

Book of Potions

by Lauren K. Watel

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The introduction to Lauren K. Watel's *Book of Potions* is written by Ilya Kaminsky, who at one point muses about the voice of Watel's speaker: "I wondered how one could live on a daily basis with that kind of biting metaphysical irony and get away with it." After finishing this transformative volume, I don't feel that the speaker or the author has gotten away with anything (although, granted, Kaminsky's statement was made as a tribute to her mental strength). Or, to be more specific, all she has "gotten away with" is an integrity that survives the annihilating turns of her experience. It is very rare for me, as for all of us who read and think about reading, to encounter a book that speaks to me more loudly than my own mind can interrupt it. Watel's energy and technical brilliance combine to bring the reader a book that is harrowing, yet comforting. To read *Book of Potions* is to find companionship despite loneliness and fear, and because of them.

"I Awoke on the Edge" are the first words of the collection. Watel is a poet of and on edges, and her speaker travels distances without reaching a solid center. While the speaker stands on the edge of the landscape, in this case a snowy field, her active mind understands her own alienation from the normal activity of life through her imagining of what she cannot see, the squirrels "burrowed in the deep" (5). The inhospitable nature of the environment for this human traveler is conveyed through a brilliant metaphor: the meadow is "plated with sunlight," which "skims over the snow as if it were an impenetrable metal" (5). The slight discord between the two versions of light in these lines—the "plated" sunlight and the "skimming" sunlight over metal—reveals that the speaker will not reach a soft place

of refuge, as the squirrels have, even if she uncovers a new layer or crosses a field of "glittering silence." Substances and natural phenomena morph into new forms, and thus remain elusive to the seeker.

Several poems later, in "No Introduction Needed," the speaker sketches some physical and social aspects of her relentlessly thinking mind. She is "middle-aged," her hair and skin "a map of experiments" (8). She gives, in fact, an entire catalogue of judgments and fragments of herself, qualified with a direction to the reader: "say I'm middle-aged," or "Say that I'm disapproving" (8) [my emphasis]. And here appears one of the major feats of the collection: it is perfectly structured. While the book opens with the vision of the bodiless, edgy mind that becomes our only guide, the reasons for the great mystery of this singular consciousness start taking shape in the initial unfolding of the book. A "map of experiments" offers no wholeness or certainty as to the terrain it depicts. Even one of the buried truths of the collection, the father "who died years ago in our back driveway" (8), slides in unobtrusively, and is not the center of this poem. The five sections of the book—"No Introduction Needed," "In the White Room," "Nightfall," "Enjoy the Mayhem," and "Go By, Go By"—take us through the speaker's mental landscape (or across it, or around it) as she herself journeys in it. As Watel puts it, "We're marching out to sea, out to sea and sand and sky, though we don't know where the currents will take us" ("We're Marching," 19).

The succinct explanation of the book's title is given on the page before the collection begins. It reads: "potion = poem + fiction." This witty portmanteau also succeeds in directing without overdirecting the reader. In fact, there is great variation in the prose poems here: the two longest run to a page and a half, while the shortest are no more than a few lines. They can be gnomic: "What sounds like rain is tires on asphalt. What sounds like sunlight is death in the trees" ("What Sounds," 15). Or they can be explosive:

"My hands clutch this notebook as if it were the hand of my father, dying of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. He was in a white room of his own. Or was it night in there? Hard to tell, his eyes were so opaque" ("In the White Room," 59). In this crucial moment, the speaker remains on the edge, clutching a notebook as if it were a now-absent hand. She can see the moment of his death, but there is no certainty that she ever grasped the hand itself—just a placeholder for it, in the form of a book. The range of Watel's style in these poems is stunning: many of the pieces are prose poems, and some are stories. All of them are still poems.

Just because the book is a wondrous depiction of the inside of a vast mind does not mean it lacks reference and relevance to the real world. Watel's recurring themes include the childishness of powerful political figures, the ubiquity of violence in the twenty-first century, and the abiding presence of racial trauma in her culture. These allusions and details are caught up in the irresistible sweep of the poetic vision, as in these lines on the end of the world: "Alas, no one fell in love and no one went mad. We sat around and ate cereal in our well-fitting mall clothes, and we admired our jewels and our watches, which all kept different times, but so what?" ("No One Understood," 63). The poet's depictions of other people, with their foibles and monstrous qualities, are memorable and sometimes poignant.

Watel's talent for the transformation of quotidian detail never fails. In "We Return to the City," an everyday return from a trip becomes a journey through an upper circle of Hell. With their suitcases, the two travelers endure the "artificial light of urbanity" with fortitude and an inability to turn away from the spiritual implications of their surroundings. Watel writes, "The other passengers look folded, faded, crumbling, like paper bags left out in the rain, the skin on our fingers and our palms creased and crumpled under the train's unblinking fluorescence" (45). A question

might be found buried in the images in this sentence: who left the paper bags out in the rain, and why would someone render an item useless like that? The uselessness of the people on the train is the aspect of “purgatory” that she is implying here, but the whole poem is dense with this kind of emotional layering. The concision and power of the final lines are pure Watel:

When we emerge into daylight again, the streets greet us with indifference, as if they’ve seen our kind before and know we’ll come around eventually, back to the rush, the shove, the slight waiting at throat’s edge. We round the corner feeling numb, as if some terrible news has been broken to us, and it has. We’re home. (45)

Once again, home is no refuge: existence is on an edge, and intimate bonds do not bring solace.

The astonishing concluding poem (which does not conclude things, of course) gives us a crystal-clear view of the tenacious mindset of the speaker, fragmented by time, yet still moving forward. It begins, “And when I awoke I saw that I was gone. Just like that, the woman I thought I knew” (“And When I Awoke,” 75). I will refrain from quoting too much of the poem, because it deserves to be read in its context. However, the verbal and perspectival gymnastics it performs are spectacular, as in these lines: “I left all the same, even though I was still there in the same body, wearing the same clothes, moving in the same gingerly way, saying the same gingerly things, but I was gone, and I was left alone with what was left of me” (75). It is no small magic that in *Book of Potions*, the speaker can comfort the reader while mourning for herself. Watel delights with the sheer variety of her imagination, showing that the world we live in is endlessly fascinating, even while it is falling apart.

—Kathryn Pratt Russell