

Florilegium

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I Seasons

Content note: this document contains frank discussions of death and grief, including descriptions of the euthanasia of a pet (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 and 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

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 2019, p. 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 n.d.), 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 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 such a context.

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 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 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. There is perhaps something to be said about the inevitability of a spiral.

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.

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. 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:

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

(Dwale 2018b)

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.

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 2021), which provides some insight into this.

⁵A month before it died, no less.

(Stevens 1917)

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. There is a movement thawed, here.

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 going to come soon, whether we like it or not (the topic of unwanted growth is a topic for later in the year⁶)

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

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 (Scott-Clary et al. 2021). While I lack the feel, 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 —
For we exhaled when you breathed in that breeze

His daughter nudges him, to no effect.
She walks away rememb'ring days they stalked the plains,
Within her womb there grows a golden bloom.⁸

(Dwale 2019, p. 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 his memory.

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,

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 2022b, p. 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 in a collection also named “Seasons”. 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.

*Mi no ue no
tsuyu to mo shirade
hodashikeri*

Heedless that the dews
mark the passing of our day —
we bind ourselves to others

(Issa and Mackenzie 1957, p. 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

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.

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,

*Ukigusa ya
ukiyo no kaze no
iu mama ni*

Floating weeds, as blow
the winds of the floating world —
drifting and drifting

(ibid., p. 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

¹⁰Or, to continue to use Dandelions as an example, 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.

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 1890, p. 33) We have in Dwale’s work a glimpse of 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 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

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’?

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.

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.

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 2019, p. 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 point of view from Winter to Spring, here, we switch away from from the concrete world and into something more abstract. Where

¹⁵It's 2022 as I write this, which means that, come September, it will have been 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.

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,

*Natsuyama ya
Hitori kigen no
Ominaeshi*

On the hill of summer
Stands the slender maiden flower
In a solitary humor

(Issa and Mackenzie 1957, p. 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.

Issa says,

*Mi no ue no
kane tomo shirade
yusuzumi*

Heedless that the tolling bell
Marks our own closing day —
We take this evening's cool

(ibid., p. 39)

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. Ask a botanist.

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 1917)

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 Sum-

¹⁹Viz. me meeting Dwale in the writers' guild 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. 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:

mer, 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 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:

"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 2022b, p. 161)

They are death in Summer, I've always felt. I was always supposed to kill them, and they were always 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.

²²Or perhaps a fear. Halloween lies there, doesn't it? There is a terror to your work, something existential, but you were also a fan of horror. 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 (Scott-Clary 2021). "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.

Seasons

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,
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 1820, p. 249)

While Stevens is much more austere about the whole season:

III

The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
It was a small part of the pantomime.

(Stevens 1917)

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 Dwale with its 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 Dwale's passing as well. Did it, too, cry? Did it, too, try to hide? When it breathed its last, did it slump over to the side and stay warm far longer than one might expect? There was no one there to chide us and send us home that I can blame; there's no cancer, if that ephemeral mention is to be believed, that lurked beneath the surface. It was and then it wasn't, and the only referent I have is a dog who died too young. I'm ashamed that I can't help but make the comparison.

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.²⁷

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.

I think of you.²⁸ I don't smile when I do.²⁹

A moment more and then the day is gone,
In evening grey, we mourn the vanished dawn,

²⁷This, after all, is what I'm trying to do, I think. I can't ask it where Autumn lies. I can't ask it if it feels the same way about the onrushing cold that I do, about saying farewell to the heat of Summer. I can't ask it if its 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 it many things. I can't ask it anything.

²⁸By its absence, I feel its presence, and yet I continue to try and gaslight myself into believing that it never existed. Is it gone? It must be. Was it ever there, though? Was it a real person? Was it someone so grounding that I felt childish before it? Was it someone I had the chance to meet back in 2015, where I stared longingly at its 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.

²⁹Maybe I will, some day. I'd sure like to think so.

And so on, maybe waiting for someone
To come drag us back to where we belong.³⁰
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 2019, p. 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. 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.³¹ 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.³² This idea that we, too,

³⁰After all, "Would God that I had died for thee" (2 Samuel 18:33, KJV) is a sentiment at least 2,400 years old.

³¹Even if that something is time.

³²Were you buried, Dwale? I realize that I don't actually know. When Idun passed on news of your passing, 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?³³ 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.

³³Every time I take the long way home from the store because traffic sucks or highway 2 is too much, I think about stopping by the mosque that I pass and asking about this. It's always also couched in that selfish desire to also ask after a framework for dealing with grief.

When I was talking about 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." (@pookleblinky 2022) 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." (@Karnythia 2022).

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 actu-

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 world at large, and it isn’t for poets. Even Dwale tackles this in the poem that will be used for Winter.³⁴

And yet there is another layer of lacking 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 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 1947, p. 23) “Spare him a little longer, Crone / For his clean hands and love-submissive heart.”³⁵

Issa says,

Akatombo
kare mo yubo ga
suki ja yara

Red dragon-fly —
He’s the one that likes the
evening,
Or so it seems.

(Issa and Mackenzie 1957, p. 65)

ally 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,
And an amen to end the sorrow.

(Scott-Clary 2017)

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.

³⁴The 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.

³⁵Who 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 unsure³⁶ 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,

*Akikaze yo
hotoke ni chikaki
toshi no hodo*

O winds of autumn!
Nearer we draw to the Buddha
As the years advance

(Issa and Mackenzie 1957, p. 11)

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

Winter

"Now Winter comes slowly, Pale, Meager, and Old,"³⁸ Winter sings in *The Fairy Queen* (Purcell 1692).

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

³⁶After 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. 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 now dialectic between you being alive, of course, but there is this dialectic within me being unsure of whether or not I've processed your death.³⁷ Sometimes I have, and sometimes I have to stop writing this essay for five days because looking at it makes me cry.

³⁷△ 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...

³⁸I wish you had died in Winter, Dwale. I wish you'd lived to comfort me through Falcon's death. 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.

sun, shine warm a little longer!” (Graves 1965, p. 206) we may beg,³⁹ but all it wants to do is lie down and blanket the land.

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,

*Arigata ya
fusama no yuki mo
Jodo yori*

A blessing indeed —
This snow on the bed-quilt,
This, too, is from the pure land

(Issa and Mackenzie 1957, p. 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

³⁹And 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,⁴⁰ 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, you was a month before you died, June 5th. You pinged me in the Guild chat asking me to DM 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. 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.

⁴⁰△ 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 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. “I do not know which to prefer,” Stevens writes (Stevens 1917). “The beauty of inflections / or the beauty of innuendoes, / the blackbird whistling / or just after.”

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 terms of the contrasts to how cold such a blanket must be.

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 1871). “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.⁴¹ It’s destined for sleep because what else would a blanket do?

I.
The snow is falling,
sleeping,
whispering,

⁴¹I 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 2020c)

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.

(Scott-Clary 2019)

And I’m sure it has much to do with the way in which one dies. Perhaps there is terror. Perhaps there is relief.⁴²

⁴²△ 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, people she didn’t know. She was in a cage until we got back.

I have no idea what you must have felt.

dreaming of water.

[...]

III.

A single snowflake awakens,
shimmers,
glows,
watches the world with weary eyes,
darkens,
settles,
and disappears.

(Esch n.d.)

Wallace ties in this sleepiness⁴³ with contrast⁴⁴ — 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

⁴³And, in sleep, there is that not-knowing, not-caring. There is something of death in sleep, and for one who years 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 2020c)

But I shouldn't be talking this way.

⁴⁴Contrast, 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.

Was the eye of the blackbird.

(Stevens 1917)

Similarly, Graves has,

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 1965, p. 143)

"As Earth stirs in her winter sleep," he writes elsewhere (*ibid.*, p. 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.⁴⁵ It is so quiet!⁴⁶ 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 1917)

⁴⁵Wishful thinking.

⁴⁶Yet 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.⁴⁷

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 1957, p. 37)

The discursive nature of this section might itself be related to the blunted vision of the world after snow.⁴⁹ 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 the edges. 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 better look at the numbers tacked to the side of the house. There are so many perhapses and maybes⁵⁰ to be had.

VI

⁴⁷Guidelines 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 2013)

And, as the guidelines say, that has stuck with me. I think about it every time it gets cold.⁴⁸ 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.

⁴⁸Which, 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.

⁴⁹Or 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?

⁵⁰Better, I think, than if-lys 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.

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 1917)

‘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,
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 2019, p. 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/)⁵¹, but beyond that, we get only hints of assonance: ‘hands’/‘land’.⁵⁵

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

⁵¹My accent⁵²has roof as /u/ vs reproof as /u/.

⁵²I 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 can only be stopped by 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.

(Dwale 2018a)

That was back in 2015, though, 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.⁵³

⁵³Or, 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.

Only, sometimes it feels it must traipse across my lap as cats⁵⁴ 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.”

⁵⁴Death, 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 is dying. Someone other than me must know.

⁵⁵My accent has hands as closer to /ɛ/ vs land as /æ/.

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?”⁵⁶

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.⁵⁷

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

⁵⁶Time 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 1977), 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, and now I’m losing Turtle.

“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.

⁵⁷A small obsession:

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

(Scott-Clary 2016)

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.”

(Scott-Clary 2022b, p. 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’.

of hedging (perhaps literally) oneself in “with no need for reproof”. Is the

"I'm up in Sultan. It'll be a good half hour before I make it down," I said.

I took her outside and she awkwardly peed at the plum tree, so I waited while Zephyr and JD watched from the back door, and then, suspecting that she was maybe in too much pain to jump into the back of the car, I got a towel around her midsection and helped to lift her into it, but I don't think I did a very good job. She didn't yelp out in pain or anything, but she looked so stunned once she'd made it into the back seat. She stared up at me with eyes that showed fear, showed pain, showed some existential terror that I didn't know yet, because I think she knew. Something about the shock that she was in left enough knowledge in her, that I think she knew she was gone.

I sat with her in the back seat of the car, on hold with the emergency vet, while she rested
her head on my lap. I was so cramped back there, I'm so tall, and my knees were mashed
against the back of the driver's seat. She rested her head on the seat, nose hanging down
into the messy footwell, and I pet her for nearly an hour as the hold music continued to play,
interrupted by announcements to bring your pet in for vaccinations, please do not hassle
the staff, we offer natural treatments for horses. I listened to the "You are caller number
 n " messages, I waited while n ticked down 7 6 5 4 3 3 3 3 2 2 1 1 and then I got to speak
to the operator, letting them know that I was in the lot, and they said that I should've just
pulled into one of the appointment spaces and brought her inside stupid stupid stupid and
they wheeled a gurney out to meet me because they weren't sure if she could walk but she
could so they put a leash on her and brought her inside and I had to wait in the car, watching
as she made it in the lobby and got so scared that she urinated on the floor and lay down
because she didn't want to be taken back to the X-ray machine without me and I think that's
because she knew. She knew! She *knew*. She was dying and she knew. She knew she knew
she knew she knew she knew she knew she knew he knew she knew she knew she knew
he knew s e kn w sh knew sh knew s kne she knew she knew sh knew
e knew she new sh knew she new sh ew e knew s knew she e she e
she k e he kn she kne h ne ek 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 se n
he e k s e kn h k sh e ek h n w k wse 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 n n

⁵⁹ And now, with Turtle, we finally have a chance for something else. We have weeks, maybe months with her. We don'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.

26

has 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 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 Summer⁶² 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

weeks or months great for her. We can 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.

We know, so we can get her wet food to eat as well as dry.

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

We know, and it's so, so much easier that way.⁶⁰

We know.

⁶⁰ △ Had we known⁶¹ 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; 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?

⁶¹ And what about with you, Dwale?

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 recent 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.

⁶² Perhaps even a dandelion.

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 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 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?”⁶³

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 translations 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 2016, p. 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

⁶³Our 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.

re-translate otherwise static text, even from minute to minute, and build up a library of meaning from a 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 on 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 use 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.⁶⁴

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 days⁶⁵ 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,⁶⁶
So now what sure course would you recommend?
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 2019, p. 14)

⁶⁴And that's not so bad, is it?

⁶⁵The 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.

⁶⁶A counterpoint to Spring, perhaps; thresh in Autumn, harrow in Spring.

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.⁶⁷ 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 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, 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,⁶⁸ but our meager attempt to

⁶⁷ Again, accents may complicate this, as ‘hours’ may be one or two syllables.

⁶⁸ Platitudes 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 2022a)

But grief, true bereavement, is almost reflexive. It is *performative* in that way. By grieving,

put into words what we are feeling when what we are feeling is still too hot.

Despite mentions of Hell,⁶⁹ it is comforting to see here that grief has transmuted into sadness. We have climbed that year-long spiral eleven times,⁷⁰ we have had our period of lamentation, the soul has been purified, and we can see what it is to live life without them.⁷¹ 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. We know it well, our sadness, and each time we take our trip⁷² 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 grieves”,⁷³ but perhaps “I, who has 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 grieve. 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.

⁶⁹And I sure hope that the torment of plagues and politics doesn’t last eleven more years, much less for perpetuity.

⁷⁰And 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.

⁷¹And it 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.

⁷²This 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.

⁷³Or perhaps “I, who writes paeans to grief in the footnotes of an essay and worries that this is not doing the actual Work”. Just me? No? Maybe just me.

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 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 1957, p. 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.

2 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 1929)

All stories are perforce interpolations within real events, or at least the initial imaginings of fictional events. The story is not written as the events happen. All stories, all conversations. They all occur at least at one layer of remove and at least a fraction of a second too late.

Stories are as bound to time as we are, and all we can do is steal back a little bit of memory through however many words. All we can do with these memories pinned in place is regard them from a second level of distance and make guesses. Guesses as to meaning, guesses as to content, guesses as to the context in which those memories might have led to their origin.

At a guess, there is no book in the Bible buried deeper under layers of guesses than Job.¹

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.”²

¹Revelation might take the cake within Christianity, but is unimportant to this discussion. There is much that falls out of its existence that I care very much about, of course. I care about the way it is used, and while I will be discussing the way that Job is used, I also care about the text, which is not something I can say about Revelation.

²A simplification, of course, but perhaps a good starting point.

Or perhaps it is the way in which they view death. While Job looks on death almost fondly,³ Revelation reiterates the Christian sentiment that death has been defeated in the context of apocalypse.⁴ 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.

Additionally, while Jews doubtless have a dim opinion of Revelation, given its relative irrelevance in their lives, Job has been the subject of both rabbinical teaching and Christian exegesis for centuries now. This may be where it outstrips Revelation in its importa and interest.

And what interest! As Alter says, “The Book of Job is in several ways the most mysterious book of the Hebrew Bible.”⁵ (Alter 2019, p. 457) He then proceeds to discuss the book for eight pages before even getting to the translation (which, while not uncommon among the books in his translation, still stands out as rather a lot of introduction). The editors of the New Oxford Annotated Bible (NOAB) agree on this, saying, “Among the books of the Bible, Job is highly unusual, and, unsurprisingly, its force has often been misunderstood or evaded.” (Coogan 2018, p. 735) This relative inaccessibility, opaqueness of prose (should one choose to ignore the poetic nature of the central work), and the mixed dates of composition have doubtless played their role in it.

Chief among those for our purpose is the mixed dates of composition. There appear to be four pieces involved in the book: the framing device, which is perhaps the oldest; the discourse between Job and his friends; the later addition of the Hymn to Wisdom, an interruption from Job in chapter 28; and the addition of the character of Elihu, written perhaps most recently.

In the Hebrew Bible, it is set in the ‘*Ketuvim*’ (writings, the ‘kh’ in *Tanakh*) between Proverbs and The Song of Songs. In the Christian bible, it is set at the beginning of the poetic books, between the prophets and Psalms.

In both cases, it is classified within the genre of wisdom literature. That is, its topic is one of scholarly, daily, or religious wisdom, something closer to education, rather than of origin stories (as is the case with many of the books of the Torah along with the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles) or prophecy (as is the case with *Nevi'im* and Revelation). This sets it among Ecclesiastes,⁶ The Song of Songs, Proverbs, and so on.

³And while I am (quite obviously) not yet fond of death, I can appreciate the fact that one has at least known it.

⁴That is, ‘a revealing, a pulling back of the curtain’.

⁵I should note that I am not a Jew. I write this from the context of a Quaker who was raised an atheist living within the Protestant/Evangelical bubble that is much of America.

⁶If Job is worth an essay, Ecclesiastes is worth a book. I do not yet have that in me.

Perhaps unique among wisdom literature, however, it seems to have one core thesis. Ecclesiastes has the core theses of a life well lived, self-created meaning, and wisdom, while Psalms, Proverbs, Wisdom, and Sirach are largely compilations of vast forms of wisdom.

The canonicity of Job is not in dispute. The character of Job is mentioned in other books of the Hebrew Bible (and thus the Septuagint, the foundation of the Christian Old Testament). Ezekiel lists him along with Noah and Daniel as one of the three exemplary, righteous men, leading to the conclusion that he must have, at the very least, existed as a folkloric figure prior to the authorship of the Book of Ezekiel.⁷ It's old. It's old and it's complex and it's storied.

And yet it remains, does it not? It remains and is its own testament to its power, as NOAB has it, its mystery, as Alter has it.

It remains.

Framing Devices

The framing device of Job 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).

⁷In fact, the Talmud suggests that "Moses wrote his own book, i.e., the Torah, and the portion of Balaam in the Torah, and the book of Job." (Bava Barta 14b, etc.) That it also suggests that Job was among those who returned from the Babylonian exile and that was not real and that it is all an allegory does little to shed light on the matter.

The Elevation of Unknown Things

God, holding court with the sons of God, greets the Adversary⁸ 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)

And here is where we first run into trouble, for now is when the Adversary, the Accuser, 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?”

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 Chaldaeans. 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.

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)

⁸This 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.”⁹ (Alter 2019, p. 466) The Jewish Publication Society concurs. (Job 1:6, JPS) It is job title more than it is identity. In fact, the transition from the Adversary to Satan himself is fraught.¹⁰ 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 2018, p. 736)

⁹Shortly 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 excellent 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*.

¹⁰I, 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 attempt to describe their inverse. Their response: “Not your enemy, but your adversary.” (Scott-Clary 2020a, p. 25)

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.

His friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar commiserate with him, sitting silent with him for seven days and nights. Even Job’s wife seems to sigh: “Do you still cling to your innocence? Curse God and die.”¹¹ (Job 2:9, Alter)

And now we skip all the way to the last chapter of the book for 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)

Of all of the book of Job, it is this framing device 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.” (Cerenó and Sims 2022)

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

¹¹There is a difference in interpretation, here. On the one hand, Alter suggests that Job’s wife is being sardonic here, saying, “Job’s wife 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 2019, p. 469). Might as well curse anyway, eh?

The editors of the NOAB take a more sympathetic view of the exchange. Job’s wife is seen as far more sympathetic: “The outcome of all Job’s piety has been to rob his wife of her ten children, her social standing, and her livelihood.” (Coogan 2018, p. 737) Curse God, then. Who else could be responsible? How can you continue to praise after our ten (admittedly unnamed) children have died?

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,¹² but he still speaks from the perspective of an ex-Christian). 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 context 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.

In this context, 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 one that divides one's life 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. And yet those are two weeks out of a finite number of years.¹³

Job having a new family (some of them even have names!) and twice the wealth before does not replace the life that he had before, does not

¹²Indeed, 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 has led 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 2022)

¹³A fantastic spot for the word 'intercalary', those days that fit between the years which do not fall within the calendar.

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.
So, why do some unsubtle sciences
forget about the in-betweens? Those pure
uncolored dreams made mere contrivances;
"between the years" now simply: "year, then year".

(Scott-Clary 2020b, p. 3)

Our lives as a whole — indeed, as a spiral — might yet have use for interstitial, intercalary days, intercalary time. An intriguing thought, is it not?

make up for lost children, but it does at least bring some joy for those next century and a half.

This centers God's response as the sticking point. He spends four chapters responding to Job the conversations that have taken place between him and his friends. While these conversations make up the majority of the book,¹⁴ 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 through the Square's planar existence. Even in so physical a form, He proves His very incomprehensibility.

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.

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,

¹⁴Which will no doubt take up the majority of this essay.

The Elevation of Unknown Things

NRSV)¹⁵

Who can blame Job? God is quite frankly terrifying. No matter how strongly I might call God to account, I strongly suspect that I, too, would fall flat on my face and do what I could to have so terrible a gaze move away from me.

But one must wonder just how much longer that desire to call God to account must have lingered in Job's heart afterwards. He lived another 140 years; did he forget his ten children? Did he forget those thousands of heads of livestock? For doubtless he had favorites! Did he still think of his great abundance of slaves? Did he think of these late at night even though he had ten new children, new favorite sheep, a new abundance of slaves? He must have. For our sakes, he must have.

And yet, that's the thing. So many of these arguments for and against the validity and importance of this book center God. It is the bible, of course, and that is often what one must do in a sacred text.

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 saying that, with near-death experiences, there are two likely

¹⁵ Alter has, "My hand I put over my mouth. Once have I spoken and I will not answer, twice, and will not go on." This captures the poetic nature¹⁶ of the rest of the book in a delightfully austere way, but the NRSV provides a simpler, if less poetic version, included for the sake of clarity on this point in particular.

¹⁶ I figured I was done with Weinberger's text when I finished the previous essay,¹⁷ and yet here I am once more, leaning on him. "In its way a spiritual exercise, translation is dependent on the dissolution of the translator's ego: an absolute humility toward the text." (Weinberger and Paz 2016, p. 20) It does rather raise the question, though, how much reading a single-translator text such as Alter's or David Bentley Hart's take on the New Testament can be an act of intent. Weinberger goes on to say, "A bad translation is the insistent voice of the translator — that is, when one sees no poet and hears only the translator speaking."

Mackenzie Morgan, however, makes the point that single-translator Bibles can offer some welcome divergence in viewpoints, as the committees that translate Bibles such as the NRSV "tend toward traditional translations; whereas a single translator can say, "Hang on, I think this actually means..." " (Morgan 2021)

We are talking about the Bible, though. We're not talking about Wang Wei. We're not talking about Dwale. As before,

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
or the beauty of innuendoes

(Stevens 1917)

¹⁷ I thought I was done talking about Dwale, too, and yet here we are.

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 become avoided.¹⁸

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.

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 2019, p. 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.¹⁹

The Book of Job asks a question. It is the question of theodicy: "why is there suffering in the world?" How could a God who is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent allow suffering to happen? If He is all-knowing and all-powerful, can he be all-good if he allows life to suffer? If he is all-knowing and all-good, can he not stop the suffering?

So far, however, we have just looked at the framing device. It raises the

¹⁸It need not be permanent, of course. When the me who I was died and I lived my intercalary life, terror filled me, yes, but not for long. Matthew died, and I was nothing but fear for years, and then Madison was born, replacing fear.

¹⁹One worries,²⁰ however, that this is not what happened. Folktales are folktales and there is only so much we can tease out of the text itself. That Job names his daughters and lives another 140 years before dying of old age provides little enough context as to his state of mind. We, of course, have other resources. The Anglicans have their three-legged stool — scripture, tradition, reason — and the Methodists their Wesleyan quadrilateral — which adds 'experience' — and so we have at our disposal tradition, reason, and experience beyond just the scripture itself.

²⁰Or, well, I worry. I do not think many apologists worry, and this is not a work of apologetics. I am not an apologist, and whether or not I even believe in God is up in the air.

question while glossing over the answer itself, waving it away in favor of allowing Job to come out all the better in the end. Happily-ever-afters are for folktales, yes, but our folktale occupies only 1/14th of the book itself. What remains is the denser part and, should we see change in Job, it is perhaps here that we will.

Interpolations

Allow a small diversion.

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 2019, p. 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 round-about 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 Qohelet²¹ has taught us anything, it

²¹That is, the teacher in Ecclesiastes.²²

²²I wrote that silly book, *Qoheleth*, with the knowledge of the misspelling right there at my fingertips and yet still managed to do so. Ah well, I was young, once, and dumb.

Which is not to say that I am not now, of course. I certainly feel it sometimes. Even the

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 Ecclesiastes, 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)

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, however. 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 Ecclesiastes. The second half of chapter 12 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" (Job 12:13-14, Alter) echoes the end of the hymn, 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 Ecclesiastes 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 Ecclesiastes, we have a teacher who is bordering on nihilism,²³ 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

young bit. Madison is, what, eight now? Not many eight 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.

²³It occurs to me that perhaps one outcome for Job is that *he* becomes Qohelet. Can one imagine going through the events of Job and not coming away with at least a little bit of nihilism? A little bit more stoic than when one went in? 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.

to account and to feel that certain sense of nihilism, would still appreciate a somewhat more positive view within its scripture.

The second of these interpolations is the Elihu's speech — and, indeed, the entire character of Elihu, who is never mentioned outside his own chapters²⁴ — 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.” (Alter 2019, p. 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 2018, p. 767)

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.

Elihu presents a departure from the rest of the book.

As the framing device draws to a close, we are introduced to three of Job's friends: Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. All three are presented as Job's contemporaries. They are wise, they are learned. They have, we can guess, known him for years now. These three friends have seen a lot with Job, rejoiced with him, wept with him, much as they do in the introduction.

Job and his friends have three rounds of arguments, which shall be

²⁴I think we all must have one, an Elihu. One of those people who enters our lives seemingly at random, sticks around for a while, speaking a little too loud and a little too long, and then leaves again, leaving nothing but a sour taste in the mouth and a sense of bafflement. I know that I have one, though they're back in my past. They slipped in sometime around 2011 or so, perhaps 2010, a friend of a friend at first, and then perhaps a friend, and then disappeared in a huff sometime early on in 2012. Said huff took the form of a few sanctimonious statements that left me so in doubt of my identity that my transition was delayed by at least a year, easy. All that came before my intercalary years, and doubtless contributed to the death of Matthew.

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.”²⁵ (Job 32:1, NRSV)

It is 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 agrees with him (“for he considered himself right” (Job 32:1, JPS)). Both 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? JPS and Alter describe Elihu as being angry because he is declaring himself more right than God, where as 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, a sense of uncolored plainness that is missing from the other translations. In this case, Elihu is seemingly upset at Job for being upset.²⁶

If you will forgive further discursion, 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 judgement. 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 2019, p. 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 2016, p. 46)

This is where we leave off, and then this youngster, this whippersnapper, this upstart Elihu picks up.

²⁵Did they give up? Did they see that Job was starting to change, was starting to stand up for himself, and realize that hey, maybe this was for the best? It seems deeper than simply winning an argument.

²⁶And here our very own Elihus return. They return and they roll their eyes and stand, arms akimbo, before us. Why are you angry? Why are you crying? Who cares if you’re right? They are in the position of authority, are they not? Get it together.

The Elevation of Unknown Things

“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 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.²⁷ Verse after verse of promises.

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

²⁷The 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 mouth²⁸ rebuking him.

²⁸Or, to look at it more seriously, some 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.

of God.²⁹

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.³¹ "For a man's acts He pays him back, and by a person's path He provides him," Elihu reasons.

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 cause must precede 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.³² 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.

More, however, Elihu seems quite upset with the ways in which he perceives Job questioning authority. This comes up several times during his speeches:

- 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."³⁴ (Job 34:5-6, Alter)
- Should He by your dictates mete out justice, for it is you who reject or choose, not I? And what do you know? — speak. (Job 34:33, Alter)

²⁹Surely process theologians bridle. Non-temporal, unchanging, and unaffected by the world? Perilously close to transcendental thought. But we must remember: Elihu is wrong.³⁰

³⁰He *has* to be, right? He must be, or else that might mean that we are wrong in all our changes.

³¹An ally and not an adversary, perhaps.

³²As it always is.³³

³³Say, for instance, that you create an avatar for yourself falling outside traditional gender roles. Context being what it is, your own Elihu might assume, "Ah, this is a kink thing! This is sexualization of identity!"

But there you are in the background, trying to come to terms with your gender and its misalignment with your body. You have this context right here! You have this way to explore what it might be to interact with the world in some form other than your own. You have your complex reasons for constructing for yourself a new front-stage persona, and all your back-stage reasons are inaccessible to your Elihu.

³⁴A twisting of words, but a subtle one. Job says that he believes himself innocent and would like for God to come and account for His actions. Alas, accurate representation never stood between Elihu and a quip.

The Elevation of Unknown Things

- Is this what you count as justice, you say “I am more right than God”? (Job 35:2, Alter)
- Who has assigned Him His way, and who has said, “You have done wrong”?³⁵ (Job 36:23, Alter)

And on and on.³⁷

That transcendental estimation of God peeks through here and there (“Why, exalted is God, and we know not, the number of His years is unfathomed,” Elihu admits. (Job 36:26, Alter)), but he’s constantly interrupting himself with exhortations to Job that, because he cannot possibly understand God, he should stop trying.

Elihu’s speech ends quite abruptly, but such is the nature of interpolations. We are left discomfited by the disjoint narrative, gritting our teeth and tensing before our books as Elihu leaves off only for God to speak. If we are to take the NOAB editor’s suggestion and move Elihu back to before the hymn to wisdom, to make that hymn his rather than Job’s, then this greatly smooths things out, but again, as they say, this is the book we are left with now, and that discomfort, that tension is now part of the canon. Without it, this book would not be Job. All stories are perforce interpolations within real events, this essay began, and we cannot change the canon of Job any more easily than we can change the canon of our lives.³⁸

³⁵A familiar enough argument against transition.³⁶There is a whole slew of responses to this, many of which lean heavily on *b'tzelem Elohim*, made in the image of God. For instance, the story of Rabbi Elazar, who, when greeted by an ‘exceedingly ugly person’, insulted him, to which the man replied, “go and say to the Craftsman Who made me: How ugly is the vessel you made.” (Ta’anit 20a:16-20b:3). Or, for a more recent example, “God blessed me by making me transsexual for the same reason God made wheat but not bread and fruit but not wine, so that humanity might share in the act of creation.” (Ortberg 2020)

³⁶Not, I think, an argument my Elihu held to. They were more concerned about me fetishizing gender, and the only argument I have against that is time and rebirth. I couldn’t say anything to them then, they were cut off as abruptly as is Elihu here.

³⁷And they do go on, do they not?

³⁸And perhaps this is why I can’t let go of that time, that version of me who died and the intercalary years that followed. There’s no way for me to sort them into some handier spot. I can’t move my recognition of my transness from after university to before high school. I can’t change how I acted then, how I responded. Transition is a story, stories are interpolations, and this is the canon I’ve got.

Friends and "Friends"

The Elevation of Unknown Things

((God comes down, Job's three friends forgive him, in a way, yet Elihu is not mentioned.³⁹))

Should All Things be Known

³⁹I've heard said in the past that "forgiveness is releasing the hope for a better past" (Wakefield 2010) 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

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 bring up mistaking accidental, individual symbols for universal ones?), it's so easy to misremember that the better past we hope for is just some dream, some thing 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 their simple angers? Who knows if they remember me? They cut contact, without telling me, without telling me why, and who knows if they even know the reason?

Who cares, other than me?

3 The Margin of the Terrifying

There is an idea out there that there are three types of prayer: *help*, *thanks*, and *wow*. (Lamott 2012)

Like all discussion around anything so complex, personal, and transcendental as prayer, the trichotomy is incredibly reductive, and yet like all incredibly reductive divisions, it does have its uses. Classifications such as this allow us to sort through our feelings and how we intellectualize abstract concepts such as prayer. They are not hard-and-fast boundaries into which we may bucketize blithely,¹ but perhaps sticky notes we can post next to text, the better to understand it when we work our way through it.

They need not even apply entirely wholesale to a prayer. Take the Lord's Prayer:

- | | |
|-------------|--|
| Wow | Our Father, who are in the heavens, let your name be held holy; |
| Help or Wow | Let your Kingdom come; Let your will come to pass, as in heaven so also upon earth; |
| Help | Give to us today bread for the day ahead; And excuse us our debts, just as we have excused our debtors; And do not bring us to trial, but rescue us from him who is wicked |
| Wow | [For yours is the Kingdom and the power and the glory unto the ages.] |

(Matthew 6:9–13, Hart 2017, p. 10²)

¹A fact which is incredibly difficult to remember, sometimes.

²I figured I'd spoken too much on the topic of translation already for it to be worth yet another go, but here I am again. You can surely remember my delight in Weinberger's idea of translator as active participant, and yes, this plays as much a role here as it did with my choice of Alter's translation of the Hebrew Bible, but I'm leaning on Hart's translation here for its distinctly modern and universalist take on the New Testament. Hart himself is a staunch universalist, his book *That All Shall Be Saved* neatly lays his reasoning bare, and much of the focus on ineffable love feels applicable to the discussion of the ineffability of love, no matter

The Margin of the Terrifying

how secular.

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