

Books by Deborah Warren

THE SIZE OF HAPPINESS

London: The Waywiser Press, 2003. £8.95 (pa.)

ZERO MERIDIAN

Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher, 2004. \$18.95

DREAM WITH FLOWERS AND BOWL OF FRUIT

Evansville, IN: The University of Evansville Press, 2008. \$15.00

“A Sudden Happiness”—The Poetry of Deborah Warren

The place to begin reading Deborah Warren’s poetry is at the dedication to her first book: *For George, Kristin, Nicholas, Honor, Colin, Fiona, Sam, Domino, Piers and Cecchi*. The first name listed is that of her husband, George McNaughton. The following nine names belong to her children, including two from an earlier marriage. Unquestionably, the biographical detail most pertinent to understanding the mind at work in Warren’s poetry is given us right there on the dedication page of her first book: she has raised nine children. She is not a poet who has kept life at arm’s length; she has lived her life in the thick of it. Neither purist nor Puritan, Warren likes the clutter and accumulation that life brings. Her poem, “Baggage,” celebrates the very things that might inspire another woman to write Dear Abby.

Don’t tell me you expect to find a guy
who comes with just a daypack. That’s enough
to date on, maybe, but – to marry on?
You’re bothered by a little freight? But why?
Give me a man who’s travelling with stuff,
with serious luggage, not just carry-on –
whole skeletons in Samsonite; who brings
impedimenta – parents, kids, ex-wife,
outstanding loans. The stained and rumpled things
in steamer trunks and duffles are a life:
The more of it the better. Where you’ve been
and what you’ve brought along – if you’ve been far
and filled a lot of battered leather, then
don’t call it baggage. It’s just what you are. (TSOH, 32)

She is not interested in a life with each thing in its place; she prefers the wildflower to the ordered English garden.

I've seen the seeds my parents knew
would gently germinate;
the dainty shoots my parents grew,
sweet to anticipate;

the seedlings that my parents thinned,
predictable as rain—
and I would rather sow the wind
and reap a hurricane.

(“Mignonette,” TSOH, 33-34)

From the bluebirds darting over a field in Vermont to the notes she finds scribbled in the margins of a book she read as a girl, from the paintings of El Greco to the constellations twinkling above the roof of a barn, Warren embraces all of her experience. The love of life expressed in her poetry is palpable.

...what they tell us—olive, vine, and cypress,
windless smoke and terraced hills—is this:
Nothing, after earth, is necessary.
Here is all our history and future—
here in this landscape mysteries enough
to lift us up until we tread the air.
Just this world. And this is what to cling to...

(“Landscape in March, TSOH, 36)

Buddhists teach that what ties us to the mutable world is desire. Warren the poet is not unaware of that “noble truth,” but she has no intention of using what she knows to disentangle herself from her earthly existence. While Warren acknowledges that desire robs us of contentment in a poem called “The Ox” (TSOH, 44), she dismisses contentment as unworthy of desire in the poem which follows, “The Size of Happiness” (TSOH, 45): “Contentment is the only kind of plenty / and that’s the domain of cows.”

No, Warren chooses rather to be a poet of cheerful discontent. She is possessed of the one quality that Ezra Pound called essential for a poet, “a continuous curiosity.” Reading her poems, I am reminded that curiosity itself is a kind of desire—the desire to know—and that of all desires, curiosity may be the least likely ever to be satiated. That Warren’s purpose in writing poetry is to *find things out* should be obvious merely from the preponderance of question marks to be found in her verse. The first twelve lines of her poem “Airplane” (TSOH, 27) are comprised of one

question fretfully giving rise to another, leaving nothing resolved, everything 'up in the air.' A single non-interrogatory statement of only three words interrupts the persistent questioning that again fills the first twelve lines of a poem titled, "The Quadratic Formula" (TSOH, 56), and one of those three words is "maybe," which implies yet another question.

Warren certainly has no compunction about riddling her verse with question marks, nor does she feel the need to supply easy answers in lieu of the difficult ones she's unable to find. With the quality of curiosity she combines the quality Keats considered of first importance for a poet, "negative capability," the capacity for accepting uncertainty, for leaving things unresolved. Because the very act of formulating a question is a step toward knowing, even an unanswered question is of value. Warren doesn't mind letting the questions in her poems go unanswered, especially as so many of them are the unanswerable kind. In a poem about visiting her aged mother whose mind is failing she fixes her gaze on her mother's cane and wonders, "Does the wood remember it used to send out buds/this time of year, and does it feel an aching,/every April, in its hardened veins?" But she drops that question before the poem has ended. "Maundering on about it—what's the good?/.../the wood is dead, and a cane is just a cane" ("My Mother's Cane," ZM, 20). Her mother, though, has not yet died, and she is made not of wood but of whatever it is that makes a person. The poem leaves one question unanswered, and another unasked.

That is the way with questions; one leads to another. This may account for Deborah Warren's being such a prolific poet. So often her poems center on a question, either explicit or implicit, and nearly as often the "answer" she finds is another question. Whatever she hopes to find in the act of making does not stay put. I remember the excitement of digging for clams when I was a child. I'd spy a bubbling hole in the sand as the wave withdrew and burrow with bare hands as fast as I could, but the single-minded mollusk would plow deeper and, more often than not, get away. Warren keeps at the business of writing poems because what she is after is so elusive. Her poem, "Destination" (TSOH, 35), describes the experience, again with a series of questions:

How could you stop? You're bent on a location
up ahead, the place you're getting to.
But do you think the skittish destination's
any different? That, when you arrive,
the thing you wanted just stands still for you?

Warren too is fascinated by the mutability of things, the ever-changing nature of everything in existence. In her poem "The Heifers" (TSOH, 42), the young animals are led to a small enclosure "where / they won't get very far away." But "inside/ the small space of a day or two," she tells us, they will indeed escape, because they will have changed; "they won't still be these heifers."

The quality of longing that makes for so much beauty in verse and music is rooted in this keen awareness of the mutability of things. It may be that poetry and song—because these arts do not stand still in our experience of them—are as good for getting at the essence of things as any instrument that science or technology will ever come up with. Warren’s wonderful poem, “Elizabeth’s Dress”, on its surface, *seems* to question the ability of language to capture reality.

Elizabeth’s dress was not the red of claret,
not maroon or amethyst or rose.
Vermilion? Not exactly. Was it scarlet?
Ruby? Poppy? Crimson? None of those.

I can have you read the way the velvet
poured itself around her narrow ankles —
tell you how it showed her shoulders: What
I *can’t* describe (except by saying *not*
and cataloguing everything it wasn’t)
would make it flesh and blood and living—but
a thing like color? Dim description doesn’t
splash you with the dye that dyed the dress
or turn your head or make you catch your breath—
and if I could make you see its shade of red,
I still could not describe Elizabeth.

(TSOH, 21)

The success of the poem in presenting to the mind’s eye the indescribably beautiful Elizabeth undermines the surface argument of the poem. Having made her excuses, speaking of “What/I *can’t* describe (except by saying *not*/ and cataloguing everything it wasn’t),” Warrens presents Elizabeth without description to the reader, who “sees” Elizabeth every bit as well as someone who attended the event at which she appeared.

Or better. And certainly better than someone who is shown a photograph of Elizabeth. Emily Dickinson advised the poet to “tell the truth, but tell it slant.” Warren wants us to see beauty, but see it slant. She knows that the fleeting image, the lovely form glimpsed out of the corner of one’s eye, is the closest we’ll get to ideal beauty, the *idea* of beauty. Every physical manifestation falls short of the ideal. Without describing anything that anyone can actually see with one’s own two eyes, the poem delivers directly to the mind’s eye an image only it can perceive. She is short-cutting the usual path of perception. The poem is an act of uncommon artistry.

Because of Warren’s skill at phrase-making and her obvious pleasure in playing with the sound of words, her poems seldom fail to deliver pleasure, but it is serious play that she engages in, and

that she engages the reader in. My sense is that she came to poetry late, only after determining that there was no better way of *finding things out*; that she would have taken up chemistry or philosophy if she'd found them better suited to her task. The ecologist Nalini Nadkarni reminds us that "science" comes from the Latin *scior*, "to know a thing as thoroughly as possible." Warren's work in poetry then is by definition a "scientific" endeavor. She writes to get at reality; her poems are like the scientist's experiments. And she shares the scientist's disregard for "truths" based on authority and etched in stone. Neither poet or reader is likely to arrive at 'the truth' in a Warren poem. The best either can hope for is a working hypotheses.

Warren's poems frequently make use of scientific terminology, often as a foil to metaphysical questioning. "Clay and Flame," the first poem in her first book (TSOH 15), employs words like "bacterium," "thallophyte," "diatom" to talk about the evolutionary theory of the ascent of man, which is taken for granted. "To tell exactly how we came/from clay is easy," she claims, slipping into the vernacular to ask the loaded question: she wants to know how "all that clay turns to flame."

Warren returns to the theme early in her third book, where she describes the workings of a water-organ in an old chapel built beside a pond, and makes the "simple design" a metaphor for the human body:

Merely to plumb

and build

a mechanism to serve the stops and keys—
it's easy as water, simple as oxygen;
only a matter a matter of keeping the thin pipes filled;
much like trachea, lungs and arteries.

(See how the clinical language of science works comes plodding in.)

The music, though, is something else again. (DFBF, 7)

Again, Warren seems to say, the scientific explanation of how things work is satisfactory as far as it takes us, but we're finally brought up short by the wonder of life itself. How does *this* work? she asks.

Often one finds in Warren's poetry a sense that the good, logical explanation doesn't go far enough. The speaker in this kind of poem, of which there are many in Warren's work, continues her questioning with childlike persistence beyond where the learned response must admit its inadequacy. The poem "Flight" employs this strategy. The poem's opening line demands, "Explain again what makes a swallow fly," investing little confidence in whoever it is she is asking

to explain. “I’ve heard it all,” the poem goes on to say, repeating in some detail what can be learned from a textbook. “It’s not enough. There must be something else.” The voice is stubborn in its refusal to accept a partial answer. “Tell me again what agency propels/the starlings through the sky—what other thing/.../what force that doesn’t let the sparrow fall” (ZM, 43). The poem wants to follow the chain of cause and effect all the way back to the Prime Mover.

There is a suspicion—probably a healthy suspicion, in a poet—that much of what passes for knowledge is only the ability to attach a name to something, without getting us any closer to the thing-in-itself. Warrens puts the question in its simplest terms in her poem, “Gray Bird”, where, after leafing through an Audubon guide to find the nuthatch, she asks,

Did I, by identifying,
see him better?
When I found the book
and got him into a syllable or two—
as if to know him all I had to do
was give him a name—the bird had flown away. (ZM, 44)

Behind the simple question there is a pressing question. If naming a thing is not the way to knowing, how *do* we come to know?

The poem is a marvel of understatement, but in Warren’s second book it is followed by another poem which at first glance seems to contradict it. “Angelica and Benedetta” tells of a winemaker who names two of his wines after his two daughters. Though the grapes for these two wines “grow like his ordinary ones,” their comparative excellence can only be traced to the blessing of the names they’ve been given: “With a name he poured the sky into a thing/sprung from the earth,” she writes, admitting that, in this instance, at least, “on its name—which clings/to the grape from the instant of its christening—the wine’s identity in part depends” (ZM, 45). The difference may be that in the first poem the naming that takes place is merely a matter of matching a term in a reference book to the bird in the tree, where in the second the names are bestowed on the wines by their maker; it is a first naming, like an ceremonial act in the Garden of Eden.

There is another difference that may be of even greater significance than that which distinguishes “naming” from mere “labelling”. Where in the first poem the speaker has to take her eyes off the bird to find its name in her guidebook, in the second poem the winemaker may actually look at his wines in a new light, having named them for his beloved daughters. He brings his love for his daughters to the care of the grapes he raises to make the wines named for them. His devotion grants him insight.

The idea is central to Warren’s poetic philosophy: Love itself supplies the necessary focus that

allows us to really know a thing. Naturally, even her most cherished insight is couched in provisional terms; even one to adhere to the scientific process, this poet is not one to trumpet the truth as she sees it. She announces her discovery almost in passing, in yet another poem about finding the right name for something. The poem, “Memorial” (TSOH, 82), begins with an epitaph the poet read in a Sicilian church, which she quotes.

“G. Batt. Marziani, parish priest,
shepherd of souls,” the plaque says, “humble, wise—
and now pure soul himself—is sorely missed.”

“Soul,” however, is not a word that Warren would use herself. She has no use for it; she is dismissive of the very word.

“But *soul* is not a thing that satisfies,

not even in a church—not me, at least;
dumb in its woolliness, it’s too abstract.”

In her usual “let’s-try-this” scattershot method, she begins to list provisional terms in an attempt to find a word to replace “soul,” something with a little more substance.

Submit a whiff of lanolin or beast
to represent me—something more exact—

for a reckoning and a record when I’m gone:
a taste of what I was.

Clearly, Warren is not at all interested in simply re-naming the Christian soul or spirit (the “Atman” of the Hindus), that which the faithful believe lives on when the body dies. She does not count herself among the faithful. What she is after is a word for the essence of who a person is or has been.

What am I,

though

(more than mutton?) More than what I’ve done,
I’d say I am the sum of what I know

and make my own by loving.

How terribly unsatisfactory her definition would be if it ended with the stanza— “I’d say I am the

sum of what I know”— and did not carry over to the first line of the next. To define a person as the sum of what she knows would be to shrink the human being to next to nothing; an outdated computer could store a thousand times as much information. Warren’s quickly amended hint at that kind of definition shows how intimately her concept of “knowing” is tied to “loving.” Knowledge, she seems to say, is a stage along the way to love. Or love is a way to knowledge; love opens our eyes to what is there.

In the title poem of her second book, “Zero Meridian,” Warren writes that we rely on a thing like love “to take the measure of / anything that matters” (ZM, 35). She argues for her way of knowing as better even than the scientific method—without depreciating the value of the latter. “Enough of numbers,” she writes in “Avogadro’s Number,” a poem which yet acknowledges the power of numbers to help explain the world around us.

Avogadro knew how many atoms
whirl in a dozen grams of carbon-12.
To understand that hidden spinning dance—
that’s to define the universe itself...

While the poet shares the scientist’s need to “take the measure of things,” still, she says, “Avogadro does not speak to me” (ZM, 75). Though clearly the poet has been listening with her usual rapt attention, the nineteenth-century mathematician and physicist does not speak to her because he does not address the issue closest to her heart, the chief aim of all her inquiry. What accounts for life itself? By what name shall we call it? How to take its measure?

Those are ponderous questions, and in the hands of a lesser poet they would weigh heavily. But Warren’s mind, while ever keen to know, is energetically playful and quick to make associative leaps even when her subject is aging and death. Her poem, “Thrift Shop” is as sprightly a meditation on mortality as any I’ve read, rhyming “wizeden” with “isn’t,” addressing the reader directly— “You know, as well as I do” —punning on the word “nap,” imagining the skeleton in its “négligée of flesh.” The poem refuses to labor under the weight of its subject, yet it is by no means light verse. Warren’s meditation on mortality begins by celebrating a “find” in a thrift shop.

“Seven flannel nightgowns, nearly new,
and I’m the flannel type.”

The shopper feels so lucky to have purchased the nightgowns, “dirt-cheap,” she wonders what would have possessed anyone to “give them—hardly ever worn—away?” But hardly has the question left her lips than the answer makes itself obvious. Certainly not because some young girl decided on something sexier to sleep in, “spaghetti straps or satin.”

“No; the flannel type is old.

And she, I think, is more than old.”

The poem’s *volta*, or turn, occurs as naturally as can be, but the very “naturalness” is the result of masterful versification. Here at the heart of a poem written in iambic pentameter are two stunning plain-spoken sentences, each of which is composed of four iambic feet, each of which ends with the same word, “old,” which recalls the first line of the poem in which the gowns are described as “nearly new.” What is more, the speaker of the poem has already informed us that she too is “the flannel type.”

The speaker yet intends to wear these nightgowns which the previous owner abandoned for “a negligée/of flesh so sheer—transparent—that/it isn’t there at all.” They will become a *memento mori*, reminding her at night to “be thrifty with my days” (TSOH, 79).

The poem is about death; and Warren’s strength as a poet is to perceive and note that death does not wait till the last moment to lay hold of the living; it is with us from the very beginning, and shows itself at every turn. The poem is as much about the death of desire as it is about the death of a person. There is mention of “spaghetti straps,” “satin,” and a “negligée,” the kind of thing “a young girl” might want to try on, “something alluring.” The transition from “young girl” who thinks she’ll try “something alluring” to the “flannel type” involves a kind of death; the young girl is no more.

But Warren’s awareness that death is ever-present in life is not a cause for gloomy despondency. As she writes in a poem called “Song of the Egg” (DFBF 40), death is there from the start, “already curled in the heart of the embryo,” —but it is “too small/a flaw to brood on,” when one considers the “brilliant crowing” that will “shatter the brittle confines of the shell.” She celebrates the life that celebrates itself, waking the morning; she recognizes the night as inevitable and even necessary to the celebration. “Open the house to the long black tongues of air,” she writes, in a poem called “Night Air” (DFBF, 13). She ends another poem by remarking, “There’s such a thing as too much light,” but the reader would be mistaken to conclude that the poem’s speaker has had enough of life. The rest of the poem, “Orion of the Barnyard,” belies that notion. The “I” of the poem takes silent leave of a party, separating herself from the “shrieks and music,” to immerse herself in the night, to feel *more alive*.

Nobody sees me wade
ankles—knees—in the wet alfalfa, eyes,
overhead, in the silences above
where thickets and forests of constellations move,
copses of stars in the black sky’s open glades.

The line-break between the second and third lines of the quotation is wonderfully misleading. Ankles, knees, eyes! How far into the high grass is she headed? Very far, as it turns out—into the “thickets...of constellations.” She is making for the presence of the divine. “These are the bright woods where I recognize/Orion” (DFBF, 18).

A poet who travels those paths is not a poet given to lamentation. In a poem called “Annunciations, Nowadays,” she confesses to being subject to fits of “*sudden happiness*” that come to her “unheralded” and “born from nothing” (ZM, 22).

There is a section of her second book, *Zero Meridian*, which takes its title from Virgil, “Happy, he who knows the country gods.” She quotes from the Georgics because something she’s read there has struck home; she’s been thinking much the same thing. Though the title poem of that section resigns itself to the impossibility of knowing the country gods in our time, the other poems in the section hint at near brushes with those laughing immortals. In one poem a painter on the roof of a shed appears to color the entire landscape “with strokes of barn-red, hay-green, [and] sky-blue” (ZM, 27). In another the “snow devils” outside the window act like the serpent in the garden of Eden, tempting the onlooker “to be like God” (Genesis 3:5); she nearly gives in, admitting, “I’m dazzled—lifted—whirled above myself/till *I’m* the choreographer of winter/who tells the sun to rise, the sun to set” (ZM, 28). Another poem notices the indomitable spirit of the pond: “there’s no pond that listens to a king” (ZM, 29). Finally, a poem called “Tapping the Northfield Maples” notes that our nearest connection with immortality is a longing in that direction, “*wanting*—never being willing to let the weather and the maples go” (ZM, 30).

Here the poet speaks of a longing born of love, that human desire that arises not from a sense of lacking something out of reach but from deep affection for what is held close. It is the most direct way to *knowing*.

I’m tempted to declare that Deborah Warren does indeed know the country gods; certainly she is among the happiest of poets. She seems to have taken Rilke’s directive in deciding how to go about being a poet: “O tell me Poet what you do? – I praise.” (Rilke, “Praise”) (Who does that kind of thing nowadays? Wilbur, certainly. Samuel Menashe. There must be others...)

It is no accident that the gods the poet feels closest to are “the country gods.” She prefers the gods of antiquity, whose sandalled feet tread the earth, to the celestial beings of more recent times. The love of life that finds expression in Deborah Warren’s poetry is love of *this* life, not of a dreamed-of, idealized afterlife. Warren’s poetry is ever-conscious of the ephemeral nature of things and of life itself. She does not want it to be otherwise: “pity a deity to whom/ a thousand ages are a night/and galaxies a living room” (TSOH, 103). Pity the one who might take for granted the daily mysteries of our brief lives. She is unwilling to let go of any of it; even the

sprouting of new green leaves in spring brings loss in obscuring “a mile of cold blue open sky” (ZM 60).

It would seem that her favorite method of composition is to pause before something marvelous and allow the poem to simply praise what she sees. The poem that opens her second book finds her at the zoo:

Look at the motion of the lucky gibbon,
pouring himself like liquid on the limb
he streams along—less animal than oil—
gliding as if there’s nothing more to him
than motion.

(ZM, 5)

The poet is so caught up in what she observes that her words take on the litheness and fluidity of the gibbon. (It’s not usually Warren’s style to write so *smoothly*.)

Warren is ever on the lookout for instances of the marvellous. On recounting for us Augustine’s description of Ambrose reading silently, to the amazement of his fellow Romans—“Romans didn’t read except aloud”—one can almost see her on tiptoes among the crowd of onlookers “who pressed around him spellbound” (ZM 22). Warren is so naturally drawn to the wonder-full (as opposed to the miraculous), that this event, a thousand years removed, retains its power to excite her. It can hardly come as any surprise to a person living today that a person might read without uttering the words, but Warren has an aptitude for recapturing naiveté. Her intensity of focus sets to one side the load of information each of us carries; she lets herself be simply amazed. I think of Whitman’s wonderful lines, “Beginning my studies the first step pleased me so much,/.../I have hardly gone and hardly wished to go any farther.”

“The Crabapple in Flower” may be the Warren’s fullest expression yet of her way of seeing the world and of making poetry of what she sees.

The crabapple tore through the house one week in April,
boughs in armloads—room after room—in vases,
jars from the cupboards, jugs from the cellar, urns.
By what ploy did an artless flower come
—white and pink, red bud and country leaf—
laying siege to the heart of our existence?

Something to do with disparity—the flower
brief and new on the gnarled neglected branch.
And something else. The long sprays dazzled us,

but their beauty pierced us, too, with a desire
to know them, to possess them, in some way
five pale senses could never satisfy. (ZM 6)

Already, in the stillness that precedes the poem, the marvelous has taken hold. The poet is caught up in it, and revels in the the sheer joy of describing what she sees till she is overwhelmed by its beauty and, as though to defend herself against the too-much of it, begins asking questions. She brings the intellect into play as a survival tactic. “By what ploy did an artless flower come/.../laying siege to the heart of our existence?” She posits a tentative, conditional response, “Something to do with disparity...,” which she immediately acknowledges as not the whole answer. “And something else.” That something else is a kind of bedazzlement, a mystery only to be hinted at. The nearest approach to it is through desire. The profusion of flowering branches coming through the door and taking over the domestic space is a form and expression of wildness that calls forth a response from what is wildest in the poet’s own nature. It awakens desire, and desire runs to greet it in loving recognition. The poem ends by speaking of desire as a way of knowing, and of the impossibility of knowing all there is to know.

You can’t help but feel that Warren is glad about that, glad for all that desire has yet to do in the way of knowing. She takes solace and even celebrates the reminder she finds in the work of the old masters that one can never really get to the bottom of things; there is always an unknown in the mix. As she writes in her own masterful poem, “Aelfgyva,” that unknown piece is “the thing you need the most—more than the things you can completely know” (TSOH,98). Her complaints about what remains beyond her ken or control sound like admiration. She speaks of a rocky hay field the way a mother might speak of a beloved, wilful child:

From the time we cleared it, all it’s been is trouble,
stubborn and recalcitrant and proud;
every winter, fractious and uncowed,
throwing up new rocks and glacier-rubble:
It’s clear it never wanted to be plowed. (ZM, 10)

Warren is pleased by the irrepressible unpredictability of things. She does not mock the King of the Persians for commanding that the waves of the Hellespont be flogged for insubordination; she celebrates both the indomitability of the sea and of human nature (ZM 57). In a poem probably inspired by difficulty getting a fire started in the fireplace, she finds a bit of Xerxes in herself, wishing she could train fire as though it were a dog. Then she reminds herself, “Watch the bounding dog, however! No two leaps are quite the same” (ZM 56) She may have failed as homeowner to tame fire, but she succeeds as poet in noting a flare of the housepet’s unextinguished wildness.

“Wildness is what living’s for,” she writes, in another poem (ZM 13). It’s the thing “that isn’t done”—in both senses of the phrase— that catches her attention. The Romans didn’t read in silence; it is the strangeness of the act that captivates. And the hillside that will never quite lay down and remain a field, where the plowing is never done—that is where Deborah Warren’s affection lies. I’d like to think it may be to that same hill she returns in a poem called “A Hill”, where she sees the night escape the “the net of stars” and “go wheeling around.” That is the kind of night she is looking for, like one of those “Wild nights!” that Emily Dickinson celebrated, “the night undone and still in the making, new/and enough off balance to be dazzled by” (ZM 17).

Time and again Warren’s poems point to the thing that goes astray, that resists being held in check, as the very thing that not only attracts attention but awakens desire and inspires love. She uses the experience of listening to Mozart as metaphor:

The music begins, and you’re listening along
when a phrase, or one note, catches you off guard.
Instead of the nice line you’d anticipated,
it swerved away and—rising, falling—jarred
the melody into your mind. Because it’s *wrong!*

It is the one “wrong” note that demands to be heard, that awakens the sense. Only then can the music make itself known. Until that jarring note arrives, it is possible to merely ‘listen along.’ After that one is forced to try to really hear. “Love,” Warren writes, “is the work the listener has to do” (“The Litany of Loreto (Mozart),” ZM, 78).

“Wildness,” untamed-ness, in Warren’s poetry, is something very different from lack of constraint, infinite choice. (A great deal of artistry went into Mozart’s placing that perfectly right “wrong” note where he did.) There is little to be gained for love and/or desire by flitting from one thing to the next. The necessary focus is lost. In a poem called, “The Tea”, she describes an unpleasant experience:

At the Cassat exhibit a machine
allows museumgoers to repaint
the pictures on a small computer screen.
So many options! Hardly a constraint—

Warren finds herself overwhelmed by the different possibilities, envious of the artist who painted the original for not having to decide on a wallpaper, being stuck with the one pasted to the actual walls of the room in which her subject takes her tea.

The pink you thought was fixed

forever on the canvas? Make it blue.
The oils are that easily un-mixed
and mixed again. Such power to undo!

The poet's horror is intensified when she considers a life as easily re-arranged as this work of art.

I've made my bed; I lie on it. But why?
What's to prevent me? I could rearrange
everything, my existence, with blue sky
my only limit, piling change on change— (ZM 54)

That is not a freedom to be desired; there is no place in it for desire; it is the freedom of whim, the freedom of the easily forsaken. It is no freedom at all; it is "the tyranny of too much choice," the very antithesis of love and desire.

And it is an affront to the imagination. Imagination is something different than fantasy, where 'anything goes.' Imagination is a door of perception like any of the five senses. The eye of the mind, like the eye of the body, sees more or less what is actually there, depending on its degree of focus. Focused clearly, the eye of the mind would see a human being for what he or she really is, a human life for what it really is. You can't just make it up as you go.

Warren always uses her imagination to do the work of apprehending what is real. The title of her third book, *Dream with Flowers and Bowl of Fruit*, reminds us that she is a person with no desire to dream her life away. She wants to dream her way deeper into her life. The title poem flirts with "romance" and "close escapes," momentarily seeing that kind of "drama" as preferable to the "still-life" her dreams present to her at night, but true poetry has a way of finding out the truth: this poem closes with mention of the kind of things the poet—asleep or waking—really looks to find: "a movement in the grapes,/and the shiver of a petal in a vase" (DFBF, 11).

Warren offers us a delightful example of that way of looking—and seeing—, using both one's own two eyes and the mind's eye, in a poem called "Swimmer."

He pauses where the oaks beside the street
grow down into a puddle, with the trees
towering so far below him that—
half-immersed in the landscape at his feet,
leaning over the surface-sheen—he sees
evidence that the earth is far from flat

and, diving into the two dimensions, swims
down, deeper, toward whatever breeze
stirs the branches and ruffles the buried sky,
flutter-kicking his way among the limbs

below—but the water won't give up the trees,
and he shakes himself and returns to the surface, dry. (DFBF, 21)

Though the “swimmer” in this poem never leaves the sidewalk, he is able to break through “the surface-sheen” of a puddle to find “evidence that the earth is far from flat.” And how the world does come alive in the language Warren uses to describe his leap of imagination down toward “the buried sky,/flutter-kicking his way among the limbs”! Use of the word “limbs” in this context momentarily closes the gap between the seer and the thing seen; it's hard to tell one from the other in so liquid an element. When, in the closing line, the swimmer “returns to the surface, dry,” the adjective alerts us to his never having moved from the spot where he's standing; but he's left himself behind for a moment, enraptured.

Many of Warren's poems center on a moment when the line blurs between the perceiver and the thing perceived, as it does when the swimmer plunges toward “the buried sky.” The experience is nearly always described in celebratory terms, as a species of rapture. In a poem called “The Ballet of the Eight-Week Kittens” (DFBF 32), the poet clearly is eager to join the dance she describes.

Dance, kittens. Take the table, flying
jump-drunk: You have cause to pirouette,
more than you dream of—barns and meadows lying
outside—things you don't imagine yet.

Sheer potentiality is the real object of praise here. The poem is a celebration of a world made new, as seen for the first time. The poet brings just enough of her experience to the scene as to allow her to say ‘Wait till you see what comes next.’

And, when you tumble to it that there's *more*
than this—more than the little world you know—
take me out there with you when you go. (DFBF, 32)

None of it has gotten old for the poet any more than for the kittens. There is *always* “something more” in the poetry of Deborah Warren, as she reminds us explicitly in a poem called “Catalogue Raisonné,” an *ars poetica* of sorts, where she writes “I'd start describing a room with the precision/sight can give it.” That she does, in the first strophe, but she is only beginning. The second stanza describes the work yet to be done:

to complete the list I'd have to cite
more: The smoke of fires that haunt the hearth;
the dry cold smell of fur on the orange cat
whose simmering purr echoes the attic pigeons'
bubbling coo; the clock's asthmatic breath;
the sofa's velvet; all as invisible
as garlic raw on fingertips—but bright
enough to see with other kinds of vision.

The other senses are enlisted to complete the catalogue; she cleverly refers to them as “other kinds of vision,” because even with this lovingly-portrayed addition of the non-visual things in the room, her work is not yet done. As invisible as the sounds and sensations listed in the second stanza are to the human eye, so is the something more, the “absence” she has yet to describe—

for which she reserves the third stanza— imperceptible to the five senses. “What I have in mind,” she tells us, is beyond description as it is beyond perception. We can only infer that these things “to which every sense is blind” are as real and as wonderful as those she is able to describe. They are like the great outdoors of which the kittens romping in the kitchen are unaware (DFBF 44).

If Warren’s *ars poetica* suggests that she include in her poems the things she cannot see or say, then every poem she writes must be incomplete according to her own standard. The poet is neither unaware of nor overwhelmed by this inadequacy. She only sees it as a reason to keep going. In a poem about a biblical figure, Moses, and in another about a saint, Stephen, she deals directly with the theme of being inspired to say what one is incapable of expressing. Moses, “The Stutterer” (DFBF 39) was commanded “from the fiery bush on Horeb” to speak to a nation; “Saint Anthony at Rimini” (DFBF 41) finds it impossible to get the men to listen to his sermons and ends up shouting to the ocean instead. But Moses, for whom “the stubborn phrases balked,” nevertheless “spoke” through his brother Aaron, who merely “talked.” And Stephen is able to convince the townsmen of Rimini not through his “well-turned homily” and “points of doctrine argued out so nicely,” but through the miracle of small fishes “spirited/up to stand on the surface.” What Warren seems to be getting at is very like the distinction between “the letter” and “the spirit.” But the language in both poems strongly hints at something like writer’s block, and when in the Stephen poem Warren says, “the air/swam with prisms,” any reader who is himself a poet recognizes the moment when the poem breaks clear of constraint and begins to write itself. There comes “a sudden happiness.”