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There Is Grief of a Tree

For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again,
and that the tender branch thereof will not cease.
Though the root thereof wax old in the earth, and the stock thereof
die in the ground;
Yet through the scent of water it will bud, and bring forth boughs
like a plant.
But man dieth, and wasteth away: yea, man giveth up the ghost, and
where *is* he?
As the waters fail from the sea, and the flood decayeth and drieth up:
So man lieth down, and riseth not: till the heavens *be* no more, they
shall not awake, nor be raised out of their sleep.
—Job 14:7–12

These verses from the Book of Job turn on two distinctions: between hope and grief, and between trees and human beings. Hope belongs affirmatively to the tree, which the scent of water may bring back even from old roots or dead stump. For the human there is no sprouting or budding again—no regeneration, at least not “till the heavens be no more.” Yet even as the passage divides grief and hope in this stark way, it poses messier questions about where subjectivity resides in matters of hope and grief. The King James Version’s expression, “hope of a tree,” leaves unsettled the question of the subjective versus the objective genitive. Does the tree experience hope of its own regeneration, or is it only the object of some other subject’s hopefulness on its behalf? More recent versions of the passage tend to settle the question. The New Living Translation makes the tree the hoper (“Even a tree has more hope!”); the New International Version casts the tree as the hoped-for (“At least there is hope for a tree”). But even as these versions dispute, together, the question of whether trees are subjects or objects of hope, they all know for whom hope is absent. In an early note on transspecies grief, ecologist and hospital chaplain Phyllis Windle recorded her astonishment at finding that she was “in mourning for these beautiful trees,” the Great Smoky

Mountain dogwoods of her youth that were being decimated by the fungus *Discula destructiva* (Windle, 1992, p. 363). Job 14 takes a different view: if there is transspecies grieving to be done, it is not the grief of humans for trees, but the grief of trees for humans.

Grievable: in the work of Judith Butler and others, the word designates a person's worthiness to be mourned. But the term also signifies "meriting grievance" (as in the expression "grievable offense"). And in the way that *viable* means "capable of living," *grievable* might also be understood to mean "capable of grieving." This essay constellates these three senses of *grievable* in relation to ecological grief, which poses challenges—certainly in most Western contexts—for all three of the word's meanings. For where established griefways instruct individuals in mourning tangible, individual losses, biodiversity loss and other causes of ecological grief can be unpunctual, diffusive, intangible, and collective in every sense. They collapse distinctions between figure and ground, subject and object. Particularly in cultural forms that rely on such distinctions, they can make mourning's compass go haywire. To take just one example, traditional elegies are, in Jessica Marion Barr's words, "premised on resolving mourning and finding consolation and comfort in nature's cycles" (Barr, 2017, p. 192). What happens to elegy, then, when a reliably cyclical "nature" is no longer available as the reassuring foil or backdrop to human loss because it has become, itself, a lost object? How does elegy function when the bereaved are both differentially complicit in and differentially threatened by the loss they mourn? Of what possible use is elegy when the very futurity in which the mourner is meant to reinvest appears imperiled or foreclosed? Climate change and attendant forms of environmental peril, distress, and devastation can leave us at a loss to grieve for, and to enter grievances over, losses we're only just learning to designate as grievable.

In "the new mourning" required by the present ecological crisis (Albrecht, 2017, p. 295), at least one thing seems indisputable: the temporality of griefwork will need to change utterly. Freud's human-centered mourning is touched off by a loss, proceeds through the incremental withdrawal of cathexis from the lost object, and eventually terminates in the ego's becoming

“free and uninhibited again” (Freud, 1917, p. 245). Even the disordered mourning that is melancholia reacts to the real loss of a loved object and can end with the ego’s having loosened its libidinal fixation on the object through repeated, ambivalent confrontations with it. Both mourning and melancholia, in other words, are terminable processes that occur in human, calendrical time, moving “forward” from loss and, at least potentially, through decathexis to freedom. Ecological grief plays havoc, in both scalar and directional terms, with these temporalities. Rooted in losses that can begin in the deep past and extend into the deep future, it exceeds the span of human seasons, lifetimes, epochs, and even species-being. And while the losses that prompt ecological grief can be actual losses in the present, these losses have a meaning beyond themselves: they are semaphores that point to planetary-scaled, often permanent losses in the future. Freudian mourning and melancholia are both post-traumatic conditions. Although no stranger to traumatic aftermath, ecological grief is also, and crucially, *pre-traumatic* in its temporality (see, e.g., Kaplan, 2015, pp. 1–22; Saint-Amour, 2015, pp. 1–43; and Cunsolo and Ellis, 2018, p. 275). We might say, further, that such grief is *pertraumatic* insofar as it is experienced “through” (*per-*) a time of ongoing loss, as what is *perennial* lasts “the year through.” The new mourning that could attend to ecological bereavement would need to address not only manifest losses in the past but ongoing losses through the time of mourning. It would need to face at least two kinds of oncoming losses—those that are unpreventable, and those that are possible or probable without yet being certain. It would need to mourn the loss of human and non-human futures without either “putting those lost futures behind us” in an obscene act of catharsis, or inducing numbness and political paralysis in the survivors by overexposing them to the scale and permanence of ecological loss. The work of mourning in the Anthropocene would need to achieve a tricky new degree of saturation, overflowing its Freudian banks without drowning the collective psychic landscape.

This essay explores how a recent novel both represents and models ecological mourning. By now it’s uncontroversial to suggest that long prose fictions are well set up to stage

losses and acts of mourning of the kind Freud described. Historically scaled to individual protagonists, powered by plots that follow conflict, loss, and complication with resolution, the nineteenth-century novel might even be said to have lent its scope and arc to Freud's model of the work of mourning. Peter Brooks implies as much in observing, of realist fiction, that "Plot itself is working-through" (Brooks, 1984, p. 140). But the very traits that make the realist novel compatible with the Freudian work of mourning would seem to unsuit it for the collective and potentially interminable griefwork shaped by our deepening ecological crisis. How could a novel—even a long, multiplot novel with several human protagonists—be adequate to a planet diffusively and cumulatively altered, to millions of lost or threatened species-futures, and to the emergent realities of climate-related displacement, poverty, hunger, illness, and conflict among human populations? How could a novel hope to compass these losses and transformations, let alone mourn them commensurately? Here one could point out that no novel could be *commensurate* with phenomena or demands of this scale, adding that novels have always metonymized their subjects, whether those subjects have been multi-generational social panoramas or a single chapter in a lone human life. Yet by substituting a part or attribute for a whole, metonymy still hews to a logic of contiguity and proportion. As a crisis of the whole—a crisis that threatens to affect earth's whole biosphere while at the same time registering the radical limits of our ability to model that totality—the ecological paroxysms of our time break the framing assumption of smooth scalability on which metonymy is premised. Some recent climate fictions respond to this crisis by doggedly re-swearing their oaths to metonymic realism, adopting a reparative attitude toward the planetary whole.¹ Others respond through an in-kind breaking of frames, particularly the frames of fictionality. Without wishing to set one approach above the other aesthetically or politically, I suggest that the second, and only the second, engages seriously with the problem of ecological grief as I have sketched it here.

By "breaking the frames of fictionality," I mean something more specific than a rejection of nineteenth-century realist codes, a disposition toward narrative counter-conventionality, or

anything else that we might once have shorthanded as “modernist.” I have in mind narratologist Gérard Genette’s definition of *metalepsis* as “a deliberate transgression of the threshold of embedding”—in essence, the traversal of the boundary between story and narration, or between what narrative theorists call the intradiegetic, diegetic, and extradiegetic levels of a fiction (Genette, 1983, p. 88). Metalepsis can occur when an author or narrator supposedly “outside” the diegesis or primary story-world appears within it; when a character crosses over from the diegetic to the extradiegetic level (i.e., from the story to the narratorial frame); or when characters who supposedly occupy the same diegetic level are revealed to occupy different ones, as happens when one character turns out to be the reader or the inventor of another. Despite being associated with twentieth-century metafiction by the likes of Luigi Pirandello, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, and John Barth, metaleptic twists like these are not of recent invention, occurring in *One Thousand and One Nights*, *Don Quixote*, *Tristram Shandy*, and a host of other earlier works. But they signify in particular ways in the context of climate change, which turns them to a different kind of work than paradox or *mise-en-abîme* for its own sake. Narrative frame-breaking finds a worldly referent in ecological grief, I suggest, because the latter is intrinsically metaleptic. We are used to managing grief by assigning it periods, stages, or calendars—frames that set the work of mourning apart as an exceptional condition. Ecological grief shatters those frames, unboxing and ontologizing a mourning that can no longer be imagined as stadial or terminable. It recognizes that there is no privileged vantage outside or above ecological loss from which to narrate it. For the foreseeable future, our stories of ecological grief will be related from the midst of ecological grief.

This manifestation of ecological world-loss in transgressions of literary worldedness is powerfully exemplified by Richard Powers’s 2018 novel, *The Overstory*. Even a cursory flip through its 500 pages reveals some of the ways *The Overstory* brushes the individualism of the novel against the grain. This is a complex multi-plot fiction whose first section (“Roots”) is made up of

eight chapters, each bearing the name of a different protagonist or (in one case to which I'll return) the names of a pair of protagonists. The first sentence of each "Roots" chapter is preceded, in the place where an oversized initial letter would conventionally appear, by a unique uncaptioned botanical drawing of what turns out to be the eponymous character's totem tree. Similarly, Powers's punning title asserts some intimacy between large communities of trees and networks of characters, respectively—between the forest canopy ("overstory" or "overstorey") and a capacious narrative whose overarching structure harbors and connects lots of smaller understories. That structural intimacy is continued in the rest of the novel's section titles, with "Roots" being followed by "Trunk," "Crown," and "Seeds." In its table of contents alone, then, *The Overstory* exhibits a tree-like structure and implies that it will reenact something like an arboreal life cycle as it unfolds. That's just what we find in traversing Powers's novel: after "Roots" introduces our nine protagonists in discrete, sometimes multi-generational backstories, "Trunk" brings the majority of them together, first in pairs and later as collaborators who converge in the Free Bioregion of Cascadia, an anti-clear-cutting collective in Oregon during the timber wars that crested there in the early 1990s. "Trunk" ends with the accidental death of the visionary Olivia Vandergriff—or "Maidenhair," as she's known to the group whose spiritual leader she has become—in a botched attempt to blow up some logging equipment. "Crown" follows the survivors as they branch out, distance themselves from their radical pasts, and, in two cases, end up being caught and imprisoned for domestic terrorism—in one case for two consecutive life sentences. Finally, "Seeds" grants the book's scattered protagonists farewell moments of epiphany that consist, variously, of apology, forgiveness, enlightenment, death, grief, hope, commemoration, and dissident creation. Both narrative time and political solidarity in *The Overstory* follow the contours of a tree upward from roots to seeds, beginning with disparate origins, briefly achieving a unified environmentalist coalition, and ending with a splitting and a dispersal.

Notwithstanding its politically entropic conclusion, *The Overstory's* dendriform structure corresponds with a largely

regenerative view of human-tree entanglement. In “Seeds,” the concluding section, Douglas Pavlicek, sitting in his prison cell and palpating the tumor growing in his side, listens to an audiotope by a famous plant biologist who speaks of “the massive tree of life, spreading, branching, flowering,” and (in a word Douglas strains to remember) *serotinous*—that is, able to reproduce only when fire opens its cones (Powers, 2018, p. 491). Ruination is a stage in regeneration. Mimi Ma, working as an unlicensed therapist under an assumed name, feels her mind become “a greener thing” as she leans against a pine in San Francisco’s Mission Dolores Park. That greening of the mind includes the realization that, after the worst devastations of climate change, “the Earth will become another thing, and people will learn it all over again” (p. 500). In a forest somewhere in the far north, environmental artist Nick Hoel and a few indigenous collaborators drag fallen trees into the shapes of massive letters that, as they decay and give rise to new growth, will “spell out a gigantic word legible from space: STILL”—a word that denotes quietness, persistence, notwithstandingness, and rootedness to a spot, “the word that life has been saying, since the beginning” (p. 502). The novel ends with a whispering voice, maybe that of Maidenhair reprising her dying words: “*This. What we have been given. What we must earn. This will never end*” (p. 502). The individual and ecological losses sustained by *The Overstory*’s characters appear to be reassimilated to natural cycles that survive and even rely, like serotinous conifers and cypresses, on destruction.

Still, for a novel given to a regenerative view of loss, *The Overstory* also carries a narrative payload of grief heavy enough to bog hope down. Before she becomes Maidenhair, Olivia briefly dies through accidental electrocution, and on reviving is able to hear the voices of trees summoning her aid: “*The most wondrous products of four billion years of life need help*” (p. 165). Her second and final death, after she has led environmentalist actions that include a year-long tree-sit in a giant redwood, is the pivotal crisis in the novel, evoking the death of Christ in the desolation and scattering with which it afflicts her disciples. There are quieter depictions of loss and grief as well. As a fourteen-year-old, Patricia Westerford, the hearing- and speech-impaired

plant biologist to whom Douglas later listens in prison, becomes fascinated with Ovid's *Metamorphosis*—especially its account “of the boy Cyparissus, whom Apollo converts into a cypress tree so that he might grieve forever” for the beloved tamed stag the boy himself accidentally kills while hunting (p. 117). (The cypress oozes sap in tear-like droplets; its genus, *Cupressus*, Latinizes the Ancient Greek word for cypress, κυπάρισσος, which is also the name of Ovid's interminable mourner.) Decades later, when Patricia wakes to find her partner has died in his sleep, she undergoes her own Cyparissian transformation, “Arms outward, fingers spread, her face so frozen in horror that even the corpse has to look away” (p. 395).² Before Nick Hoel goes off to spell “STILL” in the wilderness, he makes a silk balloon replica of the giant redwood Maidenhair lived in but ultimately failed to save and films it as it is inflated on the original tree's stump, thrashes in the wind, and spectacularly catches fire. Mimi, watching Nick's *ArBoReal* footage on her phone in Mission Dolores Park, sees the remains of the surrogate tree turn to ash as the video's instrumental soundtrack “stumbles through its last deceptive cadence and resolves to tonic” (pp. 484–85). The footage ends with the “hope of a tree” verses from Job written out in autumn leaves against a dark forest floor, no sooner legible than blown away by a breeze.

And this is just a small sample. Although vitally full of characters, plotlines, and exuberantly shared information about the hidden lives of trees, *The Overstory* is also a feast of losses both primal and terminal. And it is a kind of compendium of modes and expressions of grief, which range from dispersal to metamorphosis to remembrance through representation. Nick's self-consuming giant-redwood-shaped balloon—a non-tree that mournfully and furiously commemorates a slain tree by imperfectly imitating its form—seems even to metonymize Powers's novel, which has its own mimetic relationship to the great rooted organisms human beings are so eager to mow down. What these widely varying stories of human, non-human, and ecological bereavement have in common is a general adherence to the Freudian arc of terminal mourning. Although it gestures toward massive timespans, lamenting the premature death of a 1400-year-old tree and the clear-cutting of its pro-

spective descendants' habitat, Nick's *ArBoReal* clip itself tracks stadially through simulation, immolation, resolution, and hope in the human-scaled span of six minutes. The Cyparissus myth woven through Patricia's story looks like an exception to diegetic mourning's terminability in the novel, but even there the bereft boy must be turned into a longer-lived cypress for his grief to become interminable. Human life, Powers's book seems to imply, is too brief for human mourning not to be.

Yet as I suggested earlier, the story is only one site of thinking about ecological grief in *The Overstory*, which establishes its diegetic world partly to subject it to the warping pressures of metalepsis. To trace these, we need to turn our attention from the five environmental activists (Maidenhair, Nick, Mimi, Douglas, and a psychology grad student named Adam Appich) to the four remaining protagonists, whose stories seem to run in parallel to the central group's the way the aerial prop roots of a banyan tree stand alongside its primary trunk. We've already encountered Patricia, the plant biologist whose books are read and whose lectures are heard and attended by several other protagonists, none of whom she meets in person. There's Neelay Mehta, the Silicon Valley-based computer whiz who becomes mobility-impaired in a childhood fall from an oak, has several other life-changing encounters with ancient trees, and develops a series of visionary multi-player online computer games that decry deforestation and feature otherworldly tree beings. But for all that these games hope to catalyze change in this world by constructing virtual worlds within it, Neelay is not the main node of the novel's metaleptic energies. That role is filled by Ray Brinkman and Dorothy Cazaly, the pair from St. Paul who share a "Roots" chapter. He's an intellectual property attorney, she a stenographer, and they become a couple while acting in a community theater production of *Macbeth*. Their thread follows their amateur theatrical careers (culminating in the roles of Nick and Honey in a production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*); their inability to have a child and their debates about adoption; Dorothy's infidelities; Ray's half-paralysis by a stroke; and the renewal of their bond through caretaking, storytelling, and amateur tree-watching. In many ways they're narratively unpromising material for a novel about the planetary stakes of

human–tree entanglement, their story being essentially that of the ups and downs of a white-collar marriage. And like Patricia and Neelay, they never meet the other protagonists face-to-face, so the possibility of their entanglement with the novel’s other “Roots” seems severely limited.

After his stroke, Ray is confined to a mechanical bed at home, looking out over the backyard where, over the years, he and Dorothy have haphazardly planted some dozen trees to celebrate their anniversaries. It’s because of Ray’s immobility that the couple now have time and appetite for long narratives—first, for the novels she reads to him, then for the tree guides that explain the “unique history, biography, chemistry, economics, and behavioral psychology” of the trees in their yard, turning each one into “its own distinct epic, changing the story of what is possible” (p. 442). Reading from Patricia Westerford’s *The Secret Forest*, they learn that “Every leaf out there connects, underground. Dorothy takes the news like a shocking revelation in a nineteenth-century novel of manners where one character’s awful secret ripples through every life in the entire village” (p. 443). Novel readers are being invited here to remember George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871–72), whose protagonist, Dorothea Brooke, witnesses the misdeeds of Nicholas Bulstrode rippling through every villager’s life, including her own. As *Middlemarch*’s Dorothea and *The Overstory*’s Dorothy draw close to one another, the ontological barrier between the two novelistic worlds thins. Dorothy becomes a figure for how lives and worlds may ramify (from Latin, *ramus*, “branch”): in the sway of Westerford’s book, “She sees in the chestnut’s branching the several speculative paths of a lived life, all the people she might have been, the ones she could or will yet be, in worlds spreading out just alongside this one” (p. 443). The chestnut, too, becomes a figure for how branching possibilities break diegetic frames. First, because it shouldn’t exist, a fungal chestnut blight having eliminated the tree’s American range during the first half of the twentieth century. And second, because it prompts the co-creation, by the Brinkmans, of a story-world in which their backyard chestnut was planted by the daughter they were never able to have. Their fictional child, we could say, embodies their recognition that an impossible tree could only have been planted by an impossible child.³

The narratives the couple invent about this daughter are configured as strangers who are “out tonight, wandering, knocking on their door”—strangers whose admission to their home feels “worse than scary” because they are the kinds of guest who might undo the host. Yet for Dorothy, the narrative pull of the imagined daughter—even the simple question of what she looks like (Ray’s answer: “Fierce. Fine. You”)—is not to be denied:

It’s enough to get [Dorothy] back into the book, and the yard opens like two pages spread in front of her. Tonight, in the growing darkness, the story runs in reverse. A succession of girls, younger and younger, head out the back door and into the miniature, simulated world. Their daughter at twenty, on spring break from college, in a sleeveless tank top that reveals a horrible new baroque tattoo on her left shoulder, sneaking out to smoke a joint after her parents have fallen asleep. Their daughter at sixteen, swilling cheap grocery store wine with two girlfriends in the farthest dark corner of the property. Their daughter at twelve, in a funk, kicking a soccer ball against the garage for hours. Their daughter at ten, floating across the grass, catching lightning bugs in a jar. Their daughter at six, heading out barefoot on the first seventy-degree spring day with a seedling in her hands. (p. 459)

If the daughter’s image is “so vivid that Dorothy is sure she’s seen some model for it somewhere” (p. 459), that model may lie inside *The Overstory*, the “miniature, simulated world” in which we’ve already encountered just such a girl in the person of Olivia Vandergriff. She’s fierce, having once been “suspended from grade school for punching a chick who called her father ‘flaccid,’” and like the Brinkman girl she favors weed (p. 149). Her father, like Ray Brinkman, is an intellectual property lawyer (p. 162). The most dispositive detail is written in body ink: when we first meet Olivia as a college senior in December 1989, she is planning to graduate “with a crater-strewn transcript, two tongue studs, [and] a florid tattoo on her scapula” (p. 150), just where the Brinkman daughter’s “horrible new baroque

tattoo” is. Later, just after Nick has given Olivia the eco-warrior name Maidenhair (after the ginkgo tree), we finally see her tattoo through his eyes: “across her scapula, in florid script: *A change is gonna come*” (p. 217), the refrain from the Sam Cooke song pointing both to her near-death experience and to the needed change in human relations with the non-human. In inventing their daughter, the Brinkmans show themselves to be either readers of *The Overstory* or the authors of one of the protagonists who ostensibly shared their diegetic world. They have invented their daughter in Olivia’s image, or they have invented Olivia in the course of inventing their daughter. In either case, they are the novel’s primary metaleptic site, the place where *The Overstory* negates the impression that all nine of its protagonists exist on the same diegetic plane.

The more Ray and Dorothy tell the story of “this other life unfolding invisibly alongside the one that happened,” the more their invented daughter seems to follow in Maidenhair’s tracks (p. 460). She’s “lost for a little while” but just needs to “find herself. Find a cause. Something bigger than she is” (p. 470). When she finds that cause, the end is “two life sentences, back to back. Too severe for arson, for destruction of public and private properties, even for involuntary manslaughter. But just harsh enough for that unforgivable crime: harming the safety and certainty of men” (p. 497). The passage leaves unclear, though, whether it’s the daughter who receives the double life sentence or one of her compadres, as is the case with Olivia’s collaborator, Adam. Olivia’s surname, moreover, is not Brinkman, and as a college senior in 1989, she would have been born about five years before Ray and Dorothy met in 1974 (p. 64). Further details make the diegetic separation of Olivia and the Brinkmans as difficult to establish conclusively as their diegetic co-planarity. Ray and Dorothy are reading Patricia’s book *The Secret Forest*, so the plant biologist at least seems to be part of their story-world. Yet when Patricia keynotes a conference on climate change at Stanford University, her lecture is attended by Mimi (pp. 463–65), who ostensibly belongs to the diegetic world that Ray and Dorothy are inventing, that of Olivia and the other Free Bioregion of Cascadia activists. If Mimi and Patricia share a story-world and Patricia and the

Brinkmans do likewise, then by the logic of diegetic transitivity, Mimi is also in the same story-world as Ray and Dorothy. She crosses, as it were, out of the narrative level that is either read or invented by them back into the one they occupy, bringing her collaborators (including Olivia) with her. The metalepsis undergoes a metalepsis.⁴

As the foregoing analysis shows, the metaleptic gestures in *The Overstory* are subtle ones. Turning on details such as a character's tattoo or her father's profession, they demand attentiveness and recall on the reader's part and are easily missed. Once noticed, though, they're impossible to write off as incidental, even as they resist being resolved into a stable multi-diegetic structure. Their effect is to reimagine the novel's world-structuration, replacing the common model of discrete and hierarchized diegetic "levels" with a figure less industrial, more arboreal—a novel whose constituent stories are branching, spliced, and entangled. In a sense, this feature of *The Overstory* doesn't make the experience of reading it dramatically different from that of traversing a more conventionally structured novel. In the conflationary space of reading, we often experience a character as if she were co-ontological with us, all the while knowing she is an invented figure in a story-world distinct from our own. We also accede routinely to the specialized metalepsis that is omniscient narration, accepting that a narrator knows things she couldn't know about the narrated world if she were an occupant of it. *The Overstory* explicitly celebrates just such experiences of world-entanglement in the scene of reading. Years before Ray's stroke, Dorothy is up late absorbed in Walter Scott, Jane Austen, or another of her favorites while her husband sleeps.

She descends into the real anguish of imaginary beings. She lies still, trying not to wake him with her sobs. *What is this, grabbing at my heart, like it means something? What gives this pretend place so much power over me?* Just this: the glimpse of someone seeing something she shouldn't be able to see. Someone who doesn't even know she's been invented, staying game in the face of the inescapable plot. (pp. 210–11)

Elsewhere, though, Powers's novel probes the limits of this narrative model, even suggesting that it poses an obstacle to human reckoning with planet-sized ecological crises. Formerly a non-fiction reader, Ray has come to enjoy the novels Dorothy reads aloud to him in his post-stroke immobility. Yet he harbors some of his old resistance to the form:

[The novels] share a core so obvious it passes for given. Every one imagines that fear and anger, violence and desire, rage laced with the surprise capacity to forgive—*character*—is all that matters in the end. It's a child's creed, of course, just one small step up from the belief that the Creator of the Universe would care to dole out sentences like a judge in a federal court. To be human is to confuse a satisfying story with a meaningful one, and to mistake life for something huge with two legs. No: life is mobilized on a vastly larger scale, and the world is failing precisely because no novel can make the contest for the world seem as compelling as the struggles between a few lost people. But Ray needs fiction now as much as anyone. (p. 383)

Ray's ruminations capture how one can be in the thrall of fiction despite profound skepticism about its premises, scales, and priorities. It's a predicament that applies to *The Overstory* itself, a novel both conspicuously committed to character and constantly straining at that commitment by pointing up its scalar incommensurability with ecological disaster. But what consoles Ray is not the thought that humanity might wean itself off its fascination with character and learn to feel narratively compelled by the contest for the world. It's the thought that one might, in fact, be no more than a character oneself. For if the once-adulterous Dorothy can read *Anna Karenina* to him "with no trace of self-consciousness or shame," then fiction has given her a containment field for her real-world betrayal of his trust. The phenomenology of reading offers Ray merciful proof "that the worst the two of them have done to each other is just another tale worth reading together, at the end of the day" (p. 383). Faced with the sense that one is equal neither

to the ramifications of one's acts in the world nor to the sheer scale of the world's imperilment, what consoles is metalepsis.⁵

If this makes narrative frame-breaking sound politically quietist, it's worth pointing out that the Brinkmans' metaleptic invention of an environmental-activist daughter seems to stimulate rather than suppress their own activism. It's the thought of their daughter planting the chestnut that inspires them to stop mowing their backyard and let it start reverting to forest. It's when her need for "a cause [...] bigger than herself" gets narrated that they turn city work crews away from their land. And it's on the day when her story ends in two life sentences that they decide to resist the law-backed city landscapers, invoking the castle doctrine to do so with force if necessary. That decision triggers Ray's second hemorrhagic stroke; at Dorothy's feet as her husband dies is a copy of Patricia Westerford's latest book, *The New Metamorphosis*, open to a discussion of the old couple who showed *xenia*, "guest friendship," to strangers who turned out to be gods in disguise (p. 498). For Dorothy is not only Dorothea Brooke but Baucis to Ray's Philemon, and the mythological couple's destiny—to be turned into trees by the gods as a reward for their hospitality—was there on the first page of the American couple's "Roots" chapter in the botanical drawings of their respective totem trees, the oak and the linden, trees they couldn't tell apart when they met (p. 64). As with Baucis and Philemon, the Brinkmans' most radical act is neither to mount resistance nor to commit violence but rather to offer hospitality to the non-human—to their invented daughter (described, remember, as one of many "strangers [...] out tonight, wandering, knocking on their door") and to the plant species they allow to slowly repossess their property. "And their reward for opening their door to strangers," writes Westerford in *The New Metamorphosis*, as if of both couples, "was to live on after death as trees—an oak and a linden—huge and gracious and intertwined. What we care for, we will come to resemble. And what we resemble will hold us, when we are us no longer. (p. 499).

This makes for an appealing end to the Brinkmans' story, but it also reflects a worldview in which the gods, like federal judges, mete out reward and punishment to human beings—a

worldview Ray dismissed as even more naïve than the “child’s creed” professed by novels of individual character. It’s as a countercurrent to the novel’s strong, often mythologically expressed closural tendencies that *The Overstory*’s metalepses matter most, throwing an irresolvable narrative geometry in the path of spruce resolutions. In more affective terms, the Brinkmans’ co-fabulation takes what would otherwise be a set of end-stopped narratives of mourning, commemoration, epiphany, and repair and implies that they are the compensatory invention of a couple afflicted with grief for an unborn child and rage at the state’s opposition to their regreening land. In raising the possibility that the story of Maidenhair and her compatriots is a tale told to one another by a latter-day Baucis and Philemon, *The Overstory* transforms Ovid’s deserving old couple into Cyparissian figures of interminable mourning. In the process, Powers’s novel threatens to make its reader, too, an accessory to that endless working through. For a reader alert to its grafting and splitting of diegetic levels has a harder time “letting go” of *The Overstory* after completing a reading—and is instead thrown back into its middle or to the start of a subsequent reading in the hopes of resolving its erratically nested tellings. (This essay testifies to one reader’s having been pulled into just such a compulsive repetition.) Within the bounded terms and context of the novel, such a reader confronts how ecological loss undoes the integrity of worlds. She confronts, as well, the potential unendingness of the ensuing ecological griefwork, which would entail a necessary yet impossible—an impossible yet necessary—re-worlding across ontological thresholds.

For his part, Richard Powers has represented the writing of *The Overstory*, his twelfth novel, as a kind of arrival or homecoming after a career of wandering from one novelistic subject to the next. He told interviewer Amy Brady:

In the past, when I finished a book, I was always ready and excited to go on to a new topic—something new and different from anything I’d written about before. Now I just want to walk, look, listen, breathe, and write this same book, again and again, from different aspects

and elevations, with characters as old and large as I am able to imagine. (Brady, 2018, n.p.)

Having begun the novel while living in Silicon Valley, Powers says he became so captivated by trees' complexity and majesty and by the long "war" people have been waging on the arboreal world that he left his teaching job at Stanford and eventually moved to one of his research sites for the book, the Great Smoky Mountains. That bastion of old-growth forest, which he calls "one of the last refuges of biodiversity on the continent," is also the longtime home of *Overstory* character Patricia Westerford (Brady, 2018, n.p.). Seen one way, Powers's narrative is a satisfyingly conclusive one in which a lifetime of geographical and topical nomadism finally brings the novelist to a place worth dwelling in, and a subject worth dwelling on, for the years that remain. Seen another way, it describes the dawning awareness of a loss so enormous that its gravitational pull proves inescapable, stranding the novelist permanently in the orbit of ecological mourning. In this second view, Powers has undergone a Cyparissian metamorphosis of his own, living where his character does as if he had become a figure in his own fiction, and wishing to write the same book over and over again, there being no other loss to which he can imagine bearing witness.

I opened this essay by pondering the subjectivity of hope. When one asks of a situation, "Is there hope?" one is asking something other than "Do I feel hopeful?" It's not just that the former question surpasses the matter of one's own feeling to ask of an implied collective, "Do we feel hopeful?" The question "Is there hope?" also shifts hope from a feeling or disposition to something more like an atmosphere, a condition, even an ontology. Similarly, to claim "There is hope of a tree," as Job does in the King James Version, is to name a condition of the tree's being rather than to dwell on individual or collective feelings about a tree. We may be ready, now, to bear the ontological weight of an accompanying question: *Is there grief?* Ready, as well, to recognize ecological grief as a condition not unique to humans but enmeshing us, causally and ontologically, with

non-humans whose grieving, where we can see or intuit that it exists, may not be intelligible to us. If we take the shared ontology of ecological grief as a flattening one, however—if we see all subjects, losses, and offenses as identically grievable in the three senses I identified earlier—then we’re not paying attention. The following must be a starting axiom, rather than a conclusion, of our work on ecological grief: that human classes and communities contribute differentially to ecological distress, are differentially affected by it, and are differentially empowered to alleviate it. So too with distinct biological classes and communities. To be entangled in an ontology of ecological grief is not to be leveled or homogenous, as *The Overstory* insists through the unstable nesting of its diegetic worlds. There is grief, but not only grief, and not the same grief. Those who are a little farther from devastation’s epicenters will need to welcome and house, to cover for and compensate, those who are the closest in time and space to loss.

For *The Overstory*, the beings most immediately and urgently exposed to ecological destruction are not the trees. In one of the novel’s final reveals, the entreaty heard by Maidenhair hundreds of pages earlier—“*The most wondrous products of four billion years of life need help*”—turns out to refer not to trees but to humans. “Not them; us. Help from all quarters” (p. 493). We’re again parsing subjective versus objective genitives, for the help in question is not to be tendered *for* a tree but *by* a tree, in part via the humans trees inspire to save themselves. Note that even in appearing to sift the subjects from the objects of help—and hope, and grief—the novel imagines those ecological acts as involving a distributed interspecies agency that is its own kind of metalepsis. *There is help of a tree*: humans will not save ourselves without being called to that work by other forms of life, whose viability also hangs in the balance. *There is hope of a tree*: ecological hope depends on our learning, and quickly, how to live without collapsing the regenerative horizons of other beings, both human and nonhuman. *There is grief of a tree*: insofar as there are losses, including future ones, that we are too late to prevent, our ecological grief must at least re-bind us to being and beings. And if becoming alive to the varieties of ongoing and mutually obligating grief—the sylvan and human

grief for trees, the human and sylvan grief for humans—means splitting the old frames of mourning and ontology, let the old frames be split.

Notes

1. A recent example of this type of climate fiction is Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140*, whose found family of Manhattan-based environmental change-makers metonymize global adaptation to an altered biosphere. See Robinson, 2017.
2. Even in adolescence Patricia Westerford is a figure of interminable mourning. When her agricultural-botanist father is killed in an accident, she refuses to let any of his belongings be thrown out, preserving his library, his walking stick, and his porkpie hat "in a kind of shrine." At his funeral, "Patty reads from Ovid. The promotion of Baucis and Philemon to trees. Her brothers think she has lost her mind with grief" (p. 121).
3. It's relevant here that the Brinkmans' greatest theatrical roles were in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, whose main characters, George and Martha, also invent the child they are unable to have. In the play's fifth act, George "kills" the imaginary son because Martha has violated their cardinal rule of telling no one else about him.
4. This second-order metalepsis is anticipated in the novel's central switchboard passage, in which Patricia Westerford's visit to the Pando aspen clone segues into a synchronic traveling shot (pp. 131–32) of six of the other protagonists, linked through the aspens in their lives as if the characters, too, were part of a vast superorganism. The passage treats all seven of the protagonists it mentions as if they shared a diegetic world. Absent from the passage, significantly, is any reference to Olivia or to Adam.
5. Alice Bell and Jan Alber (2012) inventory some of the thematic (i.e., culturally, philosophically, or ethically engaging) uses of metalepsis in postmodern novels, including several 1990s hypertext fictions. *The Overstory*, I suggest here, adds ecological mourning to their inventory.

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