



///// SOME PROBLEMS  
////////// WITH LOVE

*a zuihitsu*

隨筆

Rainer Maria Rilke: *“Liebhaben von Mensch zu Mensch: das ist vielleicht das Schwerste, was uns aufgegeben ist, das Äußerste, die letzte Probe und Prüfung, die Arbeit, für die alle andere Arbeit nur Vorbereitung ist.”* ('Loving between human being and human being, that is perhaps the most difficult thing with which we have been charged, the extreme possibility, the last test and trial, the work for which all other work is but preparation.')

text : Zachary Bos; authors cited  
cover : Fennec foxes, *Vulpes zerda*

## SOME PROBLEMS WITH LOVE



**ADVERTISEMENT.** With simple pieces, gears and struts and springs and mountings, as well as with the necessary skill and care, a craftsman can build a clock, or a clockwork bird, or an automaton that can blink and turn its head and sigh with such verisimilitude that you'd swear it was a flesh creation deep in love. In the pages that follow, you'll find many such simple bits and pieces, but I'm afraid I've not put them together with anything like care. Instead, I'm dumping the bucket of parts out upon the tabletop. What a clatter they make. Anyone with the know-how has my permission to see how they can fit together the parts: sonnets, quoted material, accounts of dreams, philosophical notes. If you can make anything from that that does something useful, like keep time or imitate life, you are free to keep it. ¶ A rough accounting of the contents of this essay tells me the whole thing runs to about 4100 words,

of which  $\approx 1400$  are unique. The word “I” comprises fully 3% of the text; the word “love,” 2%; and “you,” 1%. There is a truth about the nature of love in these data. ¶ This essay is not a confessional record of my personal thoughts on love; it is a fiction. However, it does makes use of truths belonging to me.

– ZWB. **INCIPIT**. One night this winter I dreamt I was squatting beside the house in the snow. The man with me indicated the dog he was watching. It looked like a desert fox, with large ears, a beige coat. It was small and wretched, and vomited blood onto a heap of pebbly dog food. The man murmured about how bad he felt for the suffering creature, how he wished he could help it. He quoted St. Paul: “The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together.” I thought I might tell him that I was not a believer, that he’d mistaken me for one of his kind, but I said nothing and watched him watch the animal. §1 “I maintain my goodness/ so that filth will not advance/ further in the world/ by the borders of my body.” Ellen Adair Glassie, “The Diana Chronicles.” §2 Over and over again, the shivering animal splashed blood into his food and the snow. Then the man went somewhere, was gone suddenly without the merest ruffle on the surface of the reality of the dream, in that dream way persons appear and disappear. I was now alone to watch

and pity the dog. I crept closer to it, and beckoned, here boy, let me help you. A feeling of conviction grew, that there was something I could be doing to comfort the dog, if only I'd do it. I didn't know what exactly that would be. I felt if I could stroke its head, that'd be something. I crept closer. As I did, I noticed two other forms, largish animals, that had been hidden under the porch steps, man-shaped things like denuded apes. §3 *Love Sonnet*. "What are you now? You are like a whitlow,/ or a hangnail, or a hammertoe, red/ throbbing problem in a sensitive place./ You are an ache, a dull persistent pain,/ a swollen abscess, a sprung wound, a sty./ You are a fleabite that itches all day,/ that makes it hard to sit or eat or think./ You interrupt my sleep. You are a hair/ suppurating and ingrown to a cyst,/ a wood splinter underneath the nail bed./ You are every small inconvenient twinge/ of feeling that I dread. You are a sore,/ the unhealed blister on my palm, the raw/ patch on my heart, the rupture of my peace." §4 The ape-things were piteous in appearance: their wan skin only just covering the bones of their face; the fur of decay on their yellow teeth; their sores. Their eyelids drooped with exhaustion or disease. They squatted one in front of the other. I noticed that the finger-bones were exposed on the right hand of the one in front, the flesh

beginning to rot and pull away from the bone. They shuffled closer, attracted to the pity in my voice. In the unselfconscious, deictic immediacy of the dream, I felt visceral disgust—and I knew as well *that* I felt this, in a mimetic or meta- way of knowing. I felt and I knew I felt. I also knew that this seemed not to stop me, that my disgust was powerless to stop my actions compelled by pity. I gestured for the creatures to come out, it's okay, come on out. I wondered where I could put my hands on their bodies to comfort them, without adhering to a sore. §5 “I renounce the higher harmony altogether. It's not worth the tears of that one tortured child who... prayed... with... unexpiated tears to ‘dear, kind God!’” Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*. §6 This dream, I think, was a manifestation of my desire, or need, to help others—to be *allowed* to ease the suffering of others—without also having to minister to their egoic selves. What were these creatures, after all—the poor dog and the revenant apes—but avatars of suffering? Importantly, theirs was an *animal* suffering: mute, grateful and receptive, needful... and *nonreciprocal*. §7 “‘Fool!’ he would say to himself, ‘you wanted to leave your peaceful office in the Rue Saint-Honoré, to live, forsooth—well, you are living. What have you to complain about? To suffer is to live!

To live is to suffer! Ah! you have life enough, for you suffer much.' ¶ He would stop a moment, draw his hand across his forehead, and say, 'It is well done—I tell you it is well done. That will teach you; instead of remaining quietly in your hole, you wanted to have passions like the rest of the world; you gave your heart leave to beat—and it was profited by your permission, like the artful creature that it is. It beats, but to make up for not having beaten until to-day it hammers away now with force enough to burst its fragile casing.' ¶ He would break out into a laugh, and add, 'Well, and if the casing were to burst, what then? No more anger, no more rage, no more envy, and no more suffering! [. . .] How the Marquis would laugh, and I, too, first of all, in my tomb underneath my little garden—No, on the contrary, I want to love, to live well, and to indulge in ever kind of folly. Folly, indeed—I'll have enough of it. I will live in one year sufficiently to make up for all the time during which I have been only existing.'" Adolphe Belot, *Men Are What Women Make Them: Or, The Drama Of Rue De La Paix*. §8 I opened my arms to embrace the poor dog and the suffering ape-creatures, but before I could the dream ended. Or I did embrace them, but don't remember. Perhaps that's significant, because it is after all a *self* that remembers. These animals represented a kind of endless need, and my

state of being in the dream was one of unrelenting compassion. Once the two connect, compassion to need, a circuit closes and all of us are obliterated in the consummation. In other terms, the two matched selves of the symbolon merge into a selfless whole. Resolution in this operation means dissolution. The sound of these words reminds me of a question that I've been asking myself for years: do I fear absolution as much as I fear dissolution? I realize that I fear the selfhood I have obtained so far is maintained only by its brokenness. My selfhood is defined by unmet yearning. I would literally cease to be if I were satisfied. Does this reduce to a fear of being trapped in a kind of bodhisattva persona? Or of *not* being so defined? §9 *Vía Lactea, or, nothing to be done.* "There were so many stars streaking across/ the black mirror of that night I ran out/ of things to wish on them. What petty cause/ would bend the will of comets to my doubt?/ The gods? Pure human hope? Ten years ago/ I stood in a snowfall and hoped to die;/ here I am still. The universe allows/ each every kind of happiness to grow/ diffuse and lose its light. Dysphoria/ attracts its like and grows hard and compacts/ into permanence. I have no idea/ what use this hurt is. It only detracts/ from the cheap and ready oblivion/ possible in stars and what might have



been.” I write that “I have no idea what use this hurt is.” Yet I fear that I *do* know. §10 “Of all tyrannies, a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It would be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies. The robber baron’s cruelty may sometimes sleep, his cupidity may at some point be satiated; but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end for they do so with the approval of their own conscience.” C.S. Lewis. §11 I used to believe that I am compelled to help others in order that I have at least my own example as evidence that there is selfless charity in the world. Which is, of course, a neat bit of self-justification. Haven’t I been cared for selflessly by others? Having I see others caring for others? Yes; but knowing that my own compassion is really in service to my ego, has made it impossible to believe that others are not likewise compromised. §12 *There are those who love too little or too few.* “Not that they love to hurt, but that they leave love/ to the zealous; and they, they only love/ those who believe in one who revealed his love/ to just a chosen few in this world, a love/ appearing as a tongue of flashing love/ aflame only over the pates of the most beloved,/ or as a tumult in the inmost heart when love/ uncovers its caitiff core. Then it

seems love/ is a sword, swung against those whose own love/ strums against the mores of the time. Love/ of such ilk is a sin against love, a love/ of hate. Too much we have these days of love/ bound to bitterness; and too little of/ the love that refuses ever to betray love.” §13 I keep up this praxis of giving and caring, however, to see if I can get the trick of caring for others without caring for myself, and provide the evidence I’d need to have faith in humanity. It is work that reminds me of when I was a kid and would sit there focusing on a coin on the tabletop, and try to move it with my mind: Will it move without my touching it? The word poetry comes from a Greek work, *poiesis*, meaning “making.” So this attempt to craft genuine compassion out of the air of selfishness is like the act of making the real thing of a poem out of the insubstantial stuff of thought. It’s Rumpelstiltskin’s work, spinning dross into gold. Or it’s a kind of prayer, the hope that nothing will turn into something. §14 “Es ist wahr: wir lieben das Leben, nicht, weil wir an’s Leben, sondern weil wir an’s Lieben gewöhnt sind.” (“It is true: we love life, not because we are used to living but because we are used to loving.”) Friedrich Nietzsche. §15 <sup>1</sup> Happiness is foreign to compassion. <sup>2</sup> The obligation of bodhisattvas to each other is mutually assured annihilation. <sup>3</sup> Love is a mirror that you see

yourself in. <sup>4</sup> Love is a mirror, breaking easily. <sup>5</sup> Ego conceals itself in compassion, isn't that right? <sup>6</sup> Love is a mirror giving a virtual image as well as a real one. §16 "We accept the love we think we deserve." Stephen Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. §17 1: In my life I have loved (with involuntary force) anyone who has allowed me to love them. This habit has led to much heartache. 2: This love most often had no erotic component; there seems to be no functional relationship between my feelings of carnal attraction and my feelings of intense affection or devotion. I have desired people I disdain, and felt no attraction to people I love. 3: This disconnect between affection and attraction may indicate some disease, one which interferes with my ability to experience happiness. 4: I do not know if this habit of reflexive (yet, I feel, genuine) love amounts to a moral failing, or mere recklessness, or an organic disability. §18 "She's gone. She was my love, my moon or more./ She chased the chickens out and swept the floor,/ Emptied the bones and nut-shells after feasts,/ And smacked the kids for leaping up like beasts./ Now [... w]hat arm will sweep the room, what hand will hold/ New snow against the milk to keep it cold?/ And who will dump the garbage, feed the hogs,/ And pitch the chickens' heads to hungry dogs?/ Not my lost hag who

dumbly bore such pain:/ Childbirth and midnight sassafras and rain.” James Wright, “Complaint.” §19 There is a story I never finished, because I could not bear to follow through with the only ending that made sense. Two men are discussing their task: why did you bring the shovel in the boat? Because it might be better to bury the body rather than sinking it. Whose body? We learn over the course of their music hall patter that it is a little girl. A good man hired them to kill her. Hers was such an exquisitely compassionate nature, that had she lived the world and the suffering in it could only hurt her. The ghost of this little girl literally haunts me. §20 “Perhaps this is wrong to keep Tom but a little while, when nothing can come of it but trouble and sorrow, but how are we to give up the very thing we’ve wanted, no matter if it stays only a day and is gone, making the emptiness emptier, the dark nights darker, the rainy nights wetter? You might as well force the food from our mouths as take this one from us.” Ray Bradbury, “The Martian.” §21 On the train, a poster advertising a young hip congregation, Mosaic Boston: “LOVE. JESUS. SIMPLE.” Which of these, love or deity, is supposed to be simple? Neither are. It is foolishness or perhaps wickedness to tell children otherwise. Good-hearted wrong-headedness. §22 *Lines after love.* <sup>1</sup> John A. Griffin, “After

Love": "Will you take up this last entreaty then/ before my breath condenses on the pane/ between us: that you see my love but not/ as some mirage wept into longing after love." <sup>2</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "My Garden": "Hither hasted, in old time, Jove,/ And every god, —none did refuse;/ And be sure at last came Love,/ And after Love, the Muse." <sup>3</sup> Derek Walcott, "Love After Love": "Give back your heart/ to itself, to the stranger who has loved you// all your life, whom you ignored/ for another, who knows you by heart." <sup>4</sup> Robert Graves, "The Seahorse" (the first section of which is the revision of a manuscript poem titled "After Love"): "Since now in every public place/ Lurk phantoms who assume your walk and face,/ You cannot yet have utterly abjured me/ Nor stifled the insistent roar of sea." <sup>5</sup> Arthur Symonds, "After Love": "It is too hard, too hard to meet/ As friends, and love no more." <sup>6</sup> Charles Lloyd, "Sonnet L.": "The infatuated spirit must deplore/ That after love no other joy can be." <sup>7</sup> Maxine Kumin, "After Love": "Nothing is changed, except/ there was a moment when// the wolf, the mongering wolf/ who stands outside the self// lay lightly down, and slept." <sup>8</sup> Sara Teasdale, "Spring Night": "O, beauty are you not enough?/ Why am I crying after love?" <sup>9</sup> Afaa Michael Weaver, "Canadian Love": "We drove on around the curve/ of the highway where

Canada looks/ distinctly different from America,/ where you feel that you are foreign/ to this country and it is foreign/ to you, which is the awful truth/ before love and after love's death." <sup>10</sup> Sara Teasdale, "After Love": "There is no magic any more,/ We meet as other people do,/ You work no miracle for me/ Nor I for you." <sup>11</sup> Robley Wilson, "After Love": "After love, we can feel our caving in:/ Muscle at the drawn corners of our mouths/ Slackened, our eyes sinking under a swirl/ Of gold lamplight, blue threads letting the lids/ Slide closed." <sup>12</sup> William Carlos Williams, "Hymn to Love Ended": "So/ after love a music streams above it./ For what is love?" §23 I am looking for an articulation of civic humanism to confirm even the limited possibility of a form of social or civic participation that validates genuine compassion *as well as* personal actualization. Christians love their religion not because it provides eternal life, but because it offers absolution in this life. I don't fear that no one would come to my funeral; I fear too many would, and that this would create heartache I would at that point be in no position to take onto myself. §24 *Go away*. "If you want to live long/ Do not trouble with dubious elixirs./ Just arrange for your lover to go away,/ Then the days grow as long as eons." Hala Sattasai, c.200. §25 *Better Be Unsure*. "“ποθει μέν, εχθαίρει δέ, βούλεται δ' ἔχειν.” No one in

love has ever had to ask/ if what they feel is love or something else,/ a madness or dementia, or a brain/ parasite picked up in the tropics, or/ simple hate, bent by some old-school psycho-/ dynamic trick of self-defense into/ obsession that feels like love but only/ wants to get close enough to stick the knife./ Lovers don't sicken with questions: Do I,/ dare I, does she? They don't equivocate./ They simply love. And that's the risk of love./ You must allow for some chance that she doesn't,/ never did, never will. That what you feel/ is an ailment or an error. Trust doubt." The epigraph ("She longs for him, but hates him, and yet she wants him back") comes from the play *Frogs* by Aristophanes. The line is spoken by Dionysus in the Underworld, as he explains to Euripides how the comely libertine Alcibiades was able to inspire a feeling like passion in the city ("she"). I first came across this line quoted in Anne Carson's *Eros, the Bittersweet*.

§26 Personal autonomy is endangered by and perhaps incompatible with a compassionate nature. Here are three examples of religious attempts to resolve this problem (although there are others): the teachings of Jesus the Nazarene, who taught that there is no such thing as a compassionate (human) nature, and that all compassion is not human but divine, flowing through the human from the

Father via the Spirit; the teachings of Mohammed the Prophet, who instructed his followers not in the practice of human peace but in submission to divine authority so that their imperfect human compassion might be subordinated to and elevated by Allah's perfect being; and the teachings of the Buddha, whose taught a creed of essential paradox: there is no such thing as personhood, but do let's do the thing that nice persons do and be nice to all beings-*cum*-persons anyway. None of these traditions call for strength of character *other than* that exercised in the denial of one's own personhood. These are not aspirational creeds, but wretched ones. However their respective liturgies ornament these teachings, The Christian concept of love entails abjection of selfhood—the Muslim, abdication of selfhood—the Buddhist, denial of selfhood. Each is a love which denies love. §27 The Koranic creed of submission is, however, an honest one, unflinching in its conclusion of the state of affairs which must follow in a world created by an all-compassioned deity. If god-love fills the world, there can be no room for human love. This correct interpretation is a reason to reject monotheism, even if its claims proved true. §28 “The problem, often not discovered until late in life, is that when you look for things in life like love, meaning, motivation, it implies they are sitting



behind a tree or under a rock. The most successful people in life recognize, that in life they create their own love, they manufacture their own meaning, they generate their own motivation. For me, I am driven by two main philosophies, know more today about the world than I knew yesterday. And lessen the suffering of others. You'd be surprised how far that gets you." Neil deGrasse Tyson. §29 Compassion and atheism are related, as are compassion and suffering, and hunger and bread. Further extensions of this line of thought imply concomitant virtues: <sup>1</sup> There can be no ontologically deep justification for punishment (an act of authority), or for scorn (an act among equals). <sup>2</sup> Merciless is inhuman—as every god conceived is, and as the cosmos unquestionably is. But for our human selves, we are alone in an inhuman place. <sup>3</sup> Deliberate compassion entails an irreducible expression of egoism. <sup>4</sup> It is not futile to love the guilty in full measure. <sup>5</sup> Compassion is a handicap, but not a congenital one. It is a learned disease (that is, a taught one). No good person is fully able-bodied, nor is any person in love. <sup>6</sup> The predicament of the compassionate can only be relieved by the permission of the pitiful. §30 "As the King comes closer by my steps,/ I pinch my consciousness for boldness,/ saying: *This is my life, this is my life.*" Ellen Adair Glassie, "The Diana Chronicles."

§31 From the encyclopedia: “In a 1990 essay, Belgian art historian Jacques Van Lennep discusses how the conception of *Le génie du mal* was influenced by Alfred de Vigny’s long philosophical poem *Éloa, ou La sœur des anges* (“Eloa, or The Sister of Angels”), published in 1824, which explored the possibility of Lucifer’s redemption through love. In this ‘lush and lyrical’ narrative poem, Lucifer sets out to seduce the beautiful Eloa, an angel born from a tear shed by Christ at the death of Lazarus. The Satanic lover is ‘literally a handsome devil, physically dashing, intellectually agile, irresistibly charismatic in speech and manner’: in short, a Romantic hero. ‘Since you are so beautiful,’ the naïve Eloa says, ‘you are no doubt good.’ Lucifer declares that ‘I am he whom one loves and does not know,’ and says he weeps for the powerless and grants them the occasional reprieve of delight or oblivion. Despite Eloa’s attempt to reconcile him with God, Lucifer cannot set aside his destructive pride. In the end, Eloa’s love condemns her to Hell with Lucifer, and his triumph over her only brings him sadness.” §32 From *Turnings*. “I dreamed again of the purple heather/ covering the hills, the tawny blooming/ gorse-bush, the bees humming in the stone walls;/ when will we ever be there together?” §33 “I wanted to love those/ I wanted to love, often/ I did not want those/ who

loved me: it was// a disagreement with myself/ as if myself  
was myself,/ like trees which are so laden/ with night they  
are night trees,// which they are not. Sometimes/ the end is a  
contradiction/ of the tale: the end is simply/ not the end, the  
contradiction// of wanting the end and/ not wanting it. I  
want you./ I no longer want. I wanted/ to love those I  
wanted.” Michael Burkard, “Untitled.” §34 *Ghazal*. ““Was not  
the Water of Life hidden in darkness?” –Hāfez-e Shīrāzī.// You  
are outside staring up at the sky/ thinking about the love you  
couldn’t keep./ Flat across the inkspill vastness the still/  
oblique body of Orion is spread/ like that of a murder victim.  
The girl/ who wept for her lost love will forget him/ long  
before the man who killed him will./ Learn it: a blatant love  
returned by love/ is tamed and satisfied, fat and fickle./ It  
stays quick only as long as life, then/ gutters out like a wax  
taper burned down/ to the bottom of the wick. Choose a love/  
to hide, and keep it safe forever. Tell/ her name to no one.  
That’s a lasting love.” §35 In a dream once I was looking at the  
wall in the living room of the house we lived in when I was a  
boy, the wall with layers of paper peeling away from the  
plaster to make an unlabeled map of ivory- and parchment-  
and linen- and moth-colored seas and continents. In the  
dream I could see that the colors were states (as you find on a

map), and that these states were actually conditions of being: knowing, loving, working, suffering, having, wanting, losing, trying, failing. And I could see too how a traffic of lives moved from state to state. I cannot make sense out of these relationships now that I am not dreaming. §36 *Duplicitous*. “How can I say—in what way can I say/ so as to be understood in full depth/ how contemptible my crime appears now/ that I see I made you party to it./ The terms of the indictment were “never,”/ “to have,” and “you.” What would out in knowing/ whether it was love? That arresting word/ is no use to me. The accusation/ was faithlessness, not unfeeling. I laughed/ when I heard they’d thought you felt the same way,/ felt that I cared for you—feared the command/ such feeling would put to you. Each of us/ a suspect, refusing to confess and/ implicate the other. I still refuse.” // END

