

Florilegium

by

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The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the Master of Fine Arts committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

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DEDICATION

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Finally, this work is dedicated to Dwale, of blessed memory.

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ABSTRACT

A florilegium is a collection of quotations, references, and other materials built by an individual to maintain a sense of who they are. As part of the commonplacing tradition, these are intended to collect knowledge into a book for personal reference.

In this thesis, this concept is used to explore the amount of space that one feels permitted to take up in the world. Information is collected and, at first, used as a literary exploration while a parallel personal story is told, using the smaller text of footnotes to minimize the amount of space that the author takes up on the page in a literal sense.

In the second part, the concrete information and parallel story are given equal treatment on the page as the author strives to allow themselves to take up more space in the world, exploring various transitions in life while justifying their experience through academic writing.

In the third and final part, the dichotomy is broken and the knowledge provided by these quotations and references becomes an anxious plea that is integral to the author's struggle to justify a plural existence.

I — AND FLOWERS WREATH THE YOUR SLEEPING FORM

Content note: this essay contains frank discussions of death and grief, including descriptions of the euthanasia of pets (marked with ⚠).

What means death or grief

In the face of endless time?

Slow-turning seasons.

A year spirals up.

A day, a week, a month, they all spiral, for any one Sunday is like the previous and the next shall be much the same, but the you who experiences the differing Sundays is different. It is a spiral, proceeding steadfastly onward. A day is a spiral, with each morning much the same as the one before and the one after. A month, following the cycle of the moon.

But a year, in particular, spirals up. It carries embedded within it a certain combination of pattern, count, and duration that delineates our lives better than any other cyclical unit of time. Yes, a day is divided into night, day, and those liminal dusks and dawns, but there are so *many of them*. There are so many days in a life, and there are so many in a year that to see the spiral within them does not come as easily.

Our years are delineated by the seasons, though, and the count of them is so few, and the duration long enough that we can run up against that first scent of snow¹ late in the autumn and immediately be kicked down one level of the spiral in our memories. What were we doing the last time we smelled that non-scent? What about the time before?²

¹Scientists have described the ‘scent of snow’ as the air being too cold for the olfactory system to register scents.

²Seasons being a handy way to count the years, I am, at time of writing, more than ‘the time before’ years gone from when I last smelled this back in Colorado, taking a walk to clear my head after yet another argument in the Writers’ Guild chat, leaving it to the mods, to Dwale. There is perhaps something to be said about the inevitability of a spiral.

Or perhaps one thinks across the spiral. One, stuck in Winter, thinks back to Summer — ah, such warmth! — and tries to remember what it was one was doing then. “Only silhouettes show / in the billowing snow,” Dwale writes (Dwale, *Face Down in the Leaves* 19). “Remembering months, now / gone when new blooms would grow.”

The power of the cyclical nature of the year is of an importance that draws the heart onward, and that which moves the heart is fair game for poetry. The demarcations for this cycle are the two solstices and two the equinoxes. One finds oneself at the longest night of the year and knows that, from there onwards, it is downhill into summer.³ One finds oneself at the longest day of the year and before oneself lies cooler times.

Dwale (1979–2021; it/its) was a poet living in the Southern United States. It was moderator for and, for a term, president of the Furry Writers’ Guild, and was known for facilitating the ‘coffeehouse chats’, hour-long lectures surrounding various writing topics that took place twice a week. Its work is described as focusing on “altered states of consciousness...poverty, addiction, subjectivity, and the transience of existence” (WikiFur), though to reduce its body of work to any or all of those provides an inexact picture of its writing. This will be touched on in a future section on translation, but needless to say, this paper will focus on its work through the lens of seasonal progression.

The concept of seasons and seasonality is well trod within poetry. Exploring that in its entirety is beyond the scope of this paper. To rely on synecdoche is the best one can manage with a topic so large. To that end, it is worth exploring the poetry of Dwale in turn.

Spring

A season of newness and beginnings: new growth, new life, new warmth under a new sun.

A season of green things: buds greening bare trees, grass poking through late snows, the greenery of gardening as one buys flats of flowers or sows vegetable seeds in the expectation of

³I am not sold on this metaphor; both uphill and downhill bear positive and negative connotations, and it is difficult to say which to apply when. Ask a poet.

a harvest later on.

A season of expansive growth, when plants race toward the heavens, or leaves burst out from reanimated branches seemingly overnight. It's the time when you can almost feel your hair growing, or perhaps your dreams swelling in some sympathetic expansion of their own.

And, importantly, a season of expectations. The year may start on the first of January, a convenient fiction provided to us by the need to start it *somewhere*, but the expectations for the rest of the year lay dormant in the mind until spring.

A year starts not on January first.

The days may hunder but the seasons speak
of time's long march, of fast time, slow time. Thirst
for "start" and "end" neglects the limen sleek.

(Scott-Clary, *Eigengrau: Poems 2015–2020* 3)

January first is the time to make the resolutions and the rest of winter is the time to try them out, whether tentatively or with great passion, but the setting of expectations for the year doesn't come until the trauma of the year before has settled into uneasy memory — or, to use an outdated metaphor, expectations are not set until one stops writing the previous year on the date line of one's checks.

Although it often engaged with expectations in its work, Dwale tackles the subject of Spring in the context of beginnings and growth infrequently, seeming to prefer Autumn.⁴ One small example of this comes from a short *renga* it took part in on Twitter:

⁴Dwale tweeted,⁵ "Pondering on why my poetry features dead leaves so prominently, I think it was because the area in which I grew up was heavily forested. Dead leaves were everywhere, so they became like a classical element: earth, wind, water, fire, and so, so many dead leaves." (Dwale, Tweet on the topic of dead leaves), which provides some insight into this.

⁵A month before it died, no less.

Blackbird headed south
 Down to the hawks and kudzu
 Six months 'til winter

(*untitled haiku*)

While we are verging into the territory of summer here, as “six months 'til winter” implies, we do get a sense of those expectations settling into place, a feeling of “ah, so the year is going to be like *this*.” We also get that sense of growth and greenness with the mention of kudzu, a plant known for its rampant growth, quickly covering all it can in green.

Blackbirds, while often showing up in the context of winter — there is something about the contrast, the beat of wings against the stillness of snow-dulled landscapes — do occasionally make their presence known in writings that take place during other seasons. Stevens, for example, has

XII
 The river is moving.
 The blackbird must be flying.

(Stevens)

wherein the thought of a river moving again being of note implies a thaw after a long winter, a world in which this could not possibly be the case without the blackbird also flying. It tells of a movement thawed.

Some of the reason for this paucity of spring-themed poetry is doubtless selection bias: a chapbook titled *Face Down in the Leaves*, with its cover of frost-rimed leaf-litter, is unlikely to contain any paeans to new growth.

Instead, we are presented with works that focus on the fact that spring is also the time for harrowing. It's the time for tearing up that which was old, the earth that was compacted by

time and snow, in order to make room for that growth which is soon to come, whether we like it or not — the topic of unwanted growth is a topic for later in the year.⁶

This untitled work will stand as our example:

The seasonal storms have poured upon the grassy flat,
The leafless stalks abound like thirsty mouths.
Puddles form and soon are swarmed with little fish,
And all the arid life has fled despair.

And here, wrapped in rain, lies the oldest soul,
The changes wrack his bones with painful cold.
His skin is like the sky at night, as many scars
Have marked his hide as there are glinting stars.

At once he feels his lungs become bereft of breath,⁷
His daughter nudges him, to no effect.

⁶Or perhaps later in life, when cancer may rear its ugly head. It is proving quite difficult to write about even seasons of new growth and beginnings without death-thoughts creeping in.

⁷When its friends learned of its passing, many of us decided to memorialize it with poetry of our own, several of which were included in a postscript to its posthumous novella (*Dwale, A Drop in the Motion* 63). My attempt also incorporated the loss of breath:

Beneath that evening's breeze the sickly sweet
and brazen scent of countless flow'rs
awoke inside of you a darkened sleep
Of dreams dug deeper than the soil.
Oh, we are waking minds who missed that scent!
What hope have we who wait in life,
who sit and pray and watch for your next breath?
Our hope can only reach for ends —
To wit, to see you wake and meet a mind
Too keen to weed a garden clean —

She walks away rememb'ring days they stalked the plains,
Within her womb there grows a golden bloom.⁸

(Dwale, *Face Down in the Leaves* 26)

This poem⁹ in three stanzas is largely in an even meter (sometimes iambic, sometimes trochaic), though we are presented with two instances in the first lines of the first two stanzas where that pattern is broken (“The seasonal storms”: ~ – ~ ~ – and “And here, wrapped in rain”: ~ – – ~ –). When this is taken with the middle verse’s rhymes and other examples of assonance (‘become’–‘bereft’–‘breath’ stands out), we pick up a sense of a stumble mid-gallop. Although the procession of time may be linear, the procession of the seasons may be interrupted by little stalls, little snowy loops back into winter as spring presses on towards summer.

These variations in prosody combined with the third verse being “played straight”, such as it were, add up to a sense of growth, of rushing forward when Winter (we assume the oldest soul to be) breathes his last. Spring nudges him, and realizing that all she has left are her memories of him and her child, Summer, still unborn within her, walks those plains with only that remembering.

For we exhaled when you breathed in that breeze
and flowers wreathe your sleeping form.

Perhaps it is the idea of the cessation of the cyclical nature of breath that brings with it thoughts of death.

⁸A dandelion, perhaps, those yellow suns dotting perfect fields a perennial memory of summer. As May put it:

“What I love is their scent.” She held it up for em to sniff. “They smell like muffins. How can anything that smells like muffins be bad?”

(Scott-Clary, *Toledot* 162)

⁹The choosing of these four poems to focus on was originally intended to be for a music project. These were to be the texts for four art songs. I obtained permission and everything. Every now and then, I get it into my head that maybe I can go back to writing music instead of words, and am quickly disabused of the notion when I sit down to do so. The Madison who wrote music has long since passed.

This, after all, would be her new beginning. She is no longer bound to winter as she might have been before; there are to be no more of those loops back into snow, she's on her own now, pacing into the grassy flat with its puddles of fish.

Issa says,

<i>Mi no ue no</i>	Heedless that the dews
<i>tsuyu to mo shirade</i>	mark the passing of our day —
<i>hodashikeri</i>	we bind ourselves to others

(Issa and Mackenzie 11)

Spring is nothing without Winter. Even when it has its own snows, Spring is what it is specifically because it isn't Winter. There's that vernal equinox and then suddenly the days are longer than the nights, the world begins anew, and all that is in it does so as well. As with us: we are nothing without those around us, and we are us specifically because of those in our lives. There is our meeting and then suddenly that which makes us *us* is fuller than before, and we carry within us the golden bloom of who we are to become.¹⁰

We are the seasons that comprise our lives. We are beholden to the passing of our days as they are, yes, but we are also unable to truly, truly begin something anew. We are also comprised of that which came before, and are bound to those around us.¹¹ They have lived their seasons, they have traversed their own spirals and left behind scraps of their lives for us to take into our own, to build off of.

Also throughout Dwale's seasonal work is the concept of vegetation. In spring, we have the grass, those leafless stalks that open up with the rain.

¹⁰Or, to continue to use dandelions as an example, we carry within us the seeds we are to leave behind to grow in others, borne on warm breezes.

¹¹After all, I was bound to Dwale; that's why this essay exists. That's why what little poetry I have exists. I could appreciate the music within poetry, but it wasn't until I met Dwale, became bound to it in friendship, that I was able to understand poetry better on its own terms.

Here, this new grass is anthropomorphized: as new grass grows, it unfurls from the curl that it was before, forming almost a funnel which, in this instance, becomes a thirsty mouth. They live lives as full as Spring and Winter do in our poem, and one might picture their journey from thirsty mouths to rattle-dry stalks, dusty and tan, as summer fades.

Issa says,

<i>Ukigusa ya</i>	Floating weeds, as blow
<i>ukiyo no kaze no</i>	the winds of the floating world —
<i>iu mama ni</i>	drifting and drifting

(18)

There is some world that is not ours superimposed on the one we live in. This floating world is that which shows plants as the thirsty mouths that they are, shows the floating weeds as integral parts of the world, rather than something to be removed.¹² Perhaps this is the one that plants experience most clearly, where Spring may nudge Winter and, finding him dead, walk out into new grass and memories.

It is this world that poetry most clearly provides a glimpse into. It contains those symbols which pass fleetingly through our lives, drifting on by as the seasons progress.

“Here is the difference betwixt the poet and the mystic,” Emerson cautions. “That the last nails a symbol to one sense, which was a true sense for a moment, but soon becomes old and false.¹³ For all symbols are fluxional.” (Emerson 33) We have in Dwale’s work a glimpse of

¹²Something about the numinous inspires reading the animate into the inanimate (if plants could be called such) and no one that I have talked to who dwells on their sense of the numinous can either explain or deny this. Wands of living wood! The true cross! The tree of life! Secret lives of secret cells keep hope alive that one day I might speak with you again. All four seasonal poems dwell on this.

¹³I will admit that I veer towards mysticism, here. “Mysticism consists in the mistake of an accidental and individual symbol for a universal one,” Emerson goes on to say, and I will not deny my propensity toward doing so, but such is the problem with an essay. Can you really blame me for wanting to pin down the love of lost friends lest it squirm away into nothing, into some dusty old box high up on a shelf labeled simply ‘regrets’?

the symbol of the hard death of Winter, of Spring with Summer in her belly.

Summer

As the year continues on its upward spiral, we come to one of those strange apogees of the year: the longest day. Strange because yes, of course it bears meaning as the longest day, and yet the start of Summer never seems to fall directly on that day, does it? There is doubtless some good reason that, at least here, that is the first day of summer rather than midsummer.

And yet even that isn't always accurate, is it? Some years, summer doesn't feel like it has truly hit until well into July, when the temperatures climb and the rain becomes a distant memory.¹⁴ You're left feeling miserable for weeks on end, wishing for even a drizzle to quench your thirst, or even a bit of cloud cover at night, enough to maybe knock the temperature down into the low seventies so you can finally, *finally* get some sleep and yet the days spiral forwards through heat-haze.

Summer, season of hot insomnia,
That much never seems to change at all.
Laying awake in the red desert night,
I shape forest from shade and wait for fall.

¹⁴And perhaps your well dries out when you head out of town for you husband's surgery, so your dog-sitters to have to figure out water, leaving you to fret and pace around the hotel room, and maybe that's the time you decide, "You know what? Work is so terrible that I think I'll apply for grad school." But you have to provide a sample of analytic writing to do so, so you pick one of your friend's poems to analyze, and two weeks later — when you've come home to no water and a dog whose health is steadily declining though you don't know it yet — your friend is dead.

Ten years now gone,¹⁵ and who thought I would miss
 Cricket songs, cicadas and katydids?
 Then I'd gladly have grabbed a big hammer,
 Smashed them flat as Pinocchio's conscience.

Testing palisades of clocks and yardsticks,
 No advent waits for the restive dreamer.
 I bandage my tattered, bitten left hand
 And shed the smoke rings on my cloven finger.

(Dwale, *Face Down in the Leaves* 8)

The poem follows a similar structure to that chosen for Spring: three stanzas of four lines each, often falling back into a stressed-unstressed (or vice versa) meter, though far more free. We have a few more near rhymes, ('at all' and 'for fall', and, to a lesser extent, 'dreamer' and 'finger'), plus a few pleasing instances of alliteration ('*cri-cket...ci-ca-das...ka-ty-dids*').

Also as before, there is a volta in the third verse. Whereas with Spring, we switched

¹⁵It was 2022 when I began write this, which meant that, come September, it would be ten years since Margaras died.

His was the first death that really hit me. The first one I was really able to comprehend. Koray came into the bar, asked if this was the place he would have frequented, passed on the news, and then left.

It was crushing. It destroyed me. I am still not entirely sure why, since we were friends, yes, but we were hardly so close as to warrant the reaction that I had, and yet I did.¹⁶

And yet I did and now, a decade later, I only think of him on the anniversary or when I come across the notifications I have from him and from Koray. Maybe that's why there's that worry about the box labeled 'regrets'. I have my regrets for Margaras, and the amount by which those are outweighed by the good memories is too small for my liking.

¹⁶Not unlike Dwale, I suppose. Perhaps a good chunk of this — of both of their deaths — is due to just how little I interacted with them through anything other than text. I met Dwale once in person, and never met Margaras. I listened to Margaras's music and listened to audio versions of Dwale's stories, but other than that, they were relegated to words on a screen.

point of view from Winter to Spring, here, we switch away from the concrete world and into something more abstract. Where we start with hot deserts, forest shade, katydids and hammers, now we are confronted with unknown tools of measurement, dreams, and smoke rings. We have that which defines itself in the external world and that which we define internally, and with those two poles, we are left to extrapolate what is between them.

Issa says,

<i>Natsuyama ya</i>	On the hill of summer
<i>Hitori kigen no</i>	Stands the slender maiden flower
<i>Ominaeshi</i>	In a solitary humor

(Issa and Mackenzie 65)

The slender maiden flower is the slender maiden flower. We have no say in its existence except that we might pick it, trample it, or leave it be. It is itself, in all its glory — or at least all its solitary humor. The flower defines itself and though we may take action on it, may think it beautiful or ugly or lonely or austere, that doesn't matter to the flower.¹⁷

“Summer, season of hot insomnia / That much never seems to change at all” speaks well to this. Summer is Summer. It is the season of hot insomnia and it doesn't care how tired we are. It's not that it is inimical to us so much as existing within its own external nature. It exists in that floating world that is separate from us. It does not know us, it knows only itself. It's hyperreal, perhaps, only casting its shadow into our reality.

“Sleep, or don't.” Summer yawns, lingers beneath the eaves and between still branches, bothers not with such as us.

¹⁷For a while, I was quite caught on the idea that others have agency of their own. Of course they do, I mean, I just found it marvelous that this was the case. There was no way that they could not, right? They live and love and feel just as much as I do, so I can't say that this same applies to people; they define themselves, sure, but they can actively change how I create meaning from their existence.¹⁸

¹⁸Of course, having written this, I feel bad for the flower. Perhaps it desperately wants to be seen as austere instead of lonely, as beautiful instead of ugly. I do not know. Ask a botanist.

Issa says,

<i>Mi no ue no</i>	Heedless that the tolling bell
<i>kane tomo shirade</i>	Marks our own closing day —
<i>yusuzumi</i>	We take this evening's cool

(39)

This is the inverse, the other pole of our spectrum. Whether or not the bell tolls for us and our day, whether or not the evening's cool is of that floating world, we still can define ourselves and our actions in the face of it. We are the ones who can take that cool as some small respite from the hot insomnia that the Summer might otherwise offer. We can define ourselves in that context, and by that, we can define the world around us.

In this sense, the cool evening and the end of our day — indeed, the season of hot insomnia that never changes — is something over which we can layer an artificial definition. The semiosis in play allows us to turn Summer into a sign that we can interpret. Our artificial definitions apply to us, even if the heat of the day doesn't give a damn about us. "Testing palisades of clocks and yardsticks, / No advent waits for the restive dreamer" because we restive dreamers are only able to measure by our artificial definitions.

But that cannot be all. There has to be more than the external and natural, that which defines itself, and the internal and artificial, that which is defined by us. We smash the insects flat with a hammer, correct? We build air-conditioned bedrooms to be able to get our sleep, correct? What is in the middle is agency. It is the permission we give ourselves to form these definitions in cooperation with the world around us. We can cry out at the sight of blackbirds bursting from the trees, because that is a thing that we have the power to do, ourselves:

X

At the sight of blackbirds
Flying in a green light,

Even the bawds of euphony
Would cry out sharply.

(Stevens)

It is the act of taking meaning from each other, as well, for each of us has our own agency: we can interact with each other and influence each other's definitions of ourselves.¹⁹

As that golden bloom of Summer²⁰ defines itself as all things must, and we have to take it at its word. We can kvetch about the insomnia of Summer, that which makes us sweat through the sheets so that the thought of touching someone else makes one feel clammy and disgusting²¹ all we want, but that doesn't mean anything to Summer. It just also doesn't stop us from layering our own definitions atop that.

Autumn

Autumn bears a strange dichotomy of plenty and impending naught. In Autumn, we harvest. We think of squash and gourds. We think of wheat, rye, corn, those fields all tan and

¹⁹Viz me meeting Dwale in the Writers' Guild forums and deciding — actively deciding — that I would like to be its friend. It wasn't lacking, and neither was I, but something about someone who might choose 'it/its' as pronouns, someone who could engage with poetry in a way that had always eluded me. It stuck to me much as might sap from some weed. Doubt nips at my heels, though. Is "deciding to be someone's friend" a normal thing to do? Was that weird? Did it resent me for— but I shouldn't be thinking like this.

²⁰Of dandelions:

"Of course. They are a weed, yes. Or often thought of as one. The leaves make a good salad, though, and I was told that you could dry, roast, and grind the roots to make a coffee substitute."

(Scott-Clary, *Toledot* 161)

They are death in Summer, I've always felt. I was always supposed to kill them, was always told they were the sign of a dead lawn. Still, I read all about them on realizing how good they smelled and grew my little obsession. I passed it on to the characters in my books, and let them feel out that connection to death so that I could do so from a distance.

²¹Just me? No? Maybe just me.

gray. Those rattle-dry stalks we met in spring are born here.

The grain is in the silo. The gourds and potatoes are in the cellar. The fruit has been canned, the hay mown and baled, and we have never seen so much food, it seems.

And yet now is the time we consider empty stomachs. There is a particular Autumnal anxiety²² that lays bare future hunger and says, “See? It doesn’t matter how much you have stored away. This is Winter.”

It’s easy to lean on one or the other. Keats, for example, is impressively himself about the whole season:

To Autumn

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
 Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
 Conspiring with him how to load and bless
 With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
 To bend with apples the moss’d cottage-trees,

²²Or perhaps a fear. Halloween lies there, doesn’t it? There is a terror to your work, Dwale. Something existential, but you were also a fan of horror. You always asked for ‘Halloween music’. Your story was going to be the one that started that other fiction podcast we were planning on, where bummers were welcome to complete the dichotomy²³ with The Voice of Dog where there were none.

I don’t know why I associate you so heavily with both terror and horror. You were a delight to be around, and your work is not *all* terror or horror. I wouldn’t call your personality dark, or at least no darker than fallen leaves—but I am getting ahead of myself.

²³“I had read the sign,” I wrote for one of my only attempts at horror/terror (Please Look Up). “And had immediately fallen down into the space defined by that dichotomy, the gap between had-to-be and could-not-be. Dichotomy? Dialectic? There was no telling anymore, no matter how many times I’d tried to paste one word or the other onto the two phrases. Were ‘dichotomy’ and ‘dialectic’ a dichotomy or dialectic?”

Clearly, I’m still shaky on the difference, despite those seven weeks in DBT (the D stands for ‘dialectical’, after all), but at least I recognize it; I can just dwell in that space between two truths. Best I can do when I’m about to write however many hundreds of words on dialectics/dichotomies.

And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
 To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
 With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
 And still more, later flowers for the bees,
 Until they think warm days will never cease,
 For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.²⁴
 (Keats 249)

While Stevens is much more austere about the whole season:

III

The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.

²⁴I know that this line has little to do with cells in the biological sense, but how poetic a description of cancer!²⁵ Cells living in eternal summer, growing and growing, over-brimming in unchecked autolysis.

²⁵△ They said it was just a lipoma, and then they stopped looking. Even though we told them she'd had a lipoma removed from atop her head back when we adopted her, back when she was a puppy, they stopped looking. They stopped looking! They said she was too fat, said as they peered over their imagined glasses at us, as though it were our fault that she was no longer so svelte, and then they sent us home. They sent us home! They said it was a benign lump and that German Shepherds just get those sometimes, that she was just too fat because they can be such couch potatoes, and then they stopped talking to us because they were too busy, too busy, too busy. A year later, she had slowed down to the point where she refused to go outside. She began spending all day, all night in the bathroom. That last day, her gums turned white and her belly was visibly swollen. That last night, she died²⁶ in my arms.

²⁶△ I know that I'm trying to square what I have of you with your death, but when Falcon died in my arms less than six months later, then I really, *truly* knew what death looked like, and now I have to square that with your passing as well. Did you, too, cry? Did you, too, try to hide? When you breathed your last, did you slump over to the side and stay warm far longer than one might expect? There's no one who chided us over our imaginings of you that I can blame; there's no cancer, if that ephemeral mention from your girlfriend is to be believed, that lurked beneath the surface. You were and then you were not, and the only referent²⁷ I have is a dog who died too young. I'm ashamed that I can't help but make the comparison.

²⁷△ Ah, but then there was Turtle, yes? Our cat? Her face drooping down to the towel on which she rested and her heart stopping? And Zephyr, did he not fall asleep on my lap nearly two years later and then stop breathing?

It was a small part of the pantomime.

(Stevens)

In Keats's work, we see the lush language that we expect out of a romantic poetry. Even in a free meter, there is a sharp focus on technique that one expects from Keats in particular, with well-balanced assonance of both nasals (/m/, /n/) and sibilants (/s/, /z/, /ʃ/) leading to a sense of fullness, or perhaps the final warm breeze of the year.

The winds in Stevens's verse are not warm, though. With the aforementioned austerity, we are given one of the first cold winds of the year, and we see that the trees have lost their leaves already, miming against the sky as they are.

While I hesitate to say that Dwale walks a middle path here, its work does feature elements of both plenty and paucity. By establishing these two poles, we can then begin to triangulate where the poet believes Autumn lies.²⁸

Face down in the leaves

We crawl through moist humus like millipedes,
Feasting on dirt and dead, crumbling leaves
While striped skies cycle through violet hues,
While time's kisses take the shape of a bruise.
Endeavors wear the warmer years away,
Reduced at last to heaven's dormant clay.
Alive, I lick brambles until my tongue
Tears, despairing ever being so young.

²⁸This, after all, is what I'm trying to do, I think. I can't ask you where Autumn lies. I can't ask you if you feel the same way about the onrushing cold that I do, about saying farewell to the heat of Summer. I can't ask you if your moods are still defined by the school year, as mine are, these many years gone, with stress peaking around what used to be the end of term and depression creeping in around that first week of school. I can't ask you many things. I can't ask you anything.

I think of you.²⁹ I don't smile when I do.³¹

A moment more and then the day is gone,
 In evening grey, we mourn the vanished dawn,
 And so on, maybe waiting for someone
 To come drag us back to where we belong.³²
 In dreams we interred, with your pure throat bare,
 I know your breath, your jasmine-scented air.
 Alive, a god to mites and mud-daubers.
 The harvestmen scuttle and bob onwards.

(Dwale, *Face Down in the Leaves* 9)

For Autumn, we are greeted by the vision of plenty and naught in the form of fallen leaves. The bare trees speak to a lack, and so the leaves on the ground bear testament to this.

²⁹By your absence, I feel your presence, and yet I continue to try and gaslight myself into believing that you never existed. Are you gone? You must be. Were you ever there, though? Were you a real person?³⁰ Were you someone so grounding that I felt childish before you? Were you someone I had the chance to meet back in 2015, where I stared longingly at your kosovorotka in gold-trimmed black, wishing I was brave enough to wear something like that? We'll never know, I suppose. One more thing I'll never be able to ask you.

30

There was no more Codrin in the L₅ System. Ey was only here. Ey couldn't remember being there, for were the sims not the same? And if ey had never been there, had ey ever really existed there? Ey was only memories, and perhaps that is all ey had ever been. Navel gazing and existential crises mixed with the glee of having actually *done* something. No longer just the passive amanuensis, but now the active participant.

(Scott-Clary, *Toledot* 51)

Clearly a perennial fear.

³¹Maybe I will, some day. I'd sure like to think so.

³²After all, "Would God that I had died for thee" (2 Samuel 18:33, KJV) is a sentiment at least 2,400 years old.

And yet the leaves themselves are someone's plenty, are they not? The millipedes, the mites and mud-daubers, the harvestmen all have a place to live, have food for the season, even if we have already collected ours. Everything is always food for something.³³ The leaves are food for the insects, and they leave behind the humus, which will be a slow food for things too small to see.

And we, perhaps, are food for that ground.³⁴ This idea that we, too, might be a feast of plenty to someone is not a new one — 'food for worms' is an idiom for a reason. It isn't for the

³³Even if that something is time.

³⁴Were you buried, Dwale? I realize that I don't actually know. When Idun passed on news of your passing on, she also asked what observances should be made for a Muslim who has passed. I know that expressing one's wishes for when one dies is not always something does with one's partner — hell, I don't know that any of my partners and I have talked about it, though it is in my will — but it does make me wonder: were those customs upheld?³⁵ I realized, also, that I don't know how much of your identity was known by your family. I have to interpret your life only to the extent that I can interpret your poetry: I haven't the ear, I have only the words, and you are not around to ask.

³⁵Every time I take the long way home from the store because traffic sucks or highway 2 is too much on the senses, I think about stopping by the mosque that I pass and asking about this. It's always couched in that selfish desire to also ask after a framework for dealing with grief.

When I was talking about that lack of framework in the context of this essay, a friend sent me a link to a tweet wherein the poster states "An american (*sic*) is told a thousand different ways that experiencing grief is abnormal, improper, and something to be done in private on your own time." (user @pookleblinky) This is stated in contrast to the Jewish practice of sitting *shiva* and the following *sheloshim* which provides a structured procedure for engaging with grief. Another user replied that this might just be a white, middle-class American thing: "White Anglo Saxon Protestant based communities may lack rituals for mourning. I don't know that world. But everyone from Black Americans to Latinx to AAPI to ethnic white communities (Polish, Italian, Ukrainian etc) have ways to mourn that aren't exactly hidden." (user @Karnythia).

So here am I, bathed in white cultural protestantism and puritan work ethics, having nothing to hang my grief on but a desire for resolution, for even a hint at a framework. Five years after Margaras's death, when I was still trying to process what life without him would actually be like, I wrote:

Yit'gadal v'yit'kadash sh'mei raba

Would that I had the faith

To pray daily.

Eleven months to let you go,

world at large, and it isn't for poets. Even Dwale tackles this in the poem that will be used for Winter.³⁶

And yet there is another layer of lack here: we lack the absent interlocutor. *We* have buried *our* dreams, here, those dreams where *I* know the scent of *you*. This, as before, features a turn from the external and impersonal to the internal and personal. Toward the end of the first verse, after seeing only language surrounding the world around us, we get not only an action that we take (and how delightful, that homonym in 'tears'), but the feeling of despairing that comes with it.

Autumn is, it seems, a dialectic: two things can be true at the same time. Plenty and paucity. Alive and dead. Impersonal and personal. There is an eternity between each of those sets of truths, as though Autumn, more so than the rest of the seasons, holds on the longest. "How hard the year dies: no frost yet," Graves writes in *Intercession in Late October*. (Graves, "Intercession in Late October" 23) "Spare him a little longer, Crone / For his clean hands and love-submissive heart."³⁷

Issa says,

<i>Akatombo</i>	Red dragon-fly —
<i>kare mo yubo ga</i>	He's the one that likes the evening,
<i>suki ja yara</i>	Or so it seems.

(Issa and Mackenzie 65)

And an amen to end the sorrow.

(Scott-Clary, Unimportant Verse About Important People)

I still wish for that. I wished it then when I was trying to figure out why I was less of a person even five years on, and I wish it now that I have to mourn both Dwale and Falcon at the same time. I have nothing to lean on but confusion and words.

³⁶The me who is writing this from top to bottom is dreading this. I applied to grad school with the poem I plan on using, and have already bathed myself in it once, and to do so again feels exhausting before the fact.

³⁷Who knows how much of my skittishness around winter is a me thing or an us thing. Spare me a little longer.

Despite being the in-between of Summer and Winter, something that seems as though it ought to be a smooth transition between hot and cold as Spring tried to be, Autumn steadfastly refuses to be anything other than its own entity. We are unsure³⁸ of whether or not we like Autumn; surely some seem to, but this duality makes it elusive. Rather than shy away from it and decide to let it sit or cleave to it and enjoy every minute, we always have a little bit of that space between ourselves and the season, a little bit of that eternity.

Issa says,

<i>Akikaze yo</i>	O winds of autumn!
<i>hotoke ni chikaki</i>	Nearer we draw to the Buddha
<i>toshi no hodo</i>	As the years advance

(11)

We think of it. We don't smile when we do.

³⁸After all, I think our well was out into Autumn, or maybe it had just recovered. We were borrowing water from the neighbors for the dogs — Falcon, who was dying, and Zephyr, who probably knew, whose own lymphoma perhaps already sat latent. I had burnt out so hard at work I had to take a leave of absence, had to spend sixteen hours a week in therapy, and on going back to work realized I still hated everything. I'm unsure even now whether life would have been easier without that grief. There is no dialectic between you being alive and dead, of course, but there is this dialectic within me being unsure of whether or not I've processed your death.³⁹ Sometimes I have, and sometimes I have to stop writing this essay for five days because looking at it makes me cry.

³⁹△ Ditto with Falcon. Sometimes I'm able to make it an entire day not thinking about her, and then I'll be laid low by an evening of flashbacks, the way she slumped to the side, just how long her body stayed warm...

Winter

“Now Winter comes slowly, Pale, Meager, and Old,”⁴⁰ Winter sings in *The Fairy Queen* (Purcell).

Winter creeps. It eases into place. Even if there is a sudden, blustering storm to begin the season, that is but the first noise you hear. It creeps and crawls in because it cannot but creep and crawl. It’s old. It’s tired. “Dying sun, shine warm a little longer!” (Graves, *Collected poems*, 1965 206) we may beg,⁴¹ but all it wants to do is lie down and blanket the land.

⁴⁰I wish you had died in Winter, Dwale. I wish you’d lived to comfort me through Falcon’s death, through Turtle’s and Zephyr’s. Hell, I wish you’d lived to comfort me through your own. I wish you’d lived to the winter of your life, not to a mere 42 years. The very beginning of Autumn, for you! You had your plenty and your paucity. I wish you’d made it to ‘Pale, Meager, and Old’.

Of course I wish you hadn’t died at all, but I wish you’d died in Winter if you had to.

⁴¹And perhaps do. I am not — most of us are not — immune to that simple desire that we have a little more time together. Another year, another month, another day. Even another hour together,⁴² enough time for me to tell you that I think of you often, that you mean a lot to me, that I hope you understand it.

The last time we talked one-on-one was a month before you died, June 5th. You pinged me in the Guild chat asking me to message you directly you because you couldn’t find my chat in your client: “Could you DM me right quick?”. I sent you a surprised-looking sticker and you said, “Uh, just wanted to say that although I don’t know what I ever did to deserve having your support, I do see and appreciate it.”

“You just strike me as an earnest and well-spoken. [sic] You do quite a bit to buoy others up, and that ought to be returned in kind,” I said, but honestly, how the hell was I supposed to respond to that? That I think we both wind up in that spot where impostor syndrome becomes more dire? That any praise, any validation becomes almost too hot to touch?

It’s a haunting sort of message to be left with. That I should praise your work (for I think it was in response to my review of *Face Down in the Leaves*) and inspire that terrifying ordeal of being seen has me confused and upset, but I don’t know that there’s much to be done about it. I wanted to type so much more than I did, but this wasn’t the place. The conversation wasn’t open after that. It had closed up. The point having been made — inadequately by either of us, I suspect — and then I never got to say anything about it again.

⁴²△ I never really got that with Falcon, either. She was sick that morning, and then we drove to the emergency vet, and she was inside for perhaps ten minutes before the vet came out and said she had perhaps six hours to live, and it was time to make a choice. Six hours of pain and a death in agony or one hour of pain, dampened by drugs to

Much of the imagery in poetry around Winter picks up on this, and we commonly see instances of blankets, of beds, of rest.

Issa says,

<i>Arigata ya</i>	A blessing indeed —
<i>fusama no yuki mo</i>	This snow on the bed-quilt,
<i>Jodo yori</i>	This, too, is from the pure land

(Issa and Mackenzie 46)

Perhaps it is because we so often experience Winter through the lens of contrast. We experience Winter through the warmth of fire. We experience Winter because it is *out there* and we are *in here* (or, failing that, we are experiencing Winter directly because we are *out there* and would very much rather be *in here*). We think of snow on the ground, we think of blankets because, yes, of course it looks that way, but also because we are primed to think of winter in

lessen the shock, and then a blissful sleep. A slump to the side, a last breath, eyes open, mouth open, warm there on the floor.

I never got that with her. I never got it from you, only a tweet the day after you died from your partner, but it was somehow less real, less immediate, because of course it was. Stevens writes,

I do not know which to prefer,
 The beauty of inflections
 or the beauty of innuendoes,
 the blackbird whistling
 or just after.”

(Stevens)

terms of the contrasts to how cold such a blanket must be, so cold as to come with its own frigid non-scent.

Or perhaps we think of Winter this way, of snow as a blanket, of sleepy silences, because the world really does seem to be asleep. It goes beyond mere hibernation; the whole world — the Earth, the sky, the rivers and lakes — all seem to be asleep. “I wonder if the snow loves the trees and fields,” Lewis Carroll writes (Carroll). “That it kisses them so gently? And then it covers them up snug, you know, with a white quilt, and perhaps it says, “Go to sleep, darlings, till the summer comes again.””

Even the snow itself seems destined for sleep, drifting down in fat clumps or being

blown nearly sideways, helpless, only to be piled up in immobile drifts.⁴³ It's destined for sleep because what else would a blanket do?

⁴³I go back and forth on what death must feel like. There are times when I think it must be like this slow fade to sleep. It has to have that hypnagogic quality. You could try and stay awake, but gosh, it would be nice to get some rest.

Her eye turns inward,
vision dims and movement stills
as winter claims her.

(Scott-Clary, Pale She)

And sometimes, I think it must be like a wave, rolling up to subsume you, and it's so, so much bigger than you are that there is nothing you could possibly do to stop it:

A flash of coppery sweetness,
A clearing of the sinuses,
A burst of unnamed colors,
A rush of creativity, of wonder,
Velvety softness, a low hum,
And then the wave recedes.

(Rush)

And I'm sure it has much to do with the way in which one dies. Perhaps there is terror. Perhaps there is relief.⁴⁴

⁴⁴△ I'm sure that Falcon felt a bit of both. She was in so much pain, and yet she was stuck at the vet. She was delirious with pain meds. She was surrounded by the worst smells,⁴⁵ people she didn't know. She was in a cage until we got back.

And Turtle, that last day she rode in the car in my lap, and there was wonder in her eyes, yes, but terror at the pain, at the difficulty breathing.

And Zephyr— but perhaps that is too fresh.

I have no idea what you must have felt.

⁴⁵△ There is a disgusting, oily, metallic scent to death. Not to dead things, not to dying things, but to death. It left me retching after Falcon died, I smelled it all around Turtle for weeks, and that last week with Zephyr was just

that nickel-plated sourness filling my nostrils. Falcon died two weeks before classes started, Turtle died as I drafted this essay, and Zephyr died two months before I turned in my thesis — this thesis — to graduate. That whole time, the smell...

There is no death in all the universe,
 No smell of death, — there shall be death. Moan, moan;
 (Keats 384)

I remember the emergency vet coming out to my car after having taken Falcon back for the abdominal ultrasound. “Cancer has spread to all of her organs, her kidneys have failed, her liver is failing, and she’s bleeding out internally,” she said.

I collapsed into the car, unable to breathe.

“She’s dying,” she added. “She won’t last the night.”

So then I drove home and back to get JD, a 40 minute round trip, and then we spent half an hour in the room with her, and she was whining and pacing ceaselessly with all of the painkillers in her system, and she wouldn’t lay down, and then the doctor came and pushed the first medication, and she swayed once and started to slump over, and I guided her down to the ground, and as she died, the scent spiked in my nostrils. She smelled as she always did. The room smelled as it had before. It is another scent that science denies is real. There was just the sickening recognition of death in the form of a scent.

For weeks after, for months, the scent would rise and I would break down.

I remember Turtle having a moment of respiratory distress at the top of the stairs while my partner was visiting, her eyes bugging out and her neck elongated in an attempt to get enough oxygen into her blood. We took her in for a quality-of-life assessment the next week and the response was a long silence, a sigh.

“You should consider whether it might be time,” the vet said, and we both agreed.

“I feel so bad,” the vet tech said. “She perked up so much when we gave her some oxygen.”

The non-scent had been dogging me for weeks, but as he pushed the plunger and she lowered her head to towel we had rested her on, it drilled into my sinuses once more. She fell asleep and we left and for weeks after, for months, the scent, unreal, would rise...

Two months before finishing my revisions on my thesis —this thesis — I returned from a short trip to find Zephyr breathing fast. A few days later at around four in the morning, he started wheezing and looking panicked. We got

I.

The snow is falling,
 sleeping,
 whispering,
 dreaming of water.

(Esch)

As Esch continues, the snow “watches with weary eyes” before darkening and

him into the vet and spent nine hours trying to figure out what was going on.

“I’m not an oncologist, but this is textbook lymphoma,” the doctor said, looking over the X-ray. “We can put him on steroids and try a dose of chemo, which will maybe buy him a few weeks, maybe a few months at the outside, but you should also consider preparing yourself for the possibility that it won’t. Either way, we’re looking at end-of-life care.”

Falcon died two weeks before classes started, and now Zephyr was dying two months before I turned in my thesis — *this* thesis. That whole time, the smell...

We got one week. Once more, a partner was visiting — different one, this time — and the night before his quality-of-life checkup, he stopped breathing a few times. Perhaps he was holding his breath, perhaps not. He was happy enough during the day, I suppose, but certainly not comfortable.

I cooked him eggs and bacon. I gave him a whole biscuit when usually he got half. At the vet, they fed him a jar of baby food as they gave him a mild sedative shot to let him get comfortable with us for that last hour. He fell asleep with his head on my lap, breathing easier than he had in two weeks.

Eventually, we pressed the doorbell button they gave us and they placed the line in his back leg and injected the two drugs. His breathing slowed, he relaxed against my leg, and then he was gone.

I will stop short of saying that it was beautiful, but only just. He was so...at peace. He was so comfortable, so calm. He had taken his little treats, grumbled at us when we ruffled him, and then he just dozed off, as peaceful as could be. And then he was gone.

Hell, *I* want to go that way.

But the whole time, the scent of copper...

disappearing. Wallace ties in this sleepiness⁴⁶ with contrast⁴⁷ — as we shall do before long — by contrasting the stillness of a world asleep with our faithful blackbird:

I
 Among twenty snowy mountains,
 The only moving thing
 Was the eye of the blackbird.

(Stevens)

Similarly, Graves has,

⁴⁶And, in sleep, there is that not-knowing, not-caring. There is something of death in sleep, and for one who yearns for such, that bears much allure.

Pale she sleeps, sleeps still.
 Waking her may have listened.
 Endless winter calms.

[...]

If spring never comes,
 pale she supposes, that's fine.
 Winter is for dreams.

She'll dream, or she won't.
 She'll carry on or she won't.
 Cold has claimed heartwood.

(Scott-Clary, Pale She)

But I shouldn't be talking this way.

⁴⁷Contrast, then, with wakefulness. Contrast with life. "Find all the happy pictures of Falcon that you can," my therapist suggested. "Tell yourself stories about them."

It works some of the time.

She, then, like snow in a dark night
 Fell secretly. And the world waked
 With dazzling of the drowsy eye
 So that some muttered 'Too much light,'
 And drew the curtains close
 Like snow, warmer than fingers feared
 And to soil friendly;
 Holding the histories of the night
 In yet unmelted tracks
 (Graves, *Collected poems*, 1965 143)

"As Earth stirs in her winter sleep," he writes elsewhere (173). "And puts out grass and flowers / Despite the snow / Despite the falling snow." Winter has crept in and tucked the world away to sleep for a while, and though we might stretch and peek out and, seeing the sun, think to ourselves, "I really must get up," we are helpless to actually do so. Make attempts, sure, but there is no waking from Winter on any terms other than Winter's.

It plays into the timelessness of that serenity.⁴⁸ It is so quiet!⁴⁹ The contrast is so high! Morning light is the same as noon light is the same as afternoon light. How could time pass? Winter will not permit it.

XIII

It was evening all afternoon.
 It was snowing
 And it was going to snow.
 The blackbird sat
 In the cedar-limbs.
 (Stevens)

⁴⁸Wishful thinking.

⁴⁹Yet more of the same.

And, of course, perhaps we think of Winter this way because that very danger that keeps us inside. Winter, death-season, can have snow as a funeral shroud as easily as a blanket. We are not *in here* simply because it is cold *out there*, but because that very cold brings death with it.⁵⁰

Issa says,

<i>Kore ga maa</i>	Is this it, then,
<i>tsui no sumika ka</i>	My last resting place —
<i>yuki goshaku</i>	Five feet of snow!

(Issa and Mackenzie 37)

The discursive nature of this section might itself be related to the blunted vision of the world after snow.⁵² How can we define the world around us when we can barely make out its edges? We cannot define Winter because it's so blurry around its boundaries. Obscured. Defined by contrast, but only the contrast of blackbirds or bare tree limbs, rather than one hill from the next, one house from the next. We can only pin it down by walking those paths, one by one, heading up to the top of the hill and looking down from there, walking up the drive to get a

⁵⁰Guidelines for reporting on suicide state that you should not report on the method with which someone killed themselves. This, apparently, does not apply to the living. Terry Gross asked Allie Brosh during an episode of "Fresh Air" how she imagined committing suicide and, rather than keeping that close to her heart, the author explained that she had planned on freezing herself to death through a mechanism I won't describe. (Gross)

And, as the guidelines say, that has stuck with me. I think about it every time it gets cold.⁵¹ I thought about it that night after Falcon passed. I thought about doing just as Brosh said, and finding a way to experience that very sort of blanket, that very shroud.

⁵¹Which, I realize, is the opposite of death-thoughts elsewhere in the year. Perhaps Autumn is the season for thinking of fire, Spring the season for leaping, and so on.

⁵²Or maybe just because I'm riddled with memories. They pock my surface, keep me from moving smoothly through analysis. Could I write about the season of Winter in some more cohesive manner had not the ground been covered with that shitty slush the day that Falcon passed?

better look at the numbers tacked to the side of the house. There are so many perhapses and maybes⁵³ to be had.

VI

Icicles filled the long window

With barbaric glass.

The shadow of the blackbird

Crossed it, to and fro.

The mood

Traced in the shadow

An indecipherable cause.

(Stevens)

‘Indecipherable’ indeed.

And so, with an eye warmth and cold, to contrasts, to blankets and sleep, to softness and inexactitude, to death, we come to our final poem:

Dirt Garden

My garden of foxtails and milk-thistle,

Alive and wild, more so than tended rows

In growth, has died. I killed them a little,

The crab-grass clumps, Datura and nettle.

“Time and time, I commit these small murders,

⁵³Better, I think, than if-onlys and if-I-had-justs. There’s that wishful subjunctive, as always. Would God that I had died for thee. I don’t really feel that for you, Dwale, and I don’t know whether to feel sorry or grateful for that. I’ve felt it for others, as is perhaps obvious, and it is one of the worst feelings I’ve had in my life. I’m sorry that there is something about our friendship that precludes that, I guess, but I’m more grateful that I don’t have that feeling associated with our memories.

To whose benefit?" I ask why and wonder,
 The scent of sap on scuffed and bloody hands.
 If I indwelt some luring scrap of land
 Far from here, secluded, my own to call,
 I would welcome these same weeds, one and all,
 To plant their roots in my warm, earthen roof,
 Just they and I, with no need of reproof,
 And thank the thorns for making a hale fence,
 The compost for being my winter blanket.

(Dwale, *Face Down in the Leaves* 5)

This fourteen-line poem is one of half-rhymes and mixed meter. We have 'all' and 'call',
 as well 'roof' and 'reproof' (which, depending on your accent, may not be a complete rhyme;

many have roof as /ʊ/ or even /ə/)⁵⁴, but beyond that, we get only hints of assonance: ‘hands’/‘land’.⁵⁸

We come around once more to the cyclical nature of time, as subsequent re-reads of the

⁵⁴My accent⁵⁵ has roof as /ʊ/ vs reproof as /u/.

⁵⁵I do not know your accent. I do not know where you came from. I do not remember your address. I do not remember your voice. I met you twice in 2015, back at the final Rainfurrest, and all I remember was your hat, your hair, your kosovorotka. I remember Mando better, and saw him only a little bit more. I remember JM introducing you as the one who wrote “the best story in the fandom, I hear”, but that’s about it. “Behesht”, was it? The story about reaching paradise? The story of a post-apocalyptic wasteland, of the slow death of life, of the drive to press on towards something better that will only end in death?

I looked the story up when thinking about this, and came across the lines:

“Peace, my brother,” he said. “Come with us, and leave these wretched places behind. Where we are going is far better.”

When I inquired as to where that might be, he smiled and said a single word: “Behesht.” Their destination was nothing less than Heaven itself, the hidden garden which is the reward of believers.

(Behesht)

That was back in 2015, though, and “Behesht” came out in 2018, so perhaps not. The dates don’t add up. That was seven years before you died. It’s one of those things where you couldn’t have known. You couldn’t *possibly* have known, and yet I suppose you bore within yourself the seeds of your death from birth, just as we all do.⁵⁶

⁵⁶Or, at least I know I do. I know that I’m stuck with those death-thoughts, the ones that won’t leave, will only curl up into a little purring ball in the corner of my mind, unwilling to let me out of its sight. It takes up space in the mind as you do as even I do.

Only, sometimes it feels it must traipse across my lap as cats⁵⁷ do, bunting its head against my arms, needle-sharp claws digging into my thighs, demanding that it receive the attention it’s due. “Think of me,” it says. “Think of me and dream of me. Pet me and stroke me. Let me know that you love me, in your own fearful way.”

⁵⁷Death, a constant, refuses to leave. I start writing this essay on death, and then the vet calls: your cat’s asthma isn’t asthma, it’s metastatic lung cancer. Just keep her comfortable.

You who read this, or perhaps future Madison, I don’t write this that you feel sorry for me, but only for a little validation. Dwale dies. Falcon dies. Turtle dies. Zephyr dies. Someone other than me must know.

⁵⁸My accent has hands as closer to /ɛ/ vs land as /æ/.

poem cycle us through multiple meanings.

Once more, the first half of the poem focuses on concrete imagery (“My garden of foxtails and milk-thistle”, “The scent of sap on scuffed and bloody hands”) and actions (“I killed them a little, / The crab-grass clumps, Datura and nettle”, “I ask and wonder”) which, when contrasted against the turn toward the more hypothetical and contemplative second half, offers on second reading a sense of immediacy.

On one’s first read, one is confronted with the unwelcome nature of the real and the welcome nature of the hypothetical: these are weeds that must, according to some external source, be pulled, and yet in some perfect world, one might welcome them in. In both of these cases, the tension lies in the volta halfway through, where one imagines that the poet stands up from toil, a pile of vegetation at its feet, wipes the sweat from its brow, and asks for the hundredth time, “Time and time, I commit these small murders, / To whose benefit?”⁵⁹

From the second read on, however, as the reader re-evaluates the work, we know that the ‘garden’ in the first line is more than just a wistful statement, but a more active contrast from the external source. More than letting them grow wild, would the poet perhaps plant them intentionally? A thistle provides a beautiful purple blossom, and Datura’s white trumpets its own poisonous beauty; why not? Arctic foxes, by virtue of their diet, wind up planting gardens above their dens, scanty cold-weather flowers peeking through after winter.⁶⁰

⁵⁹Time and again, these small deaths! I’ve read my Job. I’ve listened to my Bernstein. I know my right as God’s creation to call them to account. And yet, *If I summoned him and he answered me, I do not believe that he would listen to my voice* (Job 9:16, NRSV).

“Lord God of Hosts, I call You to account! / You let this happen, Lord of Hosts!” the narrator cries in Bernstein’s “Kaddish” (Bernstein), and though that symphony caught me up in whorls of meaning years ago when I first heard it, I don’t think I understood this urge until these last few years. I lost Cullen, I lost Morgan and Tirix and Brone, I lost Dwale, I lost Falcon. As I drafted this essay, I lost Turtle. As I finished it, I lost Zephyr.

“Tin God, your bargain is tin! / It crumples in my hand,” the narrator continues, and the words tear at me now. I’ve read my Job and I’ve listened to my Bernstein and I know, now, what it means to call God to account. I know what it means to weep, to pull at my clothes, at my hair. I know what it means to have food turn to ash in my mouth.

⁶⁰A small obsession:

Even reading the poem top to bottom on repeat, one picks up subsequent layers one after another. Is the poet wishing for solitude? There is this rejection of external requests for someone's imagined benefit and talk of hedging (perhaps literally) oneself in "with no need for

Arctic fox's den
adorned with flowers and snow
garden in winter

(Scott-Clary, Arctic fox's den⁶¹)

It sticks with me, apparently. In my own writing, I've dug deep into the beauty of dandelions. Puffballs, sure, but also:

"Me, though, I like the flowers. They are too complicated for their own good in this stage, are they not? Sure, they close up and then become the puffballs that spread them further and further, but here, they are almost platters of yellow."

(*Toledot* 162)

Ioan, a few paragraphs above this, even talks of thistles.

Weeds are those whose goal is to cling desperately to life *even* in death. Weeds don't wish for death, they accept it as inevitable more easily than us poor fools. The one speaking in that quote, after all, is named 'May Then My Name Die With Me'.

plain enough meaning.

And yet, even Winter must die, yes? That, after all, is right where we started. Winter, dead, and Spring with Summer unborn in her belly. The poem is bound in cycles. Our reading is

she k e he kn she kne h ne e k e she knew sh knew sh n sh n w he k s ew sh
 knew e knew he k sh h e sh k w s e n he e k s e kn h k e sh
 e e k h n w k w s e e he n w n h k e new sh k w
 s n s e ne knew she n he s e kne h s e kn ew e
 n s e he h k n n k
 h

She knew.

⁶³But then, with Turtle, we finally had a chance for something else. We had weeks, then nearly two months with her. We didn't have eight hours of trauma that I'm sure I'll never be able to forget, that time will only blunt the impact but never the memory.

We knew. We could journal her breathing, her energy, her mood — and we did. We could make those last weeks great for her — and we did. We could give her a little blob of sour cream every time she gets one of her steroid pills, a treat to go with a little bit of bitterness. And we did.

We knew, so we could get her wet food to eat as well as dry.

We knew, so we could invite Ash and Merry, from whom we adopted her, over to see her one last time, laugh at how Merry called her 'the dirigible'.

We knew, and it was so, so much easier that way.⁶⁴

We knew.

⁶⁴△ Had we known⁶⁵ with Falcon, how much more time would have made a difference? Would it still have been traumatic if we'd had a few days with her rather than a few hours? Would I have been able to bring her home with some hefty painkillers to live a little longer by our sides, or in our bathroom? Surely we could have made her life a good one, those last few days. We had days with Zephyr. Not quite a week. He started breathing so quickly, panicking at night as he gasped for air, and so we spent a week with him, pampering, playing, giving treats. We cooked him a breakfast of bacon and eggs, that last day, but after almost fifteen years together, we— ah, but it is still too fresh.

I know I'm still glad that her last meal that morning was some of that wet food that she loved, even though it doubtless sat inside her bleeding belly, undigested. JD and I still would have laid on the floor with her and watched her die, but would JD have sobbed, "Come back, come back"? Would I have needed — twice! — to step out of the room to 'deal with the paperwork' just so I wouldn't be around her still warm body?

⁶⁵And what about with you, Dwale?

bound in cycles. The year is bound in cycles and as we spiral up through the seasons, they leave us changed. We are not who we were last Winter, and yet it is Winter still. Every Winter is different, and in that they are the same.

How hard the year dies, and yet there is Spring. She has walked the grassy flat with him for the last time and, the golden bloom of Summer⁶⁶ in her womb, has naught to do but nudge him to no effect.

Spiral

To return to Spring, to make it through that cycle of growth, of insomnia and harvest and frost, is to stand at a precipice. It is to stand right up against the edge of that spiral, lean over carefully, peer down into the depths from however many storeys up, and wonder. It is to confront memory in the form of heights. It is to regard the spiraling days, weeks, and months to either side of you, give them the acknowledgement they deserve, and then return to peering down into the depths.

To return to Spring is to hit that vernal equinox, look down, and feel the steam of memory, the heat of the last year, washing up over your face. What was the name of that album again? “Memories Come Rushing Up to Meet Me Now”?

We remember last Spring. We remember Autumn, because there it is across from us. We

With Morgan, we knew, yes? We had *years* to prepare for it, because she lived so much longer, so much better than we had thought. Cancer claimed her in the end, but we knew, and she worked for FC, and I saw her that last time with her hair only freshly grown back from her most recent round of chemo, and she laughed with me. That was enough time for me to compose a mental goodbye, even if only for myself.

We didn’t know with Margaras, and that hit me for days and days and days. We didn’t know for Cullen, and that hit me for weeks and months.

And we didn’t know for you, and now I’m doing my level best to process that through words — who knows how successfully, because some part of me is trying to convince the rest of me that this isn’t actually doing the work, that bathing in the grief in an attempt to define its center isn’t moving on — and hoping against hope that that fantastical place where grief no longer claws at my insides is closer rather than farther away.

⁶⁶Perhaps even a dandelion.

remember Winter and Summer through some haze — Winter is still too fresh, Summer so long ago — by peering through the haze of the days around us.

It is nearly a cliché to try and find the spirals in everything. A snail's shell! A nautilus! Find the Golden Spiral in every hidden cloister.

A cliché is a metaphor, though, and a metaphor is a framework upon which much can be built. We can look at the cliché that is the spiral and say to ourselves, “Hmm, what else fits this pattern?”⁶⁷

Fit, then, a poem — a particular poem, yes, but also the idea of a poem — to this framework. A poem is a spiral. Poetry is a spiral. Writing poetry. Reading poetry. Burying oneself in words too rich to taste — it is all a spiral.

Elliot Weinberger, in his survey of centuries of translations of one of Wang Wei's poems, does an admirable job of this. Throughout the years, he views the ways in which translations move: the views of the poem, the views of the time the poem was written, the views of the place in which it was written. Orientalism stains so many of them, especially those so early on. Even those most contemporary run into certain levels of inexactitude that miss the ways in which the languages translate. Is it ‘shine’ or ‘reflect’? Simply ‘sound’, or something more complex such as an ‘echo’?

“[E]very reading of every poem, regardless of language, is an act of translation: translation into the reader's intellectual and emotional life. As no individual reader remains the same, each reading becomes a different — not merely another — reading,” as he so succinctly puts it (Weinberger and Paz 46). “The same poem cannot be read twice [...] the poem continues in a state of restless change.” It is all very Heraclitus.

By virtue of the reader's ever-shifting state of mind, they constantly re-translate otherwise static text, even from minute to minute, and build up a library of meaning from a

⁶⁷Our relationships, perhaps. My relationship with Dwale spiraled, after all. One long spiral from when we met, however many years ago, and then that spiral made its full cycle when it died, and now I'm on to the next loop, able to look down on what time we had together.

single work. Reading a poem is as much a form of self-definition as it is of entertainment.

The spiral of the year, of the month, of the day applies as well to the poem, the stanza, the line. We've spiraled our way from spring to spring. We've spiraled our way upwards, using its seasonal poetry as synecdoche for seasonality in poetry as a whole, through each of those seasons, and so the only fitting end is to read a spiral into one last poem of Dwale's as a synecdoche for poem-as-spiral. We can read a microcosm of the spiraling year into a single poem. Start at the beginning, and when you get to the end, start over because you're already a different person.⁶⁸

And so, one more time before setting aside the topic to steep for another year, let us address one of Dwale's poems:

Poem for a Deceased Lover

Seven days⁶⁹ had passed when I heard you died,
A message in the warm morning hours. Dawn
Rose, and no one said how I should go on,
Or wade this mire without my only guide.

Flown to space by what callous earth destroyed,
I chase the long-flying radio waves.
Far away from grief and a potter's grave,
I sift to find again your breathing voice.

Teacher, my every thought was yours to thresh,⁷⁰
So now what sure course would you recommend?

⁶⁸And that's not so bad, is it?

⁶⁹The instances of seven and eleven in this work may call back to *shiva*. As a Muslim, though, the periods would have been different for Dwale.

⁷⁰A counterpoint to Spring, perhaps; thresh in Autumn, harrow in Spring.

Your kind words turned to shrapnel in the end,
 Pieces of you left here in my heart's flesh.

Lover, did you mean to leave this deep wound?
 I would sell my world to kiss you farewell.
 Eleven years facing perpetual Hell,
 And all I can say is, "Too soon, too soon."

(Dwale, *Face Down in the Leaves* 14)

If we are to tackle this as Weinberger does (and as we have touched on before), a good place to begin would be the prosody and sonority. We are again confronted with lines that follow a unique meter of iambs/troches interrupted towards the end with a spondee: "Seven days had passed when *I heard* you died" works out as three troches, a spondee, and then an iamb (we could call it a 'third epitrite', apparently, or we could be realistic), and "A message in the warm morning hours.⁷¹ Dawn" as three iambs, a troche, and a spondee.

This type of analysis may at times act as a desiccant, drying out an otherwise lush poem, but it does serve its purpose in giving us a glimpse at just why a poem makes us feel the way we do. When taken with the familiar half- and almost-rhymes (this time in ABBA format), we are once more faced with a stumbling feeling that, in this case, perhaps speaks to trying to make one's way through the day with tear-clouded eyes.

Upon returning to the top and reading the poem through, one is struck by a sense of distance contrasted with the particular intimacy that comes with a wound. 'Seven days', 'flown to space', 'long-flying radio waves' all speak to the impossible gulf between life and death, while 'pieces of you left here in my heart's flesh', 'this deep wound', and 'kiss you farewell' describe a closeness that crosses boundaries, a breach of an integument.

The grief is shown in the freshness and immediacy of the words. 'Wade this mire' feels

⁷¹Again, accents may complicate this, as 'hours' may be one or two syllables.

impossible in so low a place. “I sift to find again your breathing voice” shows the urgency that follows loss, the hasty need to find what is no longer there.

And yet, even within the span of the poem, we see that urgency lessen. We hear uncontrollable, gasping sobs calm down into mere crying. We are not yet at sniffing, not yet at the dull pressure in our head that follows actually crying, but we are at least able to speak, by the end, our sorrow. “Too soon, too soon,” we say, and it is no soft platitude,⁷² but our meager attempt to put into words what we are feeling when what we are feeling is still too hot.

Despite mentions of Hell,⁷³ it is comforting to see here that grief has transmuted into sadness. We have climbed that year-long spiral eleven times,⁷⁴ we have had our period of

⁷²Platitudes are for others. They are for those trying to convince each other that they are saddened by this change. They are mere performance.

[...]

“Good man, good man,” they mutter,
doing all they can to convince each other
through well-rehearsed performances,
that this must be the case.
The silently bereaved already sit graveside.

(Scott-Clary, Penguins)

It is all very Tolstoy.

But grief, true bereavement, is almost reflexive. It is *performative* in that way. By grieving, we bring grief into being. Add in the fact that I’m helpless before my compulsive explanation and beholden to my graphomania, and this was my grief over Dwale. I could not sit, silent, by the graveside. I could not sit *shiva*. I could not bury myself in a community that is willing to support me, but what I could do is use the framework of words to pull meaning from that which feels too big to make sense. I *do* have tools, even if it may not feel like it when grief burns particularly bright.

⁷³And I sure hope that the torment of plagues and politics doesn’t last eleven more years, much less for perpetuity.

⁷⁴And while this may have been longer than Falcon lived, longer than she made our lives a joy, we got to make her *entire* life a good one.

lamentation, the soul has been purified, and we can see what it is to live life without them.⁷⁵

Sure, we will always hunt their breathing voice, their kind words remain with us, we will never kiss them farewell, but it is now comprehensible. We can intellectualize their loss. We can pull it into words and set it before us. We can read our grief from top to bottom and then start once more at the top, translate it once more and once more again. We know it well, our sadness, and each time we take our trip⁷⁶ through the text, we can feel its impact soften. It does not leave us, but it becomes a part of us.

And now, when we spiral around once more to the top of the poem, we can look down over that perilous edge and see what we were. We can see the way we bury our face in a pillow we hug to our chest so that the gasping, choking sound of our sobs is muffled — from whom? Perhaps even this version of us, here in the future — however many levels down. We can look down to the level just below us and see how we’re starting to come to terms with that loss. It was not a smooth transition, this integration of loss into ourselves, but now that we’ve once more reached the first line, we are no longer “I, who grieve”,⁷⁷ but perhaps “I, who have grieved”. We can think about how our love is borne out of the solar system on those radio waves (for what else is WiFi?) and, even if we do not smile, we do not cry.

We can look up, too. We can look up and see all of the other times we *will* read the poem and imagine who we might be. Might we be someone who can read through this poem and only *remember* the us who was so torn by grief that they couldn’t breathe for sobbing? A hazy

⁷⁵And Dwale will live on at least as long as I do, will it not? I would that it had not died at all, but as it had to, at least I have the ability to think about it, love it from across that infinite gulf in my own, awkward way. I have the privilege of being able to memorialize it. I have my threnody, and through that, its works are set for those to see who might not otherwise.

⁷⁶This is not a new idea, of course. In my choral conducting courses, we talked about taking ‘the seven trips through the score’ in order to tease it apart so that we could put it back together with our students. Again, though, that Madison has passed.

⁷⁷Or perhaps “I, who write paeans to grief in the footnotes of an essay and worry that this is not doing the actual Work”. Just me? No? Maybe just me.

memory, one where we remember that us as some different person.

And so we read the poem again and see something new — aha! Is “I sift to find again your breathing voice” an anaphora? — and it all becomes a little softer, a little more abstract. We read and read. We come back to our poem years later and it inspires nostalgia in us. Nostalgia! Simpler times for simpler versions of ourselves. A little younger, a little dumber, but no less capable of feeling.

Issa says,

Ro no hata wa

Yobe no warai ga

Itomagoi

Around the hearth —

The smile that bids us welcome

Is also a farewell!

(Issa and Mackenzie 101)

A year passes and we look down through the haze of time, down along that spiral. We read the poem again, re-translate it for ourselves, and spiral through the lines and verses.

A year spirals up, and so, too, does a poem.

II — THE ELEVATION OF UNKNOWN THINGS

Job puts forward a note of interrogation; God answers with a note of exclamation. Instead of proving to Job that it is an explicable world, He insists that it is a much stranger world than Job ever thought it was.

(Chesterton)

I've heard it said that "forgiveness is releasing the hope for a better past," but it's more complicated than that, isn't it? That quote itself is more complicated than that:

There are ways around being the go-to person
 even for ourselves
 even when the answer is clear
 clear like the holy water Gentiles would drink
 before they realized
 forgiveness is the release of all hope for a better past

(Wakefield)

Primed as we are to take text out of context, wrap our own needs around it, and pretend that it is in all ways applicable to all situations (for did I not already ramble about mistaking accidental, individual symbols for universal ones?), it's so easy to misremember that the better past we hope for is just some dream, something we cling to long after the us that lived that past has died.

Who knows if I was the go-to person, the punching bag for my Elihu, the object of her simple angers? Who knows if she remembers me? She cut contact without telling me, without telling me why, and who knows if even she knows the reason?

Who cares, other than me?

All stories are perforce interpolations within real events.

The story of identity, the story of coming to terms with existing in some particular way, is as much an interpolation into the whole of us as anything. I am trans, yes, but that is not the story; that is the identity. I am who I am specifically because I did what I did, I learned what I learned, I changed how I changed. No amount of academic language will make that untrue, no overanalysis of this or that will make me be anything else.

“If Matthew died on September 6th, 2012,” I asked myself some years ago, “was Madison born then?”

That date, September 6th, had nothing in particular to do with gender. The answer was no, after all. Madison was born some two intercalary years later. Matthew’s death had nothing to do with gender — he died when his friend died, when Margaras hit that barricade at fifty miles an hour.

Matthew died and then I don’t remember what happened. I suppose there was a few years of fumbling around, poking and prodding at various parts of his body in the hopes that something could be salvaged. The hair, maybe? Or the softness of skin? Perhaps he could simply be recycled into something new, the same lump of clay molded and remolded until some fresher breath of life was breathed into it.

If Matthew died in 2012 and Madison wasn’t born until a few years later, if I don’t remember those in-between years, then I keep questioning whether or not I actually existed then. I suppose 2013 involved dealing with the tic, and I guess we moved in 2014, but both of those stand-out events feel as though they happened to someone else, someone not Madison.

If Matthew died in 2012, why was I not born then?

The Book of Job, out of all of the books in the Hebrew bible, is buried deepest under layers of guesses. Even in the Christian bible, the only book that comes close is Revelation. Perhaps it is the dire nature by which both approach the world. Job takes a look at the world, heaves a weary sigh, and says, “I suppose this is it. This is the lot we have been given in life,”

while Revelation looks at the world and growls deep in its throat, a sound coming from the belly, and says, “This must not be it. This cannot be the way in which the world works.”

Or perhaps it is the way in which they view death. While Job looks on death almost fondly, Revelation reiterates the Christian sentiment that death has been defeated using the genre of apocalypse (that is, a revealing, a pulling back of the curtain). The world that was is no more, and as there is everlasting life beyond it, it is worth considering only in that context and otherwise only worth discarding.

Gustavo Gutiérrez, in his investigation into the Book of Job *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, posits that Job exemplifies *disinterested religion* — that is, a non-transactional faith that holds even when there is not a direct benefit or punishment. “[The author of the Book of Job] believes it to be possible, although he undoubtedly knew the difficulty that human suffering, one’s own and that of others, raises against authentic faith in God. Job, whom he makes the vehicle of his own experience, will be his spokesman.” (Gutierrez 1) While I find this argument extremely compelling as a way to describe the entirety of Job and its role in both Judaism and Christianity, my own thesis does not necessarily have anything to do with theodicy.

Rather, I’d like to posit that there are at least two possible outcomes for Job *after* the events of the book. On the one hand, Job might follow the path of Qohelet in the eponymous book (called Ecclesiastes in Christian bibles), or he can follow the path of Jonah. That is, he can maintain his disinterested faith, or doubt can overtake him. He can become the wise, if perhaps jaded, author of a text that argues “there is nothing better for man under the sun than to eat and to drink and to make merry.” (Qohelet 8:15, NRSV) Or he can become the reluctant prophet who says to God upon saving the stupid Ninevites that he is “angry enough to die.” (Jonah 4:9, NRSV)

The framing for The Book of Job takes the form of a fable, a set of universal symbols designed to instruct as well as entertain. The structure is as follows:

Job is a prosperous and pious man living in the merry old land of Uz. He is wealthy in

livestock and in family, with his 7,000 sheep, his 3,000 camels, his cattle and she-asses, his slaves and his ten children. His seven sons love and respect each other, and he loves them all in turn (though he does seem a tad suspicious of their piety, making sacrifices in their names on their appointed days).

God, holding court with the sons of God, greets the Adversary and asks where they have been. They respond that they have been roaming the Earth, to which God replies, “Have you paid heed to My servant Job, for there is none like him on earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and shuns evil?” (Job 1:8, Alter)

Adversary, here, is the translation of the phrase in Hebrew, *ha-satan*. Alter notes that it wasn’t until much more recently that this was refigured as specifically Satan: “The word *satan* is a person, thing, or set of circumstances that constitutes an obstacle or frustrates one’s purposes.” (Alter 466) The Jewish Publication Society concurs. (Job 1:6, JPS) It is a job title more than it is identity. In fact, the transition from the Adversary to Satan himself is fraught. The specifically academic New Oxford Annotated Bible (NOAB) retains the New Revised Standard Version translation as Satan qua Satan, but acknowledges in translation footnotes each time the term *ha-satan* shows up that this is “Or the Accuser; Heb. *ha-satan*”. (Coogan 736)

And here is where we first run into trouble, for now is when the Adversary shoots back, “Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not hedged him about and his household and all that he has all around? The work of his hands You have blessed, and his flocks have spread over the land. And yet, reach out Your hand, pray, and strike all he has. Will he not curse You to Your face?” (Job 1:9-11, Alter)

And God does it. He does it! He gives Job up to the Adversary, and of course, all that Job has, all that he’s gained and all of his offspring, are destroyed. Cattle and she-asses? Felled by the Sabeans. Camels? Stolen by the Chaldeans. Sheep? Burnt up by none other than the fire of God Himself. His men are dead. His sons and daughters are dead, crushed beneath the walls of a house torn by a sudden wind.

Job, pious as he is, does not curse God. He tears his clothes, bows down, and blesses Him.

Even Job's wife seems to sigh: "Do you still cling to your innocence? Curse God and die."
(Job 2:9, Alter)

There is a difference in interpretation, here. On the one hand, Alter suggests that Job's wife is being sardonic, saying that she "assumes either that cursing God will immediately lead to Job's death, which might be just as well, or that, given his ghastly state, he will soon die anyway" (Alter 469). Might as well curse away, eh?

The editors of the NOAB take a more sympathetic view of the exchange. "The outcome of all Job's piety has been to rob his wife of her ten children, her social standing, and her livelihood." (Coogan 737) Curse God, then. Who else could be responsible? How can you continue to praise after our ten (admittedly unnamed) children have died?

Once more, God says to the Adversary that there is none more pious than Job, and once more the Adversary jeers, "Skin for skin! A man will give all he has for his own life. Yet, reach out, pray, Your hand and strike his bone and his flesh. Will he not curse You to Your face?" (Job 2:5, Alter)

Yet again, God gives Job up to the Adversary — "Only preserve his life" — who strikes Job with a rash from head to toe, leaving him to sit among the ashes and scrape at his flesh.

Why was Madison not born then?

In reply to asking myself that, I say, "If Matthew died in September of that year, then he was sick long before. This was part of his long, slow death rattle."

He'd been sick for months. He'd contracted something terminal, been infected with some terrible, memetic illness earlier that year. Words had been whispered, implications, innuendo, little hints in growing silence and distance. These drilled their way into him, teased out an immune response in the form of defensiveness, then left a husk behind.

Some long winter followed. He had died and crumpled to the ground. He mouldered a while before decomposing into the soil. He lay dormant beneath the earth, waiting for a thaw.

Madison began to grow during that false spring that hits at the beginning of March, those two weeks of warm weather that convince you that winter must be over, it must have passed and it was time to air out the house, to wash your jackets and hang them up for the year. We always forget about the second winter, but false spring is enough for the buds to peek out.

Stories are as bound to time as we are, and all we can do is steal back a bit of that memory through however many words. All we can do with these memories pinned in place is regard them from a distance and make guesses. All I can do now is make guesses as to the meaning of however many conversations — those very real words lost to the whims of technology — that lead to the slow and not always but often painful death of who I was.

Between the two halves of the fable — Job’s fall and God’s reinstatement of him — lies an intercalary period of at least a week wherein his friends — Though perhaps this ought to be put in qualifying quotes: “friends” — Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar (there is also Elihu; more on him later) commiserate with him, sitting silent for seven days and nights. There is then a series of speeches before the last chapter of the book containing the conclusion of the framing device. God commands that Job’s friends offer up sacrifices on his behalf, and when they do, all of Job’s wealth is restored twice over. 14,000 sheep, 6,000 camels and so on, down to seven more sons and three more daughters (which he gives the delightful names Dove, Cinnamon, and Horn of Eyeshade). Job lives another hundred and forty years, long enough to see four generations of offspring, until he dies “aged and sated in years.” (Job 42:17, Alter)

Job’s life being torn to shreds means that his brief time here on Earth, the only time he has with nothing after it, is divided into finite fractions, into a before, a during, and an after. Job is struck for, what, two weeks? We may only guess, as the Adversary’s second visit to the sons of God and the Lord is not dated. And yet those are two weeks out of a finite number of years.

This centers God’s response as the sticking point. He spends four chapters responding to Job and the conversations that have taken place between him and his friends. While these

conversations make up the majority of the book, His response solely in the context of this framing device (which, we must remember, is an older folktale which has been re-cast as a framing device for the rest of the book) gives us a particular flavor of “God works in mysterious ways” with more nuance than one commonly finds when that phrase is employed.

God appears to Job and his friends and expounds on the fact that none of them do — nor indeed can — possibly understand the ways in which He works. They’re not just mysterious, they’re vast and incomprehensible. This makes the most sense in a panentheistic view. If He is outside time, then, from our point of view, those ways stretch both forwards and back. If they envelop and pervade all things tangible and intangible, then they are beyond even our causal domain.

Even in a grounded, Jahwist, immediate and physical view of God (He is, after all, there in the form of a whirlwind), his entrance comes off as bizarre and unnerving. He passes through the physical plane as the Sphere does in *Flatland* through the Square’s planar existence. Even in so real a form, He proves His very incomprehensibility.

These interpretations are doing a lot of heavy lifting, however. They accept at face value Job’s capitulation in chapter 40, where, after being thoroughly excoriated by no less than God Himself, he says, “Look, I am worthless. What can I say back to You?” (Job 40:4, Alter) and “I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but will proceed no further.” (Job 40:5, NRSV)

And if He does not exist? The folktale and the book as a whole do not depend on the existence of God in their interpretation. They still work to repudiate the idea that, if bad things happen to you, it is because you’re a bad person.

Our Job, though, our poor, ruined man, has he changed? Has he grown into something new? Has he integrated who he was during those weeks or months of grief with who he was before that? Has he built for himself a new identity? Has he become braver? More fearful?

There is a belief that, with near-death experiences, there are two likely outcomes. One is that you become a braver, more vivacious person. You live your life all the fuller because you got so close to not living at all. After all, if you have been given a second chance, why not?

But still, there's that second option: you become consumed by fear. You freeze up and do not leave the house. Any potential source of death is a thing to be avoided.

This is no value judgement. To be consumed by fear after having your own mortality stand up before you, sneer down its nose, and give you a playful shove bears no shame. It is an honest acceptance of who you are in the face of the enormity of the universe.

And sure, it might be a spectrum, and there's probably that absolute midpoint where there is no change. You make it through that brush with death and come out the other side precisely the same as you were before. There is terror in this prospect, that death might be so overwhelming that there is nothing you can do but wrap that experience up in butcher paper, tie it with twine, and set it up in the attic, high on a shelf beside that dusty box labeled simply 'regrets'.

Alter argues that the names that Job gives his new daughters points to a change. "The writer may have wanted to intimate that after all Job's suffering, which included hideous disfigurement and violent loss, a principle of grace and beauty enters his life in the restoration of his fortunes." (Alter 579) This is indeed a beautiful take on it, too. Job comes out the other side and names his daughters after growing things, beautiful things. Dove and Cinnamon and Horn of Eyeshade, the most beautiful in the land and a sign of Job's joy in living.

The Fundamental Unhappiness of Identity

How do we remember the past? How do we remember all of those countless conversations that make up our friendships, our relationships, our enmities? How do we remember the past?

The Book of Job remembers it through discourses. It remembers entire conversations, entire histories of friendship, through the lens of those two weeks Job spent in the cold fire pit, covered with ashes and sores. It remembers them all through discourses and speeches and prayers. Perhaps strangest of all, though, it remembers them disjoint and out of order.

We, too, remember out of order.

I met her through a friend, Andrew. My boyfriend at the time, actually. I'd flown down to Florida some time in 2009, I think, to visit him. A quick jaunt down to Clearwater where his ex-Scientologist mom and step-dad had set up their own business, bought some ridiculous house on the beach, and raised their only child.

So much of that trip was so fun, too, even if it was the last. We drove out to some car meet-up at a strip mall. Fast car after fast car lined up in a parking lot. Men in sunglasses. Someone, years younger than I, crouching down to try and stick his cell phone, held up on its edge, under his car to prove that it had been lowered that much. "Fucking idiot," Andrew whispered. "Speed bumps would rip the shit out of that."

He was the car nerd, not me. He was the one who had a black Dodge Dynasty with a red velour interior — his "mob car" — and then that terrible minivan he tried to strip and paint black by himself, and then the...was it a Passat?

That last one we drove out to Orlando where one of his friends, Jill, her family the holders of a Disney pass, had procured a hotel room somewhere on the outskirts of Walt Disney World where we could have a small party — Andrew and I, her and her...was it her boyfriend? And Floe and Necco. A mostly quiet night of drinking and talking and more drinking. Andrew and I got drunk. Floe and Necco got drunk. Jill got drunk, and her boyfriend got truly wasted. He ran a bath, climbed in fully-clothed, and cried about how much he loved his friends. We sat on the rim of the tub, dangled our feet in the warm water, agreed earnestly.

And I did too! I loved Andrew, of course. I still do, from however far away. We haven't talked in years, but I would not be who I am without him. I love Floe — I've worked with him on dozens of illustrations over the years. I may have loved Necco, even if he also fills me with loathing now. I suppose I must have loved Jill and her boyfriend, too. That sort of sticky-sweet love is infectious in a vodka-tinged haze.

After that, we went to some event. Another alcohol-fueled party. Another awkward night. Another drive back home and then the rest of our stay. It went less than stellar, and we

broke up the day I returned home. It had been a long time coming, not least of which because, without telling me, he'd been dating Jill for months beforehand.

Edward L. Greenstein discusses the transpositions, interpositions, and interpolations that go into the book of Job. Take, for instance, Job's first speech. "For many reasons," he writes, "the passage 4:12-21 should be read here, right after chapter 3, as the conclusion of Job's first speech." (Greenstein 16) In that speech, Job bemoans the horrors that have befallen him and his family, spelling out in poetic detail all of the ways he wishes he'd never been born. Where, in the traditional ordering, this would lead to Eliphaz's first speech, Greenstein instead places a description of a vision that had, in those orderings, been given to Eliphaz. He provides three reasons: in similar tales, it is the complainant who receives a vision; Job, rather than his friends, receives the theophany in this story; and both Job and Eliphaz himself refer to Job's vision in later chapters.

I can't speak to the details beyond this and a few mentions in the Apocryphals episode on the Book of Job. Both describe the ways in which the original story would have been kept on leaves of papyrus, how easy it would have been for such leaves to be shuffled — accidentally or intentionally — by some time-forgotten redacter.

The Book of Job remembers its events out of order, and attempts to fix it, whether its addressed explicitly in the text as Greenstein does or through footnotes as Alter and the NOAB editors do, cannot be done so without addressing this fact.

We, too, remember out of order.

Andrew and I met all the way back in 2000.

He went by Miro, then, a name cribbed from the surrealist painter Juan Miró. I later learned, though far before that 2009 visit, that his parents actually owned an original Miró, and

that's where he'd thought of the name. This was before I was going by Makyo, too. Before I was Makyo, I was Ranna, a name stolen from. "Ranna the sleepbringer, the sweet, low sound that brought silence in its wake." (Nix 80)

We bonded over being young — we were both young, once, the youths of our friends group — and the fact that we'd both stolen our names from elsewhere. We bonded over being gay. We bonded over being furry. It was a perfect match for early romance, for the first time we dated.

I say "first time", as we eventually drifted apart in the young-love fashion: we got frustrated with the fact that we were growing into different people than then ones we'd fallen in love with.

We fell into love, fell out, and then, years later, as he moved to Colorado, some strange triangle — or perhaps quadrilateral — formed between us.

He moved to Denver while I was up in Fort Collins, working on my bachelor's at CSU, and I spent the occasional weekend with him, whether that was him driving up to our place or me heading down to visit him and Kinematics. I thought he was dating Kine, he thought I was dating my now husband, JD, and JD thought I was dating him.

It wasn't until he moved out of state — this time off to Carlsbad, CA to get a degree in gemology — that we actually sat down to have that conversation. I hadn't started dating JD yet. He and Kine had never dated. The us who we had become fell back into love, found some new way to exist together without driving each other nuts. Not yet, at least.

We remember out of order. I know that.

I know, for instance, that my conversations with my husband around transition were many and scattered. We would chat over dinner, or we would talk on that horrifyingly yellow couch that he'd inherited about the fact that I was feeling strange about all these different aspects of identity. But you know what I remember? I remember sitting on that couch and talking in well-formed sentences, in paragraphs and essays, about why it was that I felt like the body I had and the body I *had* overlapped incompletely, or I remember sitting on one of the

dining table chairs turned to face the living room in a skirt I had made for myself, explaining to him that I felt like a part of me died when Margaras did.

These were almost certainly conversations. True conversations. They were full of filled pauses and the backtracking failures of speech that come with just plain chatting, but that's not what I remember. I remember discourses and speeches and prayers. I remember the way we constructed well-reasoned dialogues back and forth, with none of the doublings back or filler words, none of those pregnant silences that come with his speech impediment or my preemptive justifications that leave me gasping for air — the need to be understood far outweighs the need for oxygen.

When I was 17, I got in my first car accident. The roads in Boulder are beholden to its landscape, the shape of the hills upon which they were built defining the curves. The entirety of the town huddles up against the feet of the Rockies, crowding against the Flatirons. Broadway, the main drag through town, carves a gentle curve steadily closer to heading truly north from its initial gentle westward bent. At one point, a sort of surface-level slip road ducks off to merge with 28th, the street on which my friend lived.

Driving him home after a February rehearsal, icy and disgusting, that gentle curve of slip road relinquished its grip on the truck and we seemed to float a few inches above the pavement. It was an almost gentle sensation as we bumped against the truck beside us.

Beyond that, it was all boring. Get out, exchange information, go our separate ways. I don't remember much more than that, only that I had to call my dad once I got home and tell him what happened. I don't even remember what I said to him, only that he interrupted me, laughing, and told me to stop talking like a lawyer, that he wasn't suing me. My justifications for every second of that accident had to be airtight. My need for air came second.

I don't imagine the same was actually true of my conversations with JD about gender. We probably just slouched on that horrifyingly yellow couch and talked about how I was feeling, how every time he got close, it felt like he was getting close to the wrong me.

But that's not how I remember it. I remember it as a story. There is a linear progression

from 2010 to 2015, complete with an arc, with a beginning, middle, and end, with a supporting characters and with an antagonist.

Similarly, the story I remember of Jill comes with a beginning, middle, and end. I met her through Andrew, we grew close, there was that snippy message, a sudden silence, and then that final exchange, and we haven't spoken since. Acts one through five, all told in order: introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, catastrophe.

It is important to reckon with two interpolations within the text that appear to be later additions, and it would be nice to address these before coming to the text that they interrupt.

The first interpolation is that of a poem that comprises the entirety of chapter 28. The poem takes the form of a Hymn to Wisdom that Alter describes as "a fine poem in its own right, but one that expresses a pious view of wisdom as fear of the Lord that could scarcely be that of Job." (Alter 458)

The NOAB, however, suggests an additional interpretation of the Hymn to Wisdom, which is that it may have originally been the conclusion of Elihu's speech. For evidence, they mention that this topic, the elevation of wisdom, feels familiar to those chapters of Elihu's, wherein the youngster harps on the topic of wisdom and knowledge at length. Additionally, the editors note the similarity in the final verse of the Hymn, "And he said to humankind, "Truly the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding"" (Job 28:28, NRSV) closely echoes Elihu's final words as they stand: "Therefore mortals fear him; he does not regard any who are wise in their own conceit." (Job 37:24, NRSV)

The hymn itself is a respectable piece of poetry. It begins in a roundabout way, discussing the acquisition of physical wealth. It describes the ways in which gold and silver are extracted from the earth and copper smelted from ore. It describes paths unseen by beast, ones that require work to acquire. Throughout these few verses (1–11) runs a very clear directionality. From the start, they are heading *towards* something. They are pointing *at*

something. Verse 12 illuminates: “But wisdom, where is it found, and where is the place of discernment?” (Job 28:12, Alter)

Certainly not beneath the earth! If Qohelet has taught us anything, it is that. Wisdom abides despite toil, despite merriment, despite even riches.

In fact, though many of the same ideas within the hymn are also there in Qohelet, those in the latter tend to be more refined, more fleshed out. This might be due to the later date of composition of the former, but may also be due to the context of the book and the interpolated nature of the hymn. The author of the hymn views wisdom as an ephemeral concept. It is not something that can be held or perceived by man, or, indeed, life itself: “It is hidden from the eye of all living” (Job 28:21, Alter). Even other abstract (though often personified) concepts seem to have difficulty with it: “Perdition and Death have said, “With our own ears we have heard its rumor.” ” (Job 28:22, Alter)

And we, too, remember out of order.

“Memory is playing tricks on me” is a phrase I’m never sure how to parse.

Tricks? Is it tricking me? Is it fooling me? Is it hiding a smirk as I dig and dig to try and remember dates?

I don’t quite remember when this love quadrilateral all went down. I think we had a lot of these conversations back when I was in the house on Maple Street, the one that caught fire in my housemate’s room, which means that must have happened before moving out in 2006. I remember living in the apartment on Remington Street and flying out to Carlsbad to visit Andrew, to meet his friends Toni and Wish, which means that must have happened sometime before 2009, back before we moved to the house on Andrea Street and him back to Florida.

Memory plays tricks on me, and perhaps that’s just in us remembering through transpositions, interpositions, interpolations. That’s me remembering those times with Kine and then those times we were dating in Colorado before remembering that, between those, he’d

gone to school out in California.

And perhaps it's just the ways in which *this* is pushed out to make way for *that*. What year did I visit Carlsbad? I don't remember. I do, however, remember — vividly — Toni and Wish sleeping on the floor. I remember talking about all those people we knew together from IRC channels tainted by snarky assholes two steps away from the fascists in the fandom. I don't remember when we had those conversations about relationship quadrilaterals, but I do remember sitting on the floor with JD, there with the gray, plush carpet, which must mean that it was in the Maple street house, given the Berber carpet in the Remington apartment. I don't remember what house it was that I lived in when Andrew and I broke up, though I suppose it must have been before JD and I moved in together.

There is an order to the events that happen in our lives, but that does not mean that we remember them that way. Perhaps it is that we remember things in the order in which they are most important to us. I remember that break-up conversation in one very clear way: I was on AIM and in the Denver airport. I had not yet gotten home. I remember that being such a low point in life, and yet it neared the top of the list in terms of importance — at least when it comes to this particular story. I remember visiting Andrew and Kinematics in Denver, but all I remember out of that was Kine doing a burnout in his car, laughing about how “the tires have a flat spot on them, better smooth that out.” Smoke blossomed behind the car, then, and I clutched at my seat, pretending to laugh, pretending to care.

Qohelet, on the other hand, has a much more grounded view. He says that wisdom is one of those things that you gain by experiencing, something that abides through all of the ups and downs in your life and is only ever strengthened. This is not to say that he is in any way upbeat; wisdom, folly, riches, merriment, these all will go with you to the grave. They, too, will be meaningless.

That is, until, one gets to the end of the book. The second half of chapter 12 of Qohelet is,

per Alter, likely an interpolation of its own, where an epilogist rounds out the remainder of the book with some sounder, more conventional piety. “The last word, all being heard: fear God and keep His commands, for that is all humankind. Since every deed will God bring to judgment, for every hidden act, be it good or Evil” (Qohelet 12:13-14, Alter) echoes the end of the hymn from Job, which puts it, “Look, fear of the master, that is wisdom, and the shunning of evil is insight.”

Both of these interpolations seem to be taking the raw feelings of the authors of Job and Qohelet and trying to soften them, shaving off all those coarse edges. In Job we have a man striving to be heard by God Himself, and in Qohelet, we have a teacher who is bordering on nihilism, yet both of these editors are trying to fit these texts into the context of a tradition that, while it does include (and even encourage) the capacity to call God to account and to feel that certain sense of nihilism, would still appreciate a somewhat more positive view within its scripture.

And though even this discussion of interpolations may feel like an interpolation itself, here is where it ceases being such: one possible outcome of Job’s travails is that, as suggested, he becomes Qohelet. Can one imagine going through the experiences that Job went through and not coming away with at least a little bit of that nihilism? Your family dies. Your livelihood is stripped away. You sit in the pit of ashes with lesions all over your body, and then God comes down in his whirlwind and fixes it all for you. You look back on all of your piety, you look back on all of your wealth, and suddenly yes, it is all a chasing after the wind.

Above all, I remember the past in fragments of identity. I remember my various selves. I remember the me who was gung-ho about music composition, just as I remember the ways in which I fell out of love with writing music. I remember the Matthew who dove into working in tech, just as I remember the Matthew who, so burnt by work, tried to kill himself. I remember the me who loved Andrew and yet I also remember the me couldn’t figure out how to actually mesh with him.

I remember, of course, the me who struggled with being me, the Matthew who did not want to be Matthew. The Matthew who did not want to exist.

Gender Play and Hidden Selves

I was young, once, and dumb.

Which is not to say that I'm not, now, of course. I certainly feel it sometimes. Even the young bit: Madison is, what, eight now? Nine? Not many nine year olds are smart. I still fumble. I still seem to create those humiliating moments that stick in the memory and make me wince whenever they come up, though they've changed in tenor over the years.

But I was young and dumb and desperately trying to figure out what the hell was going on with my identity, this awkward pile of senses and sensations that were causing so much friction in my life.

An aside: "Identity is psychopathological," my first psychologist said. "You only feel it when there's friction." I'm not totally sure that I agree — trans joy is as much a thing as trans pain — but, as a statement, it's true enough, most of the time. Something about the way my life was built such that the smallest things, coarse as sandpaper, would brush up against something integral, and scrape away at its surface, leaving tracks colored cherry.

It's strange to think back to those early discussions with him, too. That insight hit at such a strange time in my life. It came up in a discussion about my stresses around work. I think I had said something like, "I've wrapped up my need to be productive as part of my identity." I had been talking about the burnout I felt looming on the horizon. I had been expecting some discussion of how to tackle the concept of burnout (something I struggle with bad enough that I quit my job in tech to focus on an MFA in creative writing), but instead, I had that simple phrase thrown at me, and I was left scrabbling after truths.

After all, that wasn't the only bit of identity I was feeling acutely either, was it? I'd felt that before, back when I first came out as — at the time — gay. I felt it with work and how it was grating at me. I'd felt the way it ground up against me, skinning my elbows and knees, a sort of road rash of the self.

But now I was feeling it in some new, far stranger way, though I couldn't put my finger on just how, exactly. I was feeling *something*, but heaven knows what. Something deeper, far more integral.

There must be some way of debriding that scuffed and stripped self-stuff, I thought, so that what you're left with is some purer version of yourself, something all the more whole for what was once there now being gone. There must be some way to pare that cruft away. There had to be, right? If one was to live happily, there had to be.

Years later, one job and one house and one more dog and one more self later, I called him to ask if he would be willing to write a WPATH letter for me so that I could start HRT, and he said, "I don't think I can. I don't know enough about it, and you don't want to know how I feel about it."

I never talked to him again.

The second pertinent interpolation is Elihu's speech — and, indeed, the entire character of Elihu, who is never mentioned outside his own chapters — in chapters 32–37. Alter holds a particularly dim view of Elihu, stating, "At this point, in the original text, the Lord would have spoken out from the whirlwind, but a lapse in judgment by an ancient editor postponed that brilliant consummation for six chapters in which the tedious Elihu is allowed to hold forth." (460) Few seem convinced that the character and his speeches are from the original text. The NOAB, notably bearish on the whole Bible, agrees that this may indeed be the case, though it does so with a sigh and a tone of resignation, adding, "In any case, the Elihu speeches are part of the book we now have", (Coogan 767) with Greenstein echoing that sigh: "Even if, as most scholars think today, the Elihu chapters were added belatedly, they form part of the biblical book." (Greenstein 22)

Mitchell, on the other hand, flatly and without fanfare simply removes Elihu entirely, the chapters and verses listed in a blob of "glosses, interpolations, verses out of place." (Mitchell

131)

Job and his friends have three rounds of arguments, which shall be covered soon, and then, beginning in chapter 32, Elihu is introduced out of nowhere. “So these three men ceased to answer Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes.” (Job 32:1, NRSV)

It is perhaps interesting to note the differences in tradition, here. Alter has “because he was right in his own eyes” but offers no note as to why, which is a little disappointing. JPS (“for he considered himself right” (Job 32:1, JPS)) and Greenstein (“since in his own eyes he was right and just” (Job 32:1, Greenstein)) agree. All three of these are Jewish sources.

Christian sources, however, all lean on ‘righteous’, while the HCSB, NIV, and KJV having identical wording for that phrase. This colors the meaning, does it not? Alter, JPS, and Greenstein describe Elihu as being angry because Job is declaring himself more right than God, whereas the Christian sources all interpret the text as Job justifying himself *rather than* God. Interestingly, the 2001 translation of the Septuagint has Elihu upset that Job is “declaring himself righteous before God” (Job 32:2, Septuagint 2001), a more uncolored plainness that is missing from the other translations. In this case, Elihu is seemingly upset at Job for being upset.

The editors of the NOAB offer additional insight, that Elihu’s speeches may have simply been shuffled out of order (a problem elsewhere in the text) and that his speeches may have originally come after the final of Job’s three friends’ speeches after chapter 27. This both lends credence to the Hymn to Wisdom in chapter 28 being the conclusion of his own speech and ensures that God replies to Job immediately after *his* final speech rather than after Elihu’s, which would better fit the structure of the book. There is no reason it cannot be both, of course; the two additions could have been both interpolations and inserted out of order through some mix-up or whim in an early editor’s haste.

Indeed, Greenstein suggests that this goes even deeper: that much of the text from chapter 24 through chapter 28 may be jumbled due to this process of interpolation. This would include the interpretation that the Hymn to Wisdom belongs to Elihu. “I would explain this phenomenon by observing that toward the end of chapter 24 is a later insertion and that a roll

of papyrus pages would have had to have been taken apart in order to insert the Elihu discourses, which include, I am convinced, chapter 28.” (Greenstein 28) In the connection of the Hymn to Wisdom to Elihu, he is of one mind with the NOAB; indeed, in his reordered translation of the Book of Job, the Hymn is placed at the end of Elihu’s speeches. He, however, disagrees with the potential interpolation of Elihu before Job’s final speech, saying, “The motive for inserting Elihu into this point in the dialogues, just preceding the deity’s speeches (chapters 38–41), is apparent. The divine discourses dwell on God’s power and majesty, not on his justice or concern for humanity—which are the elements Job has been seeking.”

All this to say that Elihu presents a departure from the rest of the book.

I was young, I was dumb, and I was flaking away at the edges of that more fundamental identity. I was making use of the space I had to explore in clumsy, gangly ways. I was building up new versions of myself, one after another, to search for the smallest bit of relief from that friction.

An aside: furry is a notably queer space. It’s a subculture in which you present to others a new version of yourself; not always better, but almost always more earnest. You provide an avatar, a front-stage persona, that everyone simply takes at face value. There is no unwinding, no attempted translation of the front- to the backstage version of you. We commission art and ignore the names on the PayPal invoices. We meet each other at conventions, share rooms with each other, and still never learn each other’s real names. We refer to each other by species, a cute way to reinforce the idea the ostensibly human being in front of us is not what we’re seeing.

There’s no reason that such a space would not attract a queer crowd, yes? Some of it is doubtless the sense of safety that fandom has always provided to gay and lesbian people as well as a place where gender-bending is welcome. Still, in a place where our own original characters are the norm (as opposed to a fandom centered on canon, where canonical characters are the norm), where we become those characters, one is primed to play with identity.

So I did.

I was going by Makyo at that point, had been for a few years.

Shortly after I started to realize just how ill-suited I was to music education, I went through a change of identity online. While before I had gone by the name ‘Ranna’, cribbed from Garth Nix’s beloved Old Kingdom series, I now began to go by the name Makyo, from a Zen Buddhist term which bears a similar meaning. Something about just how focused many of the general teacher education classes were on things other than education filled me with a sense that I might not actually be in any way helping students, but simply standing in their way. I was *makyō*. I was *satan*.

I, at one point, was overtaken by the need to tell my story through the frame of a conversation with an ally. I described them — or perhaps they described themselves; the boundary between framing device and reality blurs — as “an ally, not a friend.” Towards the end of the project, we had a ‘conversation’ wherein I attempted to describe their inverse. Their response: “Not your enemy, but your adversary.” (Scott-Clary, *ally from Start to Finish* 25)

Those around me, those within furry spaces at least, saw me as that well-dressed arctic fox, the one in the subtly pinstriped suit based off my old suit from jazz choir. It was the most comfortable performance of masculinity that I could manage: one based off looking good. Not looking masculine, per se, just looking good. Looking nice. A focus on clothes, on looking good with the knowledge of how to look good. There was, in retrospect, a desire for some shallow interpretation of femininity involved in this.

It wasn’t enough, though. I needed something more. More explicit. More integral.

Enter Younes.

The next verse is all over the place in translation. KJV and NIV suggest that Elihu is upset at Job’s friends because they couldn’t find any fault in Job but still condemned him. JPS agrees, but uses ‘merely’ before ‘condemn’ which adds a value judgment. Alter has him upset

because Job's friends couldn't show Job to be guilty. Though it is difficult to pin down why, Alter posits that Elihu is angry at Job's friends because they just couldn't actually find a way to condemn him: "because they had not found an answer that showed Job guilty" (Job 32:3, Alter) (a sentiment echoed in the footnotes for verse 13: "In attributing this statement to the three reprovers, Elihu shows them admitting the failure of their own arguments." (Alter 548)), while the NRSV walks the middle path with "because they had found no answer, though they had declared Job to be in the wrong." (Job 32:3, NRSV)

Weinberger continues to be relevant: "[...] translation is more than a leap from dictionary to dictionary; it is a reimagining of the poem." (Weinberger and Paz 46)

This is where we leave off, and then this youngster, this whippersnapper, this upstart Elihu starts talking.

"I am young in years, and you are aged. Therefore I was awed and feared to speak my mind with you," (Job 32:6, Alter) he begins, and we are off to the races, or at least to some brash exhortations to wisdom. Job's friends may have left off on their attempts to convince him of some perhaps-guilt, but Elihu does not: "And I attended to you, and, look, Job has no refuter, none to answer his talk among you." (Job 32:12, Alter) Were it not for the (admittedly quite beautiful) poetic form of Elihu's speeches, he would be beyond tiresome. He goes on for more than a chapter simply talking about how he is going to answer Job before he actually does so. He is going to talk. He is going to get there eventually. He will speak. Verse after verse of promises.

The NRSV has the unique wording "See, I open my mouth; the tongue in my mouth speaks." (Job 33:2, NRSV) In a post-*Alien* world, this brings to mind some smaller mouth rebuking him. Or, to look at it more seriously, a shallower voice. Perhaps that internal Elihu we all have within us doing its best to convince us that we have, at some point, lacked the wisdom required to have kept us from our current predicament. Perhaps I'm taking up too much space here, though.

Looking back, coming up with a character that looks male, has that plausible deniability of masculinity, yet could engage with femininity on his own terms in more intimate settings was the perfect vessel for exploration. There are many terms for such a bodily configuration, one with both masculine and feminine primary sexual characteristics. Most of them are awful, but the one that many have landed on, purpose-built to be affirming rather than denigrating, is ‘altersex’.

I can’t even seem to write about this without leaning heavily on the clinical. Something this fraught, this embarrassing, is difficult to acknowledge, but it remains integral to the story. How can I possibly put something like this down on paper? How can I possibly admit to something like this, after the fact? How can I— but that’s the me of today writing. That’s the me who went through this whole series of events, who decided to toy with the form she presented to that particular segment of the world, to feel tentatively around the edges of gender and search for the tender spots. I was young, once, remember? And dumb.

And that isn’t to say that I disrespect those for whom this is their own lived identity, or those for whom this is their own lived experience. Plenty who aim for this altersex goal do so because that’s how they see themselves.

I don’t remember if that’s how I saw myself. I just remember I certainly no longer saw myself as Matthew.

Tiresome as he is, and despite the non-sequitur nature of his speeches, his language remains beautiful, and he does at points reinforce the point mentioned in the epigraph: Job questions God as to why it is that his world has become so miserable, and God cannot but reply with an exclamation that this world is far stranger, far worse and far better, than any man, no matter how righteous could hope to understand:

Why do you contend with Him,
if He answers not all of man’s words?

For God speaks in one way
 or in two, and no one perceives Him:
 In a dream, a night's vision,
 when slumber falls upon men,
 in sleep upon their couch
 Then He lays bare the ear of men,
 and terrifies them with reproof,
 to make humankind swerve from its acts
 (Job 33:13–17, Alter)

This unspoken and unspeakable, unknown and unknowable language is the only way we can possibly move within the world under the guidance of God. Here, however, he falls back into the common theme of Job's reprovers, that he surely must have done something wrong that he feels the need to call for an advocate before God — an ally rather than an adversary, perhaps — “For a man's acts He pays him back, and by a person's path He provides him,” Elihu reasons. (Job 34:11, Alter)

Strangely, Elihu, for all his talk on wisdom, seems to lack the wisdom required to understand the first part of his proposition: that the workings of God are so far beyond human understanding that we cannot know them well enough to call Him to account for his actions. He immediately falls back on the comforting assertion that visible cause must precede obvious effect. Of *course* Job is experiencing such hardships! If he is experiencing such effects, then there must be a cause, and that cause must be the most rational one: an offense against God.

We know that it's much more complex. We have the benefit of the framing device to keep in mind. Elihu speaks of wisdom yet lacks the knowledge. He can claim to have one and yet still not know that he lacks the other.

Indeed, all of Job's friends seem to be acting outside that knowledge. They seem to be speaking without the wisdom of what is actually happening. “[T]he Accuser's dirty work has resulted in an epidemic of accusations,” Stephen Mitchell observes in his translation. “Once the

archetypal figure disappears, he is absorbed into the poem as if by some principle of the conservation of energy.” (Mitchell xvi) Job’s friends accuse and accuse and accuse. After all, surely Job has done something wrong, yes? After all, what need would he have of crying out to God?

What does this say about such a God? That that He is the type to demand an interested faith? “[T]heir god is revealed as a Stalinesque tyrant so pure that he “mistrusts his angels / and heaven stinks in his nose” ” Mitchell says. (xiv)

There are countless ways to approach confusion. Perhaps one dons a cap and cape, sockets a meerschaum pipe into the corner of their mouth, and picks up an oversized magnifying glass to hunt for clues. Perhaps one sits and lets their eyes lose focus, letting their mind wander over the possible solution space to whatever problem that confronts them like some prophet of old. And perhaps one simply freezes, proverbial deer struck dumb by the proverbial headlights.

I’m not quite sure which of these I did. I know that I froze for quite some time. I know that, confronted with this identity-friction, I stood stock still for days and weeks, unable to internalize and unable to let go of this feeling of wrongness.

I also sat and thought and explored the landscape before me: what was it that I was feeling? Was it regret? Remorse? Was I feeling discomfort? Was it mental? Emotional? Spiritual?

I know also that I did my own investigations. Perhaps much of what I was feeling was due to the ways in which I engaged with sex? This would require experimentation. Perhaps much of what I was feeling was due to an estrangement from who I was as Makyo? Perhaps I could create another character.

Enter Younes. Enter Younes and exit Makyo — at least in part.

Enter Younes into so many situations with so many different people. Enter Younes into the lives of JD and Kita. Enter Younes into the home of Whiskey on that text-base role-play

setting.

Enter Younes, too, into art. Into drawings of him — him alone and with others — commissioned from artists throughout the fandom.

My day to day life began to revolve around this reflection of some more feminine version of myself. Someone masculine, yes, but not *solely* masculine. Someone who might easily pass as male, even nude, and yet not solely that.

My interactions with others online in particular were all wrapped up in this new identity of someone somehow more than I was. Every time I would talk with friends — Iridon, perhaps, or MaxRaccoon — this would be acknowledged, silently or not. They would speak to me differently, touch me differently. The vocabulary was different, the hugs were different. And, sure, the sex was different, too. The sex was an acknowledgment of this part of me. More than acknowledgment, it was worshipful. It was fulfilling on an identity level, rather than simply sating the baser needs.

Collisions

There are so many collisions throughout a lifetime. Even through a day, we may bump into this or that, may clip a wall by taking a corner too tight, or bump hips with a partner, or even just smash ideas together to see what new thoughts come of them.

Or perhaps it's the way a car, lowered too close to the ground in order to show off at some car show, scrapes over each and every speed bump as it goes. Perhaps your truck floats gently along a slick of ice and bumps against the truck beside you on an icy February night's drive. Perhaps it's the collision of ideas, where your future husband thinks you're dating your friend, who thinks you're dating your future husband, and you think your friend is dating someone else. A collision of knowledge that leads to a tangled skein of relationships that never actually existed in the first place.

And, of course, a collision may be a simple knock against a friendship that sends the entire thing toppling over. You watch as, almost in slow motion, it totters on its base and then goes crashing down, shattering into thousands of pieces that go skittering across the floor —

they never shatter on carpet, right? It's bound to be on marble or tile. The noise is fantastic. The mess is stupendous.

The primary clash between Job and his friends can be boiled down to this discussion of interested versus disinterested faith.

This is not limited to the book of Job, nor even Jewish or Christian liberation theologies. Take for instance the eighth-century Sufi mystic and Muslim Saint Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya al-Qaysiyya:

O God! If I worship You for fear of Hell, burn me in Hell
 and if I worship You in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise.
 But if I worship You for Your Own sake,
 grudge me not Your everlasting Beauty.
 (Singh 35)

Here, she describes not just an interpretation of the concepts of heaven and hell in a disinterested fashion, but in an emphatic rejection of interested faith. "I want to put out the fires of Hell, and burn down the rewards of Paradise," she writes elsewhere. "They block the way to Allah. I do not want to worship from fear of punishment or for the promise of reward, but simply for the love of Allah." ('Aṭṭār)

This is the God that Bildad, Eliphaz, and Zophar do not understand.

It was almost unnoticeable at first.

This was back in the days of AOL Instant Messenger, before Telegram and Discord — though I think by this time ICQ had breathed its last. At this point, I had two accounts, since my boss at the time had decided to use the service for communication.

It begins with a comment, it seems, though perhaps the true beginning was some time earlier. It begins with you laying together on a bed while each of your partners plays around in the other room, the both of you cozied up under the covers in your much quieter bed. It begins with a few smug words from your very own Elihu.

“I’m honestly disappointed that you would do something like that.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Like what you did with Younes.”

I frowned. “What about it? I didn’t even know that it was something you’d seen.”

“Why bother hiding it? I watch those artists, too,” she said.

“It felt personal.”

“What, appropriating the experiences of very real people? Pretending to be what you aren’t just to get your kicks?”

I don’t remember what I said. Perhaps a mumbled apology? I live a sometimes apology, after all. Perhaps I simply lay silent.

I like to think that it was the latter. I like to think that we settled into an awkward silence, even while the rest of ourselves remained there in comfort, there beneath the covers while our two partners played around in the other room, in some noisier bed.

That’s what I mean by a simple knock. I don’t know if we were under the covers. I don’t know if there was noise in the other room. Perhaps Andrew was simply showering while JD was asleep — I think he was working first shift at the time, so perhaps indeed. I don’t remember when this happened, though I do remember that it was this simple conversation that bumped its elbow against our friendship, sent it rocking back and forth, and eventually left it in pieces on our imagined tile.

It was this knock that led to her blocking one of my accounts on AIM, then forgetting she had done so and accusing me of blocking her. It was this blocking episode that led to her silently dropping most all contact with me. It was my wedding to JD in the interim, to which only family was invited (and, in her mind, pointedly not her), that sent the friendship tumbling

to the floor. There was a sudden silence, only a few words exchanged and only ever in reply to something that I had said directly to her. She stopped coming over with Andrew, and soon, he stopped coming over, as well.

I don't have it saved anywhere, but our final communication was a letter and a gift. I sent her a book — a comic, really, a limited edition of *Rruffurr* — along with a hand-written note apologizing for what I had done, though at that point I wasn't clear just which of these wobbles of our dynamic had been the true cause of her silence.

Her response was a request for no contact moving forward.

Job, to all of this, replies with disdain. They are, after all, responding to the wrong question. They have accused him of speaking wrongly of God, of doing wrongly by Him. They have said that surely Job has done *something* wrong, or, worse, that perhaps his family did something wrong — and remember, Job is noteworthy for praying and committing sacrifices on behalf of his children to ensure that his family stays right in the eyes of God — and for that they deserved to die.

I have heard much of this sort,
 wretched consolers are you all.
 Is there any end to words of hot air,
 or what compells you to speak up?
 I, too, like you, would speak,
 were you in my place
 I would din words against you,
 and would wag my head over you.

(Job 16:1-4, Alter)

By clashing with him thus, these three friends crash up against the wrong wall of his defenses. The wall is well fortified, yes, but the gate is shut. It contains the wrong door out of

which Job cries. “I was tranquil—[*ha-satan*] shook me to pieces, seized my nape and broke me apart, set me up as a target for Him,” Job cries (Job 16:12, Alter).

In this, however, Elihu is perhaps the worst, because Elihu *does* respond to Job’s request.

Let us take a case to court,
 let us know what is good between us.
 For job has said, “I’m in the right,
 and God has diverted my case.
 He lies about my case,
 I’m sore-wounded from His shaft for no crime.”

(Job 34:4-6)

And then, of course, he immediately turns on him:

Who is a man like Job,
 lapping up scorn like water?
 He consorts with wrongdoers
 and walks with wicked men.
 For he has said, “What use to a man
 to find favor with God?”

(Job 34:7-9, Alter)

He goes on to claim, as did Job’s other friends, that as God cannot possibly act in the wrong, surely it is Job who has wronged *God*, not the other way around. All of this is invective (“Would that Job might be tested forever for responding like villainous men.” (Job 34:36, Alter)) is hidden behind his own innocence and couched in apologies. “Discerning men will say to me” or “therefore, discerning men, hear me” he prefixes his insults. After all, he’s the youngster, right? The upstart?

I am young in years,

and you are aged.

Therefore I was awed and feared
to speak with you.

(Job 32:6, Alter)

This youngster, this upstart, crashes up against Job's defenses, far closer to the wall at which Job stands, and strikes at him with barbs. He enters into this discourse, clashes with Job, and then leaves. He is not introduced at the beginning, nor is he acknowledged after. He is not one of Job's friends as are Bildad, Eliphaz, and Zophar. He exists, it seems, solely to tell Job all that he has done wrong.

Up until that point, my interaction with gender had been the tentative pressing against a bruise. It hurt, yes, but one cannot help *but* press on bruises, yes? There it is, blue and purple, an angry discoloration that aches at the slightest touch, and yet you cannot stop touching it, defining the edges of that ache with an apophatic walk of the fingertips.

This exploration began to stutter as doubt began dart around and in between the wandering feet of curiosity, tripping it up and making it hold still so that it didn't fall flat on its face.

I would interact as Younes for a day or two, and then back off in a wave of self-loathing. I would log in as Makyo, that other character who remained stolidly male, and be just Matthew, that gay man who would most certainly never be anything but, right? I would log in as him and park myself in the PN where I was a gay man, where other gay men would congregate, and I would put on my brightest smile and pretend that that bruise was not there.

And then, I would hit that ache with my exploration, and I'd log back onto Tapestries to prowl around as Younes. I would find new ways to engage with his body, with the femininity inherent in his form, finding the euphoria inherent in that in turn.

Rinse.

Repeat.

Guilt and shame.

Exploration and euphoria.

Masculinity.

Tentative gestures towards femininity, towards specifically *not* my inherited masculinity.

And with each of these alternations, with each of these swings of a pendulum, came the reasoning.

As I swung closer to Younes, I began to feel those tentative wriggings toward gender as it applied to myself.

As I swung further away, I began to feel that doubt. Gender? But how could I? I was a guy, yes? I was comfortable enough in my body, yes? He/him! Bepenisised! That was fun enough, was it not? And certainly easier than the path of anything even resembling transing my gender.

And then as I swung back, there were these feelings of euphoria. Surely it couldn't be *that* hard to trans my gender. I would...what? Drop my testosterone and up my estrogen? That wasn't too difficult. I could perhaps even do that myself, if I was willing to order the medications required online. After all, JD had his own experiments with such.

And always there was the discomfort with myself. There was JD and I on that couch, the way our own intimacy began to feel strangely misshapen.

The pendulum would swing, and I would promise myself that I could simply ignore that. Bodies are bodies, and sometimes they are stupid. Perhaps I could just not engage with mine whenever I began to feel bad, and focus my energy on something else.

The friendship had crashed the ground and shattered, and then the shards began to crumble, themselves. Now, even my engagement with gender began to crumble, or at least the surface began to flake away.

“Then the unnamable answered Job from within the whirlwind” (Job 38:1-3, Mitchell).

God the unnamable, *HaShem*, whose true name, were it ever to be spoken, bears power, finally calls out to Job in turn:

Who is this who darkens counsel
in words without knowledge?
Gird your loins like a man,
that I may ask you, and you can inform Me.

(Job 38:2-3, Alter)

This is when Chesterton's quote becomes clear. God answers with a note of exclamation to Job's ceaseless questions. When taken strictly as a work of theodicy, this is perhaps ultimately unsatisfying. Job asks: why is the world cruel? Why have such terrible things been levied against me when I'm doing my best to be a good person? God answers: I made this world in all its strange and terrifying grandeur; who are you to question me when you don't know one tenth of one hundredth of the smallest iota of what I know? This is when an attempt at theodicy turns into a weak shrug and the mealy-mouthed statement of "God works in mysterious ways."

Chesterton disagrees. "God will make Job see a startling universe if He can only do it by making Job see an idiotic universe," he says. (Chesterton) "To startle man, God becomes for an instant a blasphemer; one might almost say that God becomes for an instant an atheist."

"What is all this foolish chatter about good and evil, the Voice says," as Mitchell puts it (Mitchell xxiv), *"about battles between a hero-god and some cosmic opponent? Don't you understand that there is no one else in here?"* But contrast this against the God of the legend, who Mitchell, earlier in his essay, suggests "would himself doubt the disinterestedness of his obedient human".

It's the God who responds who bears the most gravitas in this dialogue. It is the God who responds by saying "Yes, suffering exists. Yes, I know of it. And yet the world is still grand. Even you are still grand" who positions Job in the right. His apology is unspoken, sure, but it is provided in the returning of his wealth and his family (yes, a different family, but such are

fables). What comes off as capriciousness by theodicy and apologetics is intensely personal to Job.

This, then, all becomes a performance. It's a moral stage-play put on for our benefits to better understand the intersection of pain and faith.

But so, too, is interested faith a performance. "If prosperity is regarded as the reward of virtue it will be regarded as the symptom of virtue," Chesterton cautions Job's friends. "Men will leave off the heavy task of making good men successful. He will adopt the easier task of making out successful men good." (Chesterton)

Job replies simply out of awe. Fear, yes, for the sight of God is truly fearsome, but the overriding emotion to be found here is awe. It is the beauty right at the margin of the terrifying. "And we marvel at it so because it holds back in serene disdain / and does not destroy us," as Rilke has it. (Rilke 11) He says in response:

"Who is this obscuring council without knowledge"

Therefore I told but did not understand,
wonders beyond me that I did not know.

(Job 42:3, Alter)

"Therefore do I recant, and I repent in dust and ashes," he says, and we may picture Job bowing his head, his thoughts swirling violently around this knowledge that has been imparted to him. It is a glimpse of everything, the barest whiff of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That can be interpreted, after all, as a merism: by offering the opposites of good and evil, everything that lies between good and bad is implied by those two boundaries. All of the gray areas are in that knowledge, but not just gray; God, with his omniscience, is far more beholden to some Blue/Orange morality than anything else. He has "a moral framework that is so utterly alien and foreign to human experience that we can't peg them as "good" or "evil"." (TVTropes) Job, for a brief moment, smells blue, hears orange, and is able to maintain his faith in the face of it all.

The Choice of Job

There is a point of least faith. This is the minimum amount of faith required to simply get by in the world. The word ‘faith’, here, is specifically left lowercase: faith in God, perhaps, but what of faith that the world will get better? Faith that the next breath will come, that you and the world in which you exist are compossible? However terrifying this large a concept may be, as True Name would have it:

But what does it mean to believe in something like [the irreversibility of time]? Or the sanctity of life or love or art? Or God, for that matter? ‘Belief’ as a word is a stand-in for a concept so broad as to be to be intimidating or impossible. One may say as Blake did, “For everything that lives is holy”, but encompassing that within one’s mind is truly terrifying. (Scott-Clary, *Mitzvot* 122)

All of those things in which we have faith, whether it’s, as True Name says above, the sanctity of life or love or art, or perhaps God, circle around the unknown. They are perhaps too hot to touch directly, so we define them apophatically. We circle around them along with yet more simple words — life, love, art, God — and hope that we can divine their shape by the shadow of our passage. We circle and circle and circle, and our wandering steps wear down the earth beneath our feet until that which we explore is left on higher land. The elevation of unknown things is a constant and collective process. It is the point at which something which is not tangible, is not spatio-temporal, is not *real*, somehow becomes more important than the real. It’s the point at which we are overcome by the numinous and can’t help but focus on unknown things. They hover over our vision, a thin overlay, coloring everything we see.

Who knows how healthy this is.

It certainly doesn’t feel like it does much good when that unknown thing is scraping up against your identity, the worst sandpaper. It’s that psychopathological friction. It’s that slow silence that builds between you and your friend.

Of all of the book of Job, it is this fable which seems to cause the most controversy. Even the Apocryphals podcast, whose tagline is “Where two non-believers read the bible and try not to be jerks about it”, drops the ‘and try not to be jerks about it’ for this episode, host Chris Sims explaining, “Unfortunately, this week we are reading the book of Job.” (Cereno and Sims)

Sims’s argument boils down to the fact that this framing device leads to Job being a narrative, moral, and commercial failure: a narrative failure for not resolving any of its plot points, a moral failure because it fails to explain why bad things happen to good people, and a commercial failure because “it is the most cogent argument against religion that I have ever heard.”

It’s a compelling argument, too. He goes on to explain that it is almost the inverse of Pascal’s wager, in that it “presents a world where it is impossible to distinguish between God’s wrath and God’s indifference.” Whereas Pascal would have it that there is no downside to believing in God as there is the possibility of infinite salvation if you do and you’re right and infinite damnation if you don’t and you’re wrong. Here, we are presented with the fact that, whether or not you believe in God, you’re equally liable to suffer.

This, it should be noted, is an argument presented from a contemporary Christian perspective. Sims mentions earlier in the episode that reading the Book of Job is one of the reasons he is no longer a Christian, but he still speaks from the perspective of an ex-Christian.

Indeed, the hosts of the podcast The Bible for Normal People (tagline: The Only God-Ordained Podcast on the Internet — what is it with podcasts and their taglines?), list the difficulty and, yes, perhaps moral failure of the Book of Job as leading to a sizeable portion of the genre of apologetics within contemporary biblically literalist Christian traditions, saying, “[...] that’s why you need a really hefty apologetics industry to keep [biblical literalism] intact”. (Enns and Byas)

The interpretations of the same text a hundred years ago, a thousand years ago, twenty-four hundred years ago were all different. For instance, Cereno explains that the

historical context of the book, written between the sixth and fourth century BCE, does not include the same concept of the afterlife. The pre-biblical Jewish audience of Job when it was first penned would have had the concept of *Sheol* — that place of stillness and darkness where both the righteous and unrighteous wind up — rather than the contemporary understanding of an afterlife. This was written before the concept of the messiah, before heaven and hell and life after death.

It was that period of exploration that was at once my point of least faith and one of my elevations of the unknown things in life. I settled myself into Younes, into this view of myself that moved beyond the stolid masculinity that had to date defined who I was, and for that, I was torn down.

Had it simply been simply for the satisfaction of baser needs, as I put it before, would it have affected me so deeply? Had I simply been fetishizing an experience that I did not have, as Jill put it before, would it have kicked me down into this dark night of the identity? Had I just been in it to get laid — online, to be sure, and yet still — what would have happened in that point?

Guilt, perhaps. Guilt and shame.

Guilt for having done what I did, shame because that would be confirmation that I was a terrible person.

But that's not what happened. What happened is that I was torn down to the point where I had to make the choice of Job: do I move forward with greater knowledge, with a sense of self made perhaps just that much more calloused by the bittersweet, with that much more protection against the wiles of life? Or do I take a step back, settle into who I was, remain in fear and let resentment be my barrier against the unknown things?

After all of the poetry of the preceding chapters, we once more settle back into the world of the legend.

And here, it is tempting to dismiss the rest. Job continues on, does he not? He gets new kids. He gets twice as much as he had before. His life is rebuilt, and Blake depicts his life as glowing, beyond mere pleasance.

This is only part of the image, though. He and his family play harps and lyres and winds. One of his sons sings. Even as the sun and moon shine behind them all, even as his new flocks lay in peace before them, even as they stand before the trunk of what must be one of his crops and yet may well be the world tree, or perhaps the tree of knowledge of good and evil (this is Blake we are talking about, one can never be too careful), Job and his wife live on but not unchanged. Where Job's wife reads and prays in piety in the first plate (Blake plate 1), in the last, her countenance is sad, concerned, touched by worry. Whereas Job in the first plate has a smooth face, innocence in his pores, in the last, his forehead is wrinkled, his eyes more tired, his mien more open to the worries of the world. (plate 21)

The Job of the fable appears largely unchanged, simply happy to live out the rest of his days, and it is tempting to dismiss this as just how fables work, but, as Mitchell puts it, "Blake, who with all his gnostic eccentricities is the only interpreter to understand that the theme of this book is spiritual transformation, makes a clear distinction between the worlds of the prologue and of the epilogue." (Mitchell xxix) The instruments hang, untouched, on the tree behind the family in the first plate, while they play them actively in the last. They "look up to heaven with drowsy piety" in the first, while in the last they look knowingly ahead, out into the world.

Job is, as ever, an upright and honest man. He's just also a man who has had a spiritual revelation on a scale that we — we who do not have the unnamable answering our pleas from within the whirlwind — cannot possibly know. "A man who hungers and thirsts after justice is not satisfied with a menu," writes Mitchell. (xviii) "It is not enough for him to hope or believe or know that there is absolute justice in the universe: he must taste and see it. It is not enough that

there may be justice someday in the golden haze of the future: it must be now; must *always* have been now.” Job calls for an account of what has been done to him because he *does* hunger and thirst after justice. He’s an upright and honest man who is struggling against hope to maintain this disinterested faith he desires so greatly.

Job has confronted God, has seen Him in His whirlwind, has heard Him speak, heard that note of exclamation, heard when “the deep will, contemplating the world it has created, says”Behold, it is very good.” ” (xxviii)

I’m Madison now. I’m no closer to defining what it means to be transgender. Were I pressed to describe what it feels like, I may have the words — it feels like an oscillation between dys- and euphoria as I move further away and closer to this sense of identity — but I don’t have the connection to those words that makes them feel *real*, feel *true*.

This point of least faith implies for some an *ideal* of least faith: that one should strive to live their life taking the least number of things on faith as possible, that to rely too much on faith becomes a fault. For others, it is a principle of least faith: it is an intrinsic property that we tend towards the least amount of faith required to live, as is evidenced by the ever-increasing understanding of the world around ourselves.

And, perhaps because of that principle, this point of least faith is always shifting, trending usually downwards — though some discoveries, if they are to be believed, may make that line tick upwards. Every day, we drift towards some point at which all things may be known.

Or, to speak in terms of cost and benefit, that point of least faith is the point of faith at its most disinterested. It is the point at which you may hold one singular thing on faith rather than all of those countless aspects that lie within that exchange, that power dynamic. That point where, against all the world throws at us, we are still able to hold to that which we believe to be true.

Rather than simply falling back into his old life after this, he is changed, and at this point of change, he is at last presented with his choice.

At the end of his last speech, Job has hit his point of least faith. He has long since grown exasperated with his wife. His friends have heaped dull words of remonstrance upon him and have proven themselves worthy only of being ignored. His God, worst of all, has ignored him. He has not answered Job's call to simply be addressed.

It is not until God *does* answer, though, that Job is presented with the option to elevate the unknown. "Look! See? Even I do it," God says. "It is a much stranger world than you ever thought it was, yes?"

At his point of least faith, Job is presented with a choice: he can fall into fear, that all of life might be taken from him. Perhaps he might even wind up "angry enough to die." (Jonah 4:9, NRSV) After all, Jonah asks similar questions: he fled for Tarshish, remembering the destruction wrought by Nineveh, and was commanded to go save them, that wicked city, that stupid city of "more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and many animals". Why should he warn them? Don't they, too, deserve to die?

This is the point at which he might, seeing this preferential treatment for none, fall away from faith entirely: a vanishing point of least faith. His friends have done their best to convince him that faith is interested: surely, he must have done something wrong. Seeing that he has not, he might give up on God.

Or he can take up the path of Qohelet: yes, all may be meaningless, a chasing after the wind, but is there not also beauty in life? There is folly, yes, but better, there is also wisdom. There is toil, yes, but better, there is joy and celebration. There is grief, but there is also standing beneath a tree after your spiritual transformation, instruments in hand, singing with your family in a glowing life.

None of this is written, but such is the way of a text like this: it does not do the work for us. We must do the work. We must read between the lines and between the letters, and we must pull together this meaning from fable and verse. We must elevate the unknown things. After all,

if we fail to do that work, we fall upon the simple terrors of phrases like “bad things happen to good people” or, worse, “bad things happen to sinners, and aren’t we all?”

“It is the lesson of the whole work that man is most comforted by paradoxes.”

(Chesterton) We must imagine his choice. We must imagine that Job, too, can be happy.

And that was mine. That was my point of least faith. That was the point at which I...‘doubted’ is not quite the right word. That was the point at which I shouted at nothing, the point at which I demanded an advocate from no one. That was the point that God, the universe, that very same no one answered my note of interrogation with one of exclamation. Instead of some explicable approach to the problem of identity, it insisted that it is much stranger than I had ever thought.

That was my point of least faith, and that was my own choice of Job. That was the point at which I could have looked at the mess that had become my life and taken one of two paths.

The path of Jonah lay behind me. That was the path of fear, of running away from such an overwhelming unimaginability, whether or not storm-tossed ships and all of God’s biggest fish lay before me. That’s the path of falling back into Matthew, of being so angry I could die.

The path of Qohelet lay before me. That was the path of disinterested faith, of pushing through all that shit that the world had thrown at me. That was the path of looking back to see folly and looking ahead to find that, yes, “wisdom surpasses folly as light surpasses darkness.” (Qohelet 2:13, Alter) That was accepting my birth as Madison on the grounds of that faith that I was being true to myself. Sure, I may yet hate life, might hate what choice I’d made, might hate all things under the sun because the wise, too, dies like a fool.

But I would have at least done it.

I was young, once, and dumb. I can hardly say I’m any smarter, now, but at least I’m Madison. At least I’m not that angsty, angry asshole who thought to himself he needed to come

to terms with being a terrible person.

It just took me a long, long time to figure out disinterested identity.

III — THE MARGIN OF THE TERRIFYING

How much space am I allowed to take up? This more than anything lies at the heart of so many of my anxieties.

Do I speak too loud? Do I speak too often? Do I tread too close to that invisible line of being ‘too much’?

Am I too demanding? Do I need too much minding? Is the amount of attention I seem to seek above the norm, whatever that is?

Do I park myself in the corners of others’ minds? Do I sit cross-legged on the floor, a tripping hazard? Do I follow them around their thoughts, speaking — or not speaking, yet nevertheless present?

Is asking so many questions just feeding into that anxiety?

For we, when we feel, evaporate. Oh,
 we breathe ourselves out and away. From ember to fading ember,
 we give off a fainter scent. Oh, someone may tell us: you get in my
 blood, this room, the springtime,
 is filled with you... ¹

I keep having conversations about this, about how much space I take up. Almost all of them take place over text, too, as they often come with a worry that synchronous communication might be too much of a demand. Some of them take place between me and my partners, and I speak frankly about how we interact with each other. Others take place between other versions of me, characters I role-play or those that I write, each expressing their own anxiety.

¹See Rilke 23.

And were I to get in their blood, that room, the springtime? What then? What fainter scent would I leave in the noses of others? I ask and ask and ask. —*Beholden To The Heat Of The Lamps*

Over the years, I may have fallen out of the habit of asking whether or not I am a burden, of feeling like a burden. But what I have not done is relinquish the feeling that there are bounds around me. There is a barrier that marks the end of me, a sphere of influence that has a point where it stops, my own little causal domain. I do not know if anyone else sees it. I doubt it.

I see it, though. It is always there. A little shield, a screen, a forcefield, glimmering and translucent. It is the point where the space that I take up ends.

I must tell you it gives me great pleasure to think of you reading these words in licks and whorls of flame, your eyes unable to work backwards, unable to keep the letters on a page; instead, you must absorb them, admit them into your memory.²

I wish I could see triumph in this. I wish I could see victory in the space that I take up, in the way I crouch within the minds of my friends.

I wish I could prowl through their memories, touching one after the other — oh! This one! See that time we drove together, mostly in silence, maybe a little drunker than we should have been? Ooh, or this one, when we sat together outside a Friday night movie showing and you told me how you thought at one point that you were gay, but decided no, probably not?

I live a sometimes apology, instead.

Still, I have friends. The apology is only sometimes, and I will spend hours with them simply enjoying myself before that ‘sometimes’ creeps up, a strangely-shaped piece of grit between my molars. Ah, you want to come inside after that drive? I am sorry that my place is messy. Oh, you told me you are straight and I did not hide my disappointment well enough, I liked you so much.

I wish I could bask in the sense of wonder, of marvel, of beauty — rather than terrifying — that someone would perceive me.

²See El-Mohtar and Gladstone 8.

A pleasure worth hunting for! One that would take effort to hold in the mind, in tension with that anxiety; but worth it, yes? —*And We Are The Motes In The Stage-Lights*

Who, though I screamed, would hear me among the ranks
 of the angels? And even supposing one of them took me suddenly to his
 breast, I would perish within his overpowering being. For the
 beautiful is right at the margin
 of the terrifying, which we can only just endure.³

Ah well, if wishes were fishes, I would look into their glittering scales and see some more perfect version of myself.

And so I continue to make my way through the world. I, like Rilke's elegist, choke back the lure I would give, walking softly and keeping my arms and legs inside at all times. Or most of the time, perhaps.

Sometimes my apology will fail, my graphomania will get the better of me, and I will spill my words on to pages, onto screens, into books and essays and notes.

I will litter online spaces with evidence of my presence. I will write my missives and leave them in public for my friends to find, little notes that very carefully do not contain any I-love-yous.

Will you cut off, leaving my note to spin its fractal math inside you?⁴

I write and write and write, and then I fret and fret. My adversary, my *satan*, sidles up to me, their movements a smirk, brushes my hair out of my eyes, tuts.

³See Rilke 11.

And how terrifying, yes. "Every angel is terrifying," the next line says. Every angel is terrifying; must I strive against them to endure? -*Beholden*

⁴See 14.

Sharper than the anxiety of merely taking up space is the worry that my edges may be too jagged, that I might turn within the others' minds, tearing at them and leaving scrapes colored cherry. -*Where It Watches The Slow Hours Progress*

Anything I make that is at all meaningful to me — that is, anything that I feel is worth sharing — is too much to ask others to engage with. “How dare you,” it says. “How dare you ask that others consider your work meaningful.”⁵

How dare I! How dare I take up that space! And with malice and aforethought!

I use my will to wedge myself into the world. I project an intent and make myself known. I speak up and then cringe at the sound of my voice, and even my love poems, written but unsent, cringe away from my presence.

I live my life in eternal terror
of the completeness of your own.
I take up so little space
and impinge upon it so gently,
I only hope that there is space enough
for a ‘dear’ here and a ‘lovely’ there.
If beauty is at the edge of the terrifying,
I live my life in eternal terror.⁶

But, ah! My friends, all those who promised I was not a burden back when that was a thing I would ask them about, they all clap! They clap and smile and tell me that I have done a good thing. “Look at all this space I’ve made for you,” they say — have said exactly!

Do they not know that I am working hard at defining my boundaries? Do they not know they are praising me for violating those very same boundaries? Frankly, it is quite rude. Even my love poems, written but unsent, beg them stop.

⁵See Scott-Clary, *ally from Start to Finish*.

My *satan*, yes, my *makyō*. My accuser, my adversary, my demon that distracts from the path to enlightenment and greater knowledge. That ghost-cave I inhabit. –*Slow Hours*

⁶Does this count as sending the love poem? –*Beholden*

I am sorry, R.B., a part of me hopes that you never read this. –*Slow Hours*

Cover me, crush me, compress me.
 Squeeze me down until I fit in your pocket.
 Let me jangle among your keys,
 or slip between bills in your wallet.
 Forget me, let me fray, let me fall apart.
 And, some day, pull me free,
 dust me off, flatten me out,
 and tell me that you love me.⁷

But I am working at getting better at accepting that sort of feedback. I am trying to accept that taking up space is even allowed.

And we marvel at it so because it holds back in serene disdain
 and does not destroy us.⁸

I cycle through defenses. I try silence some days. Other days, as I have spent the last however many thousands of words doing, as I am still doing, I will justify my existence through words, then justify my words by leaning on those of others. “I mean what I am saying!” I say. “And here is proof! See? There is Issa and Dwale to shore up my position! See? There is Job to support my argument! There is Rilke and El-Mohtar and Gladstone! I mean what I say, I mean what I say...”

Even now, even as I set my words in pixels on screen and ink on paper and promise myself that I will *not* do this, will only sprinkle in those too-heady words that I love so much,

⁷ Another unsent poem set before the potential gaze of a lover. -*Beholden*

I am sorry, J.C. -*Slow Hours*

⁸ See Rilke 11.

And how few have! Jill, perhaps? Unition, who bade me leave my husband and move to Canada to live with him because we danced together at a rave? And precious few others, though perhaps exceptions bear too much weight.
 -*Hold My Name Beneath Your Tongue And Know*

promise myself that I am not going to justify my place in the world by shoring it up with others' writing, I do anyway. I use those quotes for color, I tell myself, then anxiously cite them in the footnotes.

PS. I hesitate to write this, but—I've noticed my letters run long. If you'd rather I grow more concise, I can. I don't want to presume.⁹

And perhaps it is too much. Perhaps I really *am* too much.

Why, then, do I feel like ever more? Why do I feel like more than myself? How did I get to a point where there is enough of me that identity began to creak and groan, to sag, to show seams where stress-fractures began?

There is a tension within me. It is not the tension of muscles — though there is often that — but the tension between contrasting ideas. I have been through my dialectical behavioral therapy. I have learned that this is a thing to be understood within one's core, to be held with care and love. I *get* that. It is a thing that I have not just intellectualized, but a thing that I have internalized. I do not struggle with the idea of dialectics, of dichotomies.

There is a tension within me, and it lies between expectations and desires. There is this expectation that I simply must take up more space than I ought, and also this desire that I deserve to take up space.

I ought to, yes? I ought to be able to be seen. I deserve to be validated. I want that recognition that I am a person and thus deserve to exist.

More, I need it on a practical level. If I am to be a writer, then surely I need that recognition in order to live. I must market myself. I must prove that what I write is worth reading.

⁹See El-Mohtar and Gladstone 65.

Who knows how much space a word takes up? And yet I cannot stop from writing. My perhaps apologies. —*Slow Hours*

I take my dreams, my idle musings, and I wrap them up in pretty cloth and set them down on the page. I dream of growing old, and of hyperfixation. I dream of an expansion of self, of what it must feel like to undergo some sort of duplication, change, following each to their logical end as they arise.

In the Post-Self books, characters can create copies of themselves with vanishing ease, and those copies are free to go on and live their own lives, facing divergence, leaning into individuation as though it were a quotidian joy. Then, if they so choose, they may merge back down with the instance from which they were spawned, and with them, all of their memories may go with.

*All artists search. I search for stories, in this post-self age. What happens when you can no longer call yourself an individual, when you have split your sense of self among several instances? How do you react? Do you withdraw into yourself, become a hermit? Do you expand until you lose all sense of identity? Do you fragment? Do you go about it deliberately, or do you let nature and chance take their course?*¹⁰

Who, then, has this merged instance become? Are they who they were? And yet, so much of identity is formed from the experiences we have, the memories that we form. Are they not also that ephemeral up-tree instance? Some mix of the two? And how much? Half and half? The down-tree instance may keep only a portion of the memories, rather than merging them all wholesale; how does that change things? There may be conflicting memories, where identity rankles; when these are reconciled, does that affect identity more or less?

¹⁰See Scott-Clary, *Qoheleth* 164.

The character speaking, Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled of the Ode clade, speaks in italics, which has been preserved here. I do not make the rules, I simply foist them upon the reader. *-Beholden*

And besides, without even knowing, I set my hopes and dreams within Dear, did I not? My dreams that I might be different from the rest of my clade. It is different from Rye, from Praiseworthy, and Warmth In Fire is different from it. *-Slow Hours*

How different my varied selves! *-Motes*

These questions attract more than a little attention from those who experience plurality, whether in the form of Dissociative Identity Disorder or some form of medianity or of any one of other countless forms or plurality.

I can see the allure, there, myself. Of course I can.

I teased myself when the first book in that series, *Qoheleth*, came out that if I had an nickel for every time I accidentally wrote something with heavy plural undertones that nonetheless made me doubt my own identity, I would have two nickels. Which is not a lot, as the quote continues, but it is weird that it happened twice. After all, had I not received all of that attention from plural folks with regards to *ally*? “I think it’s my favorite plural memoir”, Rax wrote, yes? (Rax)

And then *Toledot* came out. And, six months later, *Nevi'im*, and *Mitzvot* six months after that.

Five hundred thousand words about a people whose lives were defined by their ability to fork and individuate. Half a million words of almost-plurality heaped around me, edging me out of the corners where I had previously hid, forcing me to stand, visible, in the centers of rooms where I might be perceived.

When *ally* came out, when I got that review from Rax, I tripped over a crack in my identity and fell to my hands and knees, skinning my palms, barking my shin against this potential conceptualization of self.

Are you me?

Am I?

I don’t know. I can’t tell. I can’t tell if you’re me, if the adversary is me, if “that third-of-three parts, that part defined by negative space and shadow and blind spots” is me.

I can’t tell if hypomanic Madison is me. I can’t tell if depressed Madison is me.

Sometimes she feels separate. Depressed Madison, I mean. Sometimes she feels like another person who is doing different things, and I feel trapped up within my head, watching her act–

Or not.

–or not, and I feel like nothing I say or do can get her to change the things she does or does not do. Nothing I say or do can change the way she feels.

The way I feel?

The way she feels when she’s fronting? ¹¹

It sent me into my five thousand word tailspin where I asked dozens and dozens of questions of my ally, of myself, as I tried to nail down the panic that came with being confronted by this idea of plurality. There was this anxiety of definition – was this me? Was this who I was? – right alongside the anxiety of identification: if this is me, what does that mean for my life?

I never did figure that out in that section of *ally*. I very carefully, very *intentionally* did not. “It is all well and good that this is a question worth considering, and I am happy enough to acknowledge it here like this, in a roundabout way. I think I need to, to some extent. I need to have it in words between us. But any further investigations would, I think, do a disservice to the project at hand and the roles we play, willing or not, in the endeavor,” I wrote. “Hell, as it is, I’m torn as to whether or not I should have brought it up in the first place.”

So kind to my reader. So kind to my friends.

I do not particularly regret this decision. *ally* is a project. It is a work of art to be read. It is a constructed thing that must take into account the ways in which others will engage with it. That very nature means that there is thought put into the ways in which it will shape those who

¹¹See Scott-Clary, *ally* (web edition).

“There is confusion here,” the ally continued, and while I have picked up more knowledge, confusion remains.

–*Hold My Name*

Is even the ally another me? –*Slow Hours*

do wind up engaging with it — “oh god i changed it by observing it :P” Rax said in a message after reading my plurality tailspin — so it would make sense that I would keep my reader, my friends in mind.

What I am cognizant of is how this has become a habit. Yes, some of that is just part of human communication. Yes, some of that is simply being a kind person. Yes, so much of this anxious spiraling is just that: anxiety.

I don't know what this means. This feels like being cut off again — feels like teetering on the brink of something that will unmake me.¹²

Perhaps I am just afraid.

Afraid! If it is a part of my identity, why should I be afraid? Is that not the whole point behind Pride? Is that not part of my whole schtick as the visibly and effortlessly trans girl who prides herself on being such, who aims to be a sort of trans psychopomp?

Fig tree, how long now has it meant much to me
how you almost entirely skip the blossom
and without praise press your pure secret
into the promptly unfolding fruit.¹³

Perhaps that, too, is a trans thing, though. We come out, we transition, we live in this ridiculous world, and the whole time, our goal is to tamp down our identity. Even from within the community, even from the most proud, the goal is to tamp down this part of ourselves. Yes,

¹²See El-Mohtar and Gladstone 125.

Unmake some more singular me, some me less weird. Plurality! Medianity! Pfah, I came out as gay and came out as trans, and now I must hoard some other identity? *-Hold My Name*

¹³See Rilke 57.

So fast the fig matures, rushing into completion. Am I rushing? Sure, I have been thinking about this since *ally*, unintentionally wrote four more books about it after, but am I rushing? Perhaps that is the basis for my fear. *-Slow Hours*

praise the validity, but do so by passing ever better. Praise most of all the stealth, for they have tamped down their identity with makeup and binders. Praise most of all the successful men and women who slip effortlessly through the world around them, for they have integrated.

Surely there is something similar for plurality. I imagine, given its associations with psychology, this most often is brought up in terms of functionality. After all, if it is touched by those who touch other neurodivergencies, then surely it must be the same.

There, see? The successful trans girl with ADHD: she took her meds and did her voice training and now she does a capitalism well.

My eccentricities are tolerated: my love of cities, of poetry, my appreciation for being rootless, for being, in some ways, more Gardener than Garden, or Gardened.¹⁴

What is the analogous form of success for a plural person? I am told that for a long time, it was becoming singular. After all, even passing as singular would be better, would it not?

More recently, I have heard that it is the ability to ensure that all of the personalities within one remain in consonance, that it remains egosyntonic, in harmony with the concept of self. This, at least, I can see being analogous with my goals of being happily, visibly trans. After all, is it not my goal to live specifically as a trans woman? Not just as a woman, but specifically a trans woman. The way I bridle when I hear “I just see you as any other woman”...

Become singular, become cis. Pass as singular, pass as cis. Live in harmony, live in harmony. It is times like these when I think back to those words, “Identity is psychopathological in that you only feel it when something makes you feel bad.”

So, if I am to have this sense of pride, if I am to live in this egosyntonic harmony, then what is the fall out of that?

¹⁴See El-Mohtar and Gladstone 124.

Writing, my own eccentricity, is tolerated. Writing, furry, both are productive, both are a sharing and perhaps a source of money. Identity, though? Is that productive? Will that help me do a capitalism well? *-Hold My Name*

More strife, more strife. Expectations versus desires. Taking up space and withering at the thought. Kindness in defeat and the need to win, to live.

More strife, more strife...

Around and around thoughts flow like water downstream with eddies behind rocks building whirlpools as holes in identity. These holes are pins that prick through the selves within me to keep them in alignment and hold the totality up against the wall on display for some higher me to investigate.

Too many words, too many thoughts.

But tell me, who are these itinerants, more fleeting than even
we ourselves, since early on wrung out by an urgent (for *whose* sake,
whose?)

always unsatisfied will; which rather wrings them,
bends them, slings and swings them, throws them
and catches them back; and as from an oiled,
slipperier air, they come down
on the worn out carpet, thinner from their
incessant landing, this lost, forlorn carpet in the cosmos,
laid on there like a plaster, as if
Earth's skyward outskirts had been smarting there.¹⁵

It is hard to pull myself back upstream against the overwhelming current of so many thoughts. Already these waters have eroded the banks of the stream. Already these whorls ache

¹⁵See Rilke 47.

Rilke, I believe, is talking about the fleetingness of us, a perhaps futility, a spending of time in a "toilsome nowhere", a moving from the "merely too little" to the "empty too much". Thoughts spinning out into nowhere, crammed into a too little, emptying with a burst into some too much. -*Slow Hours*

within me. Already I feel my skin pruning, going soft, as though it may soon slough off under the onslaught of this investigation.

And even if it does not slough off, I will still be more vulnerable, will I not? I will still keep digging at these various selves and my skin, weakened by water, will break and tear, and stain these various mes pink.

It's not that I never noticed before how many red things there are in the world. It's that they were never any more relevant to me than green or white or gold. Now, it's as if the whole world sings to me in petals, feathers, pebbles, blood.¹⁶

Ah, even my words are colored rosy from all this exploration!

I cannot stop, though, can I? I dragged myself upstream and felt that singular me delaminate, and now I am...what, three? Four? That paper-thin me sheared off into impossibly thinner selves, so sheer that, holding them up to the sun, one would still be blinded, the edges disappearing into invisibility.

And still, around and around thoughts flow like water downstream with eddies behind rocks building whirlpools as holes in each.

I am bound to them.

Though I may fear that they will tear, they also feel impossibly strong. They also bind me tighter than I could imagine. Where once that skin tore, now those identities hold it fast.

And if I stop, I'll surely die.¹⁷

¹⁶See El-Mohtar and Gladstone 119.

Red, the interlocutor. -*Beholden*

¹⁷See Scott-Clary, *ally* 106.

Some day I will. "...Some terrible day — too soon whether tomorrow or the next millennium — I will not have you to share these joys with," my partner writes. I sigh, crying, but for now, these identities hold me fast. -*Slow Hours*

Around and around thoughts flow like water down stream and the edges of these identities flutter prettily. They catch the light even as, having once more been washed away in this endless cycling, I claw my way back upstream.

“Am I doing this right?” I ask those fluttering edges.

There is not a right way to do this.

“Is this a valid way to explore?”

Valid is a meaningless term.

“Is it okay? Is it alright? Will I be okay?”

You will, they say. You will and you will and you will, and I suppose perhaps even you will.

“I feel embarrassed (though not shamed) that what I had considered a settled and permanent part of my identity is maybe not either,” I said to Echo during those slow wriggings-toward of our early relationship, as the edges of my paper-thin self began to fray. “And I also feel embarrassed discussing that with you in particular. I don’t deal with impostor syndrome to quite the extent that I mentioned last night, but neither is it wholly absent.”

“You feel embarrassed discussing plurality with a plural person in particular?” ey replied.

“I think I am embarrassed because of the role our interactions have played in bringing this to the surface.”

There was a moment of silence as, I imagine, ey leaned back in eir chair, brow knit. “Goodness, what a tapestry.”

Listen to me. I am your echo. ¹⁸

And there, behind the scenes, that delamination prickled further through my paper-thin self.

¹⁸See El-Mohtar and Gladstone 149.

How I would then like to hide from the longing [...] ¹⁹

Even as we worked for weeks and months together after that, even as we pried carefully at those fluttering edges, ran that fraying me beneath the rushing waters, I worried still that I took up too much space. We inch by inch slid me apart into two, into three and four, and my worries increased twice, three times and four, that I was taking up multiples of me worth of space in eir life.

I slid from myself into Slow Hours and Beholden — the feeler and the mover. And then before long, Hold My Name — the self-actualizer — sheered away, and after her came Motes — the small.

And even so, even as I strove towards what felt like a more fulfilling future, a more complete identity, my worries at times were founded. After all, the worries that others had for me, their connections, were impacted by this, were they not? Dave worried that I was disappearing into the work, disappearing into some other dynamic inaccessible to him. Robin worried that I was too anxious — and what a lovely route to expand anxiety! — about the effects of expanded identities on my relationships with others.

But “[w]hat gives life its”living” and its “psychic” aspect is the “vibrations” that permeate and surround each living thing and account for the “chemistry” between people,” Will Crichton writes of the Duino Elegies. (Rilke 103) “In other words, life, or the non-mechanistic side of life, is in the same general category as light and radio waves and the subtle forces that these generate.”

“God is in the dynamics,” I have said. “God is a verb,” say others. “See that of God in everyone,” say yet more.

I live a sometimes panentheism.

Animistic, I see in these dynamics the divine in these relations between me and mine. Between Dave and me, Robin and me. Between Echo and this me and this me and this me and

¹⁹See Rilke 59.

this me.

Angel, oh take it, pluck it, that tiny-flowered healing herb.

Protect it! Find a vase for it! Place it among those joys

not yet open to us, in an appealing urn.²⁰

And now, I must— what? Must dwell in that space I take up in the world and claim that I, too, bear God in the dynamics? Act out God? Allow that of God to be seen in me? I must see that dynamic between myself and myself and myself and myself?

So around and around thoughts flow like the divine downstream with eddies behind rocks of yet more divinity building whirlpools as holes in identity.

And what of it? What of all of this? Waving my hand at the previous however many hundreds of words, I might ask, “Why the fuck does it matter?”

There are many things that I might ask. There are many things that I *have* asked, even in these last however many thousands of words. Questions and questions...

So, do you want to know the answer?

I don’t know.

It is strange that you sound unsure.

Why?

There are twenty-two questions on the previous page. Twenty-five if you count mine — and I suppose that whether or not we are to include those is the crux of the issue. If that is not bemoaning the lack of

²⁰See 51.

Urn! What a choice of word, rather than a mere vase. –Motes

*answers, I do not know what is. It is strange that you would be unsure
whether or not you want to know the answer.* ²¹

But there is that one that sticks in the craw: ‘why?’ Why do I worry so much, and what, pray, might I do about it?

Clearly, one answer — one I decided to explore a late March night in 2012 — was simply to escape. Just leave it all behind. Take the easy way out. Choose the escape hatch.

One way, perhaps, to stop worrying about how much space one takes up is to stop worrying at all.

Your dream, is it not this, some time to be invisible? ²²

But what does this mean for the foundation of those worries? I would still take up space, yes? Arguably, I would take up more! *Much* more, yes? I would take up an inordinate amount of space in the hearts and minds of my loved ones. They would be left not only with their knowledge of me, but also of their lack of knowledge.

They would not know why I chose to quit this life, not wholly.

They would not know who I was in those last days-hours-minutes, not wholly.

They would not know what I was feeling, not wholly, and they would not be able to ask.

Which of them would mourn me most? Which would breathe some hidden sigh of relief at my passing? Which of my beloved would tell the bees of my demise, and would they tell them why?

Now I have told the bees about your death
and wept upon the stoop of their fine house.

²¹See Scott-Clary, ally (web edition).

“Are you me?” I asked in 22 ways. The ally’s only response: “Am I?” –*Slow Hours*

²²See Rilke 87.

Death, then, the ultimate invisibility. –*Beholden*

Suicide, then, the ultimate dream. –*Slow Hours*

I've watered grass with wand'ring stories
 of your joys and miseries.
 They spilled from home; they stood me right
 and made me eat your name,
 then bade me lift my eyes to stars of you.²³

I would take up an inordinate amount of space in their hearts and their minds, occupying the whole of them as they grieved, pushing out any ability to do much else. That is what happened to me, after all. Falcon died and I was useless for days, for months. What was I to do with this sudden, overwhelming trauma? Simply...let it go? Hah!

Falcon died, she slumped against me and left me with her still warm but unalive body, and no amount of weeping, no amount of JD crying, "Come back to me, come back" could change that.

And being dead is full of the labor of catching up,
 as one gradually acquires a sense of eternity.—
 But the living always make the mistake of too sharp a distinction.²⁴

I hold in tension within myself the idea that the only way out is through — through to the void, through that narrow gate, through to darkness — and just how unfair it would be of me to choose that.

²³See Dwale, *A Drop in the Motion* 63.

But then, the Madison that kept bees may yet be alive. Some day, perhaps. One of a thousand 'some day's. -*Hold My Name*

²⁴See Rilke 17.

"Remembering is the opposite of dismembering," I was told, and then I was off to the races. "The danger in ceaseless memorialization is just how close it lies to idolatry. To elevate the dead to such a status as false god (for what being that is limited to the perfection of memory is not false?) is to ceaselessly perfect the imperfectable," I wrote in *Mitzvot* (Scott-Clary, *Mitzvot* 71) -*Slow Hours*

But– No. It is not the way through, is it? Not the *right one*, at least. That way through is the way through to nothingness. It is the way through to nullity. There will be time for that.

So instead I must choose these countless deaths other than my own. I must choose to live through Falcon’s death, through Turtle’s and Zephyr’s. I must choose to live on after Dwale and Cullen, after Morgan and Tirix and Brone and Margaras.

So instead I must choose these countless self-deaths. I must choose to be Madison, I must choose that egocide for Matthew.

I must, it seems, choose the death of a singular identity, the death of a Madison who continues to ignore plurality, if I am to acknowledge completion.

That once, having passed through the merciless insight,
I may sing to approving angles in praise and rejoicing!²⁵

Perhaps the most terrifying bit of this decision is how little change I feel. It does not feel like a new thing. It does not feel like I have become someone else. I do not feel like the various mes that I am now are somehow any different from the singular me that I used to be.

I felt better, yes! I felt a sense of relief, but it was the relief of acknowledgment rather than the relief of being somehow fixed, being somehow mended. There was not dysphoria, but there is euphoria. It was the relief of recognition of already being whole.

How strange! Every time I came out before, it involved some change in living. I came out as gay and had to reckon with the homophobia that I knew would come. I came out as trans and had to reckon with transition.

Now, I come to terms — ‘coming out’ fits poorly, here — with plurality, with medianity, and...and what? I keep living as I do, for the most part. I live as I had been living, only more earnest: “Rilke is not at all sympathetic with an other-worldly attitude. His concern is with the enrichment of this present life and its dependence on solid material things,” Crichton writes of

²⁵See Rilke 89.

the *Elegies*.²⁶ Yes, yes, this identity business veers rather close to the other-worldly, but it is not; it is a living in the moment with less of that other-worldly fretting in the way.

It is such a luxury to dwell in these details — to share them with you.²⁷

There are, to be sure, issues. There are those in my life with whom I will not share these words, these ideas. There are still pangs for the loss of unity — even if, as I say, this is simply an acknowledgment of the truth, ah, life would be easier if I did *not* acknowledge this, yes? And there are still difficulties.

As I explored these new versions of me, I ran into new deaths, too, new risks of death. I found the boundaries of these selves entangled in different ways with other people. Is my partner as one me still my partner as another? Yes. Mostly. Ish. And what of my plural partner? What of the ways in which we fell in love, that slow entangling of one of me and one of em, and that first day another instance of mine peeked out and...and I was not theirs, was I? Or perhaps I was. Mostly? Ish.

And what of the amount of time spent living into those personalities? When I stopped living into one for a few days, then nearly two weeks, I found myself crying, found myself clutching at my bed for any sense of grounding against this half-sensed death — or potential for death, perhaps — of one part of me. What would happen if she died? What would happen if I no longer found connection there? Would I lose that forever? Would I lose the relationships that she had formed? And, supposing even that those relationships spanned partials, her particular peculiarities would fade, yes? Maybe. Ish?

You, who descend with the thud
only fruits know, falling, unripe,
daily a hundred times from the tree

²⁶See 106

²⁷See El-Mohtar and Gladstone 89.

A privilege, even. Perhaps were I busier, had I still a job, I would not have the luxury to dwell in such details. —*Motes*

of jointly built up motion (which, quicker than water,
has spring, summer, and autumn in just a few
minutes) — fall off and bump on the grave;²⁸

She did not. I am still her, and gladly. But had she died, what then? I would be unwhole. I
would have a rotting edge. I would have to tape myself together around this missing self.

What will I do, sky? Lake, what? Bluebird, iris, ultramarine, how can there
be more when this is done?²⁹

But, yes. She did not. We found a way to make it work. We found a word to kick that
partial Madison into place, to smooth out coarse seams. We found a secret name. We made
promises to make time for each other, for these us-es. I am still her, she is still eirs, and gladly.

But it will never end — that's the answer. There is always us.³⁰

²⁸See Rilke 51.

Oh, but I looked down from those heights. *That* me did. *That* me clutched and grabbed at the branch, strove to stay
in existence, afraid of that bump against the grave, but killing an entire self is not easy. Forgetting an entire self is not
possible. I remember Ranna, yes? I remember Makyo. I remember Maddy. I am very few of those anymore. I am Slow
Hours and Beholden and Motes and Hold My Name, hints at names cribbed from my own work, selves with names
stolen from lines of a poem, characters with an allergy to contractions and a complex relationship with language.
I, the me who is Slow Hours, would not simply fall away and rot on the grave, even if I were to darken a while on
the branch to remain just a part of the pantomime against the sky, I would still be there with Ranna and Makyo and
Maddy. -*Slow Hours*

²⁹See El-Mohtar and Gladstone 165.

How could there be more after she died, had she? I, as Beholden, am not her. Motes most certainly not. Hold My
Name perhaps could hold some of what she was, but she is not her. Slow Hours is she who revels in the bittersweet.
Beholden is she who revels in creation. Motes is she who plays in joy. Hold My Name is visibly hungry for earnest
expression. How could I revel in the bittersweet without her? -*Beholden*

³⁰See 165.

There is always us. There is always me and me and me and me, yes, but there is always me and all of my beloved.
-*Slow Hours, Beholden, Motes, and Hold My Name*

That is the thing about hate, about loathing, even of oneself. There is a certain amount of love that has to go into that struggle. There is a certain amount of need and desire, because if there is no one there to vanquish, then what are we-who-strive even to do?

I wish I could see your triumph.³¹

You! This other version of me, this one who takes her space gladly, proudly. I wish I could see you triumph. I wish I could look up at you, broken and shattered, bleeding in the dust of some ultimately unimportant ground, and know — truly, utterly know — that I have been defeated, that I have been crushed and destroyed.

I wish I could see your triumph. Is that self-sacrificing of me? Of that part that loathes, that fears she is taking up too much space? I really do not know. It is not my place to know these things.

I wish I could see your triumph. Maybe it is my goal to succeed, to prevail, to make it through, to win, to come out the other side and into that high-functioning, compact life. It is my goal to come away with my own triumph, but always, always there is that niggling little doubt, that secret desire to lose, to be beaten in a fair fight and have it proven to my face that at least someone could bring me low and say, “Hey, at least she tried, right?”

I wish I could see your triumph. I wish I could see elation in your eyes. I wish I could see you laugh. I wish I could see just how it looks for you to set aside that way you devote every erg of energy to struggle and give me one of those full on, deep-throated laughs from your core that I know we all hide somewhere in our bodies.

I wish I could see your triumph, and I wish that, should you see mine, you understand just how much love goes into our struggle, just how much need and desire I hold for you.

³¹See 128.

Perhaps better worded “I hope that I see your triumph,” for I may yet. —*Motes*

Do you laugh, sea foam? Do you smile, ice, and observe your triumph with
an angel's remove? ³²

As always, Rilke dogs me, a lingering taste hidden around some corner of my mouth. Every now and then, I think, *every angel is terrifying*, and then I will go about my day, repeating that like a mantra: *every angel is terrifying every angel is terrifying every angel is terrifying every angel...*

He saw someone do that, I think I remember the story went. He was walking, perhaps out in a sulk, and saw someone face the sea, throw their arms wide, cry out to sea foam or ice or some unseen rank of angels, and...well, I do not remember if *he* heard them, necessarily, but that is how it went, right? (Freedman 323) Who, though I cry, would hear me among the ranks of angels, and then hundreds of lines later, ten elegies.

So whenever I get that awkward-shaped piece of grit between my mouth — *every angel is terrifying every angel is*.

I think of that scene. I think of the way we elevate the unknown to some higher place than ourselves. I think of the patterns we hunt for in the sea foam, in the waves that can take us under or bash us senseless against some barnacled rock. I think about the crush of worlds implied in the calving of an iceberg and how easily that could destroy. I think about that rank of angels who, holding me to their breast, could so easily annihilate.

Do they laugh, the sea foam, the ice, the angels?

I write in fire across the sky, a plummet to match your rise. ³³

³²See 128.

I am sure she does, this more earnest me. I hope that I see even but one second of that victorious smile, hear but a moment of that triumphant laugh before she is all that is left. —*Hold My Name*

³³See 129.

Perhaps writing this is a part of that plummet; a crashing through the atmosphere, a shrill scream of air passing over ragged edges. Perhaps I *am* seeing your triumph. —*Hold My Name*

So then, my angel, she who would live, she who gladly accepts her multiple selves, who would do that all without worrying about the space she takes up, I wish I could see your triumph.

I dream of it, that moment. I dream of falling to my knees, or being so badly broken that all I can do is lay there, unmoored, and look up to the way you rise above me.

I strive against angels as I strove against men, against the world, against the cruel vagaries of my former self and all his countless failings. Some have left me reeling, some have left me on my knees, head bowed until it almost — almost! — touches the ground, and I have had to spend a day, a week, a year catching my breath.

But never have I striven against angels. Never have I not striven against you, and there is sweetness in defeat. Defeat of the me who is afraid to accept an identity. Defeat of the me who is afraid to take up space. Defeat of that me who still craves the path of Jonah.

There is sweetness in defeat.

I wish I could see your triumph.

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⁴Denoted *Mitchell* when verses are quoted

⁵I mentioned in a previous footnote the difficulty in citing works within the realm of chosen names and modern technology; I wrote a small art-song using the opening lines of Rilke’s first elegy, but were I to quote *that* instead, how would I do so? As Matthew? He is dead, his name should be fair game. And yet that was me, was it not? As Madison?

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⁶I thought long and hard about whether or not I would cite my own works. I talked about it with my mentor, even. We came to the conclusion that part of the point of these essays is that I am taking a step back and observing myself, thinking about what I am feeling, and putting that in context of Madison Scott-Clary writ large. These are *her* works; all I am doing is reading them.

⁷There is perhaps something to be said about the inflexibility of things such as citation styles when it comes to the combination of modern technology and chosen names. I don't know these users' real names. I don't need to know them. I don't *want* to know them, unless they want to share. What was it Dear said? "Names bear power." (Scott-Clary 2020d, p. 74)

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