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A Non-Zero-Sum Game or An Essay About Nothing

...it is human nature to stand in the middle of a thing,
but you cannot stand in the middle of this.
from "A Grave" by Marianne Moore

How astonishing it is that language can almost mean,
and frightening that it does not quite.
from "The Forgotten Dialect of the Heart" by Jack Gilbert

Math and numbers in general, I suppose, have always made me uncomfortable. At first, because I thought they were sterile, unchanging things and then, after too many mandated trigonometry and calculus classes, because I discovered that they are slippery and unreliable. Infinity exists between any two numbers. Multiplying negatives results in a positive. When I try to divide any number by zero, my calculator blinks at me angrily. *Error*. I think this means operator error, which it does, but I try again. *Error. Error*. I shut the calculator in my desk drawer and return to a poem I've been writing. *Error*. I wander. I stray.

That flashing *error* plagues me. Years in the academy have taught me how deplorable errors are. Incorrect answers circled in red ink. Bloody checkmarks next to misspelled words. Intelligent people, I have learned, do not make mistakes or, at the very least, do not make the same mistakes twice. In her collection of essays, *The Poet's Freedom*, however, Susan Stewart advocates for errancy, claiming that artists often "err voluntarily" as a way to begin a project (15). A stutter or mistake as inspiration. This art form is transgressive and wrong; it encourages and even, Stewart argues, relies on errancy as a method of creation. Two divided by zero. *Error. Error*. If I am after errancy, I suppose the idea of *nothing* is a good place to start.

Since committing myself to writing poetry, I've grown steadily more and more uneasy with my decision. Sitting in my apartment at night with drained cups of coffee and tea piled unceremoniously around me, I read rejection letters from literary magazines. This is to be expected, of course, and I am not complaining. I am confused. How do I "win" at poetry? I remember being valedictorian of my high school. I was number one in my class. My status was measurable. But in the art world, there is no objectivity. Everything is about taste, perception, cleverness, beauty. Things that cannot be measured. Right now in the poetry world, without publication, without unsolicited readers or followers, I feel I am good for nothing. And I am not even good for that, seeing as I no longer seem to know what *nothing* means.

But who is the best poet? Who has ever won at poetry? Art is non-zero-sum game; there are no clear winners or losers. My success would not necessarily limit the success of other poets. There are no championships, no games or scores to measure. There are positions and titles, but the academy and artists alike insist on the superficiality and imprecision in believing such achievements measure actual success or "good art." This lack of universal hierarchy is discomforting to poets and readers alike. Poetry—or art in general—is something I cannot figure out.

The poems I write are always about something, as much as I would sometimes like to claim they are about nothing. Now that I think about it, I don't know what poetry about nothing would look like. Language is always *something*. It is errant, yes, but it is what we have and that is *something*, not *nothing*. Even poetry that doesn't use conventional language—sound poetry—is about something. Take a visual version of Hugo Ball's sound poem "Karawane," for example:

jolifanto bambla o falli bambla
großiga m'pfa habla horem
egiga goramen
higo bloiko russula huju
hollaka hollala
anlogo bung
blago bung blago bung
bosso fataka
ü üü ü
schampa wulla wussa olobo
hej tatta gorem
eschige zunbada
wulubu ssubudu uluwu ssubudu
tumba ba-umf
kusa gauma
ba – umf

My computer screen is inflamed with angry red squiggles, the spell-check, baffled. None of these are words. This is not language. Is it nothing, then? Is music nothing? Notes writ on a staff are not language, just sound. *Do Re Mi Fa Sol*. Not intelligible, but not nothing. Even if a reader does not find “Karawane” to be music, it is, at the very least, sound. And sound is something. Even ugly sound is something. We have language for it: cacophony, dissonance.

In *The Poet’s Freedom*, Susan Stewart discusses *nothing*. Or, I should say, the concept of *nothing*. This could be tricky. Stewart asserts that the notion of *nothing* is not natural—that “nature has no gaps. Everywhere there is something instead of nothing” (17). There are absences and lacks, but never nothing. Humans have never experienced nothing—we invent it. *There is nothing in the cupboard. There is nothing on the roof*. But there is always something. There are stray grains of rice. Torn leaves. Forgotten wrappers and bird dung.

I want to argue that we create nothing, but to create is to make *something* from *nothing*. I imagine God calling into the darkness (Is darkness nothing? It is the absence of light, but is it nothing? I do not know what nothing is, so darkness will have to suffice.) and creating the skies and the earth, vegetation, water, light. God’s material was nothing; the product was something, everything. Not even God created *nothing*. If we could actually create something, it could be anything, but it could not be *nothing*. Creating *nothing* is semantically impossible. This line of thought plunges me into a cold pool of uncertainty about beginnings and endings. Foundations crack and begin to crumble and I am reminded of Yeats:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.
from “The Second Coming”

Studying these three lines outside the context of the poem as a whole leaves me dizzy and disoriented. In this metaphor, I am not sure if I am the falcon or the falconer. Let’s say I am the falconer. I stand steadfast in the middle of my learning. Ideas circle above me. Some get away from me, spiral out of control, out of my reach. They do not return when named.

Let’s say I am the falcon. I fly above the truths of life that remain stationary below, calling my name. But they are so large and complicated that I must make my flight path larger. I fly higher and increase the diameter of my circle. Soon, I cannot see my handler any longer. In my pursuit of the big picture, I am lost.

Either way, thinking about *nothing* is beginning to feel like Yeats’ gyre: a process that only circumvents.

My keyboard has numbers marching across the top row. 1234567890. It’s not often that I think about computer keyboards but when I do, I think about the zero. Shouldn’t the zero sit before the one? Isn’t *nothing* a precursor to *something*? Do we begin with zero or end in zero?

I realize that the zero is there so I may use it as a building block: so that I may type 30 or 402. But *zero* and *nothing* exist as *infinity* exists—as a concept. No one has ever witnessed either; they are ways to assuage, to give a name to the things we cannot see. They give hope and reason, like gods.

The symbology of infinity is merely a zero pinched in the middle and twisted.

$$0 \rightarrow \infty \rightarrow 0$$

When unfolded, the symbols are the same.

Stewart tries to articulate the individual's position and role when the extremes nothing and infinity end up too similar to distinguish from one another:

Because we are part of nature's open totality, we have both a particular, felt relation to it and an inability to grasp it in its entirety; indeed, our sense of that entirety is intuitive and resembles the way we experience the myriad complexity of our own bodies and have difficulty imagining their individual finitude. (17)

Death, a return to nothing or an entrance into eternity, depending on how one looks at it, is another something we cannot fathom but still name and insist is real. Our minds are narrow and limited to experience, and experience is often flawed at that. Falling through thin ice—something that has happened to me twice—inflames the body. The skin feels as if it is being boiled off the bone, a human soup. I was aware that the water my body had entered was empirically cold: I was surrounded by snow and ice, I could see my breath changed to steam in the chilly air, my muscles seized and twitched. But in that moment of submersion, I would have sworn my body was on fire. Again, an instance where extreme opposites seem to overlap. I am beginning to see the problem with binaries.

Emily Dickinson's body of work is obsessed with trying to articulate the unknown, specifically the interlude between life and death. In her poem "Behind Me Dips Eternity," Dickinson writes a poem in which the speaker is in a liminal space, in limbo, and examines that which has she has left behind as well as that which she has yet to experience:

Behind Me—dips Eternity—
Before Me—Immortality—
Myself—the Term between—
Death but the Drift of Eastern Gray,

Dissolving into Dawn away,
Before the West begin—

'Tis Kingdoms—afterward—they say—
In perfect—pauseless Monarchy—
Whose Prince—is Son of None—
Himself—His Dateless Dynasty—
Himself—Himself diversify—
In Duplicate divine—

'Tis Miracle before Me—then—
'Tis Miracle behind—between—
A Crescent in the Sea—
With Midnight to the North of Her—
And Midnight to the South of Her—
And Maelstrom—in the Sky—
(721)

The result is an overwhelming feeling of motionlessness. While Dickinson is known for her use of the m-dash, they are used to excess in this poem, which simultaneously pulls the reader forward and backward, two forces tugging on her arms, leaving her rooted, immobile. Dickinson creates an equation within the first lines of the poem, positioning her speaker in the space where an equal sign would be, eternity and immortality echoing semantically on either side of her. The speaker leaves behind the confounding notion of eternity for the slightly more tangible notion of immortality, though, as readers, we have experience of neither. The speaker is “the Term between,” paradoxically connecting these two similar yet disparate figures. *Zero=Eternity*.

The speaker recognizes both life and afterlife as miracles in the final stanza—things that cannot be explained or rationalized. And yet there is no clarity; the speaker remains surrounded by “Midnight” and a “Maelstrom” swirls overhead. The speaker seems to be arguing that the interruption in her eternity is the brief period where she experiences life or living, but the return to “Eternity” and “Immortality” is not a comforting notion because these remain abstractions. Darkness envelops her. A storm swirls nearby. Circling, circling. Zero. Nothingness.

Another of Dickinson’s poems, “A Narrow Fellow in The Grass,” sometimes erroneously referred to as “The Snake,” examines the anxiety associated with the concept of nothing or zero by comparing it to the fear of a snake slithering in the grass but never actually witnessed:

A narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides—
You may have met Him—
Did you not
His notice sudden is—

The Grass divides as with a Comb—
A spotted shaft is seen—
And then it closes at your feet
And opens further on—

He likes a Boggy Acre
A Floor too cool for Corn—
Yet when a Boy, and Barefoot—
I more than once at Noon

Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash
Unbraiding in the Sun
When stooping to secure it
It wrinkled, and was gone—

Several of Nature's People
I know, and they know me—
I feel for them a transport
Of cordiality—

But never met this Fellow
Attended, or alone
Without a tighter breathing
And Zero at the Bone—
(986)

The closing line of this poem is one of Dickinson's most emblematic and for good reason. It takes the reader by surprise; the illogical, almost nonsensical construction of "Zero at the Bone" is mysterious and anxiety-inducing. A truth spoken out of fear of never speaking it. (Admitting *nothing* is a concept, not an empirical truth, has left me anxiety-ridden. I am left to wonder—what else have I allowed myself to believe without investigation?) But what is this "Zero at the Bone?" Though Dickinson's speaker would like his reader to believe that he is in tune with nature, evidenced by him walking barefoot outdoors as a boy though the threat of snakes was imminent, by calling the ground a floor and the snake a "Fellow," by referring to the snake as one of "Nature's People," he still experiences "tighter breathing" whenever encountering the snake. The "Zero" in "Zero at the Bone" may be referring to temperature in a clever play on the phrase "bone-chilling." It could, however, also be interpreted as a statement about anxiety in general. The snake is undeniably in the poem, but we never see it in its entirety. We see grasses quivering and parting, a "spotted shaft" creating the illusion of the earth opening and closing, but the snake always remains concealed and mysterious. The poem is not about fear of the snake, as I have heard some scholars suggest; it is about fear of the unknown. The snake and its concealment, its mere hinting at existence, its "not-there-ness," induces in the speaker the same kind of anxiety that the notion of *zero* or *nothing* induces in me. "Zero at the Bone," then, could be read as the speaker's realization that we allow many things that we cannot prove exist

infiltrate our minds, seeping into our bones and beings.

I ask a friend his apartment number. He lives in a large, impersonal complex where I imagine displaced people and stray cats wander the hallways at night. *Two oh four*, he tells me. 204. Zero is onomatopoeia. It is a pictogram. It sings what it means: a gaping hole, a mouth molded into a circle, the center merely air. His *oh* hints at something: people are uncomfortable with saying *zero* because it represents a concept instead of a number.

In my friend's address, the zero wedged between the two and the four does not mean *nonexistent*, it means *not there*. It is the absence of *something*, not the absence of *anything*. A three or an eight could be there instead. 234. 284. There is potential for something else.

On the Cartesian graph, the four quadrants meet at a single point. A pinprick. A solitary intersection on a continuum of information.

In military time, midnight is referred to as *zero hour*. Where does time go when days collide?

Dickinson is, of course, not the only poet plagued by the uncertainty of what *nothing* is. Dylan Thomas' poem "The Seed-at-Zero" examines the mystery of genesis, as well:

The seed-at-zero shall not storm
That town of ghosts, the trodden womb,
With her rampart to his tapping,
No god-in-hero tumble down
Like a tower on the town
Dumbly and divinely stumbling
Over the manwaging line.

The seed-at-zero shall not storm
That town of ghosts, the manwaged tomb
With her rampart to his tapping,
No god-in-hero tumble down
Like a tower on the town
Dumbly and divinely leaping
Over the warbearing line.

Through the rampart of the sky
Shall the star-flanked seed be riddled,

Manna for the rumbling ground,
Quickening for the riddled sea;
Settled on a virgin stronghold
He shall grapple with the guard
And the keeper of the key.

May a humble village labor
And a continent deny?
A hemisphere may scold him
And a green inch be his bearer;
Let the hero seed find harbor,
Seaports by a drunken shore
Have their thirsty sailors hide him.

May be a humble planet labor
And a continent deny?
A village green may scold him
And a high sphere be his bearer;
Let the hero seed find harbor,
Seaports by a thirsty shore
Have their drunken sailors hide him.

Man-in-seed, in seed-at-zero,
From the foreign fields of space,
Shall not thunder on the town
With a star-flanked garrison,
Nor the cannons of his kingdom
Shall the hero-in-tomorrow
Range on the sky-scraping place.

Man-in-seed, in seed-at-zero,
From the star-flanked fields of space,
Thunders on the foreign town
With a sand-bagged garrison,
Nor the cannons of his kingdom
Shall the hero-in-to-morrow
Range from the grave-groping place.

(146)

The “seed-at zero” is Thomas’s construction. The phrase wants to communicate the notion of nothing, but there is still something—the seed. Potential for growth. *I want to argue that we create nothing, but it is impossible.* The genesis Thomas is referring to with the “seed” vacillates as the poem progresses: at first, it seems as though “seed-at-zero” is a woman’s egg—useless

(nothing) before fertilization. The speaker speaks of “her” and “his” as well as “the trodden womb,” which seems like an overt, even somewhat trite reference to sex.

The reader is then bombarded with an overwhelming amount of war imagery: a tower tumbles and Dylan again creates his own lexicon, describing a line (of defense, one would assume) as “manwaging” and “warbearing.” The comparison of war and sex could become stale, but for Thomas’ incessant fixation on the “seed.” The “seed” is “riddled,” one might assume with bullets, though a more helpful reading would be to consider “riddled” to mean mysterious or unclear. The state of nonexistence, just like the moment of conception and the inevitable instants of death that accompany warfare, are mysterious and unknown.

Thomas even structures the poem as a riddle; just as Dickinson utilized repetition and rhyme to infer a certain stalemate in her poems, Thomas repeats entire lines, especially evident in the opening stanzas. By the end of the poem, there is little if any evolution. The seed is still “seed-at-zero” “groping” from the “grave,” implying that the dead and unborn reside in the same sphere.

Zero not as number but as space. Qualitative, instead of quantitative. A way to separate things.

Throughout this essay I have reluctantly and with some trepidation gestured toward the comparison of artist and God. As creators, artists operate under the assumption that we will always be greater than our creation; this belief allows for the very act of creation, as well as revision. I make this comparison reluctantly because of another equation that is just as uncomfortable: that of God and *nothing*. Both are incomprehensible, both are without time or definitive space. And—the words catch in my throat—perhaps both are simply inventions we insist upon to name that which we cannot make sense of.

The comparison seems inevitable—God and artist share the responsibility of creation. And while granting the position of artist with the power of creation seems like granting her complete creative liberty, the freedom of creation comes with a duty to one’s creation. In order to create, we must simultaneously invoke structure, laws, limits—freedom becomes a conceit that could potentially limit the creator instead of liberate her.

In a section titled “The Creator in Genesis,” Stewart articulates the natural though mystifying relationship between creation and nothing or, more specifically, between creation and the resultant lack of nothing:

Western philosophers of art emphasize the creation of something out of “nothing”—or if not nothing, then out of other things, such as the Greek Chaos, of no significance. And such thinkers put forward as well the creation of positive forms against a backdrop of the otherwise that remains unrealized and unrealizable. Yet the fact remains that nature has no gaps. Everywhere this is something, instead of nothing. This truth of our apprehension of the world means

that nature appears to us an integral, ever-changing and self-forming form. Nature is something not only created, but constantly creating, and creating itself...(17)

The relationship Stewart articulates between creation and nothing is one that could apply to a plethora of creation myths, including that of the Judeo-Christian God of Genesis, who spoke into *nothing* and created *everything*. In this act of creation, however, has *nothing* gone extinct? Has God done away with it for good? Stewart argues that nature is “constantly creating, and creating itself.” Surely nature isn’t creating itself the way God created nature: it uses resources already available—soil, water, oxygen—to reproduce and spread. But does nature do this to stave off *nothing*? Or is *creation* simply what occurs in the absence of *nothing*?

As Genesis opens, God speaks into the darkness and creates light, his words generating a separation. *Zero not as number but as space. A way to separate things.* The Gospel of John begins:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:1-5)

The Word is not only said to be with God, the Word becomes God and God becomes the Word. The similarities between God and artist (poet, specifically) are striking in this passage—both use words to create. Without the Word, that is God, “not one thing came into being.” The Word created life and light so powerful that darkness was reduced to absence. The Word is the presence of *something*, anything that combats the latency of nonexistence and the mere inclination to create overcomes the darkness of inaction. Without the Word, the world remains dark and *nothing* is created. The only way to create *nothing*, then, is to renounce language. But would the absence of language necessitate *nothing*? Or would we still have to create it somehow, somehow? Circling, circling. A straight line bent to make a connection. A *zero*.

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