

Meditations



Susan M. Schultz

The Bird's Nest at the End of the Mind

26 August 2021

I say I like the lotus after it's bloomed. The old man with a tall stick, dressed in emergency green vest and baseball cap, pulls down his black ear phones to tell me his grandfather grew acres of taro and lotus. He asked if I'd eaten haru. His two hands made a circle, where the lotus sat in that dish. A blonde woman pushed her blonde child uphill in a black stroller. She had no earphones, so I heard the doppler of right wing radio. We'd had words last Fall. The hoarder, whose stone Buddha nurses oranges beside the pink flamingos, paints his mailbox red. And then again the old man, the mother. Each walk a form. Remember each encounter like a line, each parting a break. Rush's voice among the birds. Moses in the rushes couldn't imagine Limbaugh, though at least he didn't kill his "real" father to marry his "real" mother. He carried large tablets to tell his people how to behave, amounting to a list of what not to do. Park signs in Hawai'i are like that, crowded with nots and don'ts. Spell check doesn't like contractions rendered plural, but diminishment is often repetition, a

collar pulled tight so the head cannot escape. The Afghan pull-out meets right wing rage from the mainstream media. Everyone to their category, everyone their walking stick. I assumed he didn't notice the lotus, but he saw me looking, remarked on its beauty. Brenda says she no longer falls back on judgment; it's unworkable. Like a garbage disposal, it only shreds, taking big garbage and crushing it into small. I've seen the sewers of Paris, but not those of Ahuimanu, though I smell sewage from the highway. Most of it's traces, a diffuser in air or light broken pink at sunrise on cloud mountain. She says she doesn't like sports. I tell her they're like mandalas, forming and deforming, an instant of beauty surrounded by a traffic jam of chaotic color. A young bird screeches from the palm outside. Not opinion but need, not talking point but desire. You ask what writers hate words. I want to know who loves them.

--for Brenda Kwon

Netflix for Academics

23 August 2021

I was in my office again, weeping. It's called a trigger, though the gun's left off, or the shot and its perfect wound. Machine-shopped stereotypes do that to us, reminding us of how others see us. Do you have a conflict entrepreneur in your workplace? Might you be one yourself? How do you dodge conflict, while remaining true to your principles, the ones you see running down the street after a hard rain, plumeria petals, leaves and oil-based rainbows melding together like pomegranate molasses? At the cemetery, a funeral program, chopped up by a weed whacker. Impermanence times two. Soon, only those who grow up in a house will have one; the rest will be wanderers in a medieval style drama lacking Charity or Good Works. Just large wooden wheels shivering over flagstones. A tiny circus came every spring to New Haven in a carriage; its memory clashes with the Hare Krishna singing, the drums, competition for our spiritual attention when all we wanted to do was magic. "There's something wrong in my head," I said on the telephone

my junior year. It was the loss of losses then; an inability to have experiences because they'd end in the rat on the chest. In recovery, you may realize you've been stuck like the good Lord in a vase at the cemetery, held down by small stones, halo like a frisbee on the godhead. Is there a space between "god" and "head," or is the hyphen/space in excess? Why did she use so many dashes? Do they create or negate space? Are they the dashes of the master used against him, like tiny printed knives? Steve says these meditations resemble therapy sessions. All I ask is that each day come with a question, that it be framed in such a way I can start to walk with it, like Robert Walser stopping to deliver speeches on the virtues of walking. For now, the walk in the cemetery leads home in a loop. A young Black man knew I was wearing a Kansas City Monarchs cap. That is how I wish to be read, wearing history on my cap, mysterious only to those who lack reference. It was appropriate, she writes, that the next chair be someone allied with the old guard who had suffered from their abuse. She fits neither side of her face, remembers giving an old dean a hand job. That's two words, no hyphen.

--for Steve Benson

All Our Issues are Belong to Us

19 August 2021

Another white man in another pick-up truck with another bomb (perhaps) throws dollar bills and coins out his window and live-streams demands. He wants Joe to call him. After it's over, we're told he has issues (mother died) and he wanted to speak to his wife. His son says they had no idea he was driving north to be a patriot. What happened to the Christmas Eve bomber who took out a block in Nashville? He, too, had problems. I dream I'm standing in a large meadow, surrounded by angry men (and some women). They've formed a circle around me; instead of singing campfire songs, they taunt me with their silences. If I had synesthesia, I'd say their auras were very dark. I want to tell them I am not origin but trigger, that I am someone they cannot know. They march forward to attach

grievances to my clothes, except their post-it notes are permanent, like flags at cemeteries. I'm too confused to be angry, permit myself to be their white board (because, as one screams, I am white). So is she, but that hardly matters; judgment triggers dopamine as sure as a facebook like. The aftermath is ache, gateway drug to self-loathing. They nurse their anger like a baby's skull, and like some skulls it breaks. It's what you do with your trauma that matters. There was a blue design on a green dumpster I missed when I left my iPhone at home. But don't throw it away. Sit at its charnel house and count your bones in prospect. The stink will fade. "Tragic optimism," the article says, counter-acts "toxic positivity." The Taliban fighters who whip women without burqas have their problems, too.

Proposition Without Thesis

10 August 2021

To write without purpose is to talk; those with purpose compose. But I can't imagine many of his poems spoken out loud, unless by someone on the street without a cell phone at their ear, or bud. The dark wood required a bushwhack, just as the lawn prescription's a weed whacker. It's improvisation within the frame of underbrush, boulder, chaos that accumulates into clutter. An idea starts the engine sputtering; you're more conscious of that than of the `io that screams over the `ohi`a. Chance operations, like lichen on a blue truck, or the leg bone of a cow beside the road, make better art than organization. Flow charts get heavier at the top, the more syllables the better, if your title means to lead and to own. If your students miss the first week, you're required by federal law to report them; that way, it's easier to take away their scholarships. It was sad to see her without her mask on, having lost her husband and then her husband's dog, but she perked up quickly. Now that's talk story, but what of non-narrative talk? They say their loved ones speak in word salad, laugh alone in their rooms. The punch-line comes not of a joke-as-story, but a confabulation of tenses. We are afraid of the future, Norman opines, but what of the present, ferries leaving Greece in flames, coral bleaching, the titles we give to self-destruction? A famous author called him in the hospital to urge him

to get ECT; it saved his life. The famous author died later, by his own hand. The Pacific, an article says, is the canary in the coal-mine for climate change. Is that metaphor mixed, or inane? And yet we understand the meaning, if not the conveyance. It's like a ground-breaking swim in the Olympics. Or the framed yellow bird who appears to whisper in the ear of a woman in the break-out room who hears a song of insecurity. We expect raven, but get gold finch. White eyes live up to their name; they, too, are invasive, brought to the islands in cages, now fluttering over the gardenia bush in the front yard. His work never changed, but he made more of his backyard than any poet earlier or since. To breathe is to be present, because only the body is, as the rest of us tails off in conniption fits, aka thoughts, leaving us to throw our anchor as air.

At the Selfie Museum

8 August 2021

When I look up “signature style,” I find a site to show me the best signature for my name. But my name has nothing to do with it, except as a marker of the signature style these prose blocks trace, not in fraktur or in all caps, or even with the S as a silent treble clef. I could break the lines again, fracturing thought like a fibia, or put in power point diagrams, all clunky squares and captions. But there's still something to think through, and this the through street, not Walter Benjamin's “one way street,” though his “one way” was code for every which. The prose block is not image, unless it's “still yet moving,” like the bridge. Nor is it TikTok: not so entertaining as two men dancing in a street for 10 seconds. What I hear outside begins as a cow's moo and modulates into machinery. A tiny white-eye lands on the gardenia. Lilith chased so hard after pheasants I had to run behind her on the loop. Feed back loops of excruciating sound tended toward abstraction as an escape route. Leave the muck to the lotus. Then, at about the time I left the dark wood, the loop slowed. “I'm just back dated.” Out of an imagined google satellite rush-to-earth came the still photograph. A friend says each photograph seems to contain a story, but I think of them as stories lacking verbs. What moves is the clock between walks around the loop; 12 or 24

hours in unseen cinematography. The narrative is all off-stage. What we're left with are chairs set down on plywood, one day a circle, and another a square, when the triangle's out of town. A vow, a vowel, a noun, a mnemonic. Hard sometimes to remember the words that go with images. So let them be set apart, like fluted vases filled with mountain grass. Or go to the selfie museum and choose your booths. One of them is called Zen; in it, sushi plates are covered in gray sand. You can push the sand around in your selfie. I suggested she go to take her friends' photographs; more subversive that way. But perhaps a bit too other-y, don't you think?

--For Violet King, and her mother, Cortney

So Much Depends on Pronouns

4 August 2021

The question that formed on the loop evaporated. I lost it at the cross street as Lilith and I turned left. The only commonality between speed skating and baseball is the left turn. A St. Louis congresswoman camped on the Capitol steps for days to extend non-eviction notices. She's considered a leftist. The question of privilege makes my high school classmate unkind, she says, victim of a father's trauma, passed down like a dowry. And don't talk to her about money. Late in her life, my mother talked to her neighbor about her father's alcoholic violence, her mother's cruelty, the losses of sister and burnt toast. She'd been all gesture, hint, provocation, not explication de texte with all its feelers, the reader an anemone clinging to coral but swaying, nonetheless. She plays the game now, its rules transactional, made to keep the game going. I hear crickets, speaking of games engineered to go a long time. You can take picnics to cricket, brown bag lunches to committee meetings, but your sustenance goes toward the stamina inertia requires. Inertia, too, fails to unfold gravity, float away like the letter A at Radhika's senior soccer game. I thought Radhik funny, but Bryant drove to the store to buy another balloon. No one wants another lock-down, but denial only sometimes serves to push a traumatic event back, far enough to avoid its jaws. You want the question that has no answer,

but lacking question, there's no reason to seek one out. Take the seeking away, and there you find your seeker. Bewilderment's one path, the other's lost in the forest. At the cross-road, take both directions, said Yogi Berra, and he was right. A brown pig the size of a horse. The black pig's sharp left turn, hoofs screeching on asphalt. The turn of a screw. Another disgraced New York governor says, "This is not who I am." Depends on how you define the pronoun "I."