Seasons

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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 snow 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?

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, with secondary markers at the equinoxes. One finds oneself at the longest

night of the year and knows that, from there onwards, it is downhill into summer.[1] 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. 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 known within poetry. Exploring that is beyond the scope of this paper.[2] 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

Spring is commonly associated with newness and beginnings. New growth, new life, new warmth under a new sun. On of green things: of buds greening bare trees, of grass poking through late snows, or perhaps the greenery of gardening as one buys flats of flowers or sows vegetable seeds in the expectation of a harvest later on.

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

And, importantly, spring is the 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

[1] I am not sold on this metaphor; uphill bears both positive and negative connotations, and it is difficult to say which to apply when. Ask a poet.

[2] Or perhaps my abilities as a writer

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. One small example of this comes from a short *renga* that took place on Twitter:

> Blackbird headed south
> Down to the hawks and kudzu
> Six months 'til winter
>
> (Dwale 2018)

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, do occasionally make their presence known in writings that take place during other seasons. Stevens, for example, has

> XII
> The river is moving.
> The blackbird must be flying.
>
> (Stevens 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 year[3])

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,[4]

[3]Or 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.

[4]When 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 —

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.

(Dwale 2019, p. 26)

This poem[5] in three stanzas is largely in an even meter (sometimes often 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 assonance and rhymes, 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 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. Here, we might picture that final snow, Spring nudging winter, and realizing that all she has left are her memories of him and her child, Summer, still unborn within her.

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,

Mi no ue no

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

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

[5]The 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.

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.

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 are also comprised of that which came before, and are bound to those around us.[6]

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

[6]After 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 was able to understand poetry better on its own terms.

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 that they are, shows the floating weeds as integral parts of the world, rather than some thing to be removed.[7] 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.[8] 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.

[7]Something 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.

[8]I 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'?

Summer

As the year continues on its spiral up, 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.[9] You're left feeling disgusting 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.

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, 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

[9] And 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 — it's dead.

And shed the smoke rings on my cloven finger.

(Dwale 2019, p. 8)

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