

Meditations



Susan M. Schultz

MEDITATION 11

1/10/20

It's a story they tell themselves that makes sense of their lives, he says. A story links race to rape, rape to the military, thus to America's wars of imperialism and back to rapes, to orphans. Then throw adoption in. Take the walkers away from sex offenders, someone writes, so they can't provoke our pity. They can walk after they're declared not guilty, can't they? He had a good experience in the Boy Scouts, but his abuser had been a scout leader. He had an abuser who was a scout, but his grandfather was a kind man. Variables sing out from flawed equations, demanding restitution. There's need for a Rage Park where we can pause to scream, throw bones to ourselves and chase them, unleash ourselves in a controlled space. The problem with containing rage is that it resists the container, spills through netting or chain link that holds it in. An arm across the chest signals love and confinement. The wedding photo showed his arm around her neck. The murder dressed as suicides came later. Someone left the abuser to die in his cell and threw out the video

evidence. It means denial can masquerade as hope. It's not just trauma we push down, mistaking silence for safety. It's also positive emotions that go into hiding in the city's sewers or basements, those things with feathers avoiding the street, angling for cultural amnesia. A schoolyard fills with terrified kangaroos, fleeing the bush fires. Bet you hadn't expected that migration. Texas will take no more refugees, as they've done their share. Who parcels out these shares, or keeps the graphs of their rise and fall? Who has victimized whom? Do not look at yourself in the mirror. I posted the photograph of a dead saffron finch on instagram; it lay belly up on the sidewalk beside the culvert, its neck so bright a yellow it appeared orange, with fragile orange beak. Does memory preserve or desecrate the bird, whose photograph I take and post on instagram? It garners lots of likes. Is it the beauty of the dead bird's plumage, or the framing of bright color by gray sidewalk? Decomposition composed. Camera as stun gun, fired at whatever you least want to change. Or can least resuscitate. My daughter finds it odd that I take pictures of dead birds; she saw a dead mouse, but refused. The Tibetan monks who meditate beside a charnel pit are not so shy. To see oneself as flesh, then bone, then dust, makes our being's imminent absence visible. Immanence is no lie, though the stories the President tells are yarns. He took photos of homeless persons' blankets, so as not to invade their privacy. She holds up the brightly colored quilt she made for her son. The last ever, she swears. Make sure your conclusion is less an ending than an opening, and leave off the moral of every story told.

MEDITATION 12

1/14/20

I am just a peg to hang his cursive meditations on. When I ask my students to offer up a quirk, one says he's an English major who doesn't read. He used to read half a book before he put it down, but now he doesn't get even that far. Very few in our generation read much, says my daughter's friend, the one who's reading Thich Nat Hanh on dying. At night they turn on *Baywatch* for the bodies, not the plot. But bodies *are* the plot, machines to make prompts for our writing exercises, the ones our parents worry about because we

can't make money off them. She realized quickly that thinking might help her earn money, so she went to class. I argue for inherent value, but that's as quaint as poetry itself. Do nothing for ten minutes a day, I put on my syllabi; if this seems too hard to fit in, remember it's a course requirement. If I could give credit, I would, but the value inheres in practice and practice makes good enough. Somewhere in the middle of that question, statement took over, the rhetorical hammered into bronze, like a statue that walked out to sea at the end of a novel I've forgotten. If earning is like memory, accruing value over time, then forgetting takes us back to living within our meaning. A small bird sits outside my window on the brown rhaps palm frond, but when I look back from my writing, it's gone. We await the dropping of the next shoe. It's hard to fight corruption, because it's spongy, and it gives and gives before folding into itself, feeding the next salted wave of paranoia. It's formalism, really, but without irony; the more you work at the poem's structure, the less you find between the ribs. I explain my dog's name by citing the woman who didn't require a man's rib. Hard power defeats soft every time, with occasional exceptions for martyred saints. Her personality is extremely rare, as she puts connections over division, others above herself. Another student comes from a family of six kids and two parents, all of them vegan. Sitting beside her is the woman who likes the all-you-can-eat meat bar. It's a diverse society, but you have to be taught to express yourself. He governed his tongue in class because the toxic TA policed everyone's words. We want everyone to be better, so we demand specific sentences of them. A man on the radio said (this was the late 60s) he thought "brainwashing" was when you took someone's brain out of their body and gave it a bath. For our next class, consider why we write while Australia burns.

MEDITATION 15

1/20/20

The world ends in hail and dust. No more a consistent tense that moves from present to present, but a tense confabulation. It's a powerful move, I tell my students, but you need to know where you're going. It's not that we're all living in the present, rather that its

fragile shell so easily shatters. Memory loses all category, as if the past only rewound the present. My mother confused my story with hers, my husband with hers. Who's to say we were not all on that plain, huge orange dust storms sweeping toward us, enveloping our drone-witness, bearing material prophecy in its grit. The dust cloud is 186 miles long and moves at 66 miles per hour; it crests over Dubbo and Broken Hill, composed of earth from farms in New South Wales. "Look at the earth," my father would say, meaning the orange clay that only broke when you took your spade to it. The earth was that color in Vietnam, a vet once told me. But now it rises as if it had wings and its poet wasn't always so stoned he heard angels singing, their verbs blooming dutifully at the ends of sentences, where they propel us back to the beginning, no matter their tense. Our witnesses watch for us, a drone hovering over Diamond Head to see how many houses burned on the first clear day in weeks. It was such a beautiful day. Without my uttering the word, my students talk about mindfulness, this being in the present, being with, not coming after. Legions of bearded white men descend on Richmond with their guns; one chides a younger man for using the word "masturbation." We're here to show our love for each other, he says, and the younger man avers, backing off. One wears a knitted American flag hat, the other an orange bandanna. Love does not alter where it alteration finds, is bronzed like another horseman in another instagram photo. Yesterday, I saw Ronald Reagan on a horse, as still as a church mouse. The drone came back to the park like a boomerang, though after the third news story it's running in the present, coming back and back to spill its video record. She read out loud from *To the Finland Station*, sentences unspooling like Krapp's tapes, students giggling at their heft. At the Atocha Station, I thought I saw old women selling bats on sticks, suspicious that the poem was an act of realism, not experiment. There was a plaque for the intervening dead. Some species may be rendered extinct by the bush-fires. To be going extinct. What tense is that? The continuous perishing.

MEDITATION 16

1/21/20

She says the neighbor was sitting on his truck bed while his daughter played on the swings yesterday. Today, he told me he was close to both of the dead officers. Marcus Aurelius writes that we observe everything before we're 40. From then on, it's a loop. We get used to things; we put a distance between us and our injuries; we reconcile ourselves. We forgive the trespasses of those who trespass against us. (Wisdom literature leans forward and back.) Aurelius would recognize the absurdity of this weekend's violence: an old man killed cops with a shotgun, then set his neighborhood on fire. If reality presses against our eyelids, then how can we close our eyes? We keep them open to our devices, real and imagined. Distraction may have gotten us here, but it had better save us now. An Englishman once asked me why Americans use "gotten" instead of "got" as a verb form. I assured him we do not. Two sentences later, I heard myself say "gotten." How little do we know ourselves by our verb forms. They make a fine family tree, however, enough to launch a holy book. Had he gotten help, he might not have run amok, the angry Czech. I want a how-to on looking, while not suffering for it. If I make my sentences longer, they might lose their hurt before the period waves its penalty flag. Can I offer wisdom before the facts, like a trial set up to occur before any witnesses are called? It's a rough path, life, my son writes, though his photograph is of a wall. No matter the angle, the edges are blunt and sharp, and each fork in the road gets you there. The president has done nothing wrong, his counsel says, so there's no need to introduce evidence. We're watching the death of democracy on our screens, but it's not entertaining enough, so we'll do it quickly. No wonder our tenses are inconsistent. What occurred before the trial must be presented after the trial is done. Acquit him first, then argue that the evidence comes in too late. There's a crisis in comedy, but I haven't watched any for years now. The transcript of an absurdity is like a garden tool used to injure your landlord. "Kill da landlord," Eddie Murphy screamed. It was funny then, but it isn't the day after the landlord cannot be found dead in her own home, burned to the ground by her tenant. You can't tell the joke, if the punch-line comes first. Or the shotgun blast. She

let him stay in the house because she took pity on him.

MEDITATION 17

1/24/2020

The man with the blank map keeps calling you into his office. The man with the blank map in his office points to blank portraits on the wall. We see that they were men, but they are featureless. All that's left of their histories shows in gilded frames, cleansed of dirt, that glint beneath the ceiling lights. The blank map man screams profanities, but the next day he will attack you for your "lack of decency." The blank faced men in frames cannot look out or in. A senator refers to himself as "visibly upset"; perhaps he has a selfie to prove it, because neither in nor out will do what at requires. Look within thyself and write, or look at thyself and whine. A good portrait keeps his eyes on you as you cross the room. The eye that sees you is more powerful than a weapon, because it gives you pause to think. "People will hear about this," said the man with the map, intending it as a threat. What is most dangerous is someone else's attention to us. I will sit quietly in my office. I will not say to anyone what they might repeat to another. My mask is a map with nothing on it. I know it covers a place, but I cannot stick a pin in that place. The memory police are out to shame us, but shame has no currency. None of my students ever drew the face of a quarter with any accuracy. We cannot see what we use. A gumball means more than a founding father. Chew on that.

MEDITATION 18

1/26/20

I hadn't seen him in a while, the gray-haired white man who walks the one-eyed dog named Rosie, sometimes yells at traffic to stop. He'd yelled at me, too, about Hillary, about lazy millennials, about the university, about how people just don't look out for each other any more, about people who drive through stop signs. A radical centrist,

he called himself. For months after, I talked about his dog and mine, the weather, anything neutral (weather over climate, I'm sure). The last time we'd met, just past the new year, he'd yelled at me about "rag heads," and I called him a racist. Turned on my heel. Today, as I came up Hui Kelu with Lilith, I saw him and Rosie ahead of us. He saw us. At his turn-around point, he crossed the road, started back toward his townhouse on the next street over. He had sunglasses on, wrap-arounds. I said, "good morning!" but he kept going. His body clenched tight: arms out from his sides, legs moving like pegs. The only softness to him might be his belly. He's my lesson, but it's a lesson I cannot learn. Perhaps he's happy in his horrible opinions, a friend opines, but I don't believe it. He's how pain turns to Fascism; he's how hurt accumulates grudges; he's how you come to hate a woman neighbor who wears an Obama shirt, so clearly a "snowflake," even in paradise. He's how you don't avoid your pain, but alchemize it into anger. It's more valuable that way. He's how you take someone aside, abuse her, and then call her indecent. He's how the mirror works. The man who yells at traffic sees me on his mirror, but not as myself. This confuses me, like the times my demented mother transposed herself with me. So accustomed to seeing myself in the mirror, I saw the image of someone I didn't want to know.

MEDITATION 19

1/30/2020

On the Friday the Republic dies, there will be a sale on our words. They're more valuable to us as empty containers than as pith. The store that sells us on organizing will stack them at the windows, inviting us to use "democracy" to store our beans, "due process" to hold our rough drafts. My students find the sonnets uninteresting, incomprehensible. Yes, there's a speaker in the poems, and yes, he's hectoring a friend. He wants his friend to "breed." He wants his friend to last forever, as a collection of words. But we'll sell those, too, like the banana taped to a wall that sold for \$250,000 before someone walked up and ate it. The banana gives us mental energy; I may be remembering my former students' names because I ate one this morning. It's useful, and to suggest otherwise is a joke. An expensive

one. They shake their heads at the thought. Is it a joke on intrinsic value, on art's rot, on the usefulness of duct tape, or do we take it at its word: "banana"? I'd tape mine to a wall if I could, then take your good money to dispatch it. If I no longer own the word "idealism," I cannot be disappointed when it proves useful in a service economy. The word "hoard" explains a lot; so does the border wall that falls in a stiff wind. One field has to do with economies of love, the other its sickness. The best words aren't just empty; they're translucent in the way plastic is, admitting light while blocking clarity. The former dive instructor said there were days she surfaced into fields of plastic. I urged her to start there; that's an image we can hold onto. Beneath the ground-cover this morning, I saw a yellow toy smile at me. I took its picture.

MEDITATION 20

2/2/20

She knew a woman who lived in the house of the woman who died at the hand of her tenant, by fire or by gunshot. The woman who owned the house worked in the library; she looked familiar. She belly-danced. I might have seen her at the old Egyptian place, a middle-aged white woman thrusting her belly forward, my friend's partner's straying eye but brief. Anne was guardian ad litem at a house where a sumo wrestler was killed over meth. Next door, a young mother beat her son when his kind step-dad was away. Up the hill, a man keeps his disabled parents hostage on the lower floor, while he goes surfing in his van. We tell ourselves it's always been bad. That despair is their friend, not ours. The practice is about facing death, but we think of that death as ours, not our republic's by which it stands, one nation indivisible, with. The poems aren't so much about love but the damage we leave, if we're lucky. He wants to translate old poems into new, render them honest in their confessions to inadequate feeling. I open the old poet's book and find an inscription--to me,--"with love," two days after a birthday. He gave me a bear hug in a thick sweater. Lived in an old fire house with his poet's wife and children. Paid ambivalent homage to Stevens, though he was a Williams man. This is what it will be like,

Bryant says, putting one foot in front of the other, not calling attention to yourself, not saying what might be reported. Cloak your words, as in a poem. (And take his name out next time.) The reader comes later, but there will be no trace of you at your place of work. Soon to be acquitted, the president rescinds the ban on landmines. Just because he's guilty doesn't mean we should convict him.