

Meanwhile: Poems by Kathleen O'Toole (David Robert Books, 2011)

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In Kathleen O'Toole's *Meanwhile*, the title poem appears late. The reader who has attended straight through to that point will find a revelation in store: "Meanwhile" doesn't seem to illuminate the entire collection. Rather it is the other way around. Upon arrival at the title poem—wherein the speaker opens her copy of *Yeats' Collected* and finds the photograph she has saved of her own mother's diseased heart, marked as it is by the cardiologist's pen—the reader has been prepared by the dedicated practice of the poems that preceded it.

O'Toole's "meanwhile" is ordinary time, a poetic space in which she presents herself, open to what comes. Her "meanwhile" is reminiscent of Auden's "the time being," which he reminds us is "the most trying time of all," wherein "the Spirit must practice his scales of rejoicing," no matter the flatness of the everyday, its sense of loss, its unmistakable brokenness (*For The Time Being*).

O'Toole practices her scales of rejoicing continually. Given her long careers in community organizing, writing, and teaching—and given her spiritual profession as a Benedictine oblate—her practice yields work not easily categorized. It resists separation into groups of poems one might characterize as nature poems, or political or "religious" poems. In *Meanwhile*, a poem is just as likely to emerge from a conversation about politics with a cab driver from Sierra Leone ("April is National Poetry Month"), as it is to emerge from a visit to the museum ("Opening: O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe"). Likewise, the same habit of contemplation that is exerted on the discovery of the mother's heart in "Meanwhile" is also exerted on a news piece about the death of a man who flew on the *Enola Gay* ("Reading Obituaries"). Again and again these ordinary moments within the meanwhile give occasion to accomplished poems in a range of styles, some worked out in traditional forms and others decidedly more free. But one after the other they seem cut from the same cloth, one poet still at work on the same project—a determined openness to the holy.

In an earlier chapbook, *Practice*, O'Toole refers to the spiritual discipline of the Benedictines. Benedictine oblates live and work outside the monastery, where they are free to marry and tend to their own families, and where they are continually at work translating the Rule of Benedict to the everyday world. Over the years, O'Toole has applied that discipline to her work as poet. Thus it is that the poems from the chapbook seem at home in the larger collection, their accomplishments a matter of course.

In "The Luminous World," while attending Mass during Advent—that time of year when the light is going—the poet listens as a blind cantor sings "of brightness in the coming/of the Lord" and contemplates her own habit:

. . . I find that year to year I hoard
more illumination to store for sunless days,
recording gradations of luster and shadow
calibrating brilliance.

The middle stanza of this poem becomes painterly, images of remembered light thickly laid, and it concludes with a flight out of Brussels during winter: "slow/ motion sunset before us, the dark diagonal of night/ behind." Even as the plane enters the airspace of frozen Manhattan, the present moment seems suspended in a rich, crimson going-down of the sun.

But the final stanza returns to the meanwhile, wherein the blind cantor sings, and wherein Milton is recalled, “painting his bright stones of desire.” Where, O’Toole wonders, would she would find grace “without the luminous world?”

The allusion to Milton here is more than humble nod, more than thanks for the gift of sight with which to paint imagery praising natural beauty. Rather it is O’Toole’s exhalation of gratitude for the gift of the luminous world itself. In the tradition of Christian poets like Milton—but without the direct address of conventional Christian prayer—O’Toole places herself in the presence of her God, and proclaims that this world, as distinguished from the next, is indeed luminous with the holy. Where would she be, she wonders, without the grace to “see” it?

Indeed, throughout *Meanwhile*, the quality of luminosity is something mysteriously greater than light by which to physically see, or (metaphorically) by which to intellectually apprehend. The Latin root *lumen* denotes light, but in *Meanwhile*, the image most striking is that of an emptying out of self to create an inner cavity (*lumen*) through which—or perhaps within which—one “sees.” In “Seen, Unseen,” for example, the advice of Paul in the epigraph (“We do not fix our gaze on what is seen but on what is unseen”), leads to close study of single moments in the natural world: a heron entering and taking leave of a pond; the discovery in the Sierra Mountains of “the shimmer and claque/ of white-silver petioles in the breeze”; and three insects—moths drawn to light, green-head flies “that light—and bite” far out in the bay, and a dragonfly “poised on the halyard in a stiff nor’easter”. Suddenly the intense looking widens to include humankind:

. . . Imagine a movement
among the super rich, rushing to cash in their billions.
A river of balm floods the sub-Sahara, overtakes
the pillaging of AIDS. Only first *see* the mothers
queuing up at a Botswana clinic, their sons bending over cassava plots,
sisters minding babies who play gamely in the dry stream bed.

A lumen has been opened: Like “fireflies lifting from the long grass/ at dusk,” the dead ancestors and “the heaven/hell around us” emerge from the darkness, “defying all we do not believe.”

The lumen is there in “Salado Markings,” a contemplation upon the Hohokam people who “left no bones for us to measure them,” but only “the aligned portals through which the equinox sun rose and set/ rose and set.” It is there in “Demolition in a Time of Penitence,” a contemplation upon the “carcasses” of four public housing high rises, as the demolition crew picks them clean, revealing “grease stains on mauve paint/ and mad-flowered wallpaper,” the lives of the poor seen briefly just before the explosives go off. It is there, too, in “Triptych,” a contemplation in the aftermath of 9/11, the third frame of which (after “Silence” and “Word”) studies “Form”—still more practice at holding while letting go, at seeing in the “honeycombed embrace of air/ and smoke” a hollowed place that is “hallowed each day/ with what it surrenders/ and what it cannot disclose.”

Meanwhile is a strong collection of poems with which to spend some time and reflect. Like Milosz (whom “Nothing but Gifts” calls back to, with its beautiful litany), the poet Kathleen O’Toole is determined to “have a blessing” on each moment of pause in the luminous world, beneath “the harsh and bountiful sun.”