

Mousse Magazine

Primavera (An Elegy)

By Sabrina Tarasoff | Summer 2020

"Lament is a pattern cut and fitted around my mind..."¹

Within the static atmosphere of inactivity, the psyche is often pushed to reinvent itself as pure storm: one is easily held hostage by the mind and its hotheaded whims. The boundaries between self and other are impossible to hold onto. The fragility and the permeability of the body are made apparent in these exchanges. Often it feels hallucinatory and stifling at the same time. I start to feel foreign. My self flickers with the shifting weather outside my window: atmospheric, political, emotional. Read it as you wish. I am told it's a cliché to think this way.

As an antidote to inherited sentiment I form a reading list of Sylvia Plath, Marcel Proust, Mary Shelley, John Milton, and Ovid. It becomes clear as I wade through their various storms that everyone, from Satan to Sylvia Plath to Semele, is subject to these laws of psychic weather. The history of literature is riddled with figures struggling to come to terms with the loss of perpetual spring. Upon experiencing the blithe scents of Eden, even Satan feels sad about having to return home to hell. He wails:

"Me Miserable!"²

It is early June at the time I am writing. Spring was largely spent in the great psychic indoors. Summer has appeared as a graven monument to springtime rite. (Spring has notably been lost to poor Pangolin: it occurs to me that many evils begin with a bite of something.) For months I pretend I am followed by a Greek chorus. It makes the follies of online life more bearable. As in Sophocles's *Electra*, the members of the chorus speak only to themselves: an "anti-dialogue," as Anne Carson once called it.³ Also following *Electra*, at one point something snaps: I join yet another video call, and imagine myself screaming at *Electra*'s high pitch: "And at what point does the evil level off in my life, tell me that!"⁴ Online viewing rooms amass. No one in the chorus answers. Someone changes their digital backdrop and disappears into a pixelated image of a garden. The euphoria of being left to my own devices edges a digital anxiety dream. Dreams of love that belonged to spring are unmade in an instant. Or, in Joan Didion's terms: "Life changes in the instant," even if the instant is often drawn out.⁵ What aches the most tends to go on and on. It becomes a durational event. In those first shocks (of love, of loss) time is distended. Things move in slow-mo. On June 5, 1978, Roland Barthes writes:

"For me, the Monument, is not *lasting*, not *eternal* (my doctrine is too profoundly *Everything passes*: tombs die too), it is an act, an action, an *activity that brings recognition*."⁶

And so spring becomes a lamentation. On my desk is a (weathered) copy of the *Fasti*, Ovid's versification of the Roman calendar. He likely wrote the *Fasti* simultaneously with the *Metamorphoses*, circa 1 CE onward until his sudden exile in 8 CE; it helps to consider the two texts as companion pieces. If the former describes a year in Roman life through the exaltations, traumas, and turmoils of the Gods as these are inscribed into civic rite as "sacred matters,"⁷ the other hones in on the mechanisms and meaning of transformation at the center of those stories. Each date is a frame. Days feel self-enclosed. The tales both hold time and tamper with its laws. Time loop-de-loops. Transformations take place not in chronological order, but in the "multiplication of the scenes, precipitation, overdetermination."⁸ Time is a sad tableau vivant. Still, sensuality seeps through.



Sandro Botticelli, *Primavera*, ca. 1478-1482. Uffizi, Florence. CCO



The poem's secret subject lies in its chosen meter: the elegiac couplet. Ovid extends the slender voice of the elegiac from lamentations of unhappy love to touch on loss as a substantial theme underwriting civic rites. Ovid understands, basically, that grief—or loss, in its most expanded sense—is “a pattern cut and fitted” around public life, where it consecrates in certain rites and rituals. He pushes an etiological reading of Roman history in order to reveal its foundational myths as emotional ones. In both the *Fasti*, as in the *Metamorphoses*, the event of loss becomes synonymous with the change catalyzed. Ovid uses this poetic form to shift focus from the tale to the commemorative act (of inscription, of writing, of recall). In part this entails dethroning the epic and its insistence on heroism as a model for social life. But it also pushes an idea of private experience into proximity with an epic scale: love, and loss, are recognized for possessing signifiatory power over time. The calendar, like the diary, or the love letter, is a monument to the intemperateness of myth, constantly renegotiated.

On the cover of my edition, tellingly, is a detail from Sandro Botticelli's *Primavera* (ca. 1478-1482) of the Goddess Flora, her face framed in Venetian blonde tresses and falling flowers. Her expression bears signs of some lethal blankness. Flora's stare haunts my head all spring. I had picked up the *Fasti* early in the year to rethink time as it is indexed in myth. But transfixed in Flora's face was an entirely other subject, namely stuck-ness, which in my head harked back to some of the final lines of Sylvia Plath's posthumous volume of poems, *Ariel* (1965). In

Lucy Bull, *Crimes of the Future*, 2019. Courtesy: the artist and HIGH ART, Paris

“Edge,” she writes:

“She has folded [...] Them back into her body as petals Of a rose close when the garden Stiffens and odours bleed.”⁹

Consider *Ariel* a kind of epitaph. Plath's verse is lucid, and distant. It devastates with a promise of spring, foreclosed. Her language forms a garden that ravishes and drags to a standstill. Roses are flat. Branches are murderous, and they strangle. The will is petrified. Poppies are pale flames. Tulips are too red, and this redness “talks to my wound, it corresponds.”¹⁰ Spring flickers in the poems, but only as a threat. Flit back to the *Fasti*. On February 10, at the edge of spring, Ovid warns of cold spells still to come. Plath commits suicide on February 11, 1963. I notice while reading that there is no entry for this day in the *Fasti*. I find it remarkable. Not because I care to venerate Plath's refusal to see herself through another season. Instead the coincidence seems to confirm the place of the paralytic in spring. It points to Botticelli's painting to suggest that the stuck-ness etched in Flora's features signals, simply, something that has been lost. It is not until “Book 5: May” (May 2, to be precise) of the *Fasti* that Flora appears. Roses spill from her mouth as she speaks:

"I who am called Flora used to be Chloris. [...]

I used to be Chloris, a nymph of the happy field where once, you hear, fortunate men had business. What my figure was like, it's hard for me to tell you modestly—but it found for my mother a God as a son-in-law."

"It was spring, I was wandering. Zephyrus caught sight of me. I began to leave. He pursues, I flee, he was stronger."

In the *Primavera*, Flora's transformation is shown, strangely, in arrested motion. Her shape-shifting is freeze-framed. To the far right of the painting we see first the winged figure of Zephyrus, one of four Anemoi, or wind Gods, blowing into the court of Venus. He has been permitted entry into the garden of perpetual spring as his west wind promises balmy weather, but clearly he is disturbing the court's calm countenance. Laurel trees bend around the zephyr as he pushes into the garden. The curved boughs imitate the fleeing nymph's stature. She turns, panicked, to face the Wind, but the flat roses already spill from her mouth. Their stares lock. The flowers conjoin with those adorning the diaphanous dress of the woman beside. This woman, the Goddess Flora, is suspended in the act of strewing flowers. Her weightlessness is prime Botticelli. She is held at the edge of movement. Zephyrus, Chloris, and Flora form a visual chain that speaks to causality and change. Chloris is closed into the garden, or folded into Flora: "—and the lament remains," she consoles, "written on its petal."¹¹

What Plath—and Ovid and me and you and everyone we know—knows is that what fucks you up tends to be transformative. Violence pushes Flora to develop a language of flowers. Her grief finds an idiolect in the act of cultivation. "Through me, honor rises from their wound"¹² is referring to those turned into flowers by their metamorphoses. She has laid out their language through her own grief. But there are many other private languages in Ovid's tales. Those who love too much, become too jealous, see their selves threatened, are overcome by chaos, or other evils, or traps, are each transformed into various forms of life cut off from normative discourse. Mouths and tongues are often targets of violence. Their lamentations lose the calming consort of language. And still the paralytic manage to say what they mean. Their shrieks, screams, howls, and silences unsettle the surrounding world. "It takes a long time to relate examples of forgetfulness that have been put right by penalties," confesses Flora: "What was I to do? By what means was I to make my resentment plain? What penalties was I to exact for the slight on me?"¹³ She kills all vines and crops and gardens. Makes the skies go black. Sends squalls to topple boats. She lets signs perform her grief until it gains recognition by the Roman consuls. Eventually they vow to her the *Ludi Florales*, a festival of flowers, pleasure, wine. It announces (to the proletariat) the first days of summer.

For the most part, people are not transformed into divine versions of themselves when things go wrong. Transformations instead tend toward wildness. Grief is an image of "a real Bacchanale."¹⁴ Devastation and pleasure alike are often linked with acts of lying down. Crawling through the hell in our heads, sobbing on the floor. Rolling down meadows, *déjeuner sur l'herbe*, sex. I think about the complicated dynamic of this when Meriem Bennani and Orian Barki release their animated miniseries on Instagram about life in quarantine, called, simply, *2 Lizards* (2020). In episode 1, we follow two Brooklyn noble savages—both anthropomorphized artist-reptiles—marvelling at a rooftop scene while discussing being "kind of into" the isolation because of all the time it lends to private pleasures. Around them, various fauna on faraway roofs form a dispersed orchestra. Their flash mob plays a late-spring lamentation to the borough. The videos are sweet, witty, and sort of make my heart soar, but I get hung up on the lizards' disarming eloquence and upright stance. I wonder, perhaps too seriously for my own good, what this very humane version of being- or becoming-animal tells us. (I think to how Semele, the little lizard who lives beneath my mailbox, does lizard push-ups on all fours whenever she feels threatened. Her defense mechanism is to stand taller, her push a tiny act of resistance. It's cute.) By episode VI, the digital anxiety dream of lockdown has loosened, and the animal pals meet for dumplings to chat horror. One of the lizards recalls an absurdist trauma from childhood: "You know that the story of *Us* happened to me?... When I was five, I also got lost in a mirror maze for about an hour, and the park security had to come get



Milena Büsch, *Biene Maja / Maya blau*, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and FELIX GAUDLITZ, Vienna. Photo: kunst-dokumentation.com



Orian Barki and Meriem Bennani, *2 Lizards Episode 2 (still)*, 2020. Courtesy: the artists and CLEARING, New York / Brussels

me out." The secret heart of the miniseries flickers in front of me. Change is not always so straightforward. It pushes the chimerical. In tiny upward thrusts.

But, still perturbed by those left less sentient, I think also to the circumstances that freaked forth Milena Büsch's recent painting work. After a prolonged period of self-exile from the art world, distance had made the act of painting feel foreign. Everything around glittered in the aura of art, except what she was making, so she solved her stuck situation by taking to the readymade. She bought a plastic canvas covered in flowers and butterflies, painted over it, and called it a day. The shame made her sick, then suffer, and then finally, in slow motion, she felt some satisfaction. She felt herself solidify as a "painter" again. Perhaps painting on flimsy surfaces, carpets and napkins, troubled some blur between self and object. That is, maybe it helped her perspective (on art) to see painting so prostrate.

I realize in the midst of the June gloom how often I am overwhelmed by plant life. I am overwhelmed by my own plant-likeness. I often feel botanical. I try to solve this problem by identifying with plant-people. Not infrequently I dream about Édouard Vuillard's ability to make figures dissolve into a landscape. His paintings are ambient dreams of metamorphosis, but instead of pushing the human-animal boundary, people become patterns, wallpapers, shadows, plants. The works describe being swallowed into space. Vuillard nails a very contemporary anxiety of feeling oneself brightly and ecstatically dissolved. I often imagine that the apotheosis of this blur can be found in Lucy Bull's abstracted paintings. They seem shone through with pure light. Something in them glows like the promise of love (and traps, accordingly). In the midst of my botanization, a red tide also washes onto the coast of Southern California. A neon wave of bioluminescent plankton. The shore, all lit up, speaks a mysterious language. A friend tells me that some species communicate with their glow. "It's us that don't communicate by light that are weird," he says. "The sea was telling you something." The tricky thing is learning how to listen. If you figure it out, I think, it'll sing, or spring, you into change. Not lost at all, not lasting, but in motion—*tombs die too*.

Endnotes

- 1 Sophocles, *Electra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 56.
- 2 John Milton, "Book IV," in *Paradise Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 47.
- 3 Anne Carson, "Screaming in Translation," in *Sophocles, Electra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 50.
- 4 Carson, "Screaming in Translation," 50.
- 5 Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 3.
- 6 Roland Barthes, "June 5, 1978," in *Mourning Diary: October 26, 1977–September 15, 1979* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 133.
- 7 Ovid et al., "Introduction," in *Fasti* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 133.
- 8 Gilles Deleuze and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, *Masochism* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 70.
- 9 Sylvia Plath, "Edge," in *Ariel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), 80.
- 10 Plath, "Edge," 13.
- 11 Ovid, "Book 5: May," 92.
- 12 Ovid, "Book 5: May," 92.
- 13 Ovid, "Book 5: May," 94.
- 14 Ovid, "Tereus, Procne, and Philomela," in *Metamorphoses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 139.