
angry that their youth is gone,
but angrier that the young will become like them.

Nature Walk

In a little over an hour
we've covered plumbing, hardware, and flooring.
By mid-afternoon we'll reach
appliances, shelving, and paint.
If humans are part of nature
then what humans make is part of nature,
and the expanding anchors
that we pick from our Lowe's nature walk
will go perfectly alongside the crocuses.

In Line At The Checkpoint

She's on the other side
of a retractable belt
that hooks from one stanchion into another.
She's an African villager abroad,
many miles over land and water
from where baskets are balanced on heads.
She wears a fiesta of multi-hued fabrics
that leave neither skin nor figure exposed.
At the end of her dangling left arm
a hand that's ground seed into flour
and corn into meal
holds a cell phone.

Comparisons

In the men's health club
I look at the beards--
heavy from the right ear to the left ear,
or malnourished at the ears
and overfed at the chin,
or meager all over except
for a substantial mustache.
I hear in the men's conversations
voices deep and stentorian
or high and reedy.
I watch them train with weights,
knowing the man who benches five-hundred
and the man who benches two-fifty
both have white seminal fluid.

Ownership

Lost somewhere on Emma Creek Road
I came upon a neat stack of timber
in front of a hardwood tree collective.
Nearby, a lone brown horse
with a white patch on its chest
stood in a well-tended pasture.
Even a hundred yards away
I was the closest thing to it.
The horse owned the pasture
and the lime green hills behind it
and the ashen clouds above it.

Fever

A low-grade fever powdered the city
as it always does,
only today we paid it notice:
A woman attaching a hinge plate to a door
felt the final screw tighten after ten turns;
a junior-high student closed her ring binder,
and felt the snap as the edges met precisely;
a rock climber found the perfect foothold;
a vocalist hit a true f sharp;
even I, who can't tell from three yards away
if a valve is open or closed
was running a fever that told me.

Silent Meditation

She closes her eyes
and concentrates on her breathing
and the trickle of water from a tabletop fountain.
A hundred things, all meaningless,
invade her meditative space,
and she fights them off with passive acceptance.
But sometimes her empty mind longs for laughter,
so Liberty Mutual's Doug and his emu
get invited in for the chuckle she needs,
and sent away without selling a policy.

Driving Past The Drury Inn

New flying interchange ramps
joining I-10 and Loop 1604
swirl around this firmly planted local landmark.
Every day I travel over this interchange,
not knowing the applied science
behind this illusion of flight.
If I took the elevator
to the top floor of the Drury Inn
I'd do so not knowing how it works.

Grackles

It's market day in Asheville.
Grackles join the crowd of gigantic shoppers,
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 wingless, featherless giants spend their money,
and leave with loaves of Italian bread
poking out of canvas bags
while the grackles eat for free.

Attraction

A mother pulls her young child across the street
in a red unfolded multipurpose cart.
The sky is an optically gentle blue.
The front lawns are oceans of green
with brown and bare islands.
The mother swings the cart around
when they reach the other side of the street.
Today is watering day, and on the wet grass
droplets twinkle in the sunlight.
As mother and daughter head down the sidewalk
bushes fronting the porches
thrust their branches out to them,
and the mother's not sure
if it's attraction to light or beggary.

Flat On My Back

I lie in the grass facing puffy pillow clouds
that swallow and then spit out
all manner of aircraft.
I'm no more self-conscious
than the clouds are of their condensation,
and the jets of their Teflon-aluminum bodies.
Dragonflies flitter over me;
I'm keenly aware of them, vaguely aware of myself.

Weed Power

New black fabric underlays the mulch
we just spread around our flowers,
but already weeds are growing through it.
How can this be, that a flimsy blade
can force its way through tough fabric?
Overnight rain has turned the yard to mud
because it couldn't soak into the clay soil,
but a long trail of weeds rubs the mud off
so that when I get in the house
I can walk on the carpet and leave no trace.

One Bed Over

It was my coffee cake,
but here was Kenny, always shunned,
in the bed next to mine
eating a piece I'd broken off for him.
It would've been my last mouthful, but he ate it
as if it were his every ungranted wish.
A burr-sized crumb fell on his bedsheet,
and he wet his forefinger, pressed it into the bed
and lifted the crumb to his mouth.

Behind Golden Corral

Golden Corral won't open for another three minutes,
so I walk behind it, and enter brush
that opens into a dirt clearing
garnished with crushed rock.
I relieve myself on a billing company's
stained tri-fold letter
lying next to the slit window envelope it came in.
But Golden Corral is about to unlock its doors.
It's time to eat, not wonder if the bill was ever paid.

Too Much On Their Minds

If you look carefully you'll notice
that none of the cut blocks
set in the concrete wall
that partitions the homes behind it
from the main road in front of it
are identical.
But to drivers on the main road
with too much on their minds
the stones are people
on the platform of a local stop
seen by someone on an express thundering by.

To Know Without Knowing

Every hue was part of a strategy:
He mixed them into reds and oranges and browns;
he mixed red with orange, orange with brown,
then red with brown.
He added black and white, mixing them into grey.
He knew exactly where to lay the paint,
how to swipe the brush and knife.
When it was finished El Greco had a sky
that resembled the mental state
of a man five-hundred years in the future.
El Greco knew me without knowing me.

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.

Stones In Autumn

Magenta and vermillion blooms
pop out from a bush;
a prospering crepe myrtle
advances yellow plumage;
mallards paddle on a lake
that moves with the slightest wind;
sidewalk borders bulge with rocks
in their natural state--grey, white and brown--
enough to stone every lawbreaker.

In The Sleep Research Center

A small square frame with a woodcarver's
labyrinthine vision,
inside it an impressionistic painting:
A crop field in pink and blue,
pink where sunshine is the brightest,
getting smaller as it disappears
into olive and turquoise leafage.
When the medical assistant calls me
I'll be somewhere hidden in the furrows.

Morning Stroll, Thanksgiving Day

Overcast sky, a vendor of clouds for every taste;
layer cake landscaping
of white stones and black mulch;
chalk markings on the asphalt
for the water department crew;
rebar breaking free from its sidewalk tomb;
old effaced wooden skateboard split lengthwise,
all milage used up.

Party Laughter

Saturday afternoon, a patio party next door;
stereophonic sounds, unfamiliar music;
people sitting and walking, eating and laughing,
in the spaces between the fence boards;
black solar panels inscrutable, enigmatic;
Palm fronds on the far end of the patio,
each torn into hanging fringes;
afternoon shadows move westward,
shade for a dozen laughs
in a dozen pitches and tempos.

Living Together

Green knolls and dips
live with lawn edgers
and riding mowers;
shrubs and bushes
live with branch loppers
and hedge trimmers;
marigolds and thyme
live with cultivators
and garden spades;
manure and topsoil
live with hoes, rakes
and seed spreaders;
dogwoods and elms
live with birding guidebooks
and tree surgeons.

Evening Rush

White headlights moving slowly south,
amber taillights moving slowly north,
on the freeway, on the ramps,
on the parallel frontage road.
Speedometers that go up to one-twenty
hover between zero and ten.
Hidden in the ranks of this march of lights
a driver and her rider, their faces lost
in the dark of their car's interior,
tool around a rural backroad on a bright morning
in a hand-cranked horseless carriage
that runs only on imagination.

Valero Station

The Valero station down the street is closed.
The gas pumps are gone, the mini mart is dark,
and within that dark store are unopened boxes
and deposit bags and file trays and desk drawers.
In the tiniest desk drawer old receipts
are crammed in so tight that if the drawer were opened
some of them would spill behind into the cabinet,
including the one that has on the back
the illegible code to the safe.

The Great Wall

Before there were superhighways
that cut through everything in their path,
that drove snakes
from their mating grounds
and cut deer off
from their watering holes,
there was this great wall in China
that was raised from the earth
and belonged with the earth.
To imagine those hills without the wall
would be to imagine a coral snake
without its rings.

Just After Sunrise

The blinds are closed, but the quarter inch between slats
lets enough light through
to show the knobby crown of the bedpost.
I hear the thermostat kick on, I smell composite wood.
I feel my weight on the mattress, the ceiling fan's draft.
I know it's Tuesday, November, Scorpio rising.
But waking up at night with deadened senses
my eyes open to a place as dark as unconsciousness,
a place of no discernment, no location.
It's as deep and as far as the last outpost of the universe—
deeper than brain waves, deeper than neurotransmission,
further than zero mass, further than sequential time.

About the Author

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.