# "So That The Raggedness Becomes Confused":
# Max Ritvo's *Four Reincarnations* and the Poetics of Con-Fusion

*"Cinders are still matter. I sign in the humus.*
*Of the inhuman, I bear witness to the inhumed."*
– Jean-Francois Lyotard

They say you're not supposed to take your eye off of the object, in a paper like this – that you're supposed to write about the thing, and keep your relation to it off to the side. I think that that's always impossible. I know that it's impossible here.

They also say you're not supposed to die of cancer at twenty-five.

And so we're here because one rupture deserves, or demands, another; because I loved Max Ritvo, and then he was dying, and then he wrote *Four Reincarnations*, and then he died – and then the book came (back) to us, just like it promised to, with a chance to hear his voice again, to imagine conversations never had, to be told what dying was like in a shout bellowed from the window of the bullet-train as it sped to the other side of the veil. The morbid fascination of last words, cut through with the tantalizing possibility of a living-on. I thought it might bring him back to me. Max knew better, knew it could only bring me back to him.

In order to understand *Four Reincarnations*, it is first necessary to identify its narrative structure – or structures, for, as its title and quadripartite form suggest, Ritvo's text is concerned with the possibility of articulating multiple temporalities, of uncertain shape and relation. Unsurprisingly, given the circumstances of its composition, the most obvious of these structures is an almost-teleological narrative of terminal illness. *Four Reincarnations's* first poem, "Living it Up," begins in a moment of crisis and confusion – "The bed is on fire, and are you laughing?"

(3) – that serves almost to define the first word of its title. As the poem continues, this confusion ramifies, as the problematic of "living" is fleshed out more fully, as Ritvo declares that "I wish you would let me know / how difficult it is to love me. // Then I would know you love me / underneath all that difficulty," raising the fundamental – and fundamentally twinned – questions of how a person can bear being with another person, especially one who is dying, and how that other person can bear being loved. To this, Ritvo adds an image of living as learning to live with the air that is taking his place: "and air puts his feet in my slippers, / and air scrubs his teeth on my brush, // and we must learn to share a bed, / we must learn to share a body."

The narrative of illness continues in "The Watercolor Eulogy," a poem dedicated to Melissa Carroll, a painter and friend who died of the same cancer that would claim Ritvo's life a few years later. The poem begins with Ritvo contrasting how Carroll flits in and out of his memories with his memory of her funeral: "When you leave my mind, / the last piece of you to leave / is your hands. // When you go to the earth / the last part of you visible / above what is either sand or clay / isn't a hand, but a glowing shroud" (11). At the end of the poem, Ritvo imagines his own burial – "And soon I'll join you / amid the terms / for tiny bottles of defunct potions / and no longer understood passions" (12) – and declares that when this happens, he and Carroll will likewise put the private intimacy of their relationship into the ground: "and together we'll bury / our own particular *I love you*. // I wouldn't mind it being sealed off with us, in our brick of earth." Although the poem itself offers some resistance to the finality of this image, the overwhelming sense is of death as a container that 'seals off' not only those that it holds, but also their attachments, extending even to the meanings of the words that passed between them.

The final poem of the illness narrative in the book's first section is "Poem to My Litter," in which Ritvo meditates on twelve mice who have been given his cancer, in order to test the efficacy of possible treatments. "My doctors split my tumors up and scattered them / into the bones of twelve mice. We give // the mice poisons I might, in the future, want / for myself. We watch each mouse like a crystal ball. // I wish it was perfect, but sometimes the death we see / doesn't happen when we try it again in my body" (14). Ritvo – who, as the title of a later poem reveals, was a vegetarian – is horrified by what these mice are subjected to, in the name of finding a treatment for his illness, describing a litany of miseries – "Before the tumors can spread // they bust open the legs of the mice. Who bleed to death. / Next time the doctors plan to cut off the legs // in the nick of time so the tumors will spread. / But I still have both my legs. To complicate things further, // mouse bodies fight off my tumors. We have to give / the mice AIDS so they'll harbor my genes peacefully" (15) – before declaring that the mice, who he has named after himself and admits seeing as substitutes for the children he doesn't have, are "like children you've traumatized / and tortured so they won't let you visit." He ends the poem by wishing the mice the same peace he is himself seeking through their torment: "I hope, Maxes, some good in you is of me. / Even my suffering is good, in part... // And since I do absolutely nothing (my pride, like my fur, / all gone) nothing happens to me. And if a whole lot // of nothing happens to you, Maxes, that's peace. Which is what we want. Trust me" (15) – a declaration that hovers uncertainly between hope and resignation.

The book's second section is notably all-but-devoid of references to the illness narrative, save for a passing reference to "my eternal sickbed" (29) in "Stalking My Ex-Girlfriend in a Pasture," which also concludes with the ambiguous declaration that "I refuse the doctor's fizzy

tincture / because each bubble is me / until it pops on my tongue / and then it's you." It returns in force, however, in the volume's third section. "When I Criticize You, I'm Just Trying to Criticize The Universe" begins with a question, posed by Ritvo's wife, that turns the reader's focus immediately back to the brutal, visceral realities of living with illness: "*Why do you shit so much – is it cancer or anxiety?*" (36). Later in the poem, Ritvo implores his wife not to be "mad" at his desire to "sleep in the bathroom tonight," bringing into focus the derangement of intimacy that his illness is wreaking; her reply – "*I'm not mad at you, / I'm mad at the universe unfolding in your body."* – re-imagines his cancer as a cosmological phenomenon, an infinite excess that allows her to relate to him in a way that allows him to relate to others ("*Me seeing the universe in your body / is what makes you such a people person*"), but is nonetheless tearing his body apart from the inside.

From this point, the third section takes on what can only be described as a terminal velocity, as Ritvo grapples frontally with the reality of his death, now seemingly-imminent. He imagines his "Radiation in New Jersey, Convalescence in New York" as a process of false hope for more life intervening in his his ability to share his remaining days with his wife – a "place … / where the Ziploc bag prevents the lovers / from breathing the same evening // … where the water's emptiness / is so savage that / when you drink it / the fish of the throat die, / causing malignant thirst" (40). He imagines the sound of the machines aimed at treating him as droning domestic appliances that drown out his attempts at conversation: "I awoke on the table with a blue cylinder pressed to my neck. / From deep inside the cylinder I heard a sound // like a trembling man / opening the smallest can of soup – / a can with only one green bean in it. // Next to him, a woman is completely silent. / Feeding him the bean / becomes her only thought, / even

when he tries to admire her beauty / or make her laugh. / She folds into the green glow / and nobody will listen to his news" (40-41). If, in "Poem to My Litter," Ritvo is struggling with the harm done to the twelve mice being used to test the effects of potential cures, unsure of whether his pursuit of "peace" outweighs the violence inflicted on them in the process, here the nature of his hopes seems to have tipped from survival to being allowed to not spend his last days flailing against the inevitable.

By the first lines of the next poem, "Poem Set In The Day And In The Night," it is clear that those responsible for his care have come around to sharing these diminished hopes: "Just do the things that are meaningful to you. / Go to the beach, says the Doc" (42). At the beach, however, he has a vision of absolute horror:

> The sun is wide, like an eye cut open,
> and it blasts the man so that his whole shadow
> scuttles beneath his belly.
>
> The shadow grows dense
> and the man sweats himself thin.
>
> The man becomes a web / and his shadow becomes a spider. // … //
>
> That night a cricket kills himself in the man.
>
> It's unbearable, his silk body thrilled throughout
> with the screams. All the man is: a speaker –
>
> and not loud enough to communicate
> the fear to God.
>
> Enough, however, to bring the spider.
>
> Who brings a kind of relief. (42-43)

The horror of this vision is sufficient to prompt Ritvo to consider taking morphine to ease his suffering. "Is it a sin to take the moon? On a night like this? // To bathe the body in soapy light, sipping / gray moisture like beads on a necklace?" (42), he asks – but he decides to hold fast to

consciousness, answering these questions with another: “But what night isn’t like this?” Surfacing from the agony, he feels almost reborn, exclaiming that “On the other side, you’re the body again, / and the shadow is again shadow. // You can enjoy anything – you don’t remember /how clumsy the old hands were, how picky the tongue.” The poem ends with an image of purgation in this Purgatory: “when you weep, sorrow comes clean out. / Hello again, you say. Hello again” (44). The valence of this moment, however, depends entirely on whether one takes Ritvo to be addressing the world, renewed after his sorrow has washed out with his tears, or his sorrow – who must, by this point, be so familiar as to warrant being welcomed like an old friend.

The final four poems of this third section find Ritvo drawing progressively closer to death (in “Troy,” the section’s antepenultimate poem, Ritvo acknowledges this directly: “The watchman in his tall tower / worries / Every day he must make his yo-yo string / a little tighter” [48]) – before, in a moment of the most profound uncertainty, he flits across its threshold. In “A Poem to My Dog, Monday, On Night I Accidentally Ate Meat,” Ritvo imagines himself trading places with his dog, who has already died. “The lights went out on Monday / lying on a green rug – / wanting to make noise, only – // a visitation left / in his small white body” (45), Ritvo narrates, “Monday, the Hunt left your bed. / It found a white bulb / in your body to sleep in. // Monday, it’s leaving me too. / Why does life love flowers most / when they are still bulbs?” Punning on the image of bulbous plant matter, Ritvo offers to be a lamp lighting his dead dog’s eyes – or an almost-suicidal shot in the dark: “I will slip behind your poodle eyes, / loading myself like a cartridge of light. // I will live in your small ecstatic brain / and take your life, // and you can take mine, / and we won’t give our lives to cancer, / but to each other. // And thank God for the future, / where we levitate, / or maybe Oblivion curls down our ears / into wings, or figs

that He eats" (45-46). By the conclusion of this poem, Ritvo seems to have one foot on death's doorstep, meditating on a coming transfiguration into other kinds of life, matter, and memory.

Before this moment arrives, however, he shines one more shade of light on the figure of the bulb in "Heaven is Us Being a Flower Together." The poem begins by describing a disagreement with his wife, Victoria, on the nature of death: "Victoria, I think death comes at blindness. // I think pupils are sails / and death is when the wind goes slack. // Winter, by being so white, is trying to talk to me – // *closing* communicated to one who sees death / as white worms / riddling the apple of the eye. // You think death comes at the cessation of touch. / You are a flower bulb / that can feel even in winter earth" (49). Ritvo and his wife thus diverge on the question of whether death is experienced entirely from within – Ritvo's perspective, as the dying man – or on both sides of the membrane of touch, as his wife, who will survive him, maintains.

The next time he speaks, on the other side of this figurative consummation, Ritvo finds himself already dead. "When I was about to die / my body lit up / like when I leave my house / without my wallet" (50), begins "Afternoon," the final poem of the third section. He imagines the moment of his passing as a wishing-well turned to steam by the heat generated by the simultaneous realization of every hope with which it's ever been invested: "– my body lights up for life / like all the wishes being granted in a fountain / at the same instant – / all the coins burning the fountain dry – // and I give my breath / to a small, bird-shaped pipe." The poem's final lines – "In the distance, behind several voices / haggling, I hear a sound like heads / clicking together. Like a game of pool / played with people by machines." – introduce interlocking ambiguities. The most obvious reading is that these lines are meant to revise the temporality posited by those that open the poem. "When I was about to die" would then be

reframed as presenting a near-death experience, rather than a voice from beyond the grave – a reading in keeping with the fact that the dead, typically, cannot write poems; in this reading, the poem's closing lines would thus describe Ritvo's coming to, in a hospital, after having died only momentarily. If one recalls Ritvo's claim in "Poem in Which My Shrink Is A Little Boy," an earlier poem in the third section, that "Just like neurons fire into a mind, / part habit, part chaos / so too the world's voices fire into a God" (38), the ambiguity of these closing lines suggests a much deeper, cosmic ambiguity; Ritvo, having given up his breath, is unsure whether the divine cloud of voices that he hears is not merely masking the noise of a self-regulating mechanism in which human lives are but a few the pieces. The uncertainty over whether Ritvo's poem is, in fact, narrated from beyond the grave, thus becomes folded into a much broader uncertainty about the nature of that beyond, which in turn informs the conditions of possibility of the narrower question with which it is involuted.

The fourth section of *Four Reincarnations* does little to resolve this uncertainty, at least on its surface; it is almost devoid of the characters that have populated the earlier sections, and the "I" that speaks takes on a diminished role in the utterances it contains, which range wildly across planes of memory and metaphysics, through visions ecstatic, natural, and banal. The illness narrative, such as it is, appears properly in only a few poems. In the first, "Second Dream," Ritvo recounts a conversation with a beloved friend: "Me: *What is my future?* / Shon: *Flowers. You are marrying flowers*" (53). In addition to being presented as a dream, untethered from material reality, this conversation blurs the lines between life and death, figuring burial as marriage with the earth and what grows from it. In "Appeal to My First Love," Ritvo asks the memory of a partner whose adoration he found "stultifying" (56) to "Come back … // Adore me

to sleep before sleep can adore me on it's own terms" (56); in "The End," however, he describes how "I wondered, at one point, / if I had in fact killed myself – / if death just meant spending / all your time with your past" (63) – a questioning that unmoors "Appeal to My First Love" from any firm grounding in the fullness of life. "The Vacuum Planet of the Pee-Pee Priestess" closes with Ritvo declaring that "I hear my own voice, in the moaning, / from the world beyond: " (61), with the white of the page that follows meant to either underwrite or overrule the possibility of a voice from beyond the grave. In "Zyprexa, The Snow Pills," there is an account of the failure of treatment, but one wholly devoid of a speaking subject: "have too many wounds to zip up, / brain becoming a suit of zippers, / soberly shutting" (66); the poem, however, stands alone in the volume for having its title operate as a part of its text, as if the speaking subject has been displaced by language speaking itself – a sense reinforced by the way that the poem turns around the closing of the 'zip' that opens "Zyprexa." Following the account of a world utterly unlike this world in "The Hanging Gardens," Ritvo declares "I will move on" (69); the next poem, the volume's last, takes place on the edge of his grave.

"Universe Where We Weren't Artists" begins with Ritvo addressing those who will live on after him: "I am given a reward: / You two will pick / where I rest" (70). It closes with another death scene, as he recounts "A cuff of air. / We look up to / the hilarious moon. // I fall down in white mud." Finally, it closes with an exhortation that is also a benediction of sorts: "When the breath starts to be ragged, / tickle me, my deepest beloveds – / so that the raggedness becomes confused." And with this, he is gone.

Or is he? The final word of the volume serves, in fact, to open up an alternative metaphysics, which throughout *Four Reincarnations* contests the illness narrative thus described,

and the linearity on which it depends. What, after all what is confusion? Etymologically, it presents a paradox: to be 'fused,' or melted together by heat, denotes a change of phase, of solid matter becoming liquid flow, losing its rigid boundaries – but the 'con-' implies that this melting together takes place *with* something else, re-inscribing a fluid border between these separate substances in the moment of their union. It is this uncertain line of demarcation that provides the structure for *Four Reincarnations*'s alternative narrative(s), as it wonders (at) where the self stops and the other starts, where life ends and death – or another life – begins, what it means to be with someone, or with oneself; what it means to live with cancer, without hope of cure; how to bear witness to all of these *withs*, how to *bear withness*, to live (on) in con-fusion.

In addition to tracing the linear progression of the illness narrative up to and beyond the threshold of the beyond, each of the volume's four sections can also be understood as a *cycle*, taking up the problematic of "con-fusion" from a different angle; furthermore, each does so around the figure of a woman (or women) who serve as the model for the mode of relationality on which the cycle is focused. In the first cycle, this figure is the absent woman introduced in some of the first lines of the book: "You leave the bed / and leave me without thought" (3). If this 'you' leaves "without thought," however, her leaving has precisely the opposite effect on Ritvo – who is, as a result, left *alone with his thoughts*. As the cycle progresses, this figure becomes Melissa Carroll, whose first appearance is a double act of leaving: "When you leave my mind / … // When you go to the earth" (11). In the next poem, "Hi, Melissa," Ritvo presents two sets of three lines each which provide one of the clearest figures in the book for Ritvo's poetics of con-fusion: "I have spoken to you of heaven – / I simply meant the eyes are suns that see. / Seeing is the faces' nervous delicious Lord. // Listening to you makes me naked. / When I kiss

your ankle I am silencing an oracle. / The oracle speaks from the hill of your ankle" (13). The first stanza thus posits the eye as a celestial body that "faces" worship, thus situating heaven *within* the earthbound, the spiritual *as part of* the corporeal. In so doing, it presents a paradox: One turns one's face to (or away from) the divine, but if the divine is the act of seeing as it resides in the eye – as it, in turn, resides in the face – then this gesture of devotion becomes impossible, and the physical reality of the body deranges the conceptual schema here outlined.

A similar paradox is contained in the second stanza: Ritvo explains that he is made "naked" by listening to Carroll – because an oracular voice issues from her ankle, and is silenced when he kisses it. Once more, the chain of causality presented is impossible; Ritvo's nakedness must be preceded by Carroll's own, or else he could not kiss her ankle at all, but silencing the oracle of her ankle with this kiss would prevent the "listening" that he declares as the cause of his own nakedness, such that consummating their mutual nakedness simultaneously effaces it. Again, then, the contact between bodies, like the fact that the faces' Lord is lodged in the face, *interrupts* the very communion that those bodies seek through contact; the situation is hopelessly confused.

There are, however, three alternative readings of these six lines, which resolve their apparent problematic in diverse ways. First, if one understands Ritvo's nakedness to be caused *not* by the voice of her ankle, but by the fact of its being naked enough to speak to him, then the kiss that silences the oracle *would not* carry the annihilation of its intent along with it; likewise, if the "seeing" that is "the faces' Lord" is not the seeing performed by its own eyes, but by the eyes that behold it, the face would *not* be unable face its Lord. Such a reading would posit a communion that is dependent on the independence of the other, one's powerlessness to intervene

would therefore become the predicate for intimacy. Second, if one remembers that Carroll has already passed away (and been buried, many times over, in the previous poem), the emotional valence of the second stanza becomes inverted; the "oracle" speaking from her ankle can be seen as predicting Ritvo's own future demise, thus making him naked, while kissing the ankle would silence its intimations of mortality through an assertion of the body's power to leave the mind behind (thus anticipating the central thematic of the second cycle). Finally, if one jettisons linear time and causality – and, perhaps, interpretation in the traditional sense – and replaces them with *inter-predication*, a sort of con-fusion where effects can cause their own cause, and the spatio-temporal borders between things become fuzzy, then "Hello, Melissa" presents no paradoxes to resolve.

The inter-predication described by this lattermost reading would seem to bear some similarity to the movements of a mind, in a way that is echoed by the poetics of the first cycle. In "The Curve," Ritvo recounts an origin story of sorts:

> Something, call it X, wanted a body
> so it made our bodies.
> But our bodies weren't right for it –
>
> gum around the bones,
> a rash of gold or black,
>
> eyes like blisters, leaking fondness.
>
> *
> X realized all animal bodies were like this, so it made language.
>
> *
> Language forced X into the body
> like carbonation into a soda. (4)

This cosmogony of language and embodiment posits both as structures devised for containing something heterogeneous to either; a variable that, as the poem later suggests, may in fact be a

figure for indeterminacy itself, X as a constant of variability: “We imagine a vertical meadow / complicated into our world *needlessly* / but complication is all X ever wanted for us. / We misunderstand purity. This is purity.” (5). This understanding of the body leaves the mind always a step removed from its trappings – “confused, surprised at the confusion, / surprised at the surprise, / and so on, very tiringly, so on” – and thus posits confusion as resting at the heart of what it means to be.

The very language making up the poems of the first cycle performs this con-fusion: the “rash of gold and black” that Ritvo identifies as the source of X’s dissatisfaction with animal bodies reappears in “Holding a Freshwater Fish In A Pail Above the Sea,” when Ritvo asks the absent woman: “Where have / you gone? I was / hoping to wake / from this dream // with you drawing / the curtains, a gold / glow on the sheet, wrapping me up” (9-10). The reference to drawing suggests Carroll, the painter, who appears on the following page; this identification is reinforced by the resonances between the “glow on the sheet, wrapping me up” and the “glowing shroud” (11) which Ritvo claims is the last part of Carroll visible before she is buried. In the lines immediately following, Ritvo describes “The black goose / with you name in its throat / and my name in its stomach” (11) who “will cough you up with her hoots: / part jelly, part watch, / part bone, part me, / part power.” The “rash of black and gold” thus re-appears, centered around proximate figures of the absent Carroll, who has been transformed in the belly of the goose into a con-fusion of sounds and concepts.

Among these concepts is time –in the figure of the “watch” – which reappears in “Dawn of Man,” the first cycle’s penultimate poem. Coming immediately after “Poem for My Litter,” with its claim that “My genes are in mice, and not in the banal way / that Man’s old genes are in

the Beasts" (14), "Dawn of Man" opens with Ritvo imagining himself as the product of a failed metamorphosis: "After the cocoon I was in a human body / instead of a butterfly's. All along my back // there was great pain – I groped to my feet / Where I felt wings behind me, trying // to tilt me back. They succeeded in doing so / after a day of exertion. I called that time, // overwhelmed with the ghosts of my wings, sleep. / My thoughts remained those of a caterpillar –" (16). These lines complicate the human-animal con-fusion of the previous poem; emerging from the metaphorical cocoon of young adulthood not as the expected butterfly, but rather a frail, cancer-ridden human, Ritvo finds himself pulled down to the ground by the weight of the *absence* of his wings, and in possession of an insect-like mind. The poem concludes with Ritvo declaring: "I'm told to set myself goals. But my mind / doesn't work that way. I, instead, have wishes // for myself. Wishes that aren't afraid / to take on their own color and life – // like a boy who takes a razor from a high cabinet, / puffs out his cheeks, and strips them bloody" (17). The poem thus turns around an image of suffering caused by precociousness – the young man, reaching for a razor before his time and wearing his "own color and life" on his bloody cheeks as a result, serving as an apt figure for the poet told that he is dying far before his time.

At the same time, however, the poem is full of alternative models of temporality. There is the geological time of the title, "Dawn of Man"; the animal time suggested by the image of metamorphosis, as well as the narrative time that this figure implies (and which is suggested again by the poem's mention of "ghost stories," which also carries an intimation of spectral time); clock time, as Ritvo mentions "minutes," and "hours"; physiological time, in the invocations and figures of adolescence; and astronomical time, as Ritvo mentions "a day of exertion." The facial narrative of precociousness and suffering is thus revealed to be predicated

on accepting one of a vast number of simultaneously-occurring conceptions of temporality – even as Ritvo's thoughts perform the very violence he charges them with in "The Senses": "Everything feels so good to me: /... // But I keep having thoughts – / this thought always holding at bay the next thought / until it sours into yet // another picture of dissatisfaction / that loves to be thought, // another pear, ugly / as the head / of a man who is thinking" (6).

This process is literally realized in the final poem of the first cycle, "Black Bulls." "My mind is / three black bulls on / three hills of sand, far apart" (18), Ritvo intones, before explaining that "The aqueduct of the city of my language / clot with lather. // The world is bad / and I am bad." This lather can only be the lather from the image of the savagely abortive attempt at shaving from "Dawn of Man," the poem immediately prior – which is itself an image for the ways that Ritvo's hopes and wishes are shorn bloody by the reality of his illness. Here, then, the narrative of the first cycle concludes, with Ritvo despairing of the idea that he can navigate the confusion of his illness simply by being left alone with his thoughts, and the language they produce: "Three black bulls on three hills / of sand are stretching apart / the sheet of my language, crawling with ants. // This is the basis on which we seek company: / I am bad, / the world is bad. / … // I am so sorry that you have come to this mind of mine" (18-19). With these words, Ritvo closes the first cycle, refusing the confusions of mind and language alone as sufficient grounds for intimacy and succor.

The second cycle picks up right where the first leaves off, and takes up the idea of the bodily ecstasy as a mode of relationality and con-fusion, turning around the two figures of Ritvo's ex-girlfriend and his mother. The cycle begins with "The Crow," which presents a whirlwind of fusion and con-fusion as a possible antidote to the confusion of dying of cancer: "I

am a crow, and / I think you are mostly a pattern of motion / and I am a leaf – and your hands fan under / and over me, and create a little space / in which the thing in my life that adds / is my motion" (23). Ritvo delves deeper into this notion that the riot of the body can quell his body's riotousness:

> not I think you can be traced / most easily by the echoes of your kinetics, my love. / Your lips, neck, arms, / these are not a harbor; / the you around-you is the harbor. // In our bed, in the dark / it is sound, not outline, / but the motion of you / that brings to the surface of my body / all of the apparentness / of a settling glass of muddy water. // How I feel is then forgotten, / and instead I find myself / moving, joy, moving! (23-24).

This is the very picture of ecstasy – literally, standing outside oneself, but also ex-stasis, motion following stillness. The next poem, "To Randal, Crow-Stealer, Lord of the Greenhouse" literalizes this notion of ecstasy, as a shamanistic Ritvo performs imagines himself quarreling with "Randal," a figure representing his rational mind. Ritvo describes Randal as literally exiting his body as he inhales the smoke of a flower sacrificed on a burning altar: "...a little man emerges: this is called being possessed. // I dance out here, trouserless on the salt flat, dazzled by hail, / because every gesture perfects my body / into the little man's happy home. // You have no flowers in your indoor dark, fireless Randal!" (26). While Randal preaches to Ritvo the virtues of staying indoors – "*Imagine prying fingers through the bricks, / making tunnels your mind first saw as ghosts. // Imagine pressing your lips to the pipes / and sipping dew from the outside. //... Max, I have invented glass, through which the sun may light my flowers. // One day you'll be stable enough to make a woman happy, / and that will go a long way*" – Ritvo rejoices in the body's visceral unruliness: "You are exquisitely sensitive. / I imagine defecating over your eyebrows: a unibrow." If Ritvo finds some succor in this rampant, thoughtless physicality, however, it does not last long.

Indeed, in "Stalking My Ex-Girlfriend in a Pasture," Ritvo runs into yet another kind of ex-stasis; that is, being hung up on his ex – who, as the poem describes, "described an orgasm / so imaginatively that I longed to become her. // She instructed me to unyoke the mind and body / so that the mind could speak / as the body came" (28). The problem, as Ritvo describes it, is that "I split wrong. Only my mind split – / into an array of sirens with / show tunes played in between them. // Or maybe it was only my body / and that is why I am naked and bloody," thus suggesting that con-fusion through the ecstatic body alone is also bound to failure, because it reinforces a dualism of body and mind that makes it impossible to encounter the other as a unified person, or to be a unified person in the encounter with the other. Hence, Ritvo's refusal of "the doctor's fizzy tincture / because each bubble is me / until it pops on my tongue / and then it's you" (29) – there can only be alternation, and not con-fusion, with the other when interaction is predicated on a dis-integrated self – and his desire "to take back the hide she took // to be the sheet / on my eternal sickbed." The ambiguity of these lines – does Ritvo want to take back the hide she took in order to use it as a sheet on his "eternal sickbed," or take back the hide that she *took to be* "the sheet" on the eternal sickbed of his mind – turns on how one reads the words "to be," thereby simultaneously reinforcing the ontological ambiguity that the second cycle grapples with, and resisting the notion that a fusion of bodies can serve as an adequate palliative for a confused mind, or an adequate substitute for a deeper sort of con-fusion.

In the next poem, "Mommy Harangues Poor Randal," the literal ex-stasis wrestled with in the previous poem is aligned with the figure of the mother, and the broader stasis of remaining mired in the past. In the poem, Ritvo's mother – or the voice of his mother that Ritvo has internalized – reminds him that the body is a site of violence: "take hard look in the mirror //

your brow is brutal, your teeth are for meat, / your eyes are globes and hunched beneath them / is *my* ghost who blinks them shut, who pulls out / your tears...” (30). The voice then threatens Randal, the figure of the externalized mind leaving the body to its own devices: “Go outside and play, but if you come / knocking on my door when you’re done / don’t be surprised if I say *Who’s there?* // And if you *keep* pushing, and dare / name yourself, here’s a warning – / they call it a punch line because I punch you / in the fucking face if you step over the line.” Here, then, the figure of the ex-girlfriend is de-personalized, by virtue of being muddled in with the figure of the mother; these are figures of and in conciousness that enforce the inability of consciousness to abandon the body. Ecstasy, as it turns out, is not only not an adequate way of being-with oneself *or* the other; it isn’t even truly available to a person, shaped by history and memory.

The final poem of the second cycle, “Lyric Complicity for One,” makes this abundantly clear, while also providing a measure of retrospective forgiveness to the figures in these memories. “I wanted to speak with a woman / so passionately and imaginatively that our personalities / would dissolve, we would begin to lie, / and a thing between us / much more beautiful than either of our voices / would begin to speak – a lyric complicity” (31). This “lyric complicity” is another way of figuring the con-fusion that Ritvo is so relentlessly seeking – but even here, he recognizes that the *dissolution* of the self in the other is a form of dishonesty; were it to be attained, “we would begin to lie.” Furthering the image, he provides a stunning figure:

> Instead, imagine a fisherman / rubbing hot water on his throat. / His mother once said /gargle hot water when your throat’s tight. He cant remember the word *gargle* in the memory, / only his mother fanning out her fingers as she said it, / small, precise, and a little wicked. / So now he gets it wrong, feeling forlorn. // Beneath him swim bluefin tuna at fifty miles and hour, / fast and invisible as the wicked fingers. / These sea-seams, these black-bodied cloaks of guts, / are just as dazed as the thoughts of the fisherman. / For every thought, a new fish soars / right under the anchored boat – / a lullaby to quiet another lullaby. (31)

These dense lines show Ritvo realizing that the image of the mother in the previous poem is distorted by memory; he remembers her fingers looking "wicked" as she fanned them out to show him how to care for a sore throat, but not the remedy she actually prescribed; his errors are his own, his inability to open his throat enough to attain a "lyric complicity" not his mother's fault. Yet his misremembering makes the fish he seeks – and the "lyric complicity" he so desperately wants with a woman – unattainable; the fish are "fast and invisible as the wicked fingers." Seeing the fish as only bodies – "black-bodied cloaks of guts" – he is unaware that they are moving in concert with his thoughts; the comfort they might offer silences the unheard but soothing voice of his mother, "a lullaby to quiet another lullaby." With this realization, Ritvo moves beyond both ecstasy and ex-stasis, and is able to exchange its confusion for the con-fusion he seeks.

Thus, when the third cycle begins, Ritvo is married, and marriage – centered around the figure of his wife, Victoria – is the mode of con-fusion explored by the third cycle. In its first poem, "Poem About My Wife Being Perfect And Me Being Afraid," Ritvo describes a union premised on inter-predication: "You chase my face with your face / by making my faces: // Your lips, right after mine / form a crescent / and wax and wane with all the moons of my mouth. // You catch up and have my thoughts. / Your brain binds around mine, a gold gauze" (35). The poem begins with mimesis – Victoria chasing Ritvo's face with her own, pursuing him by making "his faces" – but soon she has caught up with him, and binds herself to him as a healing "gauze" around his troubled mind. From this point forth, mimesis yields to inter-predication: "You have my thoughts faster than I can. / The mouth made from our lips / pours chilly water / out the pipe. // We go faster than I imagined / my mind built time or built itself." The single

mouth made out of their two mouths inverts Randal's injunction in the second cycle to "*Imagine pressing your lips to the pipes* / *And sipping dew from the outside*" (26); the consumptive relation of the disjoined person is replaced with a generative productivity of a person internally integrated, and externally con-fused with another. This con-fusion throws time itself out of joint; not only do Ritvo and Victoria "go faster than I imagined / my mind built time or built itself" (35), but this velocity is such that it rockets the reader back to the beginning of the poem, lending a new sense to the claim that "You chase my face with your face / by making my faces" – it is now possible to read these lines as saying that Victoria *makes* Ritvo's faces even as she chases them; a reading reinforced – and wedded to the concepts of generativity and creativity – by the poem's closing line: "Thou art me before I am myself." Again, the reader finds a shift in ontology, where the *art-ing* of the other lies anterior to the *be-ing* of the self.

Ritvo shows the con-fusion of marriage to be not without its confusions, however. In "When I Criticize You, I'm Just Trying To Criticize The Universe," Ritvo answers the question "*Why do you shit so much – is it cancer or anxiety?*" (36) with the admission: "I go to the bathroom to visit my ex-girlfriends." While there, he recounts a series of nested dreams, which echo the burials inside of burials of "The Watercolor Eulogy": "I dreamt two dreams – one inside the other – / The outer dream, a shell, / the inner dream, a yolk. // In the yolk dream I was a horse – the dream broke, / I awoke, and saw you driving the dream, / charioteer of my sleep. // Then the shell dream broke and I woke again" (36-37). The imagery of these dreams recalls Ritvo's claim in "To Randal, Crow-Stealer, Lord of the Greenhouse" – "I am a horse, and my mother is riding me" (25) – and the scene is thus reframed as him struggling, even within his married state, to fend off the ex-stasis whose overcoming provided the central drama of the previous cycle.

Ritvo succeeds, however, and returns from the bathroom to his sleeping wife: “Beyond the door, in the realest bed, / I find you sleeping. / Your breast / is like the delicious voice / in the telephone. // Your bones when I bite too deep / are the phone’s wires, / full of voice, blue marrow.” The image of the body as the voice in a telephone provides a figure of intimacy across distance, but with separateness maintained; the poem’s final lines, meanwhile, find Ritvo chastising himself for gnawing through the wires, interrupting the connection, when he bites “too deep.”

The next poem in the cycle, “Poem in Which My Shrink is a Little Boy,” finds Ritvo considering another kind of marriage: the marriage of souls obtaining between himself and his psychoanalyst, who he imagines finding reincarnated in the body of a small boy, identified as the one Ritvo is seeking by virtue of his ability to pick out his analyst’s “old legal pad” (38) and “Listerine PocketPak Breath Strips” from a line-up. “For all eternity we’ve switched off as patient and doctor, / our souls twinned through countless bodies. // … // Our chats are as important to God / as your thalamus is to you. / He can’t risk us not / analyzing one another forever – / he might have a seizure. // If this doesn’t make sense yet, don’t worry. / Tell me about your day, / and I will tell you about your day / until it is our day” (38-39). Crucially, this is the only appearance of the word “soul” in the volume, to describe what of Ritvo and his analyst migrates from body to body; the false dualism of the first two cycles has been resolved into a more integrated conception of the person. Even in this marriage, however, Ritvo has some doubts – although fittingly, it is not clear if the words with which he concludes the poem are his or his analysts: “Things don’t change unless we want them to. / And why would we want to give up / the little things we know / when we know so little?” It is clear that these words reflect some

ambivalence on Ritvo's part about being wedded, across time and space and several lifetimes, to his analyst-analysand relationship – but it is also clear that this relationship is the kind of con-fusion with which one can live.

The third cycle's exploration of the inner limits of con-fusion continues through "Radiation in New York, Convalescence in New Jersey" – both through its title (New York and New Jersey exist in their own kind of con-fused marriage, after all), and its exploration of the delicate balance between Victoria's desire to prolong Ritvo's life, and Ritvo's desire for her to create spaces "when he tries to admire her beauty / or make her laugh" (41) – and the visions of horror and rebirth in "Poem Set In The Day and In The Night," as it straddles the hallucinatory twilight and closes with Ritvo and his words turned into rings: "When you smile, every tooth is a perfect O, / when you write, every letter is a perfect O" (44).

Con-fusion takes on a darker cast in "Poem to my Dog, Monday, On Night I Accidentally Ate Meat" – in addition to the unintentional carnivorousness recounted by the title, and the proffering of a murder-suicide-by-body-swapping pact to a dead dog, Ritvo is uncertain about the ethics of the poem's central conceit: "The symbol is outrageous: like a hungry man / in your soul slamming down jam jars. // Thank God for the past tense, and its order / and that the dog died before it was symbolic" (45). The order and regimentation of language is thus offered as a means of mitigating the con-fusion around which the poem turns, but this mitigation is itself confused, for the symbolic weight of the dog's death inheres not as a result of when it died, but of how Ritvo employs that death in the poem's present. The con-fusion overruns its bounds and turns back into chaotic confusion in "Troy"; the opening litany "Tooth and tooth / Tooth and tooth / Baboon. // There are tents where the sand / is made of lice / under the light of the moon. /

Tooth and moon and tooth / Tooth and tooth / Baboon" (47) shows Ritvo's earlier image of "every letter … a perfect O" (44) spilling over into excess, while the claim that "A candelabrum melts, or the sand crawls up it" (47) shows what happens when con-fusion boils over into pure fusion, as the members that it joins lose their distinctness-in-union.

Thus, the disagreement that structures "Heaven is Us Being a Flower Together" – on the question of whether death comes at the cessation of vision or of touch – takes on a new cast. "The cold is a line that will not bend, / drawn through you from foot to head. // Heat is a planet / fleeing its own cold line" (49), Ritvo writes, figuring within the text the line of demarcation around which con-fusion is confused. Following this, he resolves his debate with his wife on the nature of death by uniting their opposing conceptions around the figure of the "bulb," with its dual meanings as a source of illumination and a figure both of and for procreation – and parallels this resolution with a figure of sexual union that is itself simultaneously a figure for the linguistic generativity through which it is attained: "I have written this poem inside of you. / I am clutched in with your mother blood, / feeling your bends in the dark, / becoming a soft bend in your body. // We are becoming a bulb / in the ground of the living / in the winter of being alive." The child of Ritvo's marriage is this "bulb," which stays true to his and Victoria's beliefs simultaneously, while planting something new in the barren soil of their circumstance. Likewise, the nested uncertanties that close "Afternoon" – whether Ritvo has died or narrowly escaped death, whether he hears God or the clockwork of the universe or simply doctors and medical machines – is transformed from a confusion into a con-fusion; at this point in his life, and in the volume, he is writing from beyond the grave; there is a substantial amount of death in his living, and he speaks as with one foot already on the other side of the border of the beyond.

The fourth cycle thus takes up the most confusing of all of these con-fusions – living with living *without* Ritvo. It's female figures are the "Snow Angels" of one of its poem's titles – lingering traces of an otherworldly presence, who do not *appear* in the text but which retain the impression of a body that has paused to play for a while before passing along; these snow angels, then, are also a figure for those that survive Ritvo, who live on without him. The vantage point of this sections poems is thoroughly ungrounded; Ritvo speaks from and across a confusion of registers of being. In "Plush Bunny," he compares his dwindling future to the stuffed rabbit he put away as he moved on from childhood: "My poor little future, / you could practically fit in a shoebox / like the one I kept 'pecial bunny in / when I decided I was too old to sleep with her" (54). This box quickly becomes a coffin, which soon becomes Ritvo's coffin: "I'd put a lid on the box every night. / I knew she couldn't breathe – she was stuffed, / but I thought she'd like the dark, the quiet. / She had eyes, I could see them. / They were two stitches. My future has eyes, / for a while. Then my future has stitches, / like 'pecial's. Then cool cotton, like her guts" – "Those are pearls that were my eyes," Ritvo seems to be saying, putting his own spin on Ariel's Song from Shakespeare's *Tempest*: "Full fathom five thy father lies; / Of his bones are coral made; / Those are pearls that were his eyes; / Nothing of him that doth fade, / But doth suffer a sea-change / Into something rich and strange" – a fitting allusion for Ritvo's poetics of con-fusion. And indeed, Ritvo pivots from these lines into metaphysical speculation: "Of course there is another world. / But it is not elsewhere. / The eye traps it so where heaven should be / you see shadows" (54), echoing "Hello, Melissa's" situation of heaven in the eye as seeing sun. To close the poem, Ritvo sets his pronouns in a whirl of confusion: "You start to reek. / That's you moving on." Here, he is either addressing his stuffed bunny in both lines, or his stuffed

bunny in the first and a depersonalized version of himself in the second, or himself in the first and his survivors in the second; in any case, the problematic of the relationship between the deceased and his survivors is posed.

The imagery of the coffin is picked back up in "The Big Loser," which opens with a "guardian angel" watching a man walk down a street: "The angel sees a pinewood box in place of the man, / and the street he walks is a boat, the hull like a coal crater. / Somewhere in the real world there is such a boat and box. / The angels call these overlays *dreams*, / and believe they crop up because angels / can't sleep but want to – // space falls apart when you have unlimited time" (57). From the perspective of the guardian angel, the living man is mistaken for his own coffin; from a vantage outside of time and space, the two are understandably con-fused. Next, the angel hears the coffin "rattling," so he "sends the man / a happy vision from his past … // … // The angel thinks he's applying lemon oil / to the creaky, wounded wood of the box. / He knows it's palliative, but it's beautiful" (57-58). The poem thus envisions memories as the effect of angels polishing our coffins – but then the perspective shifts, and the man resolves into Ritvo, again displaced from himself: "The man reaches the end of the street. He's a sick man / and he starts to ponder death / as he often does these days: // All of death is *right here* / – the gods, the dark, a moon. / Where was I expecting death / to take me if everywhere it is / is on earth?" (58). Ritvo thus bifurcates his perspective, simultaneously viewing death from outside time and from the precisely temporal perspective of a man on the bleeding edge of dying – and again, he insists that the beyond is co-extensive with the here-and-now, the angels with the snow angels we leave behind, our afterlives with those that survive us.

In “The End,” Ritvo continues to struggle with this con-fusion, imagining an apocalypse in which “Heaven was a vacuum – / the earth, a dirty carpet” (63). Yet again, this figure posits earth as the repository of the detritus of the living, and the world beyond as literally a void – dust to dust, and then dust clinging to carpet fibers against the pull of Oblivion’s Oreck. He meditates on the nature of this attachment, declaring: “The more there is, the more loss there is – / true not only of the world, but of perceiving it, /even the imagination sizzling on top of it.” This seems to stiffen his resistance, as he concludes the poem with an explicit refusal to be ground to dust and reabsorbed by a greedy God: “Enoch has written / *We are made in His image* / but God may have many images. / He may want even more. // Perhaps He is using my body / to remake His / into a kind of thinking dust. // This is, however, an abnegation / of my choice. I am here, / no voices in my ear, / no madness but the one of life –” (64). Confronted with the reality of con-fusion with God through the destruction of his self, Ritvo refuses; in the next poem, “Touching the Floor,” he confesses: “I used to want infinite time with my thoughts. / Now I’d prefer to give all my time / to a body that’s dying of cancer” (65) – the starkest such declaration in the volume, and one that threatens to re-inscribe the pernicious dualism that he struggled so mightily in the first two cycles to overcome.

After this, however, comes “Snow Angels,” and a radical reconceptualization of the relationship between God and man. The entire poem reads: “We call it snow / when the parts of God, // too small to bear, contest our bodies / for the possession of our smallest sensations. // The snow brings suffering to the only thing small enough / to have lived peaceably next to suffering” (67). If the poem is clear that the snowflakes are the smallest parts of God, fighting us for the possession of our smallest sensations, it is silent on the question of for whom they are “too small

to bear" – man or God – and equally silent as to whether the entity to which they bring suffering, "the only thing small enough / to have lived peacefully next to suffering," is God or man. In this blizzard of con-fusion, then, Ritvo abandons his conception of God as a hostile mass trying to grind him into "thinking dust" (64); God and man are *always already* con-fused, through the quiescence with which they abide the suffering that surrounds them.

Thus, Ritvo finds himself in "The Hanging Gardens," a place that is either heaven or earth or both or neither. "A land and its people are often spoken of together. / This is a description of just a land / and not its peoples" (68), he writes. "A bare tree here is not like / a bare tree elsewhere – / It does not have potential, nor is it dead. / It is a wrecked loom; / do not hang your wash on it." Although Ritvo is not describing the "peoples" of the Hanging Gardens, he nonetheless describes their hospitality, which forms a perfect circle of con-fusion: "I am offered tea at every place the paths meet. / The circle of tea is like a locked sun, / or a fish with a tail / so good at being a tail / it reaches its head again / and makes the head a tail, / until it is one round tail." From here, he launches into a rapturous vision of destruction as creation: "Buddha says, *fire, fire, put out the fire!* / Everything burns here, / but not like Buddha says: / not from a fire-hoop around the head / where the flames point in. // Rather, flames take / The shapes of hammers and nails and lumber / around the burning things" (68-69). This vision causes time and space and the cosmos to undo themselves from the inside:

> The new day is slid underneath / the old days: / the clouds can hear only themselves, / the wind can hear only itself, / the old sky grows dark and idiotic, and becomes heaven, / the sun wrenches itself open: // Babylon before Eden, / orchard before garden, / our variety before variety, shame before shame-knowledge: / when shame was an entity / wandering even from the body / into the tea, / into the brass doves, / into this autobiographical moment. (69)

With this con-fusion and reconfiguration of the fundamentals of metaphysics, Ritvo resolves the accusatory refusals at the close of "Plush Bunny" and "The End": "I must take full responsibility.

/ Quite right. / I will move on." And with these words, he takes the leads the reader to his gravesite in the following poem: "I am given a reward: / you two will pick / where I rest" (70).

In this light, the light of the "hilarious moon," the closing lines of *Four Reincarnations* become clear: "When the breath starts to be ragged, / tickle me, my deepest beloveds – / so that the raggedness becomes confused" (70). Ritvo addresses the readers, his beloveds, as those buried in him, and who he is buried in. The ragged breath that he is worried about is not his, but our own; when we are worn down by loss, he reminds us, we should elicit his laughter, so that our raggedness becomes con-fused with his joy. As it closes thus, with laughter at a resting place, across the border between life and death, with confusion on all sides, the final words of the poem thus bend back to touch its opening line – "The bed is on fire, and are you laughing?" – with the gravity and levity of its cycles of con-fusion bending its narrative of illness back on itself like the fish in the Hanging Gardens, "a fish with a tail / so good at being a tail / it reaches its head again / and makes the head a tail, / until it is one round tail" (68), bearing witness to how we can bear withness, and withoutness.

I love you, Max; I'm con-fused.

*Works Cited*

Ritvo, Max. *Four Reincarnations*. Milkweed, 2016.