

*Poems below taken from Meditations,
winner of the Poetry Society of America National Chapbook Prize, 2004*

Meditations in the Margins of the Book of Irish Curses

i. In the middle of the field, may your horse kill you

Let it be a roan, without foal, without a crown
of honeybees circling her mane of clover.
The tongue of a bee is golden and can never
mourn the evening as it weaves through

the river birches, *Nyssa Aquatica*, named for
the water that sweetens its touch, and *Pinus Palustris*,
long-leaf pine, named for the palace of cinder
above the river. Let it be the roan, please, without

holiness, or shame. May she throw my ribs to the graveyard clay
and make a cake from my legs of broken air.
May her tail, coarse as an orphan's wrist, sweep the bees
into my mouth that will never taste the river again.

How can the silence remain whole beneath the grass?
May she never know how much I loved her.

ii. Your soul to the devil

*What farness summons you? What grief?
In my sleep I see you burning.*
— Laurie R. King

Nothing that this distant night brings is enough
to hold back the dawn. The same with the soul,
that orthopedic star, that clubfoot who rents
the room above us. Our souls are not our own.

We do not own them, and I am comfortable
with this fact, this one true finality
that can never touch the sweet reply of coal trains
in the night. For what reason they haunt this air

is not mine to answer. The soul asks for nothing
and to give it the warmth of a body is to make
it laugh in the dunes of a mind oblivious and beautiful.
White heart, white road. See, my friends, there among

the black branches? The sad, voiceless envy
of the unchanging dead? Doesn't take long at all.

*iii. Back from the river, back to the river,
may savage dogs eat you, one foot on a mountain*

This is the landscape I once believed in,
and because of belief, I have made it across
the frozen river, the marshes torn apart
by winter, to the disappearing rooms

of the sea. Make me want it: this loveliest
of air. Make the world another world,
beneath the persimmon grove and the rain.
I am not hated and I am not lucky, but I know

that when I leave a place the rivers will not
miss me, and if the owl and bat hunting
among the persimmon briefly touch (talon:
skin wing) and leave me to myself,

then pray the dogs feast on my gallant feet,
for the mountain is burning, and I regret none of it.

*iv. I Have Tried to Imagine the Kind of City
You and I Could Live in as King and Queen
(Or: May the cats eat the women)*

Beyond the cities, bees have inherited
the ruined walls of barns, so hail to whatever
you found in the sunlight that surrounds us.
Hail to the bees in their blue walls humming

the song of dead men, which is no song.
Hail to the pumpkinseed rotting in the embers,
to the red nail on the tongue that said May the cats
eat the women, to the broken little fish under the docks,

under the ice and light and the failure of it all.
And if there were grief within this, within all beauty,
then every city would be enough to hold us,
gathered in the long hours before dawn,

the harbor abandoned, the ships undone by the tide.

v. May you not see the cuckoo nor the corncrake

It could be worse. On Attila the Hun's
wedding night, he got so drunk he hemorrhaged
from the nose and suffocated to death
in his own blood. I'm not saying I want

any of this. I've always considered
myself a victim, though. Haven't you ever
embarrassed yourself? It's embarrassing
to live sometimes. I've touched a nest of wasps

in the night just to get an idea of how the human
flame is shaped, and a sparrow joined me, yet I can't
say birds aren't grateful for such a chance, there
in the darkness that only the leaves own.

I'm living is what this means. Maybe you've noticed.
The tiny hearts have gathered in the trees.

vi. The curse of the widows and orphans on you

There is a kind of peacefulness that exists only after
the winds stop and the trees on this street come alive
in their silence. I felt that now, the want of my hands
to become breath against these leaves,

the same leathery magnolias the rum-shod drunks
on Grace Street weave cups from, stems
looped with sap, tossing petals
to the pretty girls on their lunch breaks,

a little money jangling in their pockets
after a day's work at the dry dock.
I want a heaven for us, from a time
when there was some hope, an abacus

of sparrows asleep in the high branches.
Only then would I be happy.

vii. May God weaken you

There is a light that fails in my mouth.
— *Georg Trakl*

I have seen my face in an autopsy photo, adrift
in the shroud of 1910. This light is so much like you,
I tell myself, under the alcohol lamps and bone currettes.
Now a cadaver, I can see what it means to be

honey in a tobacco pouch, the skin of God in a firefly's gut.
The stars' grand indifference is not enough anymore,
that falsest of freedoms. I want to fall on the ice of a frozen river
and see the grasses swaying in the current beneath.

I want to uncork the ether jars and wash the moths from
the apothecary's wooden bedpan. Remember when we were
the only ones alive, dear surgeons? The century, neglected, witnessed
our passing, our cursed days. There we were, weakened

and lost among the tourniquets, the amputated legs of night graceful
in the wind and in the flesh and in the porous dawn.

viii. The death of the kittens to you

A brace of partridges in a meat-shop window:
I ask for sorrow on the house of trees.
A red bone in the throat, a red nail on the tongue:
I ask for twilight in the house of bees.

A pig's snout on her and the dead mouth of a sheep:
I ask the stars to drown, to yawn, to veil.
A gentle mule abandoned on the road to sleep:
I ask for dawn, and on the sea, a sail.

So much for the swans under the willows and rain:
So much for the kittens under the bridge at dusk:
So much for the sky and the sane and the insane:
So much for spring, my love, let it run. Let it rust.

(A field of garlic, Shepherd's Purse, wild ginger:
If I could remember, I would, and miss her.)

*ix. May the entrails and mansion of
pleasure out of this worm fall*

I feel that we have failed somehow.

Not the present, not the past, but the absent
way a boy sharpens a stick on the sidewalk
to stab a sleeping dove. Sure, the light gathers

in the white field of husks and we grow
accustomed to the dark, but time diminishes
us, settles into the city's incessant furrowing,
and look where I ended up, drunk in an orchard

of tar and lead, the tobacco factories dead in the air
and the radio towers across the river broadcasting
the red lights of famine, of sleep. Dear city, I am incapable
of love. I abandon you to the willows.

Dear city, your breath is glass in my ear, your throat
a boy, crawling through the long night grasses.

Damnatio Memoriae

The light that is with us, here, now,
will ruin us one day—

angelic among the whitened orchards of cloud,

palest blue, the tips of bee's wings
home from a clover patch.

Perhaps the only time we become angelic
is over our world—the furthest away
from everything we have ever known—

an ether, a grace, a world that belongs
not quite to us—but is suddenly inherited,

as twilight inherits the trees, the dead branches

of winter—as the cities far below gather their rivers.



From up here, the clouds seem tethered
to their shadows, each with a blanket
of its own, tablecloths of walking rain.

Ephemeral, of course—but why put a name on it?

They part the way they deserve to,
the evening slipping away
beneath them, night's undertow

eroding the blue soil of sky—

kind of like an ocean,
only deeper.

Call the clouds *white-throated vireos in the new hives*
and it wouldn't be enough.

Dead satellites orbiting the five rows of moon
is close,

brailled letters of patience swimming the pale reefs,
closer.



Each time a plane takes off it is the end, really:
witness to the end of the world.

Funny, how it happens over and over.

The same flight attendant filing the same red
fingernails is a disease only the damned can know,

her reddened eyes still asleep in a Denver hotel,
the same red exit doors, red wing-lights,
wilted cherry blossoms and Coca-Cola

and the red mouths of children sitting too close
to televisions somewhere below us.

The old woman seated in front of me is asleep.

She could be anyone and because of this
she is nothing and I like her for it.

Anonymity gives her a certain beauty,
as does sleep, as does the last bit of sun
glinting from the wing.

Watching her decide whether to leave
the tiny plastic window shade up or down
was enough to convince me that one day long ago

a man gathered a crown of lilacs from a ditch
to put in her hair

and she looked at them so closely and full of wonder,
the man knew he had it made, already
owned the pearl buttons on her blouse

but she was counting the aphids gorging
on the stems, smiling a little

at their ruined, indifferent hearts.

Between the crack in these seats, I can see through
her thinning platinum hair to her pale scalp—

it reminds me of the albino boy
in my sixth grade class who shaved his own head
so no one would suspect his curse of pigment,

his immense longing for light,

though his scalp glowed the white
of a chickadee's song and brought upon him
a cruelty I could ever bear.



I heard that naming a cloud is like living one more day
with an x-ray of your hand filled with buckshot
slipped under the mattress,

hoping that, when the rooms of sleep
finally eat away the black stars of shrapnel,
your hand will emerge from the bandages white,
whole, and beautiful again.

I do both in case it's true.

Lenin did it to Trotsky, not with an x-ray,
but with a photograph. Trotsky is there beside him,
stoic, wrapped in a thick gray coat and hat, and Lenin,

bare-headed on the wooden stage, pointing towards
a future far off in the hills, and I imagine, the scent
of burned sausage rolling through the square.

Seven years later in the same photo, no Trotsky.
No hat, either.

Just an empty space that even a cloud couldn't fill,
a boy in the bottom left corner vomiting into a flour sack,
the lonely arm of Lenin aiming north to a Ukraine
eaten away with peasant graves.



The Romans did it long before Lenin, and were
more obvious, dramatic, preferring to loan out,

for a small fee, hundreds of bone-chisels
and let the crowds hack up
the deposed emperors along with their statues.

The emperor's children were spared the chisels
and instead, given to the lions:

a small, nameless meal:
a new hunger for the hungry.

Their soft and precious ears strung up on ivy
took days to dry, and the villagers renamed
the ears to distract the little deaf ghosts:

apricot-halves: sponges: doe-prints-in-sand:
olive leaves: look!—skipping stones.

The Romans didn't mess around.

They didn't need mattresses,
or for that matter, clouds.

It seems childish, I guess, to believe
that to make the body whole

or change the collective memory of history

all you have to do is slip a bit of film
between mattress and box-spring,
grind a skull into a grayish paste.
From this height, though, I can believe anything,
even the translation from Latin:

Damnatio Memoriae—

a mere whisper of it is enough to dim the heart,
turn leaves into smoke. It is simply—

the condemnation of memory.

No more, no less, no introduction, no awl
or chisel, no star hung from the night's rotting beams,
no hat, no scalp, no cloud, no grave.

Call it whatever you want. It will erase what you love,
follow you through the frozen streets of oblivion.

It will outlive you.



The woman's head in front of me
lulls sharply to one side.

I would like to hold it up for her, a gentle kite,
no stories or songs, just my hand for a pillow,
hairspray sticking to my palm.

Easy does it: rest now: head in hand: sleepy doe.

Let's be sentimental for once,
let's return to the authentic.

The crop circles through the window:
dinner plates or bruises or transgression
of earth—what does it matter now?

Far off, dusk spreads across the fields,
yellow-tipped—this absence
is what we have between us,

the heart a clock.

If I held her head in my hands,
would it save me?

Save me from the memory of the albino boy,
gullible and pink, as Danny Joye,
the principal's son, pummels him over and over

for no other reason than to erase him,
a fission of soil and blood,
me looking away and knowing

that I was heartless for not stopping it
and human for laughing with the rest of them,
at that pale boy who laughed back at us
in the way a bat blindly echoes through
telephone wire: skin wing: crimson mouth:

under the light of a spring sun bright enough
to carry all the bees dying in the clover.



America is a cloud, by the way—of light
and shadow and silvered calm.

The nervous chatter of businessmen
when the plane hits an air pocket
is the kind of sound honored

in the outermost level of hell.

Turbulence, one of the businessmen says,
reminds me of screwing my secretary
while talking to my wife on the phone

and his associates laugh their ringing coin
laughs, each remembering a childhood

that seemed more like a documentary film
on adolescent growth than an intimate life:

testosterone line graphs: vague discolored
diagrams of genitalia: National Geographic
stuffed under the mattress.

I am no angel here, either—or anywhere—
too clumsy and dulled to be
that weightless, that azure-eyed.

A little boy sitting beside the old woman

vomits peanuts into the pilot's hat
which looks nothing like Trotsky's.

The beauty: gone.
The glinting wings: forgotten.

The sky can make a list of forgetfulness,
and I've seen this for a fact.
Lover, dearest, pilgrim, carrion,

I will outlive no one. I will erase what I have loved.

The one white sail fluttering below
is a ghost on a trip to the city of ghosts—
rising into the emptiness cities fill—
pointing its lonely arm towards a night
that will blanket all our graves with its song.