

2005

## Places: A Memoir

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### Recommended Citation

Warren, Rosanna (2005) "Places: A Memoir," *Robert Penn Warren Studies*: Vol. 5 , Article 4.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/rpwstudies/vol5/iss1/4>

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*Places:  
A Memoir*

ROSANNA WARREN

I am writing in my father's study in Vermont, the little wooden cabin – perhaps “coop” would be the more accurate word for the single room and screen porch – perched on a wooded knoll over the stream and swimming pond. He had this study built in 1961 by our woodsman-carpenter-first selectman neighbor, Stubb Sampson, a man we revered for his forest lore and bedrock decency. It seems right that it should have been Stubb's rightly-judging eyes and steady hands that set this study in place. My father worked here almost every summer for a quarter of a century, hearing the same brook from which I now take dictation, smelling the balsam, watching beech leaves tremble and clouds write ephemeral script across the dark surface of the pond. I have set myself the task of evoking a number of my father's work places and some of the poems he wrote there. And why not start here, where I have worked since his death in 1989?

My parents bought a small cabin on this property in 1959 for winter holidays and summers of writing. But the household, effervescent with my brother and me and our childhood pranks, with visiting cousins and friends, along with dogs, cats and canaries, threatened to spill out of that first cabin which was lit by kerosene lamps and for which we drew water by toiling away at a hand pump in summer and in winter by flailing along a snow path to plonk buckets into a mysterious well. In 1963 my brother and I watched the construction of the larger house, “Shack Two,” across the sloping orchard, a crazy rhomboid eyrie designed by the young architect Bob Nevins to honor my mother's desire to reproduce what she loved in the cabin: a view of the mountain from the veranda, a screened eating porch over the brook, and “moonlight in the potty.” My father's study was in the woods beyond the new house, protected from its racket by a stand of balsam, beech, and spruce. My mother worked in an old hunter's cabin in the woods across the dirt road. And we children roamed free, wading the brook, hiking miles into the woods to explore beaver dams, building elf pavilions among the knotted pine roots and moss banks, writing our own plays and a family newspaper (my department) and building model boats and war machines (my brother's). From my father's study came the rat-a-tat-tat of his typewriter. Sometimes an enterprising woodpecker engaged in a duet with him, hammering away on the study roof joists in synchronized rapid-fire percussion.

We children knew that the hours from nine until two were sacrosanct work time for our parents, and we rarely disturbed them. We knew from observation that it was hard

work writing books. But it also seemed as natural as the equally hard work of our mother chopping a trail through dense woods with a machete, or hanging out laundry on the line, or making vats of soup, or as our father's lugging large, flat stones from the brook and setting them in place to make paths, or digging and crowbarring old railway ties into the earth to make steps down to the pond. When I did, rarely, knock on his study door during work hours, I had the feeling of having drawn him up from a well of concentration much deeper than the spring from which we drew water for the cabin. What did I want, he would ask, with his quicksilver, affectionate and disheveled courtesy. His study floor was a sea of discarded paper. His big old Hermes typewriter, pea-soup green, stood on a small table in the far corner of the screen porch. If he was working on a novel or a textbook, typewritten sheets lay wildly about. But poems were a different matter. For them, he had a low-slung, canvas deck chair in which he sat, day-dreamily, with a yellow legal pad on his lap. No rat-a-tat-tat for poems. He sat and listened to the brook and the varying breezes and the scurrying of squirrels and chipmunks. What did he hear?

“All voice is but echo caught from a soundless voice.”

Sitting in that chair of reverie, he heard voices of poems from many centuries he carried always within him. And he heard the voices of his Kentucky childhood. But also, over the years, he translated the sounds and sights of Vermont into a metaphysical drama, a quest for personal truth he kept renewing and recording until his last days. I look at these Vermont poems for traces of my father's voice and vision in a landscape we shared. For instance, “Hope,” among his last poems in *Altitudes and Extensions*. I look here to see how carefully he watched and named the colors of sunset, and how he found in those shifting hues an inner landscape, a meditative process by which to transform private mood to some larger acceptance. The pacing of these free verse lines gives a measure not only for transitional light, but for transitional feeling. The poem does what most readers ask poems to do: to move us. That is, to move us from one state of mind and heart to another. In this case, we are moved from a curdling of soul to forgiveness. Every nuance of changing light in the poem, every line break, contributes to that process, but the movement is most dramatized in the enjambment between stanzas, “Let your soul // Be still.”

### Hope

In the orchidaceous light of evening  
 Watch how, from the lowest hedge-leaf, creeps,  
 Grass blade to blade, the purpling shadow. It spreads  
 Its spectral ash beneath the leveling, last  
 Gold rays that, westward, have found apertures  
 From the magnificent disaster of day.

Against gold light, beneath the maple leaf,  
 A pale blue gathers, accumulates, sifts  
 Downward to modulate the flowery softness  
 Of gold intrusive through the blackening spruce boughs.

Spruces heighten the last glory beyond their stubbornness.  
They seem rigid in blackened bronze.

Wait, wait—as though a finger were placed to lips.  
The first star petals timidly in what  
Is not yet darkness. That audacity  
Will be rewarded soon. In this transitional light,  
While cinders in the west die, the world  
Has its last blooming. Let your soul

Be still. All day it has curdled in your bosom  
Denatured by intrusion of truth or lie, or both.  
Lay both aside, nor debate their nature. Soon,  
While not even a last bird twitters, the last bat goes.  
Even the last motor fades into distance. The promise  
Of moonrise will dawn, and slowly, in all fullness, the moon

Will dominate the sky, the world, the heart,  
In white forgiveness.

“Hope” is one of my father’s lonely poems. But he wrote, also, many poems of companionship. In “Last Walk of Season,” composed only a few years before his death, he commemorates the beauty of a long marriage in the beauty of the late season and a worn and ancient landscape. Time and its erosions are felt here as a gift, not as destruction.

... We came where we had meant to come. And not  
Too late. In the mountain’s cup, moraine-dammed, the lake  
Lies left by a glacier older than God. Beyond it, the sun,  
Ghostly, dips, flame-huddled in mist. We undertake  
Not to exist, except as part of that one  
Existence. We are thinking of happiness. In such case,  
We must not count years. For happiness has no measurable pace.  
Scarcely in consciousness, a hand finds, on stone, a hand.

They are in contact. Past lake, over mountain, last light  
Probes for contact with the soft-shadowed land.

Still, many of these Vermont poems risk solitariness. *Pace* some critics, I would not call these poems self-centered. The self encountered here, out on its errands in the woods and mountains, is looking beyond solipsism to ask where it stands *vis-à-vis* death, love, and the idea of God. In such poems, the idea of place becomes a metaphysical laboratory, as it is in “The Place,” set at twilight near a mountaintop:

... Self is the cancellation of self, and now is the hour.  
Self is the mutilation of official meanings, and this is the place.

You hear water of minor musical utterance  
 On stone, but from what direction?  
 You hear, distantly, a bird-call you cannot identify.  
 Is the shadow of the cliff creeping upon you?  
 You are afraid to look at your watch.

You think of the possibility of lying on stone  
 Among fern-fronds, and waiting  
 For the shadow to find you.  
 The stars would not be astonished  
 To catch a glimpse of the form through interstices  
 Of leaves now black as enameled tin. Nothing astounds the stars.  
 They have long lived. And you are not the first  
 To come to such a place seeking the most difficult knowledge.

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The first place I remember my father working is in the ruined fortress called La Rocca in the village of Porto Ercole, a little north of Rome, where we lived the first five summers of my life. La Rocca, which my mother had discovered just after the war (“the war,” for my parents’ generation, was of course World War II), had been built for Philip II of Spain in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. My father described it in the poem he dedicated to me, “To a Little Girl, One Year Old, in a Ruined Fortress”: “*Rocca*: fortress, hawk-heel, lion-paw, clamped on a hill.” I remember La Rocca. We lived in what had been the stables for the garrison, an immense, cavernous space with oak ceiling beams and a flagstone floor where Ernesta, wrinkled and smiling, prepared our meals on a charcoal fire in a stone fireplace at the far end of the room, and where we ate at a long oak table and played records on a gramophone with a curving brass horn. My baby brother and I played out in the wide, walled-in courtyard, now wild with thistles and agitated with chickens clucking and scattering, where the Spanish must have gone through their cavalry manoeuvres. Beyond a massive wall, in the interior of the fortress, Ernesta drew our water from the well with its creaking wheel for the bucket rope, and we peeked through an iron grate into the dark and urine-scented hole that led to the dungeons, where, it was rumored, vipers now lived. Across the inner courtyard, in a honeycomb of habitation massed against the outer wall, lived La Signorina, our ancient landlady. She was so miserly, I remember my mother saying, she ate moldy spaghetti. She looked to me as old as the fortress. We were protected, in this inner world, by the gigantic outer walls which dominated the whole spur of the peninsula, and by a wide and serious moat you could be killed falling into, and by an honest-to-God drawbridge. All this, to my brother and me, seemed perfectly natural. And it must have cost my parents almost nothing to rent. I add this financial note with a touch of indignation; I once heard someone sneer at my father for living in a “castle,” as if he had betrayed his country and his class by going to Italy. Is it a crime, I ask, to live imaginatively, to move from one’s origins – in this case, a small town in Kentucky – and to roam the world physically and mentally? How else but by

distance can one know one's origins? And is not the greatest poverty, not lack of money, but lack of curiosity?

In the case of La Rocca, ruin taught my parents to ruminate, and they ruminated in their tiny guardhouses capped with conical roofs, built into the outer wall. Each guardhouse had three vertical slit windows – to shoot from, I suppose, or perhaps to pour boiling oil from – and just enough room for a portable Olivetti typewriter on the windowsill and a camp stool. There, commanding a view of the Mediterranean and visited by the occasional scorpion, my parents mused and wrote for five summers.

I was the little girl, one-year old, in the ruined fortress, and all my life I have held the poem at arm's length. At an affectionate, quizzical arm's length. Because, though I recognize and remember the place, that little girl is not me. She lives in the poem, where she will never grow older. I visit her occasionally. Not so much for her, but for the fact that my father's soul lives there too. His essential poetry; you can feel it as much in what the creative writing cadets will call over-writing – all those repetitions, blaze, and gold – as in the prosaic and ironic matter-of-factness: "*Philipus me fecit: he of Spain, the black-browed, the anguished, / For whom nothing prospered, though he loved God.*" The poem's energy jolts up from the collision between idealizing, gold-struck vision and the brute realities of war, poverty, and physical deformity. My father, a new father, contemplating his own first child, was discovering something in this poem, some new risk and vulnerability of feeling, casting out long lines far beyond the pentameter, and deferring verbs until the end of sentences: "And on the exposed approaches the last gold of gorse bloom, in the sirocco, shakes." The human sympathy in this poem was not new to him, but it found here a particularly acute shape in the scenes of the saint-like, triptych sister and the monstrous, damaged child. Unlike the Vermont poems, which tend toward solitude in the contemplation of nature, this poem and others from the Italian setting allow themselves to be hurt by history, by human nature, and they look steadfastly into that hurt: "I think of your goldness, of joy, but how empires grind, stars are hurled. / I smile stiff, saying *ciao*, saying *ciao*, and think: *This is the world.*"

The gesture of Italian greeting, *ciao*, so simple, so fundamental, stands in for the many ways in which my father's poems imagine connectedness in the recognition of suffering. He was not a religious man, but he had grown up in a religious culture with a heavy dose of old hellfire Presbyterian Calvinism. He had inherited various Christian promises and threats; he had knocked about the world long enough to see what hell people create for themselves and others, and to understand the need to find some ground for blessing. The greeting, *ciao*, turns up again in one of his most sympathetic poems, one which evokes but resists doctrinal consolation. Also set in the coastal landscape of La Rocca, "The Cross" describes the speaker walking the beach after a storm and finding, among other sea-smashed debris, a drowned monkey. I cherish this poem for its clear language, its clear-sightedness, and its ironic and large-hearted humanism. For it is humanism to reach out in brotherly fashion to a monkey:

...And most desperately hunched by volcanic stone  
 As though trying to cling in some final hope,  
 But drowned hours back you could be damned sure,  
 The monkey, wide-eyed, bewildered yet  
 By the terrible screechings and jerks and bangs,

And no friend to come and just say *ciao*.

I took him up, looked in his eyes,  
As orbed as dark aggies, as bright as tears,  
With a glaucous glint in deep sightlessness,  
Yet still seeming human with all they had seen—  
Like yours or mine, if luck had run out.

So, like a fool, I said *ciao* to him.

Under wet fur I felt how skin slid loose  
On the poor little bones, and the delicate  
Fingers yet grasped, at God knew what.  
So I sat with him there, watching wind abate.

No funnel on the horizon showed.  
And of course, no sail. And the cliff's shadow  
Had found the cove. Well, time to go.

I took time, yes, to bury him,  
In a scraped-out hole, little cairn on top.  
And I fool enough to improvise  
A cross—

Two sticks tied together to prop in the sand.

But what use that? The sea comes back.

The summers of 1966 and 1967 we lived on a rough, forested island off the coast of the Côte d'Azur in the French Mediterranean. Port Cros was a nature reserve, protected from development, so it had no screaming discothèques, grand hotels or condominiums, and none of the frenzy of the beaches two hours away from us on the mainland at Cannes and St. Tropez. There was one tiny fishing village with a small hotel, and Le Manoir, where we stayed, an austere, stone and stucco hotel up the path from the port, nestled among eucalyptus and pines. The guests tended to be cranky French intellectuals and artists, and pensive *bourgeois* in retreat from TV., movies, and urban life. I remember Monsieur l'Astronome, a pompous *savant* who thrust math problems at the hotel guests at dinner (my ten-year-old brother infuriated him by solving the problem rapidly). The actor Jean-Louis Barrault could be seen, tanned very bronze, hiking alone on the steep trails, looking somber and not a little ferocious. Except for days of high wind, the *mistral*, we ate breakfast and dinner on a terrace overlooking the harbor, where sailboats bobbed at their moorings under the protection of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century fort at the far end of the port. Here, again, our parents worked from nine until two, my mother in a donkey shed and my father under a fig tree in the sheltered garden. At two in the afternoon we children joined them for a picnic lunch and then set off on the half-hour walk to the beach. This is the landscape that turns up in *Promises*.

The fig, the mullet, the sun, the sea: in these poems, I find my father testing the elemental, finding a new, dangerous balance in his lines and in his rhetoric. A heady test; he takes crazy, sensuous, Elizabethan-Biblical plunges. He extends one's sense of life; he plays nothing safe; if we follow him, we are taken out of our depths. I, for one, am grateful for these rather mad, prophetic encounters with the gods of fig and mullet. These poems thrust body and soul together: "Where the slow fig's purple sloth / Swells, I sit and meditate the / Nature of the soul..." ("Where the Slow Fig's Purple Sloth"). Snorkeling, my father had met the mullet, one of his totems, to be added to hawks and to Audubon's birds as a principle of reality:

### The Red Mullet

The fig flames inward on the bough, and I,  
 Deep where the great mullet, red, lounges in  
 Black shadow of the shoal, have come. Where no light may

Come, he the great one, like flame, burns, and I  
 Have met him, eye to eye, the lower jaw horn,  
 Outthrust, arched down at the corners, merciless as

Genghis, motionless and mogul, and the eye of  
 The mullet is round, bulging, ringed like a target  
 In gold, vision is armor, he sees and does not

Forgive. The mullet has looked me in the eye, and forgiven  
 Nothing. At night I fear suffocation, is there  
 Enough air in the world for us all, therefore I

Swim much, dive deep to develop my lung-case. I am  
 Familiar with the agony of will in the deep place. Blood  
 Thickens as oxygen fails. Oh, mullet, thy flame

Burns in the shadow of the black shoal.

The Hebrew Bible, more than Christian Scripture, haunts these Port Cros poems. So there was my father, as ever agnostic, as ever God-tortured, having another go at his age-old question: "... We must try // To love so well the world that we may believe, in the end, in God" ("Masts at Dawn"). The ambiguous placement of the words acts out the tension of unbelief and yearning. The sentence proposes, not "to love the world so well," which would be the easy solution, but "to love so well the world"; and it asks us to consider "that we may believe in the end" as much as it tempts us to "believe... in God."

I will conclude these reflections by invoking a poem of my father's which has helped me to live. "The Leaf" is one of the Port Cros poems from *Promises*. I find myself going back to it, in quandaries of my own, as I try to discern my own truths, the limits and damages of my nature. I take it that that is one of the responsibilities of art, to help us in our struggle toward truthfulness – that private clarity upon which justice and

compassion and the recognition of others must stand. “The Leaf” opens under my father’s fig tree, his Eden, an Eden already guilt-struck:

Here the fig lets down the leaf, the leaf  
Of the fig five fingers has, the fingers  
Are broad, spatulate, stupid,  
Ill-formed, and innocent—but of a hand, and the hand,  
  
To hide me from the blaze of the wide world, drops,  
Shamefast, down...

The lines I return to again and again open the second section:

We have undergone ourselves, therefore  
What more is to be done for Truth’s sake? I  
  
Have watched the deployment of ants, I  
Have conferred with the flaming mullet in a deep place...

To place the first person singular pronoun out so vulnerably at the ends of two consecutive lines may risk a terrible self-dramatization. I take it differently. For me, this poem puts the self in danger in order to sound its reaches and depths. And what is the worth of a life that has not taken such soundings? When the “I” has been tested, it can stand generously in relation to a “you.” “The Leaf” is a father poem, in which my father hears his own paternal voices calling to him from a grave in Guthrie, Kentucky, and from Adam. I will borrow, or steal, or inherit, these lines, and use them in gratitude to evoke my hearing of my own father’s voice in his poems, which have become common property to all who might need them:

From a further garden, from the shade of another tree,  
My father’s voice, in the moment when the cicada ceases, has called to me.

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