

YOUR ECHO COMES BACK IN GREEK



a Festschrift

IN HONOR OF

✻ ROSANNA WARREN ✻

ON THE OCCASION OF HER RETIREMENT

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The Book-Gift

Once I was almost given a book.
At other times I might have rejoiced
in that very "almost," that deedless sliver,

as book-gifts, no matter the intent,
tend to get shelved away by my dread
that I won't get around to reading them

and that my shame will burgeon while
they parch up and I pray to stay unasked,
"So, what did you think of it?"

"I haven't yet. Soon, I promise!"
But this book I wanted. This book I would
let quaff me like a monastery ale.

Penned by the offerer's uncle—a judge
with mystical leanings, who sat up late at night
thinking on tea and attar, until, like Ishmael,

he felt an undulation in the air—it told
of a golden age long gone. It peered into the ore.
Through the peering, the gold became present.

I didn't know this yet, though; I only knew
I wanted to read it. He offered it twice,
then asked me to remind him, which I did.

When we next met, I asked if he had brought it.
He winced, if I remember. "I'm sorry,
it turns out both copies I have are signed

and dedicated, and it wouldn't be right
to give you a book inscribed to someone else.
I'll look around for a clean one for you,"

It might have been more decorous to wait,
but I was on a roll. I went online
and ordered the book. It arrived in three days.

I read it, dazzled, as its disciplines,
eras, thoughts thundered together
in simple sentences, sparse pages,

then read it again, sinking into its secrets.
It had something to say about loss.
More about that later. But first:

I wrote an essay (or rather, a dialogue,
letter, diary) about the book, and sent
it to him, welcoming him to share it

(if he saw fit) with his uncle. "I look forward
to reading your thoughts," he messaged me.
Weeks went by. I touched it up a little,

it,
sent it again, waited, texted, waited.
He said he hadn't read it yet. "Sorry,
I'll get around to it soon." More slow weeks.

Two months and too many messages later,
it dawned on me that maybe I had taken
some of the fun out of his impending reading:

maybe, like me, he balked at soft demands
and found reading a bit hard besides,
seeing as it couldn't be accomplished lightly.

But did he? Was his not-reading, his blank,
anything like mine? Can two zeroes match?
Can we know, ever, what an absence holds?

Evenings sweep by as we scour our nulls,
turning and tilting their recursive scrawl,
our own, anyone's, the new moon's.

Soon, though, it hit me: maybe
it had been a mistake; he hadn't fully
intended to give me the book. The offer

had slipped from his lips, as had been his wont
with dozens of others, who he trusted
would mumble thanks, then drop the matter.

When he found me not only eager to read it,
but bent on doing so, his words trembled, quaked,
and avalanched. Maybe. Also, an inkling

tingled in me that accepting his offer,
then leaping over it, seizing the book,
and writing about it had whisked me to my loss.

While I'm on that topic: the book
told me, between the lines, of a time
that was but is no more, and how

its being no more by no means means
that it never was. Though gone now,
it had its place and therefore still exists

in the soul, which wends its way to joy
by letting itself take part even in marvels
that had their day and cannot be brought back.

This very book he never quite gave me
helped me marvel at the loss itself:
the slow shock, the rock-ribbed rebellion,

the cracking of crust, down to the I-and-thou,
the reckoning, the drift of night, the sleep.
We stayed friends, but at a new remove:

the old mistake was now unmakeable,
its pattern ripped. Yet even the tear
had beauty to it, our fallible swift

fingers unearthing a deep-set bulb,
I murmur, as I pull out of the shelf
a glow of poems you gave me years ago,

which I have long been meaning to reread.
It wasn't like tossing bread / in a stream,
nor was it comfort. A session so bright

and slow that it put brooding in its place.
If I could steal into the garth of worries,
uproot the better questions freesia,

trumpet lily, gladiolus, chionodoxa,
(and what of the rose? that too)—and rebed
them here, where tending is of the essence,

just think of all the gifts I'd read at last.