

“Seasons” is a braided essay of sorts, relying heavily on footnotes for the braid rather than sections or mixed content, a deliberate choice to allow for nested footnotes. This is also why this is being presented as a PDF rather than a GDoc or DOCX, for which I apologize (neither let you nest footnotes, and Word doesn’t even let you comment on them, which sure is a choice that they made). Unfortunately, the typesetting program I use, XeLaTeX, doesn’t obey line spacing in footnotes (and one of the footnotes in the bibliography got dropped¹). Sigh. Nothing’s perfect, but the typography is important to me.

I submitted the first two parts to this essay during the previous workshop. Over this last semester, I have been dealing with long COVID which has greatly impacted my ability to concentrate on research, so I’ve been spending much of that time revising and working on fiction instead. However, this is the piece that I’m most keen on feedback. In particular, I’ve worked with my mentor on a mix of tones within the text (an academic tone, a poetic tone, and a personal/emotional tone), and I spent a portion of my time on revisions making these flow smoothly one into another—though obviously the emotional tone winds up in the footnotes more frequently—so that they were consistent within each tone without detracting from the overall flow. I’d like to know how well this works for the reader. This also includes the point where I stop talking *about* Dwale and instead talk *to* Dwale in the footnotes. I’m curious how that works for y’all.

To address a concern from a note last workshop, I do have permission from the publisher to use the entirety of each of Dwale’s poems, thankfully!

¹On an entry for one of my own works: “I thought long and hard about whether or not I would cite my own works. I came to the conclusion that part of the point of these essays is that I am taking a step back and observing myself, thinking about what I am feeling, and putting that in context of Madison Scott-Clary writ large. These are *her* works; all I am doing is reading them.”

Seasons

Madison Scott-Clary

December 18, 2022

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

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.¹ You're left feeling miserable for weeks on end, wishing for even a drizzle to quench your thirst, or even a bit of cloud cover at night, enough to maybe knock the temperature down into the low seventies so you can finally, *finally* get some sleep and yet the days spiral forwards through heat-haze.

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

Ten years now gone,² 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.

¹And 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.

²It'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.³

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.

³Not 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.

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

Issa says,

Natsuyama ya

Hitori kigen no

Ominaeshi

On the hill of summer

Stands the slender maiden flower

In a solitary humor

(Issa and Mackenzie 65)

The slender maiden flower is the slender maiden flower. We have no say in its existence except that we might pick it, trample it, or leave it be. It is itself, in all its glory — or at least all its solitary humor. The flower defines itself and though we may take action on it, may think it beautiful or ugly or lonely or austere, that doesn't matter to the flower.⁴

“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

(39)

⁴For 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.⁵

⁵Of 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)

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.⁶

As that golden bloom of Summer⁷ defines itself as all things must, and we have to take it at its word. We can kvetch about the insomnia of Summer, that which makes us sweat through the sheets so that the thought of touching someone else makes one feel clammy and disgusting⁸ 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.

⁶Viz. 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.

⁷Of dandelions:

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

(Scott-Clary, *Toledot* 161)

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

⁸Just me? No? Maybe just me.

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 anxiety⁹ that lays bare future hunger and says, “See? It doesn’t matter how much you have stored away. This is Winter.”

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

To Autumn

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,

⁹Or 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. You always asked for ‘Halloween music’. Your story was going to be the one that started that other fiction podcast we were planning on, where bummers were welcome to complete the dichotomy¹⁰ 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.

¹⁰“I had read the sign,” I wrote for one of my only attempts at horror/terror (Please look Up). “And had immediately fallen down into the space defined by that dichotomy, the gap between had-to-be and could-not-be. Dichotomy? Dialectic? There was no telling anymore, no matter how many times I’d tried to paste one word or the other onto the two phrases. Were ‘dichotomy’ and ‘dialectic’ a dichotomy or dialectic?”

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

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.¹¹

(Keats 249)

While Stevens is much more austere about the whole season:

¹¹I know that this line has little to do with cells in the biological sense, but how poetic a description of cancer!¹² Cells living in eternal summer, growing and growing, over-brimming in unchecked autolysis.

¹²△ 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 died¹³ in my arms.

¹³△ I know that I'm trying to square what I have of you with your death, but when Falcon died in my arms less than six months later, then I really, *truly* knew what death looked like, and now I have to square that with your passing as well. Did you, too, cry? Did you, too, try to hide? When you breathed your last, did you slump over to the side and stay warm far longer than one might expect? There was no one there to chide us and send us home that I can blame; there's no cancer, if that ephemeral mention from your girlfriend is to be believed, that lurked beneath the surface. You were and then you were not, and the only referent I have is a dog who died too young. I'm ashamed that I can't help but make the comparison.

III

The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.

It was a small part of the pantomime.

(Stevens)

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

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

While I hesitate to say that Dwale walks a middle path here, its work does feature elements of both plenty and paucity. By establishing these two poles, we can then begin to triangulate where the poet believes Autumn lies.¹⁴

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,

¹⁴This, after all, is what I'm trying to do, I think. I can't ask you where Autumn lies. I can't ask you if you feel the same way about the onrushing cold that I do, about saying farewell to the heat of Summer. I can't ask you if your moods are still defined by the school year, as mine are, these many years gone, with stress peaking around what used to be the end of term and depression creeping in around that first week of school. I can't ask you many things. I can't ask you anything.

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.¹⁵ I don't smile when I do.¹⁷

A moment more and then the day is gone,

In evening grey, we mourn the vanished dawn,

And so on, maybe waiting for someone

To come drag us back to where we belong.¹⁸

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.

¹⁵By your absence, I feel your presence, and yet I continue to try and gaslight myself into believing that you never existed. Are you gone? You must be. Were you ever there, though? Were you a real person?¹⁶ Were you someone so grounding that I felt childish before you? Were you someone I had the chance to meet back in 2015, where I stared longingly at your kosovorotka in gold-trimmed black, wishing I was brave enough to wear something like that? We'll never know, I suppose. One more thing I'll never be able to ask you.

¹⁶

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

(Scott-Clary, *Toledot* 51)

Clearly a perennial fear.

¹⁷Maybe I will, some day. I'd sure like to think so.

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

The harvestmen scuttle and bob onwards.

(Dwale 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ This idea that we, too, might be a feast

¹⁹Even if that something is time.

²⁰Were 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 done 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?²¹ 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.

²¹Every 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." (user @pookle-blinky²²) This is stated in contrast to the Jewish practice of sitting shiva and the following sheloshim which provides a structured procedure for engaging with grief. Another user replied that this might just be a white, middle-class American thing: "White Anglo Saxon Protestant based communities may lack rituals for mourning. I don't know that world. But everyone from Black Americans to Latinx to AAPI to ethnic white communities (Polish, Italian, Ukrainian etc) have ways to mourn that aren't exactly hidden." (user @Karnythia).

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

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.²³

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 23) “Spare him a little longer, Crone / For his clean hands and love-submissive heart.”²⁴

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, Unimportant Verse About Important People)

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

²³The 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.

²⁴Who knows how much of my skittishness around winter is a me thing or an us thing. Spare me a little longer.

Issa says,

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

(Issa and Mackenzie 65)

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 unsure²⁵ of whether or not we like Autumn; surely some seem to, but this duality makes it elusive. Rather than shy away from it and decide to let it sit or cleave to it and enjoy every minute, we always have a little bit of that space between ourselves and the season, a little bit of that eternity.

Issa says,

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

²⁵ After 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.²⁶ Sometimes I have, and sometimes I have to stop writing this essay for five days because looking at it makes me cry.

²⁶ △ 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...

(11)

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

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²⁷There is perhaps something to be said about the inflexibility of things such as citation styles when it comes to the combination of modern technology and chosen names. I don't know these users' real names. I don't need to know them. I don't *want* to know them, unless they want to share. What was it Dear said? "Names bear power." (Scott-Clary 2020d, p. 74)