



warp

LAURA BYLENOK

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Arthur Sze is the author of nine books of poetry, including *Compass Rose* (2014), a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize; *The Ginkgo Light* (2009); *Quipu* (2005); *The Redshifting Web: Poems 1970–1998* (1998); and *Archipelago* (1995). He is a professor emeritus at the Institute of American Indian Arts and is also a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

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The etymology of “warp,” with its root the Old Germanic *werp-*, leads back to the common strong Old English verb *weorpan*, which included the sense to throw or fling, and to the noun *wearp*, which referred to weaving. In contemporary usage, “warp” most often means “to distort”; it is also used to describe what happens to space and space-time in the theory of relativity, and the use of “warp” in science fiction comes from a group of theoretical solutions to Einstein’s field equations.

*hwet is word bute wind?
... a windes puf, a word, mei afellen ant warpen*

*what is a word but wind?
... a puff of wind, a word, may warp her*

—Anonymous

Wave–Particle

warp (v): To project through space. Obsolete.

I have graven you upon
the surface, jigsawed,
sown with moon,
of lake, of lack, of
light beyond
your signature, your *I*
and *oh* a vertigo
of dashes spilt and split,
unhinging at the lee
of a canoe and there,
in situ, space: its mirror
zero cups its hands
around your face—

an heirloom linking
O and I have pressed
a chain into your palms
and bound you
as a book, a binary,
a proof of light, devout,
unraveling its particle
from moon to lake,
a span as fleeting
as the second
just before a second
thought, a doubt.

Genome

warp (v): Of bees: to swarm.

I've been dreaming of a swarm
of bees I've kept in a chest of drawers,

bees wriggling like chromosomes, their bodies
shaped like compound sentences I read:

come with me, sisters, and we are
the self I have been looking for.

I don't know what it means.
It's been that way for years. Once, before all this,

I saw a man crush a bee like a cigarette butt
between his thumb and finger.

I wanted to know about the honeybee.
To know the honeybee has 10,000 genes,

has breakable codes in her unbroken crypt.
To know to extract the DNA

each adult bee is crushed individually
with a pestle and homogenized in a buffer.

To know the bee is centrifuged until
unwanted tissues fall away

and form a pellet to be discarded.
The honeybee, *Apis mellifera*,

delegate of kingdom Animalia,
is one among others I know

—the silkworm, the sea squirt,
the clawed frog, the zebra finch, the rat—

of which we can read every letter of the body.
It sounds like a metaphor but it is not.

Design is decanted from the flesh
with a micropipette:

orders and disorders, oddities, legislation
of the essence, encoded

as a fugue in four voices, notes
to self to split, to dance, to fertilize, to flee.

So easily I get away from myself—
it was the man I meant to tell you about,

the man I used to know,
who killed the bee so carefully—

a lab technician whose job it was to sew
rats together, thin ones to fat ones,

to monitor the effect of hormones
on genetic obesity.

He told me that sewn together down the side,
the rats shared a circulatory system,

and they each made blood
for the other: everything mixing up

when there was no barrier,
no skin to hold it back.

I wanted to know so many things.
That the creature with the most chromosomes

is a fern and the one with the fewest
is the Jack jumper ant.

That a human has fewer genes
than a mustard plant.

That we console ourselves
with the fact we can't understand

our own complexity.

In the dream, when I watched the bees

I pressed my abdomen to imagine
my organs—there was my kidney,

my liver, my ovaries, my body
I can't see. I wanted to know

were the rats one animal or two.

To know what they shared,

what they knew, if they knew
they were going to die.

Each pair survived a few weeks.

The honeybees are swarming

early this season, out of my chest
to the magnolia tree in the yard

I can see when I'm at the kitchen table—
it's simple as a fortune cookie

I break to know what's said inside,
and when I do

a bee flies out, humming as I am
also humming

when I wake, a chamber
of my own, of my own making.

Lomas de Casa Blanca

I have waited in this house, my blood.
Lomas. Hills covered in stars, each one a house
collapsing so slowly it's as if it could stop itself.

By which I mean my body
is collapsing and I have been falling this way
into my cleft mouth—*there*,

where I tongue myself like a missing piece
and lie, face down and trying
not to breathe but to not feel jasmine

burn my palate, its split trumpet howling
through the street, the night street
and slumping stars, the hills

graffitied with x-ed out eyes and pulsing—
still pulsing cold starlight through glass,
white as jasmine on the trellis:

lopped and swollen, jasmine corroding
the night with its chemical burn,
lustrous as plaster on the wall I never

learned to scale, to where it's always night
and the white hills shudder—far above
the hand I feel slide up around my throat,

subtle as a pulse, and I collapse again
around myself like a broken roof
when the jasmine closes its mouth.

Strange Loop

Nights I fall
under a spell of sirens,
one heady scream threading

ahead on a loom of screams,
nights when God slips
into my bed without a word,

nights I lock the window,
when the night is a warm tongue
I want to slice off

screaming and there's nothing
but glass between me and what I tell
myself must be just an animal—

a fox, a pack of foxes, orgasmic,
and I pry my fingers
into their soft lung, their cry

coming apart in a handful
of maggots—wet cascade
of neurons and God

is a siren, is a scalpel, swerving
through tissue, the universe
a single track of nerves,

and the God of God
restitches the abyss
—on nights I fall I am

the animal wife living in the belly
of a fox, waiting for the night
the ambulance dies

in front of my house
and God is the rippling arm
of a paramedic, who knows

we know how to break
each other, and we do,
and he is comforting

and wifeless, with his hand
at my throat.

Nocturne with Spiral Bore

warp (v): To cast, throw, fling. Obsolete.

Streetlight casts its yellow ghost.
Long fingers of streetlight
rifle through the desk. Through petals
fallen from a glass, sprouting
the wilted stalks of week-old lilacs
with a pack's worth of cigarette butts
rooting like maggots in the stems.
It's late. I put the kettle on
and check the phone to listen
to the dial tone. When the record
goes static, when the moon wraps
a white sheet around the animal night,
there are always two more pills
to roll me snake eyes. I wait and listen
to the kettle, restless,
hiss and rattle itself empty.
Streetlight prowls like hands on my face.
When the moon comes in it beckons
like a finger. Long fingers
of streetlight hang like rifles on the wall.

Notes

Definitions of warp are quoted from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

hwet is word bute wind? . . . is quoted from the *Ancrene Wisse*, or the *Anchoresses' Guide*, an anonymous monastic guide first circulated in Europe in the early thirteenth century. The Middle English here is from the volume edited by Robert Hasenfratz (Medieval Institute Publications, 2000).

“Wave–Particle”: The first line is adapted from Isaiah 49:16, KJV: “Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me.”

“Pseudomenon”: The title comes from *pseudómenos lógos*, the statement in ancient Greek, “This sentence is false,” also known as the liar’s paradox. The manchineel is a highly poisonous tree that grows on coasts in the Caribbean, where it is called *manzanilla de la muerte* [little death apple].

“Parallax”: Orion’s second brightest star, Betelgeuse, is a red supergiant moving at the unusually fast 30 km/s, making it a runaway from its origin in the association of stars that includes Orion’s belt.

“Void If”: B) *The product has been damaged* . . . is quoted from the cell phone warranty policy for the Samsung Galaxy Centura.

“Impossible Object”: *Here, we show that DNA...* is quoted from Dongran Han et al., “Folding and cutting DNA into reconfigurable topological nanostructures,” *Nature Nanotechnology* 5 (2010): 712–17.

“If Void”: *The fields...* is quoted from Richard Feynman, *The Feynman Lectures on Physics*, Vol. 2.

Acknowledgments

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Artful Dodge: “Harvest”

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Cimarron Review: “Mythology” and “Impossible Object”

Cream City Review: “Slip”

Diode Poetry Journal: “Wave—Particle” and “Fable”

Fourteen Hills: “Facts”

Guernica: “Luz”

Little Patuxent Review: “Cosmic String”

Measure: “Parallax” and “Elegy with Lime”

Ninth Letter: “Serenade” and “Pseudomenon”

North American Review: “If Void”

Pleiades: “Infinite Regress”

Sewanee Theological Review: “Figure”

Sixth Finch: “Lomas de Casa Blanca” and “Strange Loop”

Subtropics: “Void If”

The Sugar House Review: “Bitter Oranges” and “Driving After
Midnight”

Sugared Water: “Rape of Electra” and “Caiman”

Tupelo Quarterly: “Subject” and “Landscape with Uncertainty
Principle”

TYPO: “Lullaby”

Unsplendid: “Aubade with Peacocks” and “Elegy with Lies”

West Branch: “Genome” and “Young Coconut”

“Harvest” was selected by Ben Grossberg for a 2013 AWP Intro Journals Award.

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The etymology of the word “warp” is constantly at play in Laura Bylenok’s new collection of poems, though the word almost never appears. Warp becomes an agent of the change that is central to existence, projecting through space and laying on hands. Bylenok weaves iterations of warp’s definitions through her verses like a wave, a particle, a distortion, a sigh.

“I want to feel a thing, to feel / myself turn over in my fingers, / turn over in my hands / of salt, my mouth of salt.” Never obvious, Bylenok’s imagery and sounds linger.

“Your signature will cover me, an x / I carry in my eyes, and on my tongue / a sip of scotch about to vaporize.”

Bylenok writes important poems grounded in physicality, finding the divine in the ordinary. “In the church, I always saw her, / absentminded, touch her own hands / as if to touch something under the skin.”

Laura Bylenok is from Seattle, and holds degrees from the University of Washington and the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University. Her chapbook *a/0* was published by New Michigan Press in 2014, and her poetry can be found in *Pleiades*, *Cimarron Review*, *Guernica*, *North American Review*, and *West Branch*, among other journals. She is currently a Vice Presidential Fellow at the University of Utah, where she is pursuing a PhD in creative writing. She lives in Salt Lake City.

Warp is a distinguished book of poems that combines imaginative verve with longing to create a rich tapestry across space and time. With a fresh command of language, demonstrated in poems that harness the vocabulary and structures of science, as well as in poems that deftly handle the more traditional sonnet and villanelle, Laura Bylenok is writing memorable lyric poetry.

—Arthur Sze, 2015 T. S. Eliot Prize for Poetry judge

What a brilliant first book this is. In *Warp*, Laura Bylenok makes an unending loop between word and world, art and science. Each of these beautifully woven poems is also a sound game played between writer and reader. High wit and deep feeling make this poet's debut one of the most exciting I've seen.

—Mary Jo Salter, author of *Nothing by Design* and *Open Shutters*

You could call Laura Bylenok's *Warp* an extended meditation on a word, but during the course of her remarkable investigation she shows us that her word, perhaps like any other, is all but singular. To warp word into words, even in the act of meditation, is to engage the entire multiplicity of language, all its gorgeous meanderings and torques. Bylenok is an inveterate follower of language into wherever it leads—play, tragedy, time—and her own warpings, transmutations, and glorious reinventions ("swoon" into "swerve"; "aurora" into "ouroboros") show us that if language is the perpetual lens of the poet, it is always turning us into new ideas. In these poems, play is the method, but play as serious pleasure. Bylenok shows us again and again how, in pressuring our language, we reshape ourselves and our deepest understanding of reality.

—Katharine Coles, author of *The Earth Is Not Flat* and *Flight*

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