

Rupture, Glimmer, and Womb: a love song to metaphor (or: a prayer)

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I read once that metaphor is a distraction. We need to look at the thing itself without obscuring it, without disguising it. The author of a newsletter I subscribe to riffs on this theme, writing, “there is no pure perception — of a mountain, of a person. In everything we look at, we see partly a reflection of ourselves – a projection of an internal model seeking to approximate the actuality. If we are conscious enough and unafraid enough of being surprised, we will keep testing the model against reality, incrementally ceding the imagined to the actual.”¹

Carefully testing our perceptions, looking at the “thing itself,” these stances suggest an objective reality outside the scope of our ability to discern. Somewhere beneath the many layers of our compromised enmeshment, reality twinkles lovingly, awaiting our finally unobstructed gaze. Jacob Sherman might call the assumption I am exploring emblematic of the postliberal turn, the recognition of the self’s historicity, context, social creation. Our postliberal epistemic limit, in contrast to the epistemic limit of the Kantian turn, is socially determinative. Yet as Sherman writes, both “turns” conclude that what we can know is finally and decisively limited by the divisions of the subject from others and from the divine.²

Those of us steeped in religious tradition sometimes get at this in a different way, imagining God to be the ultimate reality always beyond our reach. C.S. Lewis captures this God/self divide in *Till We Have Faces* through his mythic character Psyche, who poignantly declares that “The sweetest thing in all my life has been the longing — to reach the Mountain, to find the place where all the beauty came from — my country, the place where I ought to have been born. Do you think it all meant nothing, all the longing? The longing for home? For indeed it now feels not like going, but like going back.”³

In the language of a particular theological anthropology, the divine realm, or the level of God’s understanding, is the erotic center of the divine-human connection. We are not made for this world, Lewis opines, we are longing for and Platonically charged in spiritual memory to another. Even with caveats, my journey of faith has largely adopted the language of longing and ultimacy in its vision of God. God is the transcendent, knowing actor. Omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent. The problem with sustaining this “story,” as Sarah Bachelard puts it,⁴ has come for me personally with the ever-growing list of ruptures piercing the triumphant veil of ultimacy.

A few weeks ago, for example, I was at the park with my kids when my daughter ran over to me face aglow. “Mama, there’s a mouse here! A REAL one, and it isn’t running away!” Skeptical, I followed her over to a grassy corner and found her pronouncement miraculously fulfilled. A small, white mouse lay in the grass, squirming but immobile. As we inspected, we discovered why: the mouse was wounded; her tail was missing, and the dismemberment had apparently rendered her paralyzed. Over the course of the hour or so we remained at the park, the creature’s movement progressively slowed. By the time we left, the mouse was no longer squirming but

lying on her side, breathing in and out, and in and out. As often as I could I walked over to check on her, hoping to find her struggle over. Every time, her tiny belly rose and fell. Every time, her tiny paws moved with her breath.



What is the “ultimate reality” here? How do I read the mouse truly? A few of the paradigms I slipped on include: 1.) the love affair of life and death. My children, splashing in the water, glimmering in the sunlight, dazzling in their vibrancy. While one life decays, others bloom. 2.) The circle of life. Beneath the mouse the worms work resurrection. Above, the sky gathers rain. Between, we empty time of its authority, creating meaning from our ancestors' gardens. 3.) The death of God. Mortality, creeping facelessly along, indifferent to the suffering of helplessness. The cruelty of banality.

What would it mean to look at the mouse *without* metaphor? To behold the suffering, to witness this creature hovering between the fecundity of life and the mystery of death? Perhaps a psychological angle sharpens the focus of inquiry. Beholding the dying mouse, I see my children. I see the ceaseless turn of impenetrable wheels arcing not toward justice but toward entropy. I project onto this small white mouse my fears about my children's future, the suffering I cannot protect them from, the agonies I cannot forestall. *Why did the mouse have to suffer like that*, I'm raging, and I know that my rage is not empathy for a fellow creature. It's rage for Sophie, and Lauren, and Alex, and Palestine, and Israel, and me. I'm looking at the mouse and thinking *why, why, why?*

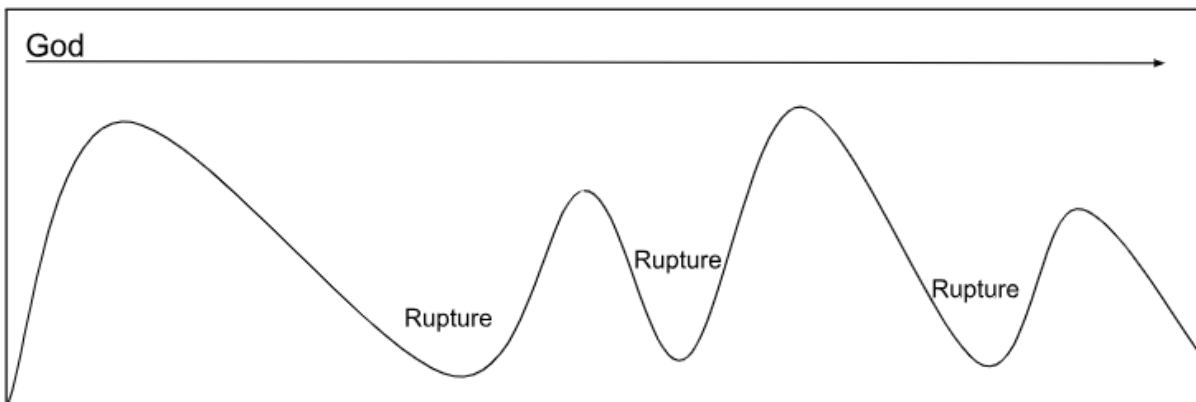
I hardly need to elaborate. The 6-year-old hovering between life and death after a car accident. Another one whose parents fished his body out of a river. The stillbirth, the divorce, the abuse, the loneliness, the unending ache for no imaginable reason. My daughter crying out in the car while talking about leaving a family vacation, “But what if they don't remember they love me?”

to my list, you add your own, throbbingly vibrant one. You know. The mouse is a metaphor for the mess of existence. A synecdoche for the ruptured, aching world.

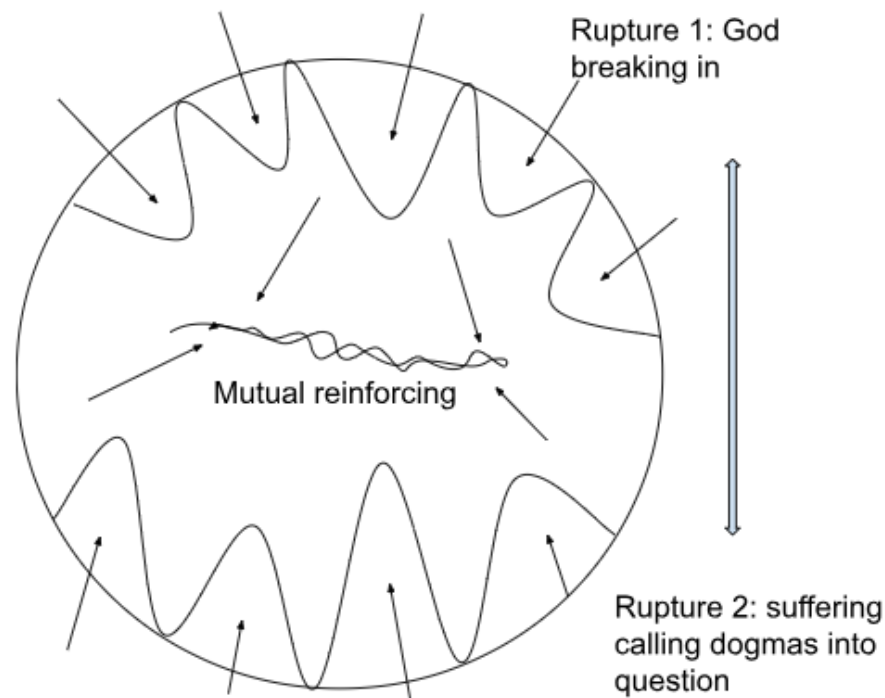
Rupture, rupture, rupture. For every miracle, an unfulfilled ache. For every “if/then,” a deviation. For every promise, a break. The gaps push themselves wider and wider until all I see is gap between prescription and practice, between conviction and agony, between promise and promised. The story crumbles as I try to eat it, to nourish my ever-expanding belly with it. It fades on my tongue, dissolved into an aftertaste. Is the blood still good?⁵

As I consider what it means to be a scholar of faith, I am beginning to think that it is time to let go of what I am calling a “rupture paradigm.”

Rupture Paradigm:



A rupture paradigm is inherently violent and, more importantly, assumes violence. Ruptures suggest ruptureless alternative, peace as opposed to puncture. On the other side of break there is assumed wholeness. An anthropomorphic theophany, which ushers the Latter-day Saint tradition into being, suggests divine rupture, God breaking-in to the brokenness of the human condition. In Barthian terms,⁶ revelation obliterates our measly schemes. God ruptures—albeit with goodness—but God ruptures. Either the rupture is dogma and therefore morally and ethically uplifting, born of love, or the rupture breaks a pastoral sense of moral and ethical right, calling these same dogmas into question. In other words, the rupture points both reinforce and require each other. My rage, my discontent with God, circles over and over between the ruptures, attempting to use the one to heal the other, or expand the one to judge the other. But the mutuality of this closed circle holds no conversation partners. Her role is to nurse wounds, to elaborate upon them, and then to find their origins.



But what if the division between God and the world, between God and the self, is our own fabrication? What if there is not brocade, blockade, cement towers between us, but rather tissue paper crinkling with each luminously human tear? What if God's breaking-in is not strictly rupture, a reordering of the mess we've made, but glimmer, sand between my fingers, tulle shaping my skirt? Glimmer, the opposite of trigger, like fireflies in the Ohio dusk, like the moment you realize the ferocity of life beneath your toes submerged in the ocean, like a baby's giggling holding satin up to his face when he has just grasped object permanence. Peek-a-boo. Behold.

Behold the thing, as though the thing lurks behind the curtain for us to unveil, as though the answers lie just out of reach, as though God is withholding, silent and complicit, as though there is perfect rationality in the calculus of certainty and predictability. Or perhaps metaphor is the best way into the shadow, the mystery, the luscious, luminous darkness. Perhaps metaphor knows its own limits, knows it is a facade, a tongue-in-cheek inquiry, knows its job is to illuminate, not to rupture. Perhaps the quest of the wholly unobscured real will bring fulfillment and certainty of a certain sense, perhaps not. But its twin, I think, is not nihilism. Its twin is the rupture paradigm. They are two sides of the same coin, two parallel impulses with a particular god at the center.

On the other side of certainty, I am not certainly unsure. I am not empty of it all, detached and untouched. I am in it. I am touched, held, moved, filled by it. I am watching the sun rise in a hospital room as my body commands my mind and dilates, widening, reaching, communing.

Sunday

the sun opens the world

as my body opens to it

He is not here

And I speak with the angels

guarding the passage between worlds

I am tomb

I am resurrection

I am the blood of the covenant

He is not here

he is coming, he is already, he is waiting

we are waiting for the rising,

the light glistening in the garden

As she turns to see Him alive again

And I breathe and push, the light steady,

to bring him living, to witness the emptying of the tomb

which is to say the tree of life

which is to say the sun bathing the world in warmth

which is my womb, this tomb, this sepulcher rolled away for life

Risen, golden in the new day,

crying out with new lungs

reaching for mothers milk

He is here

He is risen

the blood and water telling the story again and again,

the passage to life written in my flesh

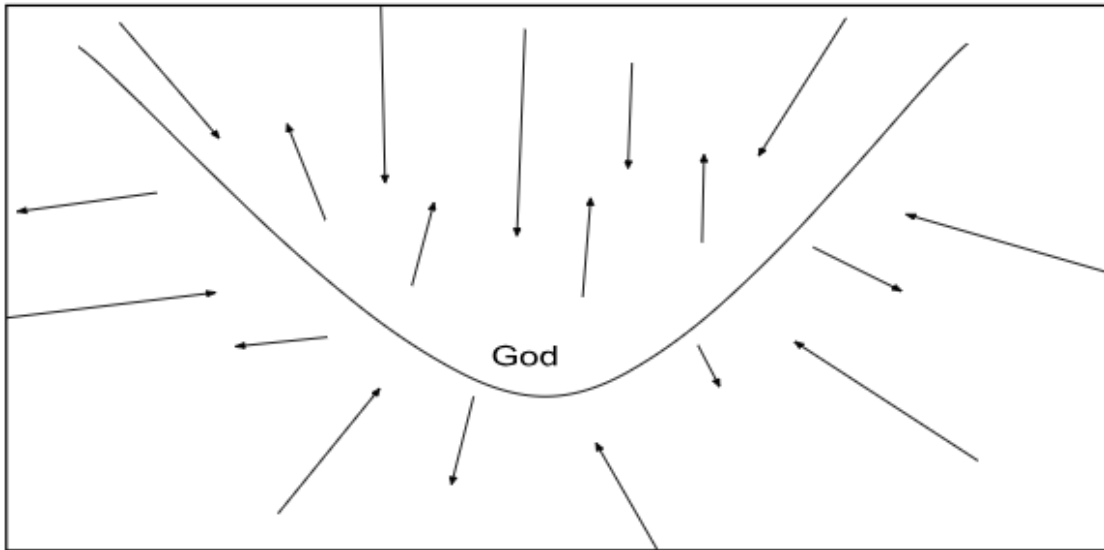
Birth and death and Sunday,

light steaming through the window -

Resurrection

Hallelujah.

Womb Paradigm:



The shadow, the mystery, the womb which is tomb which is life which is unknown which is mystery. The center of the story, of what I will call a womb paradigm, is not the triumph, not the overcoming, not the unveiling. The center is the radical incarnation, the messy aliveness, the mud and the water and the blood, the dying mouse. Perhaps there is comfort in every corner, perhaps there is agony, surely there is always both and more besides. Perhaps the lines I draw between these things are my own lines, my drawings on the walls of the caves of my home. And if I stare into the darkness, I find the etchings of my mothers before me, who also drew on these cavernous walls. I ache for their voices as their ghosts wander amiably by, and I try to decipher the meaning of the words they carved, painstakingly. I open my mouth and out they come, bold and strong and curious, and I pray *God, convert the gaps to metaphor.*⁷

The river is high this year, fiercer and louder than I remember, but I still recall every turn of the trail. And when I look to the mountain, it is still my home. Glimmering on the horizon.



¹ Maria Popova, *The Marginalian*, June 16, 2024.

² “This double reification of the self-world and self-God divide leaves the self—whether the transcendental ego or the socio-linguistic subject—simultaneously isolated and absolutized. In the absence of access to what lies above (the transrational and transpersonal) and to what lies below (the pretheoretical and prelinguistic), both the liberal and postliberal turns to practice ultimately regard the anthropic middle as self-referring and self-mediating.” Jacob Sherman, *Partakers of the Divine*, 234).

³ C.S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces*, page 76.

⁴ Sarah Bachelard, *Experiencing God in a Time of Crisis*, page 42.

⁵ Borrowed from Carol Lynn Pearson’s “Pioneers.”

⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*.

⁷ Matthew Wickman, *Life to the Whole Being*, page 122.