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Rachel Mindell

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WHAT IS A HOLE MADE OF: QUEER IDENTITY AND GRIEF

IN *AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF RED AND RED DOC*>

By

Rachel Claire Mindell

BA, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, 2000

Thesis

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Approved by:

Sandy Ross, Dean of The Graduate School  
Graduate School

Robert Baker, Chair  
English

Louise Economides,  
English

Beth Hubble  
Women's Studies

Whorled Without End:  
An Introduction to Carson

Anne Carson is a classical scholar and a poet. She has authored fourteen books and translated five, to considerable acclaim. Her creative writing spans a wide formal range, and it can be challenging to place any particular work squarely within a single genre. Carson writes prose poems, essays, operas; she is a visual artist who has garnered better reception for her words than for her art. As she told interviewer Kevin McNeilly, Carson still thinks of her language as a sort of painting: “It’s not about the meaning of each individual word...It’s about the way they interact with each other as daubs of meaning...as impressionist colours interact, daubs of paint, and you stand back and see a story emerge from the way that the things are placed next to each other.” Indeed, Carson’s oeuvre is all about how pieces fit together, how one idea set beside another can provoke a spark. Her texts are replete with references to other authors, ranging from classical to contemporary, from canonical to avant-garde, and she brings them into contact in fresh and surprising ways. Considering her steady reliance on outside texts, Calvin Bedient has proposed that Carson’s “mind is like a creature that eats only the bones of other creatures, the hard, durable passion-facts, leaving the soft flesh alone.” Her books, *Autobiography of Red* (1998) and its sequel *Red Doc>* (2014) are marked, not only by this sort of appropriation and reinterpretation of outside materials, but also by characters with fragmented internal and external landscapes, strongly rendered by strange fusions of form and content.

Though lauded by creative writers, scholars and theorists (including Judith Butler, with whom she collaborated in a performance of her *Antigone* translation, *Antigonick*), Anne Carson is not without her critics. The same qualities that draw her most enthusiastic audience—innovative form, rich extra-textual material and juxtaposition, whimsical oddness, playful treatment of canonical authority—cause others to question her legitimacy and intent. As Roy Scranton notes, while critics celebrate “Carson’s daring language and admire her command of ancient Greek, they also express concerns about her lack of responsibility toward both her texts and her audience” (209). Carson has been accused of taking too many liberties in

translation, a criticism of particular interest if one considers *Autobiography of Red* and *Red Doc*>. Here, Carson focuses on the myth of Geryon, a monster slain by Herakles as one of his heroic labors. She claims to draw from the version told by Stesichoros, an ancient Greek poet of whose work only fragments remain. Very little of either story, however, actually relies on Stesichoros, though an average reader would never know it. In trying to piece together how Carson herself assembled materials, the avid researcher comes across very few consistencies with the source text, the *Geryoneis* (“The Geryon Matter”) by Stesichoros. In fact, a particularly critical review of *Autobiography* by Adam Kirsch claims (perhaps rightly) that “Stesichoros is completely unnecessary,” since “neither the verse nor the emotional tenor of the story is affected by his presence in any way.” One of the two texts’ most salient features, and indeed, an important strand of analysis in this thesis – the queerness of Geryon and Herakles – turns out to have been a result of Carson’s caprice. When asked what in the ancient Geryon myth inspired this choice, Carson responded, “absolutely nothing. In the ancient myth Herakles goes there, confronts Geryon and kills him and the story is over. But in other ancient sources, for example *The Iliad*, there’s a certain amount of reference to homoerotic tenderness and it’s interesting to me how that works in a story and I wanted to give Geryon a fun part to his life” (Wachtel).

Kirsch’s main contention with Carson, however, focuses on her play with genre and form. “What makes Carson think of *Autobiography of Red* as poetry,” Kirsch asks since, “the writing is quite clearly prose,” observing that there is “no strictness of measure or rhythm; the division between a long line and a short one is typographical only, or at best syntactic.” He agrees that the “novel” portion of the work’s “novel in verse” designation is apt, and Carson herself backs Kirsch up on the arbitrariness of her broken lines. She did indeed envision a novel first: “something huge and substantial with lots of manly activity” (Wachtel). The work initially featured “whole paragraphs of prose.” However, Carson recalls, in “one day messing around with the lines I worked out those couplets that are long and short alternations, which seemed to work so I went ahead with it. And then it proved to be quite nice to do.” This observation recalls a chance

mishap on Carson's computer that resulted in the eccentric form of *Red Docs*>. When Carson mistakenly struck a key while writing and the document's margins went wild, she found the accident quite pleasing. For better or worse, this is, in fact, one of Carson's primary methods of composition: allowing space for experimentation and error, though she points out to interviewer Will Aitken that "lying and error are the same word for the Greeks, which is interesting. That is, 'to be wrong' could have various causes." So, perhaps better said, Carson insists on having the creative space to play, be wrong and possibly even deceive. Her work with fragments and translation allows for ample room, as do the strange juxtapositions between source texts she chooses to work with.

Carson is proud of her eccentric aesthetic practices; she has spoken and written about them with some regularity. She reveals to Aitken, "I have open spaces where I put that question and just see what happens." It is the reason she loves fragments: "no matter what the thought would be if it were fully worked out, it wouldn't be as good as the suggestion of a thought that the space gives you. Nothing fully worked out could be so arresting, spooky" (Aitken). It is also why she enjoys translation: "I like the space between languages because it's a place of error or mistakenness, of saying things less well than you would like, or not being able to say them at all" (McNeilly). The ways space and text come together are exciting for Carson. She has said that, in poetry, "you have the presence and the absence together which is totally thrilling," since "it gives and it doesn't give at the same time" (Fleming). Writing, for Carson, is not an act of regulation but rather of relinquishing. "The things you think of to link," she says, "are not in your own control. It's just who you are, bumping into the world. But how you link them is what shows the nature of your mind" (Aitken). Carson's "bumping" is infused with playful error. As Hainley asserts of *Autobiography of Red*, the "breathtaking temporal spiral of it all is her [Carson's] fingerprint, expanding: wrong love, wrong genre, wrong thought, wrong seeing, wrong grammar, wrong translation, wrong identity, wrong me, wrong you. She writes wrong, whorled without end." One can imagine Carson describing herself in the same way. Her own observation to Jim Fleming mirrors *Red Doc*>'s epigraph by Samuel Becket ("Try again. Fail again.

Fail better.”): “I mess around, and mess around, and mess around,” she says, “and look for accidents, just to try to make something come out of unexpectedness.”

On the final page of Carson’s *Autobiography of Red* (1998), an imagined interviewer of 5<sup>th</sup>-century Greek poet Stesichoros attempts to enumerate the latter’s themes, believing them to be: “identity memory eternity”(149). These are also Carson’s major subjects, though she is perhaps most intrigued by how these concerns are affected by the ache of human existence, marked as our experience is, so heavily, by desire and loss. Bruce Hainley calls her “a philosopher of heartbreak” and Scranton observes that “entanglements between poetry and life, between the eros of bodies and the eros of words, are elemental to Anne Carson’s work, and for her, such entanglements always limn a void—lack pangful with longing, grief, lost lives surviving in tatters and hearsay” (202). *Autobiography of Red* and *Red Doc*>, consider this void and the ruins that persist, even in the face of tragedy. Carson suggests in these texts that identity and experience are fragmentary, layered, hybrid, muddled, chaotic, tumultuous and riddled by holes. According to Carson, the artist is tasked with articulating such a reality. In this thesis I draw on criticism related to queer theory and grief to illuminate her vision.

In *Autobiography of Red*, Carson explores the young life of a monster figure from antiquity, Geryon. In classical renditions of the myth, Geryon possesses a herd of red cattle that spark jealousy in Herakles. As one of his labors, Herakles kills Geryon and steals the cattle. *Autobiography of Red* recasts the figure of Geryon in the modern day, narrating his experiences from youth on. In Carson’s book, Geryon and Herakles are adolescent lovers, and Herakles betrays Geryon’s adoration. In their twenties, the two meet again in South America and Herakles’ new lover Ancash teaches Geryon about the magical nature of his wings. Geryon flies into a volcano (to photograph it) and survives.

The first chapter of this thesis, “Geryon Walked the Red Length of His Mind,” focuses on *Autobiography*, outlining the basic plot and form, tangled as it is by peculiar appendices. I then consider Stesichoros, the historical myth of Geryon and the fragments Carson makes little explicit use of to

formulate her text. Delving deeper into Geryon's story, the following section traces how he comes to practice art as a means of healing. Just as the main body of *Autobiography* proceeds chronologically, I discuss Geryon's life from childhood forward, pausing on moments of significance for the development of his particular aesthetic. Next, I utilize queer theory, beginning with a discussion of Carson's personal relationship to gender designations. The links between monstrosity and queerness in the text are assessed, followed by an examination of how power and violence influence Geryon's sexual development. The fourth section also surveys Geryon's own questions (and shame) about gender and sexual identity to demonstrate the divisions he struggles to articulate through photography. Lastly, I use theory related to grief and melancholia. For Carson, desire and suffering are linked – Geryon is destined to feel pain both in wanting Herakles and in losing him. Geryon sees his fractured emotional state reflected in the world around him; he loses his capacity for language and is made to recognize the vulnerability of his bodily form. *Autobiography* proposes that the only control Geryon has over his fate is to render it through photography. As Carson told Aitken, "I finally decided that understanding isn't what grief is about. Or laments." Instead, she says the process is "about making something beautiful out of the ugly chaos you're left with... You want to make that good." *Autobiography of Red* is, above all, a story about love and loss and survival by way of art.

*Red Doc* picks up with the estranged lovers as they approach middle age. Geryon (now called G) has a small hut and a herd, and Herakles (renamed Sad) is a traumatized war veteran. G has given up on his autobiography and lives a solitary life. The ex-lovers are brought together by a woman named Ida who works with G. Reunited, G and Sad travel to the inside of a glacier that houses a mental institution, where they meet a cast of fascinating and damaged characters. When G's mother suddenly dies, the group exits the clinic and narrowly avoids catastrophe (an erupting volcano, a falling musk oxen), only to disperse again. The book closes with Geryon alone in the rain, mourning his losses.

Chapter 2, “How and Where and Why No Ones Says the Word Lost,” concentrates on *Red Doc*, with reference to *Autobiography* as it serves the discussion. This chapter also begins with a brief overview of the book’s narrative and poetic style. *Red Doc* oscillates sporadically between three forms and the text moves, without identifications, from character to character, from narration to speech, from present to past. Just as the book’s timeline jumps forward and back, in the second section of this chapter I also evade strict chronology, focusing instead on several significant characters in succession (G, Sad, Ida, Io, 4NO, CMO, Sad’s mother). I then analyze G and Sad by drawing on queer theory, in particular the work of Judith Halberstam and Judith Butler. This section begins by identifying Eve Sedgwick’s conception of the “mesh,” and discussing how characters are both linked and estranged from one another by desire. However, here I focus mainly on queer temporality (and space) as it relates to both the mechanism and the plot of the text. The concluding section, devoted to a discussion of mourning, begins by reflecting on the inevitable loss and suffering eros implies. Again, the organization is character driven, considering, in succession, the violent trauma experienced by 4NO and Sad, the heartless rationality of CMO and G’s mourning of his mother. Whereas *Autobiography of Red* focuses on the passion and pain of a doomed amorous relationship, *Red Doc* is marked by a wider scope of suffering, relating to death, war, violence, mourning and abandoned hope.

In *Economy of the Unlost*, Carson observes that “the poet is someone who feasts at the same table as other people. But at a certain point he feels a lack. He is provoked by a perception of absences within what others regard as a full and satisfactory experience” (108). Carson is a poet who has written extensively about this kind of dearth, both by way of her characters and in oblique reference to her personal losses. She claims an inability to operate in more conventional forms as a result of these gaps; art is how we might respond to such ruptures, though even in creation, they persist. “I have struggled since the beginning to drive my thought out into the landscape of science and fact where other people converse logically and exchange judgments – but I go blind out there. So writing involves some dashing back and forth between



the darkening landscape where facticity is strewn and a windowless room cleared of everything I do not know. It is the clearing that takes time. It is the clearing that is a mystery” (“Notes on Method” vii). In *Autobiography of Red*, Geryon is driven towards this mystery by his ruptured identity, as a result of both his liminal status as queer, red and winged, but also as a result of trauma. He is the artist waiting for the clearing. The same is not true in *Red Doc*: G no longer has a creative practice, though he can admire the production of others, like Ida and 4NO.

The gap, the clearing and the fragment are all places of potential significance, and a queer analysis may be utilized to “reread gaps, silences and in-between spaces,” if the term “queer” is understood as having come to “signify the continual unhinging of certainties and the systematic disturbing of the familiar” (Gifney & Hird 4-5). Geryon straddles many gaps and is himself riddled by them. He is Geryon and G, a mythical monster and a modern teenage boy; he is porous, synesthetic, full of questions, and mired in sadness. However, according to Butler, society (and the law) requires of us that we “present ourselves as bounded beings—distinct, recognizable, delineated, subjects” (*Precarious Life* 24-5). Carson continually asserts that this is impossible – that we are made of pieces even when we aren’t “broken,” though most of us are. Her tentative solution is art and even art cannot be unified or bounded, distinct. When Fleming asked Carson if she considers her work poetry, she responded thus: “No I don’t think I do really...In ancient Greek they just call poetry making you know *poiesis* means making. That seems respectful of the activity.”

## Chapter 1

Geryon Walked the Red Length of His Mind:  
Aesthetics, Queer Monstrosity and Loss in *Autobiography of Red*

*Autobiography of Red* focuses on the epic monster Geryon, recounting his youth and early adulthood. Although a creature of ancient heritage, Carson's Geryon is reset in the modern day. He maintains physical aberrations from his mythical past: he has wings and a tail. Further, his body is red, and to add to this potentially isolating difference, he is queer. *Autobiography of Red* depicts Geryon as a strange and sensitive boy with a peculiar family. He is attended to sporadically by an eccentric mother, and abused by a brother, prompting his retreat into self-reflection and art. At age fourteen, he meets Herakles in a train station and falls in love. According to the classical myth, Herakles sails to Geryon's island home in order to steal the latter's famous red cattle. To do so, he must first slay Geryon. In *Autobiography of Red*, Herakles doesn't murder Geryon and take his herd, but rather steals Geryon's heart and breaks it. Just when it seems that the end of their affair will destroy him, the narrative cuts to a 22-year-old Geryon on his way to Argentina in search of new photographic subjects. He accidentally reunites with Herakles there, and with Herakles' new lover Ancash. The tale throughout is marked by volcanic passion, and at its conclusion, Geryon flies inside a Peruvian volcano.

Straddling artistic forms, *Autobiography of Red* is written in sprawling poetic verse marked by persistent narrative. Carson has chosen to designate the text a "novel in verse." Characteristically critical of genre's limitations, here Carson continues to defy expectation. In an interview with Jim Fleming in 2012, Carson insists that the ancients didn't have a word for structure as we conceive of it now. "They had genres," she asserts, "but genres arose out of occasions...and we don't have those kind of occasions anymore, demanding certain kinds of language. So it's all become an invention." As Carson sees it, finding the right form is like "groping" since "the form has to arise out of the thought," so that it might be "free somehow from all the things that are impediments to what it wants to be." The portion

dedicated entirely to Geryon (the actual “autobiography”) is made up of poetic lines that alternate, mainly, between quite long and very short.

The book opens with two sections called “Red Meat.” Here, Carson discusses Stesichoros, author of the *Geryoneis* (“The Song of Geryon”), whose fragments from the 5<sup>th</sup> century purportedly inspired *Autobiography of Red*. Three appendices follow, focused on the legendary blinding of Stesichoros by Helen and the former’s attempt to make amends. The last segment in the book, after the autobiography, is a mock interview with Stesichoros (“S”) by a figure called “I.” These six sections serve both to frame and unhinge Geryon’s story. While they provide interesting “historical” background for Carson’s project, demonstrating her finesse for mischievously handling classics, they also complicate the autobiography, perhaps unnecessarily. Stesichoros’ supposed sight loss, for example, has little apparent significance to Geryon’s tale. Carson’s framing devices establish a story-within-a-story, one in which the author identifies herself as a classical authority, as well as a spirited bandit and cunning fabricator. She writes, “If you find the text difficult, you are not alone,” though clearly *she* is the expert on the ancient fragments (*Autobiography* 6). According to Stuart Murray, Carson grants herself the authority to dislodge “the underlying conditions of intelligibility,” what “would uphold both the authority to name and the authority of the name” by frustrating “the logic of the appendix as a supplement” (106).

Stesichoros is a name Carson certainly knows well, though her actual reliance on his fragments is minimal. Geryon is, for the most part, Carson’s own creation, and perhaps also a reflection of herself. He is a strange and sensitive creature assaulted by the world, who finds meaning and comfort in art. Carson’s personal connections aside, in *Autobiography of Red*, monstrosity is linked to queerness, as are Geryon’s experiences of disempowerment, sexual reluctance and associations with the feminine. He is a melancholic, riddled by abuse, desire and loss. In the world around him, Geryon sees this internal grief reflected back, and he struggles to adequately express himself and overcome the limits of his physical vulnerability.

### What Difference Did Stesichoros Make?

The first “Red Meat” opens with an epigraph by Gertrude Stein: “I like the feeling of words doing / as they want to do and as they have to do” (Carson, *Autobiography* 3). From the outset, *Autobiography of Red* establishes an occasion for words to take on unprecedented agency. The sensation aroused by individual units of language, which might indicate both yearning and obligation, is a positive one for Stein. Here, Carson identifies the Ancient Greek poet Stesichoros as having approached language in a similarly innovative way. Adjectives are “the latches of being,” according to Carson, and by way of rule-breaking grammar, Stesichoros “began to undo the latches,” and thus “released being” (4-5). Not only was the substance of the Stesichoros’ poetic unique, but also the content shone new light on the figure of Geryon. Traditionally, the story of Geryon’s destruction by Herakles focused on the triumph of the latter, resulting in “a thrilling account of the victory of culture over monstrosity” (6). What remains of the *Geryoneis*, however, indicates that Stesichoros told the story from Geryon’s perspective instead. Geryon thus becomes more than a mere monster whose death is unimportant, and instead a being with a childhood, a sympathetic mother and even a pet. Just as Stesichoros relied on cultural precedent to upset the myth of Geryon, so does Carson rely on Stesichoros to reimagine Geryon as a contemporary, sensitive, queer, red young man with wings, who falls for the wrong lover.

Though a rebellious visionary like Carson, Stesichoros was not the original source of the Geryon story. In fact, the myth “corresponds with the many stories of a triple-headed creatures that appear all over the northern hemisphere,” seeming “to take their origin from a very primitive Indo-European source” (Curtis 11). Geryon was purportedly a myth that preceded the arrival of the Greeks and was integrated into their story-telling tradition. Curtis further asserts that, like the Minotaur, Geryon was a prime example of “a creation born from an artist’s mind,” a “hybrid” comparable to “other strange hybrids Herakles meets” (12). It is important to note that Carson is drawing, however minimally, from fragments of the *Geryoneis* that have themselves been translated many times. As she notes, these

pieces read “as if Stesichoros had composed a substantial narrative poem then ripped it to pieces and buried the pieces in a box with some song lyrics and lecture notes and scraps of meat” (*Autobiography* 6-7).<sup>1</sup>

The book’s second section purportedly lays out Stesichoros’ fragments, though Carson indicates that her own numbering of them pertains randomly to “how the pieces fell out of the box,” and that readers might “keep shaking” for themselves (7). Indeed, as Curtis observes, determining where each fragment should appear with any certainty is impossible; he notes that there are at least five potential positions for the largest remaining fragments (44). In fact, there is no way to prove absolutely that Stesichoros was the author of this poem at all, though he is the “most acceptable guess” because “his *Geryoneis* is well-attested” and “no other fragments have been found” (60). These doubts allow Carson ample room to expand from her materials.

As the story most often goes, Herakles borrows a golden cup from Helios to sail across the Tartessos River to a red island (Erytheia). He has designs on the mythical red cattle of a monster with either three heads or three bodies. This monster, Geryon, as described in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, is the offspring of Medusa’s son Chrysaor and the Okeanid Kallirhoe (Stafford 26). According to Stesichoros, Geryon has six hands and feet, as well as wings. When Herakles arrives on the island, he first kills Geryon’s dog Orthos and the herdsman Eurythion. Menoites, another of Geryon’s herdsmen, goes in search of Geryon, as the gods take sides – Athena supporting Herakles and Poseidon on the side of Geryon. Scholars tend to agree that Herakles fought deceptively, hiding as Geryon approached and (possibly) dipping his arrow in the poison of a hydra (Curtis 135-6). After killing Geryon (perhaps with just an arrow, or a combination of weapons and assaults), Herakles loads the cattle into the golden cup and sails away.

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<sup>1</sup> In her use of “red meat” and “meat,” Carson is likely playing with the classical myth’s focus on Geryon’s red cattle.

One possible interpretation of the classical story, among many, is that “Herakles embodies the Greek settler” and thus “in many ways the triumph of Herakles over Geryon is emblematic of Greece’s conquest in the West” (Curtis x-xi). Since the myth of Geryon preceded the Greeks, incorporating the native myth into their own folklore, and to their advantage, could have potentially aided in the colonizing effort. Further, just as Carson blends history with invention, the Geryon myth was already in itself a sort of hybrid. As Curtis observes, “hellenization did not completely destroy and engulf native art and lore” such that “if Geryon was believed to be a native deity by the Greeks, the *Geryoneis* too might be seen as an amalgam of local and imported Greek elements, making it consistent with...artistic trends” (20).

In Carson’s telling, very little of the original is preserved. In fact, the only major similarity between the two renderings is that Geryon is destroyed by Herakles and robbed of something he valued. In the second “Red Meat” section by Carson, “Fragments of Stesichoros,” when Herakles shoots an arrow through his skull, Geryon’s neck leans like a “poppy shames itself in a whip of Nude breeze” (*Autobiography* 13). This reference to the poppy by Carson is no accident. In fact, Stesichoros made the same comparison. As Curtis notes, “although plant similes are quite common in epic poetry, Stesichoros’ comparison of a soft-limbed flower to an armoured three-headed monster is remarkable” (43). Carson chooses not to rely on this ancient landscape, but rather sets Geryon’s story in an evolved present where he is punished for wearing a mask at the dinner table, and taken upstairs to “the ticking red taxi of the incubus” (*Autobiography* 10). His mother’s face is described as being like the “coil of a hot plate starting to glow” (12). Clearly, Carson takes liberties with what remains of the *Geryoneis* in terms of timeframe. Her Geryon lives in a world with dinner tables, taxis and electricity. At this point, the reader is already immersed in the “apparatus” of a text “that cleverly queries the status of knowledge and offers a radical epistemology that plays with time, meaning, and affective reality” (Georgis 154).

### Like Horses in War: Portrait of the Artist, Geryon

Emily Dickinson's poem #1748, which begins "The reticent volcano keeps / his never slumbering plan—," marks the beginning of Carson's immersion in the Geryon story. This poem explores the themes of silence, power and immortality. The volcano keeps its "projects pink" and "confided," and while nature knows Jehovah's tale, nature maintains "buckled lips" (*Autobiography* 22). There is value in these deep secrets, in contrast to the "only secret people keep," which is "immortality." Throughout *Autobiography of Red*, Geryon's passions, especially those concerning Herakles, are compared to the characteristics of a volcano. As Dina Georgis observes, "Herakles is undeserving; he nevertheless stirs the volcano within" (162). Sexual tension inspires Geryon to feel that "fires twisted through him" (Carson, *Autobiography* 44), whereas when Herakles breaks with him, "a red wall had sliced the air in half," as "flames licked along the floorboards inside him," and his "heart and lungs were a black crust" (62). Immediately before Herakles ends the relationship, the boys have been talking about Krakatoa, a volcano about which Geryon has memorized a considerable amount of information (61).

In addition to the plot's fascination with volcanoes, Emily Dickinson will appear again. When Geryon reunites with Herakles in Argentina after many years, the latter is creating a documentary on Dickinson. He and his new lover Ancash are recording the sound of volcanoes and Herakles refers to poem #1677, "On my volcano grows the grass". Geryon knows the poem and can discuss its rhyme scheme critically (108), demonstrating a marked development from his traumatic beginnings with language.

In Carson's telling, when Geryon is young, his relationship with his mother shapes his linguistic understanding. He trusts the manner in which she renders the world for him through language. "What does *each* mean," he asks, trusting that "she never lied to him" and "once she said the meaning it would stay" (26). The example she gives ("like you and your brother each have your own room"), however, turns out to be a lie. Still, until a grandmother's accident forces the boys into the same room, Geryon

trusts in the strength of words to protect: “he clothed himself in the strong word *each*.” When Geryon’s brother sexually abuses him, an allowance made possible, in some sense, by linguistic shift (they no longer *each* have a private space), Geryon’s notions of safety are forever altered. He now thinks about “the difference between outside and inside,” deciding for himself, “inside is mine” (29). This trauma initiates a rift within Geryon that inspires his autobiography, a place in which to record “all inside things.” Throughout the text, he keeps words inside himself like lava rather than express vulnerability or confusion. Language is insufficient for him as a means to record his unique experience (queer, red, winged), and he turns to photography. According to Michael Cobb, “Geryon acquires a skill all too common once one’s soul has been violated...by another: he splits the world” (41).

Even before this emotional rupture occurs for Geryon, he struggles with boundaries related to experience, specifically in relation to his synesthesia. In the first chapter of *Autobiography of Red*, Geryon’s vision overlaps with touch and smell. In the schoolyard, he undergoes both the “intolerable red assault of grass” as well “the smell of grass everywhere pulling him towards it like a strong sea” (Carson, *Autobiography* 23). Geryon experiences the sensual world in a synesthetic blur. While in Argentina, Geryon recalls an instance of trying to explain this type of sensing to his fellow 7<sup>th</sup> graders, all of whom had already “unlearned” it. He remembers this as “the year he began to wonder about the noise colors make. Roses roaring across the garden” and “silver light of stars crashing against the window screen” (84). The other students don’t understand him – they “had to admit they did not hear the cries of roses being burned alive in the noonday sun. *Like horses*, Geryon would say helpfully, *like horses in war*.”

While the experience of color invades Geryon’s perception, one particular shade saturates his whole existence – red. Geryon is himself red and experiences life in terms of his redness, seeing red in everything. Interestingly, the book is entitled not *Autobiography of Geryon* but *Autobiography of Red*. According to Georgis, Geryon’s “red monstrosity organizes and inflects all of his experiences, not easily



defined by him or by those who are his witnesses” (155).<sup>2</sup> Still, Murray warns against conflating the color with Geryon. As he argues, “to collapse Geryon and ‘red’ ontologically would be a mistake, because it is precisely the difference between them—the difference between Geryon and his proper name or proper identity, between him and Herakles” that “is dramatized and has to be worked through” (112).

Geryon attempts to negotiate the ample complications of his “monstrous” existence through an unconventional approach to autobiography. The first artifact Geryon designs to this end is a sculpture. He attaches a cigarette and shredded money to a tomato (Carson, *Autobiography* 34-5). Though his mother calls the sculpture “beautiful,” it is unclear whether or not she discerns its associations with Geryon’s lived experience. The tomato is a red object, rather than a red subject with agency. Geryon’s mother smokes avidly (whereas he represents the volcanic, she is merely smoke with no light), and Geryon’s brother gives him a dollar after sexually manipulating him (29).<sup>3</sup> Though still very young, Geryon is able to make representational connections between the object world and his family context and recollections. As Judith Butler asserts, “the disorientation of grief – ‘Who have I become?’ or indeed, ‘What is left of me?’...posits the ‘I’ in the mode of unknowingness” (30). Geryon has suffered a violation resulting in grief, a grief that will be intensified by his unsuccessful relationship with Herakles. According to Georgis, Geryon “must survive not the loss of cattle to Herakles but his ‘early death’ from an originary trauma and then from a broken heart (161). His suffering encourages Geryon to engage in self-questioning and explore artistic answers.

After he learns to write, Geryon begins the textual portion of his story. He labels a blank book “Autobiography” and inside he enumerates the “facts”: “Total Facts Known About Geryon. Geryon was

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth briefly noting that doubt remains whether Geryon, though winged and monstrous certainly, was historically the color red. Carson may, in fact, be the first to portray him in this manner, perhaps drawing on the color of Geryon’s mythical red homeland, or the red ink used in ancient depictions of the story, or even her association of Geryon with the fire of a volcano. In the purported interview with Stesichoros at the end of the book, “he” says, “it is red that I like and there is a link between geology and character” (Carson, *Autobiography* 149). When the interviewer lists his “constant themes” (“identity, memory, eternity”), S wishes to add, “and how can regret be red and might it be.”

<sup>3</sup> Of course, here Carson may be playing at a parody of the notion that art should (and can be) easily psychoanalyzed.

a monster everything about him was red...Herakles came one day killed Geryon got the cattle” (Carson, *Autobiography* 37). It seems significant that Geryon chooses not to write about his life in first person, but rather narrates his mythical fate (and death) from the perspective of an outsider. As Georgis observes, trauma “is retained in memory but not as an event that can be directly narrativized. It returns in fragments of time, in absences, and in intensities” (161). The suffering Geryon has already experienced, and the inevitable suffering to come, have distanced him from a direct, personal narrative. Georgis draws an interesting connection between this notion of divisions and Geryon’s eventual obsession with photography. As a medium, the photograph allows for several fragmentations of space and time (between the photographer and the subject, between the time in which the photograph is taken and when it is observed, and between the lifespan of what is photographed and the lifespan of the image itself), all of which create conditions for infinite potential gaps and overlaps (161). Photography thus seems an appropriate response to the “shattering” of Geryon that results from such severe distress.

Geryon is first seen making use of a camera in Chapter 8, “Click.” His mother questions him about Herakles, but he will not respond. As his mother talks on (“maybe I’ll just keep talking / and if I say anything intelligent you can take a picture of it”), Geryon focuses his camera on her throat and then her mouth (Carson, *Autobiography* 40). It is unclear whether he captures any images, but he does use the device to clearly express an unwillingness to account for his relationship with Herakles. Geryon is later fascinated with the photograph “Red Patience,” taken by Herakles’ grandmother (51). The image captures, by way of a fifteen-minute exposure (a technique Geryon will later utilize), the eruption of the unnamed volcano near Hades, the town in which Herakles and his family live. Geryon is “disturbed by it” but can’t articulate why, which seems to augment the fascination. Photography becomes the most significant expression for Geryon just as Herakles is about to break his heart in Chapter 19. Before Herakles suggests that Geryon take a bus home, Carson reveals to the reader that “the autobiography,

which Geryon worked on from the age of five to the age of forty-four, had recently taken the form of a photographic essay”(60).

Geryon’s next observation seems to anticipate Butler’s exploration of mourning: perhaps, Butler supposes, “One mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation” (*Precarious Lives* 21). Geryon associates the predominance of photographs in his autobiography with his thought, “Now that I am a man in transition...” Herakles cuts off this train of thought, catching Geryon in “that blurred state between awake and asleep when too many intake valves are open in the soul” (Carson, *Autobiography of Red* 60). Thus, in a moment of liminal vulnerability, Geryon is prepared to undergo change, the painful change that Herakles will foster by ending their relationship. Geryon takes one last photograph before returning home, an image of “some red rabbit giggle tied with a white ribbon” entitled “Jealous of My Little Sensations” (62). The figure of this nameless rabbit engaged with “giggle” and “white ribbon” is swiftly darkened by the word “tied.” This image recalls the swift “red wall” that cuts off Geryon’s air when Herakles reminds him about the availability of buses to take him home from Hades. Geryon is like a helpless animal bound.

In their final interaction as adolescents, he and Herakles argue about aesthetics and the nature of time. Herakles claims that Geryon must not understand what photography is, since he is troubled by it (65). For Herakles, this art is merely “a way of playing with perceptual relationships.” Geryon cannot face the impending loss of Herakles, and he thus refuses to accept, in the easy manner that Herakles does, that stars aren’t actually there, that they “burned out ten thousand years ago.” Herakles dismissively tells Geryon, “You see memories,” and Geryon pretends déjà vu (“Have we had this conversation before?”) but the truth is, Herakles is right. In a state of suspended mourning for their lost love, Geryon cannot let go of memory. Butler affirms the significance of inquiries regarding melancholy that go beyond the human such that “an insurrection” occurs “at the level of ontology, a critical opening up of the questions,

What is real? Whose lives are real? How might reality be remade?” (33). For Geryon, the stars are grievable. The volcano of red passion he once was for Herakles has subsided and left his insides a “black crust” – the volcano is grievable. Photographs are disturbing because they display a subject in particular tension with time, something that is no longer as it was at the moment the image was captured, a loss that might be grieved.

Whereas Herakles challenges Geryon’s aesthetics, the former’s grandmother engages Geryon meaningfully about photography by way of “Red Patience.” She agrees that the image is disturbing, and questions whether Geryon is unsettled, not by the content, but by the “silence” he might observe in it (66-7). The grandmother attempts to explain why a captured image might be unsettling, rather than discounting Geryon the way Herakles does (“you don’t understand what photography is” [65]) or setting up a relationship with the language of his query that proves unstable (as his mother does when Geryon asks about “each” [24]). Some ten years later, as Geryon persists in a melancholic attachment to Herakles and perhaps also another lost relationship that seems decidedly significant (with the grandmother), he will choose to leave home for Argentina (a regular setting for the grandmother’s anecdotes about people like Virginia Woolf and Sigmund Freud).

However, taking this journey, Geryon must wade, for years seemingly, through the waters of torrential grief. Herakles has moved on to other prospects, and Geryon arrives at his mother’s house having “taken the local bus from Hades. Seven-hour trip. He wept most of the way” (68). With the mention of Herakles’ name, “a cloud of agony poured up his soul.” According to Butler, grief exhibits “the thrall in which our relationship with others holds us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control” (23). In Chapter 23, “Water,” mourning seems to come from a natural force outside of Geryon – rain on a volcano. “Water! Out from between two crouching masses of the world the word leapt” (Carson, *Autobiography of Red* 70).

Geryon is not in control: “It was raining on his face. He forgot for a moment that he was a brokenheart / then he remembered. Sick lurch downward / to Geryon trapped in his own bad apple.” To gain some sense of order, Geryon watches the clock, bidding for brief intervals of self-control, and here laying the groundwork for an obsession with the nature of time itself – “‘what is time made of?’ is a question that had long exercised Geryon” (93). In the progression of a single minute, “years passed / as his eyes ran water” (70). Geryon is powerless to the natural forces of grief; he is “weak as a fly,” with “his wings trailing over the drainboard.” He responds to this bout of mourning artistically, by completing a fifteen-minute exposure of a fly drowning in a bucket of rain outside (like Geryon in his sadness), entitled “If He Sleep He Shall Do Well” (71).

After the torrential pain of initial separation from Herakles, Geryon enters a “numb time, caught between the tongue and the taste” (72). He works in a library and takes photographs of coworker’s shoes and socks. As Murray observes, “in the aftermath of their failed love, Geryon’s fourteen-year-old body enters a suspended animation in which sensations are neither clearly inside nor outside” (109). Geryon’s gaze is downturned and his attention is sensually suspended. When his mother asks, Geryon cannot “remember if the librarians were men or women.” Butler asserts that grieving “is not to be resigned to inaction, but it may be understood as the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself” (30). For Geryon, the process is indeed slow. After returning from the library one night and receiving an unlikely call from Herakles, Geryon wakes in the middle of night and watches “the sweep hand of the electric clock / on the dresser. Its little dry hum / ran over his nerves like a comb” (Carson, *Autobiography of Red* 75).

He finally departs for South American at age 22, leaving his old life behind “like a weak season,” only to find his otherness magnified and his solitude more glaring (78). Geryon struggles to “fit” himself into life in Argentina. On the airplane ride, he shifts “himself down and up in the molded seat,” and “half turned sideways but could not place his left arm” as time began “squeezing Geryon like the

pleats of an accordion” (80). In a Buenos Aires café, he fearfully writes postcards, shifting “his upper back muscles inside the huge overcoat, tightening his wings” (82). Here, Geryon contends with the physical discomforts of his unlikely form in a foreign environment. It is as though his status as a tourist magnifies his own displacement within his physical body. He is “crushed” into a cab with a philosophy professor he meets at the café named Yellowbeard (88), and again squashed into a desk at the lecture they attend: “it was a tight fit in his big overcoat. He couldn’t cross his knees” (90). Geryon’s insistence on disguising his wings makes it difficult for him to navigate space in Argentina. However, it is amidst such marked physical discomfort that Geryon takes his first self-portrait entitled “No Tail!” His body is contracted “in fetal position,” but his wings are “outspreed on the bed like a black lace map of South America” (97). Only in his autobiography can Geryon explore the potential beauty and power of his physical form; in the outside world, he must keep markers of his mythical history hidden.

One evening in a hotel while reading Merleau-Ponty, Geryon is struck by a passage that provokes the volcano-like ache that Herakles used to inspire in him. Geryon reads the following, and feels “something like tons of black magma boiling up from the deeper regions in him”: “to deny the existence of red / is to deny the existence of mystery. The soul which does so will one day go mad” (105). With a seeming exuberance, he heads into the Buenos Aires night with his senses awakened to “brilliant young men,” “heaps of romance” “forty-four cans of lychee nuts.” He stops “at a newspaper kiosk to read every headline” (106). What had seemed a passionate upsurge of new life, a throwing off of melancholic divisions via philosophy, should have in fact served as a warning. The volcano in Geryon’s belly was actually a premonition; in the middle of Argentina he runs into Herakles, literally – and “Geryon’s heart stopped” (107).

When they first meet in a bus station as adolescents, Geryon and Herakles are described as “two superior eels at the bottom of the tank” that “recognized each other like italics” (39). Like the italicized titles of two different myths, the young men can sense destiny in one another. Whereas

Stesichoros may have been struck blind, this unlikely romantic pair is flooded with sight. In Argentina (now truly “at the bottom of the tank”), Geryon and Herakles wrestle with the myths that created them. Herakles proves himself to be the thief of his epic Labors, but instead of taking cattle, he steals a tiger from a department store. Geryon and Herakles grow in understanding of one another by way of Herakles’ new Peruvian lover, Ancash. These three ostensibly form a love triangle. According to Carson, desire is necessarily associated with triangulation, since there are “three points of transformation on a circuit of possible relationship, electrified by desire so that they touch not touching. Conjoined they are held apart. The third component plays a paradoxical role for it both connects and separates, marking that two are not one, irradiating the absence whose presence is demanded by eros” (Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* 14, 16). Ancash, Cobb claims, is “the figure that interrupts the eternity of Geryon and Herakles, makes it impossible for Geryon to be pulled back into the myth of Herakles” (45). When Ancash discovers the secret of Geryon’s wings, he provides Geryon with a new mythology in which the latter is triumphant.

According to Ancash, Geryon belongs to a group of “wise ones. / Holy men I guess you could say” essential to the history of Huaraz, where Ancash is from (Carson, *Autobiography* 128). As he tells Geryon, “the word in Quechua is *Yazcol Yazcamac* it means the Ones Who Went and Saw and Came Back.” They were a people who went down inside the region’s volcano, had “all their weaknesses burned away – and their mortality” and came back as “red people with wings” (128-9). The bulk of Geryon’s photos occur after he is inscribed with this new identity – at least six, for which Chapters 40 through 46 are named. Georgis argues, “with Ancash, who is touched and narrates the difference of his red wings, Geryon is able to begin to think about and narrate the secrets of his mysterious hybrid being” (164). Miller concurs: “Ancash here provides Geryon with an empowering mythic identity and autobiographical purpose apart from his subordinate role in the classical Herakles story” (6). The final photograph, numbered “1748” for Emily Dickinson, is one Geryon “never took, no one here took it” (Carson, *Autobiography* 145). In order to rewrite the pain of his origin myth, Geryon must believe in a new one.

Since Ancash has made Geryon immortal by way of the Yazcol Yazcamac, “Geryon does something an immortal might do...perhaps out of guilt for still loving Herakles, but also perhaps because Ancash saved him from death” (Cobb 45). Geryon hits “Record” and flies into the volcano (Carson, *Autobiography* 145).

When Geryon first learns to write in elementary school, his teacher comments on the autobiography’s calm acceptance of inevitable violence laid out by “Total Facts Know About Geryon.” “Where does he get his ideas,” she wants to know, and also, “does he ever write anything with a happy ending?” (38). Geryon takes the notebook from her and pencils in a “New Ending:” “All over the world the beautiful red breezes went on blowing hand / in hand.” At the conclusion of the book, Herakles, Geryon and Ancash visit a bakery at the Huaraz volcano. “We are neighbors of fire,” Geryon observes, and time is described as “rushing towards them where they stand side by side with arms touching” (146). Perhaps this image is the happy ending young Geryon described. Cobb proposes that “myths and epics are about those who are heroic and those who strive to be like the immortals who make the red breezes of the world flow,” and in this case, “instead of dead cattle, we have fire, a connection, and a sense of a large great feeling that can burn our faces with something like immortality—a new kind of red complexion” (45-6).

### **Who is the Master of Monsters: Wings, Power, and Woman Liquors**

*Autobiography of Red* is deeply concerned with the frontiers inspired by eros and grief. Characters move from myth to current day, from visual media to text, and through states of convergence, dissonance and dislocation. According to Eve Sedgwick in *Tendencies*, “queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, troublant. The word ‘queer’ itself means across—it comes from the Indo-European root *twerken*, which also yields to the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English athwart” (cited in Hall and Jagose 32). Certainly Carson is interested in these sorts of bends, curls and crossings, as she works across ancient fragments, translations, and texts (both her own and those of



others). As an author, she is provoked by the traversal of boundaries and binaries, be they constraints of form (poetry vs. prose), expectations regarding fidelity in translation or the divisions between human and animal, man and monster.

In an interview with close friend Will Aitken, Carson discusses her early obsession with Oscar Wilde, responding to Aitken's questions about her life "as a gay man." Carson says, "It's been a somewhat checkered career as a gay man...I can't exactly remember why I fixated on Oscar Wilde, but I did feel that it gave me an education in aesthetic sensibility, and also a kind of irony towards oneself that was useful in later life, an ongoing carapace of irony that I think lots of gay men develop." An essay in her book *Plainwater* describes walking the Camino Santiago and in it Carson refers to herself as a man. When Aitken questions her about this, she replies, "I guess I've never felt entirely female, but then probably lots of people don't." In reference to this trip, she recalls:

when I did that pilgrimage, I didn't have any connection to the female gender. I wouldn't say I exactly felt like a man, but when you're talking about yourself you only have these two options. There's no word for the "floating" gender in which we would all like to rest.

Perhaps at the time of this interview, completed in 2002, the term queer wouldn't have appealed to Carson for any number of reasons. It seems fair to note that Carson has made a career for herself engaging with queer authors, including Sappho, Proust, Wilde, Stein, and Woolf to name a few. However, if we consider Rosemary Hennessy's ideas on the topic, certainly Carson's personal sense of "floating" gender is relevant, even if she doesn't identify herself as queer. According to Hennessy, "queer theory distances itself from lesbian and gay identity politics because it sees any identity as internally divided and therefore not an apt or effective rallying point for change. 'Queer' is a mark of the instability of identity" (35). In reference to *Autobiography of Red*, Carson reflects, "I was drawn to the Geryon story because of

his monstrosity, although it's something of a cliché to say that we all think we're monsters. But it does have to do with gender" (Aitken).

In *Skin Shows*, Judith Halberstam analyzes monstrosity and the ways in which it overlaps with society's fear of queerness, specifically in gothic tropes. Her assertions are significant to *Autobiography of Red*, though clearly Carson's text isn't directed toward horror of this kind. Halberstam observes of monstrosity that, "within the history of embodied deviance, monsters always combine the markings of a plurality of differences even if certain forms of difference are eclipsed momentarily by others" (5). Certainly, Geryon is made up of various characteristics that distinguish him from others, including not only his red skin and wings, but also his intense sensitivity and queerness. As Georgis asserts, "Geryon's red wings stand for his abjectly marked body...his queerness makes him vulnerable to social expulsion and to hate so he lives with his red wings masked, shamefully strapped under his clothes for no one to see" (159). It is interesting to note, however, that the world around Geryon disregards his most obvious differences (redness and wings) almost completely. Geryon is never harassed for being gay or liking art. Nor is he recognized, for that matter. Ancash is the only character in the book to actually acknowledge Geryon's physical difference, and his reaction is surprising. As Halberstam writes, "Monstrosity (and the fear it gives rise to) is historically conditioned rather than a psychological universal" (6). Ancash reacts to seeing Geryon's wings not with terror but awe – he has been prepared to regard such difference with respect by a cultural tradition of winged "holy men" (Carson, *Autobiography* 128).

According to Halberstam, "Within the traits that make a body monstrous – that is, frightening or ugly, abnormal or disgusting – we may read the difference between an other and a self, a pervert and a normal person, a foreigner and a native" (8). In this case, Ancash identifies Geryon's disparity (Geryon is the foreigner, in several senses, and Ancash is a native). Still, Ancash treats Geryon's difference with a kindness and acknowledgement that Geryon has never received. To Ancash, these legendary Yazcamac figures are neither monsters nor creatures; he refers to them as people: "These people did exist. / Stories

are told of them still.” It is Herakles, a monstrous lecher himself, who intrudes on the scene and makes of Geryon a powerless other, perhaps out of jealousy. As Carson writes, “Herakles laughed / and flicked Geryon’s blanket. *I’m a master of monsters aren’t I?*” (129).

When Geryon is spending most of his time with Herakles at fourteen, he begins “experiencing a pain not felt since childhood...His wings were struggling” (Carson, *Autobiography* 53). He “fits” even less than before. His wings “tore against each other on his shoulders / like the little mindless red animal they were.” Geryon attempts to make his appendages behave: “with a piece of wooden plank he’d found in the basement Geryon made a back brace / and lashed the wings tight. / Then put his jacket back on.” Even with the man who will serve as the love of his life, Geryon feels the urge to hide his difference—not just his wings, but also his vulnerability. In Argentina, he panics that he will be asked to leave a café, that they will call the police and throw him out because he won’t know what to say when the waiter approaches: “it was not the fear of ridicule, to which everyday life as a winged red person had accommodated Geryon early in life, / but this blank desertion of his own mind / that threw him into despair. Perhaps he was mad” (83-4). His difference terrifies him into isolation, even as an adult. When a tango singer says to him, “looks like time for you to get home to bed,” Geryon hears “who can a monster blame for being red?” (104). His whole life is colored by his red, winged, and queer experience.

Though clearly *Autobiography of Red* isn’t a gothic text, Halberstam’s framework for how that genre functions proves relevant here. According to her, within the gothic narrative system, “the author professes to be no more than a collector of documents, a compiler of the facts of the case. The reader, of course, is the judge and jury, the courtroom audience, and often, a kind of prosecuting presence expected to know truth, recognize guilt, and penalize monstrosity” (20). Carson certainly presents documents she claims to have compiled; however, she follows the lead of Stesichoros, painting Geryon not as a monster to be penalized, but as a person to be sympathized with. This notion of the courtroom comes into play in the first chapter of *Autobiography*, entitled “Justice.” The book begins: “Geryon learned about justice from

his brother quite early” (Carson 23). It follows that Geryon will be punished for his difference, first for being unable to find his kindergarten classroom in the elementary school, and then for being unable to protect himself physically from one of his only sources of (damaged) familial love. As Butler writes, “Justice is not only or exclusively a matter of how persons are treated or how societies are constituted” since it also “concerns consequential decisions about what a person is, and what social norms must be honored and expressed for ‘personhood’ to become allocated” (58). For Geryon’s brother, justice involves domination; Geryon becomes less than a person, and violence serves as greater capital in his environment than protection.

After snapping him repeatedly with a rubber band, Geryon’s brother asks him *“What’s your favorite weapon?”* before revealing that he prefers a “catapult” since it can surprise and annihilate large groups (Carson, *Autobiography* 32). “From behind his knees,” Geryon responds “Cage” (33). His brother uses this reply as a further excuse to abuse Geryon, retorting *“You idiot cage isn’t a weapon. It has to do something to be a weapon. / Has to destroy the enemy.”* Of course, G is profoundly right: psychological and spiritual cages are the worst kind of weapon. Later, Yellowbeard will remark, in reference to a law code the philosopher has just recited, “if / there were such a thing / as justice that’s what it ought to sound like—short. Clean. Rhythmical. / Like a houseboy” (89). Yellowbeard does not believe that justice even exists, but if it did, he implies it would be about servitude and latent sexuality. According to Butler, “The question of who and what is considered real and true is apparently a question of knowledge. But it is also, as Foucault makes plain, a question of power” (215).

Geryon’s brother clearly possesses the command in their childhood space, using violence and sexual abuse to demean Geryon. As Butler questions, what is “the relation between violence and those lives considered as ‘unreal’”? Does violence effect that unreality? Does violence take place on the condition of unreality?” (*Precarious Lives* 33). Geryon, in some senses, is not completely real to his brother. When Geryon asks why his brother masturbates in their shared room (“why do you pull on your stick?”),

the latter responds, “None of your business let’s see yours...Bet you don’t have one...You’re so ugly I bet it fell off...Show me yours / and I’ll give you something good” (Carson, *Autobiography* 27). Whether or not his brother actually believes these things, he accuses Geryon of being so abnormal as not to have genitalia at all, or even worse, that his freakishness has caused his penis to disappear. Geryon’s brother manipulates him, as though he were less than human. The nightly ritual of abuse continues, such that “voyaging into the rotten ruby of the night became a contest of freedom / and bad logic” (28). Here, the red of the ruby is associated with violence and abuse, passion transformed into lust for domination. Geryon cannot liberate himself, and his mind cannot save him.

When Geryon reads Merleau-Ponty in Argentina, he is drawn naturally to the following assertion: “I will never know how you see red and you will never know how I see it. / But this separation of consciousness / is recognized only after a failure of communication, and our first movement is / to believe in an undivided being between us” (105). Carson’s characters never seem to attain, or even fully believe, in this “undivided being.” Herakles and Geryon never actually become one, but remain, “not touching / but joined in astonishment as two cuts lie parallel in the same flesh (45). As Butler notes, “there is always a dimension of ourselves and our relation to others that we cannot know, and this not knowing persists with us as a condition of existence and, indeed, of survivability” (*Undoing Gender* 15). This not-knowing has a strong connection to sexuality, such that “sexual difference is the site where a question concerning the relation of the biological to the cultural is posed and reposed, where it must and can be posed, but where it cannot, strictly speaking, be answered” (186).

Geryon clearly expresses doubts about sexuality and consummation. Soon after he and Herakles have begun spending time together, the latter expresses sexual frustration: “I guess I’m someone who will never be satisfied” (44). As Carson writes of Geryon, “fire twisted through him. / He picked his way carefully / toward the sex question. Why is it a question... He understood / that people need / acts of attention from one another, does it really matter which acts?” Geryon wants to understand

the process intellectually, emotionally. “Hot unsorted parts of the questions,” Carson notes, “were licking up from every crack in Geryon.” Though he and Herakles do become sexual, Geryon continues to possess a certain innocence about their “animal” nature. When the pair see two butterflies going past, one atop the other, the following exchange occurs: “*How nice, said Geryon, he’s helping him. Herakles opened one eye and looked. / He’s fucking him*” (49-50).

Fundamentally, Geryon and Herakles see the world and their own sexual identity in completely different ways – Geryon is the conquered and persuaded; Herakles is a vanquisher who fearlessly thwarts expectations about sexual demeanor. He does not care to question how or why he likes to have sex with men—like his mythical counterpart, he takes what he wants. Herakles has just met Geryon when he puts the latter’s cold hands under his shirt (Carson, *Autobiography* 39). Even as an adult, Geryon never quite loses his sexual timidity and shame. In a Buenos Aires bookstore, “*Balling from Behind* caught his eye / (a whole magazine devoted to this? / issue after issue? year after year?) but he was too embarrassed to buy it” (106).<sup>4</sup> Geryon tries desperately in South America to suppress the reigniting of his passion for Herakles, both emotional and sexual since for Geryon, the two are aligned. He wills himself to hold out, he tells himself that “he was not / remembering how Herakles liked to make love early in the morning like a sleepy bear / taking the lid off a jar of honey” (111). This thought alone forces Geryon to take a cold shower.

Throughout his life, Geryon has an intense connection to the feminine perspective. In Chapter Three, “Rhinestones,” he is awestruck by his mother as she prepares to go out for the evening. Carson notes “she had all her breast on... / Geryon stared in amazement. / She looked so brave. He could look at her forever” (30). Geryon suffers from insomnia, dating back to his infancy. Awake in the night “he

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<sup>4</sup> Instead, he winds up fascinated by the following line from a book called *Oblivion the Price of Sanity?* (an invented title): “There are no words for a world without a self, seen with impersonal clarity. / All language can register is the slow return / to the oblivion we call health when imagination automatically recolors the landscape / and habit blurs perception and language / takes up its routine flourishes” (Carson, *Autobiography* 107). The quote, actually from a biography of Virginia Woolf by Lyndall Gordon, refers to the inevitable influence of norms on both our language and behavior.

thought of women. / What is it like to be a woman / listening in the dark?," he wonders, picturing a rapist as he comes up the steps "as slow as lava. She listens / to the blank space where / his consciousness is, moving towards her" (48). Geryon is able to deeply consider the feminine space of sexual vulnerability. In Hades with Herakles, he goes upstairs to use a phone, suddenly asking himself, "Who am I?" (57). When he finds the light switch, it is as though the room "sprang towards him like an angry surf with its unappeasable debris / of woman liquors, he saw a slip / a dropped magazine combs baby powder a stack of phone books a bowl of pearls / a teacup with water in it himself / in the mirror cruel as a slash of lipstick—he banged the light off" (57).

His identity is influenced by deep associations with the feminine that he struggles to accept. When he leaves the room, Geryon recalls that "he had been here before, dangling / inside the word *she* like a trinket at a belt. Spokes of red rang across his eyelids / in the blackness" (57). Geryon and Ancash are drawn to reflections of their unconventional gender performance in the world around them. While they are walking one night, "two women in furs came towards them swaying on their heels / like big gold foxes. No— / they are men, Geryon saw as they passed. Ancash was staring too. The foxes / disappeared in the crowd. / Ancash and Geryon walked on. Now a hunger was walking with them" (114). Though the nature of this "hunger" is unspecified, it seems to connote both a predator/prey scenario, and also a desire for free expression of sexual difference.

Butler argues that "the terms that make up one's own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author (and that radically contests the notion of authorship itself" (1). Indeed, Geryon's story, even with the designation "autobiography" here, is not his own – it has been told and is being retold outside of him, in Carson's text. Carson herself isn't even the sole author, since Stesichoros, Stein, Dickinson, Heidegger, and others are essential to how the book functions. It is Carson, however, who chooses to portray Geryon as queer – his maleness was decided by myth. *Autobiography of Red* is playful with the Stesichoros fragments, however, using the simile of the

broken poppy again when Herakles gives Geryon a hand job on an airplane headed for Peru (118).

Geryon has mistakenly purchased a book of erotica and is aroused, though “it made him furious with himself / to be stirred by sentences like, / Gladys slid a hand under her nightgown and began to caress her own thighs”. He experiences “a wave of longing as strong as color” and as Herakles touches him “Geryon’s / head went back like a poppy in a breeze” (Carson, *Autobiography* 119). Whereas in the myth, Herakles breaks Geryon’s poppy with an arrow, here Herakles breaks him with sexual pleasure, a parallel that seems to imply that sex and pain (even death) are, for Carson, linked.

### **The Empty Fruit Bowl: Eros Expropriates, Grief Debilitates**

From the moment he meets Herakles in a train station, Geryon is forever altered. As Butler writes of grief, “for if I am confounded by you, then you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you” (*Precarious Lives* 49). From that moment forth, from that inexplicably charged instant forward, Geryon has already begun to lose. Their encounter is “one of those moments / that is the opposite of blindness” as “the world poured back and forth between their eyes” (Carson, *Autobiography* 39). They are destined to encounter one another, and the result, at least based on mythical precedent, will be fatal for Geryon. With love comes new vision, but certainly this type of love is also blind and blinding, a trope Carson toys with here. Though we may not know “what it is in another person” that we love and then lose, this lack of knowledge cannot change the painful outcome (Butler 28). Difference is a source of eros but also risk. What is it about Herakles? He possesses a personal magnetism and sexual liberty that Geryon lacks – Herakles is one who conquers. When he meets Herakles as an adult in Argentina, Geryon recalls that as a teen, he “had never known what Herakles was thinking. Once in a while he would say, / Penny for your thoughts! / and it always turned out to be some odd thing like a bumper sticker...What Geryon was thinking Herakles never asked. In the space between them / developed a dangerous cloud. / Geryon knew he must not go back into the cloud. Desire is no light thing” (Carson, *Autobiography* 132-3).



Butler observes that “there is no way to collapse the distinction between the Other and oneself. When we say ‘we’ we do not solve it” (25). Geryon is not only divided within himself, broken between his interior and exterior worlds, between his status as both a queer young man and a monster, but divided even in union with Herakles. This is the pain that marks both loss and desire. As Carson observes, “the boundaries of time and glance and I love you are only aftershocks of the main, inevitable boundary that creates Eros: the boundary of flesh and self between you and me. And it is only, suddenly, at the moment when I would dissolve that boundary, I realize I never can” (*Eros* 30) When they sleep together again after many years, Herakles wakes to Geryon in tears (*Autobiography* 141). “I once loved you, now I don’t know you at all. He [Geryon] does not say this. / I was thinking about time—he gropes— / you know how apart people are in time together and apart at the same time.” Both of Geryon’s responses, the thought reply and the voiced, rely on this idea of separation. Love can’t keep time from passing or people from changing and becoming strangers to one another. At some level, Herakles and Geryon were never a “we” anyway, not only because they were unsuitable for each other, but also because a true union, of the type Geryon desires, is impossible.

“Eros is expropriation,” according to Carson, since “he robs the body of limbs, substance, integrity and leaves the lover, essentially, less” (*Eros* 32). Still in the thralls of youthful passion, Geryon observes of himself “love does not / make me gentle or kind” (*Autobiography* 42). He is robbed of language and patience in the presence of his mother by his adoration for Herakles. Even though we are, according to both Butler and Carson, incapable of ever experiencing true unity (be it within ourselves or with each other), we are united, at the very least, by the fact that we will all experience love and grief. “Loss,” as Butler observes, “has made a tenuous ‘we’ of us all. And if we have lost, then it follows that we have had, that we have desired and loved, that we have struggled to find the conditions of our desire” (20).

When young Geryon returns home from Hades broken-hearted, he tries to avoid conversation with his mother by distracting his hands, spinning an object on the table. It is an empty fruit bowl that marks another important moment in Geryon's story. In Chapter 3, Geryon's mother leaves Geryon and his brother with the babysitter, and Geryon's brother puts the fruit bowl over Geryon's head, to be cruel. Geryon leaves it there, as a sort of helmet, and as Carson tells it, Geryon *becomes* the object. "The fruit bowl was very still" and then "the fruit bowl paused...*Is Geryon sulking again?...No*, said the fruit bowl" (*Autobiography* 30-31). Without his mother home, Geryon needs protection from his brother. He wants time to speed up and he wishes he could disappear. In Chapter 12, after yet another loss of innocence, he notices something peculiar about the bowl. "Why is this fruit bowl always here?" he asks (68). "Been here all my life never had fruit in it yet. Doesn't / that bother you? How do we even / know it's a fruit bowl?...How do you think it feels / growing up in a house full / of empty fruit bowls?"

According to Moya Lloyd, a Butler scholar, melancholia is "concerned with ungrieved loss; it results in an identification with the lost object" (86). Clearly, for Geryon the lost object is Herakles but the immediacy and shock of this loss causes him to fixate on a visible emptiness, the fruit bowl with its perpetual lack of contents, implying inattention and a scarcity of nourishment. Luckily, the absurdity of his outburst causes both him and his mother to laugh until they cry. Lloyd further asserts, in outlining Butler's theory, that "the loss of the object that occasions melancholia is not just the loss of the object. The social world the object inhabited or made possible is also lost" (100). When Geryon is cut off by Herakles, he also loses his proximity to the volcano he innately (physically) understands, as well as to Herakles' grandmother, a worldly source of stories and aesthetics. Geryon loses an environment of excitement and strangeness that inspires his art, coming home only to find a mother surrounded by cigarette smoke and an empty fruit bowl.

Though Herakles' insistence that Geryon take the bus home is perhaps the most severe challenge to their love, Geryon's language abilities seem compromised from the beginnings of their

relationship. “The very ‘I’ is called into question but its relation to the Other, a relation that does not precisely reduce me to speechlessness, but does nevertheless clutter my speech with signs of its undoing...My narrative falters, as it must” (Butler 23). Soon after starting up with Herakles, when his mother speaks to him, Geryon is silent: “He did not answer. / He had recently relinquished speech” (Carson, *Autobiography* 40). He later observes that “The instant of nature / forming between the, drained every drop from the walls of his life / leaving behind just ghosts / rustling like an old map. He had nothing to say to anyone” (42). Though Geryon was never portrayed as especially loquacious, Carson remarks on this change repeatedly. In response to his mother’s questions about his relationship with Herakles, a “thousand things he could not tell flowed over his mind” (43). He thinks to ask, “how does distance look?” considering that it “extends / within to the edge / of what can be loved. It depends on light.” Geryon is so wrapped up in his expansive new feelings, and his fresh observations about photographic light, that he is rendered nearly speechless. He manages only to ask his mother, “light that for you?” While still in Hades (before the breakup he knows is coming), Geryon takes a trip with Herakles and Herakles’ grandmother. As they speak, “all / the sentences mixed in Geryon’s drifting drowsing head” (63). He is in anticipation of so much pain that he can barely parse the language he hears or even stay awake.

Butler writes, “perhaps it is, and ought to be, insoluble [the division between Other and self]. This disposition of ourselves seems to follow from bodily life, from its vulnerability and its exposure” (25). As Geryon begins to experience the dissolution of his relationship with Herakles, his body becomes weak with exhaustion, as though he wishes he could escape his physical form and thus, his reality. When Herakles says, “Geryon you know / we’ll always be friends,” Geryon “had a sudden strong desire / to go to sleep” (Carson, *Autobiography* 62). As they travel, “Geryon fell asleep seven or eight times on the way”; when they arrive, he gives Herakles’ grandmother his arm and falls asleep while she’s still holding onto it (63-4). Geryon becomes so emotionally vulnerable, that his body is susceptible to breakdown.

Carson tells us “when Geryon was little he loved to sleep but even more he loved to wake up,” making his desire to sleep all the more poignant (26). This is not, however, the first (or last) time Geryon’s physical form betrays him as a result of grief. During the time when his brother is abusing him, Geryon develops a sore on his lip, which his mother forbids him to touch (30, 34). “The body,” as Butler argues, “implies morality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well” (26). Geryon’s body is violated by his brother, then used and rejected by his first lover. As an adult, on another road trip with Herakles to a volcano, Geryon suffers from hemorrhoids, such that “each time the car bounces him up and down Geryon utters a little red cry” and his body registers “hot apple icepicks / all the way up his anus to his spine” (Carson, *Autobiography* 137).

Geryon is vulnerable physically and also refuses to move beyond his suffering over the loss of Herakles. According to Freud, whom Butler both recalls and revises in exploring melancholia (and whom Carson tacitly mocks throughout the *Autobiography*), the following distinction is significant: “in grief the world becomes poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself. i.e. worthlessness etc.” (167). As previously noted, Geryon is captivated and distressed by the photo “Red Patience,” an image of a volcano erupting, taken using a fifteen-minute exposure by Herakles’ grandmother. He asks her what it would be like to shoot a photo with a similarly long exposure of “a man in jail, let’s say the lava has just reached his window” (Carson, *Autobiography* 52). “I think you are confusing subject and object,” she tells him, to which he responds, “Very likely.” Geryon is already the man trapped without hope, watching the lava rise – his object is himself, his own ego immersed in dread. He is a man so divided that he cannot tell himself apart from the world around him – everything serves his painful confinement in volcanic desire and loss of love. Geryon gets high in Peru and takes the photo, “Origin of Time,” which shows a group around a table. Carson notes, “He had never been so stoned in his life. I am too naked, / he thought. This thought seemed profound. / And I want to be in love with someone. This too fell on him

deeply” (*Autobiography* 136). Geryon is split within, vulnerable and full of yearning to share his emotional self. At the book’s close, he dives into Icchantikas, saying “This is for Ancash...this is a memory of our / beauty” as he looks down into the volcano, “dumping all its photos out her ancient eye,” and “smiles for / the camera” (145).

According to Scranton, each of Carson’s book is “a memento not only of loss, but of the longing for love that makes loss ache” (214). At the conclusion of *Autobiography of Red*, Geryon captures the ultimate memento, an image from the inside of a volcano, that deep and dangerous red world where survival is threatened. However, rather than remain inside, Geryon returns to Ancash and Herakles, allowing for the book’s concluding hopefulness, however tenuous it be. Though Geryon’s capacity for lava-like passion and singeing emotional pain are tremendous, ultimately his story seems to imply that art can give a monster the capacity to come through as a man. In spite of his emotional and physical strangeness, his deep yearning and still deeper loss, Geryon’s wings have shown him capable of facing demons and even taking their snapshot. Whereas in this book Carson has presented the reader with “a sophisticated scholarly riddle of how we make historical narratives out of fragments and lies,” it seems Geryon might yet solve, as Scranton puts it, the “buzzing mystery of adolescence [as it] connects with erotic desire and erotic loss” (207).

## Chapter 2

How and Where and Why No Ones Says the Word *Lost*: Forgotten Art,  
Fractured Time, and Suffering in *Red Doc*.

Instead of heat, community, and the grand feeling like immortality that close *Autobiography of Red*, *Red Doc*> features musk oxen and bats, ice, disconnection, and an impending sense of death. *Red Doc*> both recalls and disassociates itself from its predecessor, as well as the ancient texts from which certain content is derived. The substantial prose (and loose poetry / prose hybrid) of the “novel in verse” structure in *Autobiography of Red* has in *Red Doc*> been transformed into a jumbled collection of fragment sections containing three distinct forms that resist classification and include theatrical elements like a near-chorus (“Wife of Brain”) and a play within a play (*Prometheus Rebound*). The content of *Red Doc*> resembles its container in that the narrative is, as Roy Scranton observes, “helter-skelter and hard to follow and the characters inhabiting it seem almost ciphers” (210). Although the storyline of *Autobiography of Red* is whimsical, the progression (with the exception of preliminary framing) is chronological. *Red Doc*>’s action is again fantastical but also presented in a non-linear way and imbued with catastrophe. Characters collide with each other, strike one another and fall down. The wind and cold batter everything.

The story traces Geryon (referred to as G here) as he tends to a herd of musk oxen. G acquires an outrageous new friend, Ida, and reconnects with Herakles (now Sad But Great though mostly just called Sad and sometimes SBG), a war veteran suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Through a series of violent coincidences, the three eventually find themselves inside a glacier that houses both a psychiatric clinic and a car mechanic shop. In this strange underground world, they meet CMO (a psychiatrist), 4NO (a veteran friend of Sad’s who can only see the future), a group of mental patients, and a figure from classical myth, Hermes, who appears to be wearing a curiously gleaming silver tuxedo. When a “riot” occurs underground, the group escapes, only to head straight into the path of an active volcano and G’s favorite ox Io, who has jumped from a cliff directly above their car as a result of

hallucinations. With the help of some ice bats (a creature Carson admits to having invented [Anderson]), G saves Io. However, this victory is quickly eclipsed by the tragic loss of G's mother, which provokes in him a torrential grief that carries the narrative to its close.

The naming of characters is significant, from the mythical figures of Io and Hermes, to the abbreviated names of 4NO and CMO, both of whom have served in the military. The latter is an institution acridly characterized by order and functionality, exemplified by MREs (Meals Ready-to-Eat) and titles that G jokes serve as “name rations” (Carson, *Red Doc* 71).<sup>5</sup> Many times, though, speakers remain unidentified, forcing the reader to rely on context. A total lack of quotations or italics indicating dialogue make it difficult to distinguish between what is spoken, or thought, or merely narrated, and by whom. However, the most immediately notable act of poetic aberration here is the form. There are three types of text that occur in *Red Doc*, a project named, apparently, for the title Carson's computer assigned to the file by default (Anderson).

Pages alternate between long strips of centered, justified text that avoid punctuation (allowing phrases to meld together), indented stanzas that begin with long, left-justified lines marked by forward slashes, and sections entitled “Wife of Brain,” which roughly resemble the chorus of an ancient play. According to Scranton's reading, the latter suggest that these pieces are “the partner and helpmeet of the capricious narrative brain, its better half, as it were” (210). The majority of the book, however, features the aforementioned centered, left-justified streams of words that blend visual constraint with a marked freedom of content. The strips of text permit a number of readings; they might indicate a visual link with ancient fragments, or perhaps Carson prefers them for the speed they necessitate, performing a kind of road (or journey) around which the narrative centers. Regardless, Carson characteristically avoids an easy explanation—they are, purportedly, the result of a formatting error that Carson found “instantly liberating,” as Anderson puts it. “The sentences,” he adds, “with one click, went from prosaic to strange,

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<sup>5</sup> These abbreviated names also reflect on the shortened communications afforded by technologies like texting and program documents (docs).

and finally Carson understood—after years of frustration—how her book was actually supposed to look” (Anderson). Which is to say, the freedom provided by an accident presented Carson with the form that allowed *Red Doc* to be what *it* wanted to be.

Whereas the form of the text may have started out as an error, the characters are full of carefully distinguished intricacies. An analysis by way of queer theory reveals them to be entangled and, yet, also held apart. Their relationships to one another, to time itself and to the world around them are skewed. Suffering blows them over in gusts, or hovers just above their heads like dark clouds. Because the characters of *Red Doc* have been victims of eros, they stand to lose even more. Further, 4NO and Sad are the true victims of the war in which they fought. CMO is a heartless bastion of senseless order, and G suffers from both recollections of heartbreak and the death of his mother.

### **Present Tense Abolished: *Red Doc*'s Characters in the Mire**

The Geryon of *Autobiography of Red* is G in *Red Doc* (and at one point even Gerry). He is still red, and still has wings, but he has aged considerably and Carson has returned to the myth's pastoral features, albeit with characteristic torque. G is a “lonely herdsman” who lives in a red hut near an overpass where people dump trash and hide out (Carson, *Red Doc* 22). The collection presents G tending to musk oxen, rather than red cattle, in a medley of ancient and contemporary. According to Natalie Angier, “taxonomically and metaphorically, the musk ox is in an icy cubicle of its own.” The creature is related neither to oxen nor buffalo, and though its closest known relatives are goats and sheep, these comparisons are hardly relevant since musk ox date back to the Pleistocene, the age of mammoths and mastodons. Whereas most of these gigantic mammals became extinct 10,000 years ago, the must-ox has survived.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Why? Scientists note their “loosely knit family-bonded societies” and “keen memory” as potential clues (Angier). Certainly, Carson's selection of these creatures isn't casual. Musk oxen are ancient and mysterious – their history is full of gaps. Placed in the care of an aging G on a post-pastoral strip of land, they provide an apt reminder of both the



G has abandoned his autobiography in *Red Doc*: “I / gave it up...Nothing was happening in / my life,” he tells Sad (Carson 44). The odd spirited young artist of *Red Doc* is now Ida, full of questions and seemingly never without a sketchbook. She is “innocent and filled with / mood like a very tough / experimental baby” (11). Ida is now the one attempting to capture the verbally inexpressible; when Ida is interviewed, “the TV / Person is rather out of / breath” and she wonders “how to draw that” (115). Geryon’s perpetual question, “what is time made of?” to which Yellowbeard responds that “time isn’t made of anything,” that “it is an abstraction” (*Autobiography* 90), in *Red Doc* becomes a query posed by Ida. “What’s a hole made of,” she questions G, and he answers, “itself a hole’s made of itself” (81). Ida holds the power in *Red Doc* to destroy Geryon’s “poppy,” as when she blasts G with her 2x4 (perhaps another “killing club” like the one Herakles uses), “down he goes his poor / poppystalk bent oddly / sideways” (8).

G is a figure of somewhat predictable routines. He visits his mother, to the point that “she seems ever / more bored with him” (10). The wings that propelled him into a volcano at the close of *Autobiography of Red*, for the sake of passion, he uses in *Red Doc* to keep himself from freezing and to save his favorite musk ox. Even this he cannot do alone, aided on both occasions by ice bats. He later fears looking ridiculous in flight; after such a long time not exercising this capacity, he wonders sadly, “Am I turning into one of those old guys in a ponytail and wings?” (55). The palpable eros that motivated Geryon in the first collection can be glimpsed only remotely here in his literary fantasies about coming to know the deceased Russian author Daniil Kharms in *Red Doc*. If G exhibits any remaining eros, it is the kind Carson identifies as a desire for knowledge, since falling in love and the yearning to

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heartiness and luck survival requires. Whereas in *Autobiography of Red* the arrow of Herakles is said to part “Geryon’s skull like a comb Made / The boy neck lean” (13), in *Red Doc* the musk oxen each have “two horns that part as / neatly as a boy about to / play the piano wet his / hair and hopes it stays flat” (12). G is no longer a boy and the violence of the arrow is transformed into the weapon of G’s herd. Io, G’s favorite musk ox and a reference to the mythical white cow of the same name, nearly resembles a pet, perhaps like the red dog *Autobiography of Red* mentions but never narratively pursues.

know “have at their core that same delight, that of reaching, and entail the same pain, that of falling short or being deficient” (*Eros the Bittersweet* 71).

Two authors are significant to G. In *Red Doc*>, Proust appears as a reading accomplishment G is boastful of: “did I tell you I finished Proust?” he asks his mother (4). “Seven years,” he says “reading it everyday.” Although G longs to have brought Proust along on his journey to the glacier with Sad, instead he reads *Today I Wrote Nothing: The Selected Writings of Daniil Kharms*. Another interesting choice, Kharms is a Russian writer who died of starvation after being placed in a psychiatric hospital by Stalinists (Saunders). In *Red Doc*>, G thinks about how “Daniil / Kharms used to lie down / on the highway to see if / traffic would stop (it did) / then walk away” (Carson 36). G sees his aged face in the mirror and wonders if Kharms had a similar moment (37-8). G fantasizes about being friends with Kharms, of helping him through his hardship, if only with a bowl of soup, even though he must know the author is already dead (42). The figure of Kharms serves as an object of desire for G, an alter ego, and he also foreshadows the psychiatric unit inside the glacier.

The young Geryon who rewrote the ending of his autobiography to state that “the beautiful red breezes went on blowing hand / in hand” (*Autobiography* 38) inhabits a different realm than G, where “wind rips the / house off the house...battering the world at full / north,” threatening to “blow / the door off the car” (*Red Doc*> 32, 41). Geryon can see his future in *Autobiography of Red*. Even as a little boy he can set down the “facts” pertaining to fate, foretelling his death. In *Red Doc*>, other characters are the ones to see the future. 4NO (whose name means foreknowledge) is likened to Prometheus, capable of seeing what will happen before it does. As a result of trauma involving the death of his (implied) queer lover, 4NO lives perpetually in a state of “present tense abolished” (50). Even G’s mother knows about G and Sad’s trip to the glacier, sending G a message and asking about the trip, as does Ida who also reads G’s mind: “Like cats he / thinks. Like cats Ida says.” (12). Of BATCATRAZ (the name of this strange underground world), G asks Ida “what do / you mean you knew we / were here nobody knew / we

were here...it was pure / chance we came here nobody knew” (80). The understanding G does share with others, especially Herakles, is an overriding sense of loss.

In *Red Doc*>, we see the proud, energetic, lustful and exuberant Herakles from *Autobiography of Red* transformed into a broken and traumatized veteran of war (22). His new name is Sad But Great, called SBG by CMO, but mostly just Sad. It seems the “But Great” is intended both ironically and as a sort of useless military pick-me-up, since this character is far from being well. If we are to read “great” in reference to power, both texts consider different strengths implied by the Herakles myth. In *Autobiography*, young Herakles has the powers of charm, cunning and mobility. As W.K.C. Guthrie asserts, his is a “unique case of a mortal who by his own superhuman efforts was raised to the plane of the upper gods” (cited in Feder 161). Though *Red Doc*> acknowledges Herakles’ warrior side (as its prequel fails to), here we see Herakles laid low, fighting insanity even as his war battles have technically ceased. His delusions can, however, be understood beyond a loose Carsonian critique of war via PTSD. According to Lillian Feder, although “Heracles is best known for his courage and his amazing physical strength, perhaps his most impressive quality...is his power to endure the burden of great toil and danger and agonizing personal sorrow.”

On some level, Sad wants to carry on, as his intentions (and will) to visit the glacier clinic imply. Mythically, Sad must also bear the burden of Herakles’ lunacy as told by Euripides in “The Madness of Herakles.” In this play, after returning from battle, Herakles is deceived by the goddess Hera into killing his wife and children. When he comes back to his senses, Herakles must face his actions and carry on. In *Red Doc*>, Sad is haunted by a nameless woman he killed in the war, by the specter of her eyeglasses lying in the dirt and the white plastic shopping bag she was carrying. When Ida interrupts 4NO’s staging of his play *Prometheus Rebound*, holding a similar bag, he becomes deranged (seemingly outside of himself as though possessed by a higher power) and tries twice to attack her.

Certainly Carson's skill for reimagining forgotten stories is exhibited in her scavenging of *Prometheus Bound* for *Red Doc*.<sup>7</sup> *Prometheus Bound* is an Ancient Greek tragedy and although the play's author remains uncertain, Aeschylus is most often credited. In *Red Doc*, 4NO rewrites this play, christening it *Prometheus Rebound*, and he endeavors to stage it in BACATRAZ reading all the parts himself. In *Red Doc*, Carson incorporates various elements from the original, specifically related to Io and Hermes. Io is the love object of Zeus in *Prometheus Bound* and he turns her into a white cow to protect Io from Hera's jealousy. In *Red Doc*, Io is a musk ox that G loves dearly, a "lone white one" that "glows like an idol" (Carson, *Red Doc* 11). The Prometheus of *Prometheus Bound* can see the future, and tells Io that though she will have to journey to Egypt, she will eventually give birth to a son from whose line Herakles will be born, and Herakles will then, ultimately, come to the rescue of Prometheus. Whereas the Hermes of *Prometheus Bound* is a messenger of the gods and threatens Prometheus with a future of torture, in *Red Doc* he is a man in a sparkling tuxedo who joins the group escaping the underground<sup>8</sup> so that "with Hermes in the / car everything changes. / They don't know it is / Hermes. Don't know they / are headed for death" (120). In *Red Doc*, 4NO is heard voicing the part of Prometheus.

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<sup>7</sup> It seems significant, that in all her classical allusions, Carson chooses to exclude any mention of Dante's *Inferno*. Perhaps her reasoning is related to the unfamiliar depiction of Geryon exhibited by Canto XVII. Though he is decidedly monstrous in a way perhaps amenable to ancient descriptions ("Behold the beast with pointed tail" [1]), and his nature is tri-fold, in Dante's depiction Geryon has the face of man, a lion's body and a tail like that of a scorpion (Hollander 322). Notably, though Virgil describes him with great disgust, Geryon never acts less than obligingly, giving Virgil and Dante a ride on his back. This strange un-monsterly behavior is reminiscent of his depiction in Stesichoros. One possible link to Carson, however, can be made by considering Robert and Jean Hollander's note: "Rhetorical energy increases as Dante swears to each of us, his readers, that he actually saw the creature he is about to describe," such that "Dante has put the veracity of the entire *Comedy*...upon the reality of Geryon" (308). The logic that follows is reminiscent of Carson's discussion on the blinding of Helen, in that Dante is toying with the literal untruth of poetry," and as Castelvetro argues, Dante "claims that his poem is literally true while tacitly admitting that he has made it all up" (Hollander 308).

<sup>8</sup> The question of Geryon's role in the underworld, however, is another interesting one. According to Curtis, the "Geryon of the 5<sup>th</sup> century resembles a chthonic deity," since "exposure to an unfamiliar culture and its gods...must have created many demons in the minds of the Greek settlers. For mortals, such a journey into unknown territory was on par with that of some hero going down to the underworld" (22). In his book *The Herdsmen of the Dead*, J.H. Croon asserts just this, convinced especially by the presence of Menoites, herdsman of Hades, and the indefinite location of the red island Erytheia before references to Tartessus in Stesichoros (14-15). Croon asserts that Herakles' journey over water to the island was representative of his travel to the underworld in order to rescue lost souls (the red cattle) from a chthonic monster. If we consider Carson's Herakles and his multiple road trips (and disregard Geryon's presence in the car), perhaps certain parallels can be drawn. In *Autobiography of Red*, Herakles ventures to a volcano, a potential "hell-mouth" which Geryon alone is able to enter. In *Red Doc*, the characters venture underground and emerge changed, with two souls newly in their charge.

Carson does incorporate other significant elements of the Prometheus myth apart from the play, including his battle with Pandora after stealing the gift of fire (interestingly Hermes is also credited as the inventor of fire). Pandora lets loose from her box all the misfortunes of humankind – the only thing that remains is hope. In *Red Doc*>, 4NO has written in his play “I stopped them seeing death before them / chorus / who / prometheus / human beings / chorus / how / prometheus / I planted blind hope in their hearts / chorus / why / prometheus / they were breaking / chorus / you fool” (109).<sup>9</sup> Although *Prometheus Bound* does not include all of Io’s story, Carson makes use of it. Before turning Io into a cow, Zeus first tries to block Io with a cloud so that Hera doesn’t see her. This cloud returns in *Red Doc*>, as ash from an exploding volcano, a “black cloudform,” that advances “from the horizon / toward the car its molten / edge snarling” (133). Io sees it, jumps into the air believing she can fly, and is luckily, saved by G.<sup>10</sup>

Like G and Sad, G’s mother also returns in *Red Doc*>, now on her deathbed after years of smoking; she struggles to breathe. Although we do not see her interact with Herakles in *Autobiography of Red*, here she recalls him “vaguely” as being “blond” and “bit of a / rebel” (3). With her, Sad is honest, perhaps since she momentarily reminds him of his own mother. In *Red Doc*>, Sad’s mother appears only once and only in his memory. Sad’s father, however, is a constant presence. He is depicted encouraging Sad to go to war, perhaps a reference to Herakles’ father Zeus embroiling his son in battle. When Ida looks in Sad’s wallet, she finds a photo of Sad’s father on the day he tossed his eyeglasses down a well because, as the father attests, “I / was already seeing too / much” (87). This idea of Sad’s father’s god-like sight returns when “Wife of Brain” describes Sad at war, “crawling / plank to plank / and the big Zeus eye / drilling his every noon” (95).

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<sup>9</sup> The characters of *Red Doc*> have also been protected (somewhat) from the death that awaits them – it is the death behind them that has endangered (with the exception of Ida) their blindness and their hope.

<sup>10</sup> In the myth, Hera takes Io and forces the monster Argus look after her until Zeus sends Hermes who frees her. Perhaps in some sense G is the monster that Hermes comes to slay, although he fails. Regardless, Io is free, if only free to nearly fall. Lastly, not surprisingly, Io is one of Jupiter’s moons and is filled with volcanoes, one of which is called Prometheus.

Eventually, Hermes, who Carson reveals is the harbinger of death (120), will lead G and the others to G's mother on her deathbed. As Scranton observes, "mortality haunts Carson's latest book in various forms before it finally enters, but nothing in the story prepares us, nothing *can* prepare us, for the sudden, chasmal dislocation that the death of a parent opens up" (212). When G realizes his mother is going to die, that the number accompanying her message (arriving mysteriously to the inside of the glacier) is not her number (but that of the hospital), this incident is called, first, the "place where he / caught his breath," and then later, "places" (142). That same gas, the breath of life, that Sad took away from G via eros (G refers to his passionate attachment to Sad by recalling "the man had been his / oxygen once. When he left / there was no more oxygen" [14]), his mother is now claiming through his grief. When he clips lilacs for his her, G reverts to the synesthesia of eros-filled Geryon as "the smell / plunges up. A vertical / smell. Wet purple / unvanquished" (145). In his mother's room, as the oxygen machine goes off and on, he hears song lyrics that mingle anticipated loss and eros by way of breath, divine wind from wings: "*She's counting / my soulmate gasps of / make my heart beat at a / fast rate. Oxygen*" (153).

As Carson tells Aitken, "Some people think...the poet takes a snapshot of an event and on the page you have a perfect record. But I don't think that's right...a poem, when it works, is an action of the mind captured on a page, and the reader, when he engages it, has to enter into that action." Indeed, *Red Doc* pulls the reader inside of it and the experience is jarring, marked by disrupted forms, twisted narrative and content replete with human suffering. With this poem, Carson has created a peculiar world in which characters are overcome by their brokenness, and in entering their action, the reader is pulled along, through the gasping and the heartbeats towards the book's central event, the death of G's mother. This is a story about the inevitability of sorrow and mortality, wherein the few connections characters forge are of particularly marked significance.

### A Deep Glowing Blank: Connection, Desire, and Time in the Queer Mesh

*Red Doc*> continually explores boundaries of internal and external. As G searches the clinic after everyone has evacuated because of the volcano, he sees “at every / window the vague twilight / of this dayless day come sifting / down. He listens and his / hearing drowns in it. Is / he outside inside or inside outside. He has no / bottom to his mind” (142). Life permeates life, material and otherwise, in a manner that defies limitations and makes even divisions of time untenable. This type of blurring calls to mind Eve Sedgwick’s idea of the queer “mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning” (cited in Hall and Jagose 8). Carson’s text functions, formally, as a type of mesh, wherein description, speech and thought are smashed together undifferentiated and surrounded by white space.

Community among characters also functions in unexpected ways here, in part due to considerations of gender and sexuality. According to Butler, “One only determines ‘one’s own’ sense of gender to the extent that social norms exist that support and enable that act of claiming gender for oneself. One is dependent on this ‘outside’ to lay claim to what is one’s own. The self must, in this way, be dispossessed in sociality in order to take possession of itself” (*Undoing Gender* 7). When G’s mother recalls the lizard pants and pearls Sad wore to graduation, Sad vividly remembers that time in his life: “it was the year of his / audacity the year he / decide to be a lion of / himself not just a bad / influence. Year he / discovered beauty (his / own) and its power. / Lizard pants girlfriends / boyfriends he had acid and / Thunderbird wine” (Carson, *Red Doc*> 151). Although we don’t know about Sad’s bisexuality in *Autobiography of Red*, we learn in *Red Doc*> that Sad was openly queer and dressed as he wished from an early time. Young Sad did not feel the need to conform to the “outside,” and aggressively built community around him. “Sad’s need to / make friends everywhere. / Sex friends club friends gym friends dope friends / shopping friends / breakdown friends a / common enough problem. / Sad didn’t

see a problem” (60). However, his father didn’t approve of this liberty and Sad eventually was possessed by a community in which such flamboyance is not appreciated (the military).

G, on the other hand, is a loner from the start. In *Red Doc*, he has a closer relationship to animals and books than to any person. As Carson writes, “Wilde Wild / Wildness does surely attract / him although what he / knows about it is not much. / Knows (with the oxen) that / they prefer common gorse” (24). G is drawn to both Oscar Wilde and the wildness of his herd, their animal knowledge. His behavior is safer and more closely aligned with societal expectations. He prefers celibate companionship to gay sex, and the consumption of art to the creation of it. The sexual desire G once had for Sad has dissipated. The image of honey from *Autobiography of Red* is repeated here, on the radio: “think of / yourself as a jar says BBC / 4. The words are honey. / Pour the honey into the jar” (35). G, however, is only vaguely stirred. “What was it like to be / sexual,” he tries to recall. “To want say this / person on the floor,” G wonders, “or / any person...the hot / cold amazing difference / between before and after / as if a diagram shot inside / out he remembers the / diagram but the feelings / no. Necessity no.” As Ida and Sad have sex (“the / actual touching neither a / positive nor a negative / experience they each / would admit but no one / does”), “in another / room of the clinic G is / dreaming of Daniil / Kharms. They are driving / along in a paper car. G / has a big roll of newsprint / which he is cutting into / stretches of road and / leaning out to toss them in / front of the car” (82). Sad still needs to pursue pleasure through the body, but G is more caught up in the eros of his mind, having admitted that though “he still / hates the book but is / beginning to love the man. / DK’s face on the cover is / pure fury and girl’s lips” (42). What is particularly compelling about G’s dream is that he seems to be describing the layout of *Red Doc*, the book in which his story is taking place. It is as though G is taking agency of the text as it proceeds. Just as he went inside of woman’s perspective in *Autobiography of Red*, G now imagines Ida. As Carson writes, “Ida / wears the frill now. He / wonders how Ida finds / Sad as a



lover. He / wonders if she lies / watching moonlight...Men fall / asleep straight after sex / and girls get used to it. G / never did” (85).

Carson proposes that desire is related to time, and time is, in a sense, “queered” by *Red Doc*>. The poem’s timeline leads us into the heart of the glacier where Hermes persists ubiquitously in his glittering suit and clinic patients prepare to watch a play from the past (reimagined) about the burdens of seeing the future. Judith Halberstam’s theories of queer time provide insight into how internal and external landscapes function in these texts. According to Halberstam, queer temporality opposes “temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk / safety, and inheritance” (*In a Queer Time and Place* 6). When Sad’s father sends him to the army, there are implications that Sad needs to grow out of his chaotic, queer adolescence and take a more normal track. “His Dad had hopes a little / *warplay* / might straighten / stiffen / darken whatever / that yelp of his / to something like / backbone” (Carson, *Red Doc*> 95). Queer temporality resists a defined, linear advance towards “maturity” by way of a heteronormative “settling down.” As Halberstam maintains, in postmodernity, diverse people “will and do opt to live outside of reproductive and familial time as well as on the edges of logics of labor and production. By doing so, they also often live outside the logic of capital accumulation” (10). In *Autobiography of Red*, Geryon and Herakles travel and live independent of traditionally adult concerns like marriage, children and money.

Not only do Carson’s characters evade conventional notions of time that determine an exclusively normative outcome, but also the narratives of *Autobiography of Red* and *Red Doc*> disturb linearity. *Autobiography of Red* recasts two ancient figures (about whom stories are multiple and contradictions abound) in a contemporary setting where Carson builds between them a new sort of relationship. For Carson, Geryon and Herakles are both products of a past and instruments of a present. Because they are mythic, it follows that they would be immortal, but their deaths are a subject Carson insists upon. Even if, as they are framed in *Autobiography of Red*, Geryon and Herakles were to shack up in

the heteronormative way Halberstam refers to, would the implication be that this resulted from their contemporary “choice” (or modern pressure) or, rather, from an ancient fate? It would be unclear.

*Red Doc*'s narrative also evades linearity. The opening scene of the book takes place after G and Sad have been reunited. G tells his mom about Sad, how Sad “just got out / of the army,” is “messed up” and is staying with him “for a while” (Carson, *Red Doc* 3). This conversation even reveals details never presented in the book's action, about a man who “shows / up with a padded envelope / of drugs every night.” A section from “Wife of Brain” follows, setting the scene (and foreshadowing *Prometheus Rebound*), “how it begins then the lights / come on or go off or the stage / spins it's like a play *omnes* / to their places” (6). From here, the narrative steps back to before G meets Ida, Ida the figure that will bring G and Sad together. Other temporal inversions occur, notably in the garage on pp. 58-9 when the car is hoisted up for a new drive shaft before the car arrives.<sup>11</sup> At times we are told “centuries” or “years” have gone by, and the nature of temporality is discussed at length after G discovers his mother is dying. In this last case, two pages are dedicated to all the things time is and does, beginning “time passes time / does not pass” and concluding “time / got the jump on me yes / it did” (143-4).

This queering of time takes on spatial dimensions as well. In *Autobiography of Red*, little Geryon stands outside his classroom because the logics of space elude him—“in place of a map of the school corridor lay a deep glowing blank” (24). The reader is given the sense that he will wait forever, through “the first snows of winter” and beyond. In *Red Doc.*, almost immediately after their reunion and without warning, Sad and G are suddenly on the road like old times, destination seemingly unknown (to G at least). They pass identical towns and further north they enter a landscape of “no tree no bush no / barrier no edges or scale / just a huge flat hand that / sweeps where it will and / wrecks what it wrecks” (*Red Doc* 33). Without visible markers (tree, bush), how can one measure distance or time? It is the

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<sup>11</sup> Although it is conceivable that the two scenes are referring to different cars, the passages' proximity to one another and the fact that G and Sad would be concerned with the repair of only one vehicle, leads us to assume that Carson is intentionally demonstrating that space and time function strangely in BACATRAZ by way of this vehicle.

visible warming of the ice that directs Sad to his unrevealed destination, when the men notice “streams of meltwater / lunging down the face of / the rock no more / than a hand’s breadth / across. Each closed in its / own pitch. The pitches mingle and do not” (43).<sup>12</sup> They enter the glacier “but how and where and / why no one says the word / *lost* / We’re going a new / way says Sad,” as he ignores the maps he can no longer see and backs up to drive around an “IMPASSIBLE” sign (45).

### **We are at the Whim of Whom: Grief Batters, Death Conquers**

Although one might argue that the ruling sensation of *Red Doc* is mourning, eros remains significant, as the concepts bear notable similarities. “Alongside melting,” Carson observes of eros, “we cite metaphors of piercing, crushing, bridling, roasting, stinging, biting, grating, cropping, poisoning, singeing and grinding to a powder...giving a cumulative impression of intense concern for the integrity and control of one’s own body” (*Eros* 41). Prolonged suffering and melancholia are a result of loss, extended in time, whereas eros relies on distance and thus lives continually in loss—it is “an emotion concerned with placement and displacement” (14). Erotic desire gives rise to a new understanding of self, “a self not known before and now disclosed by the lack of it—by pain, by a hole, bitterly” (66). *Red Doc* is replete with such holes. When Sad asks Ida, “what do / you see inside your mind,” she responds, “see a hole right through / the middle of you” (18). Later, Ida questions G: “what’s a hole made of / Gerr / is this a riddle / no / itself a hole’s made of itself / I think so too” (*Red Doc* 81). Sad has been broken inside by the war, G has been fragmented by disappointment in love, and Ida is wrecked by the hole in Sad. Thus, both eros and loss result, to some degree, in existential crisis. According to Carson, for the lover, “the presence of want awakens in him nostalgia for wholeness. His thoughts turn toward questions of personal identity: he must recover and reincorporate what is gone if he is to be a complete person” (*Eros* 31). Further, “change of self is loss of self to these [Greek] poets. Their metaphors for the

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<sup>12</sup> This separation is reminiscent of “not touching but joined in astonishment as two cuts lie parallel in the same flesh” (*Autobiography of Red* 45).

experience are metaphors of war, disease and bodily dissolution” (39). Though here Carson is mainly referring to Sappho and Sophocles, similar markers of violence, illness and physical deterioration cause the characters in *Red Doc* grief.

Just as the volcanoes that populated *Autobiography of Red* evoke emotion, so does the glacier in *Red Doc* promote an exploration of what longing remains as it intersects with time. Even inside the chill of the glacier, Ida and Sad consummate desire, leaving them much like cattle; as Sad tells her, love is “a bunch of grass that grows up in your mind and makes you stupid” (*Red Doc* 86). The character most attuned to the surfaces of time is 4NO, who experiences the overlap of present and future continually, and it is to him “all white / all the time” (64) like endless snow and ice. G speaks with him, beginning “so this white stuff’s / coming at you all the time / yup / you can’t stop it / I can slow it down with / alcohol and pharmaceutical / I / choose not to” (64-5). Here 4NO, the “prophet,” reveals his mode of contending with the damage he has sustained through war trauma, a damage (and gift) that has dismantled the sense of distance necessary for both erotic desire and a manageable relationship with time.

As Butler notes, “we cannot represent ourselves as merely bounded beings, for the primary others who are past for me not only live on in the fiber of the boundary that contains me (one meaning of ‘incorporation’), but they also haunt the way I am, as it were, periodically undone and open to becoming unbounded” (*Precarious Lives* 28). 4NO lives in an exaggerated version of suffering’s time skew as a result of his trauma. Before he is called 4NO, before his trauma, he is referred to in the text as F (short for Friend but also suggestive of other F-words). He meets “a boy he / thought was a girl,” a “courtly boy” named Lucky (Carson, *Red Doc* 48). Although never stated, the text hints at the relationship’s erotic nature. F sleeps at Lucky’s and meet’s Lucky’s mother. We are told that “sometimes they would all / three of them put on her / lipstick and head to town / for the evening” (49). On one such occasion, a “man of town / powder” comes through the “red plush / curtains,” slaps Lucky twice and then kills him. However, before this happens F sees it coming, and from this point on, “no tooth he

breaks on an / olive will ever again be / unforeseen He breaks it / anyway” (50). As a result of violence, 4NO is continually assaulted by the future. He tells G “I see / Seeing I am the god of this / I see Seeing coming” (63).<sup>13</sup>

Time is layered on top of itself like endless sheets of ice for 4NO<sup>14</sup> and he attempts to cope through writing. In one scene, Sad’s suffering and 4NO’s artistic rendering of grief are brought together. After a particularly rough night, Sad wanders (in a crawl) into the room where 4NO is rehearsing his play. Sad is laid low by his trauma and as Carson tells us, “every flap / to be peered under every / crevice to be crept into / every scuttling memory / there they go like / clockroaches” (72). He is soon, quite literally, rolling about on the floor of his painful history, unable to rise. Sad’s observations are intermingled with 4NO’s dramatic voicing of Prometheus, who speaks from on high, as a god. He can be heard to say “O roaring / universe that aches and / sings,” lamenting his fate: “you / see me gripping this frayed / rope-end of pain for the last / ten thousand years!” (72-73). Whereas Prometheus (penned by 4NO) expresses suffering of an epic degree in elegant terms, Sad crawls. Sad has been unable to take the step 4NO has, to use art as a means of processing melancholy. 4NO makes Sad get off the floor, saying “get your head out of your butt” while prodding Sad with his boot. In a strange turn, the two begin to waltz. The harshness of 4NO’s wakeup for Sad has softened into an embrace, albeit still measured and controlled. Two queer men damaged by violence dance together, as G observes from outside, like “eighteenth- / century balloons” (74), out of time and place, kept from floating away by one another.

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<sup>13</sup> This observation recalls the mock interview with Stesichoros at the end of *Autobiography of Red* where Stesichoros is quoted as saying “I was (very simply) in charge of seeing for the world after all see- / ing is just a substance” (148).

<sup>14</sup> Carson acknowledges that a similar process affects the texts from which she draw. As she observes, “After all, texts of ancient Greeks come to us in wreckage and I admire that, the combination of layers of time that you have when looking at a papyrus that was produced in the third century BC and then copied and then wrapped around a mummy for a couple hundred years and then discovered and put in a museum and pieced together by nine different gentlemen and put back in the museum and brought out again and photographed and put in a book. All those layers add up to more and more life” (Aitken). Fragments of text, like those of Stesichoros, have been altered in compelling ways by time’s passage and human intervention. The “life” Carson refers to is only possible because of death. Similarly, an inevitable negotiation with the past marks our own lives and those of Carson’s characters.

Who is leading? As Butler proposes, grief is a state in which “something is larger than one’s own deliberate plan, one’s own project, one’s own knowing and choosing” (21). In *Red Doc*, as a result of pain, characters lose control of themselves. Before G and Sad have actually reunited, the former can sense the return of anguish, as his wings begin “rising / up on his back and he / wants to know why” (Carson, *Red Doc* 12). Ida heads into town riding Io and G observes that “Something more / than Ida has moved out of / his control” (13). Sad crashes back into G’s life and soon, seemingly without reason, they are on another road trip. No conversation is had about it, but suddenly there they are again, heading not to a volcano (until later) but a glacier: “Sad’s / rules. Night driving. Day / sleeping” (33). When they are inside BATCATRAZ, power shifts again: “The short road trip Sad / had in mind is soon to be redefined / by one who calls himself / a god and is / arguably no fake ‘reversal’ because little snags come tumbling / out of the text” (62). This is 4NO, who is revealed to be the reason for this adventure, and is now in the driver’s seat, so to speak. Then Ida finds them and “the spark struck / by Ida flares into doom / provoking / dissension on that old tragic question who are we at the whim / of (whom?)” (76). Ultimately, we find that none of these characters is in control because Hermes (as Death’s stand-in) is calling the shots. He is the force larger than any individuals “plan” or “project” or “knowing” or “choosing.”

Before reuniting with G, Sad’s life is dominated by violence and war. Butler observes that “violence is surely a touch of the worst order, a way a primary human vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its most terrifying way, a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another, a way in which life itself can be expunged” (28-9). In an interesting reversal of this idea that violence is a means of taking control from another person, Sad’s control is relinquished by the violence he inflicts, rather than any violence he endures. “I wasn’t / going to tell anyone back / home about” Sad recalls, but “Oh it found its / way out it surfaced. I had a / tan when I came home no / wounds no cuts. Everyone / kissed me” (25). Like the mythical Herakles, Sad is a hero but at a cost to his soul, at a price

paid by blood. There is no adequate way for him to grieve the woman with the white plastic bag and so she returns again and again. Butler refers to the “unburied” and “unburiable,” in reference to those whose lives are not deemed valuable enough to be grieved, those lost to the HIV virus, those lost to foreign wars (34). In *Red Doc*, the nameless woman with the eyeglasses in the nameless war Sad fights, cannot be buried; she haunts him perpetually.

Though their parting was not violent in this same way, Carson sets G’s suffering up next to Sad’s violent actions on pages 14 and 16. First, G recalls fragmented bits of their breakup: “No. Yes. Thin / red tracking no. Yes...take it my / astonishing morning it’s / fine. Bleeding he says. / The other. Last. No. Yes...Your redletter brain as you struggle and sift...Memory is exhausting” (14). Then Wife of Brain recounts Sad’s experiences in war: “their orders were to mow the children no one / let A pig in the shape of a down pig Bleed would he / Ever let a pig bleed to / spared at such evening your nightfall bleed drugs in / they / come with the death in a bleed” (16). Loss of love and loss of life provoke blood – even if G is still a victim and Sad is still a perpetrator, they are now more of a “we” than even in their common grief over the violence of loss. According to Butler, those lost “have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again)” (33). The ghost of failed love returns to G continually, as the ghosts of those he has killed haunt Sad, and he tries, in hallucination, to slaughter them again.

Sad has been so wounded that he no longer believes in human beings’ capacity for logic. Certainly, grief is not rational. He says, “you could / take the entirety of the / common sense of humans and put it in the palm of / your hand and *still have / room for your dick*” (26). The only staunch believer in logical order is CMO, a rather unlikable character, whose name stands either for Chief Marketing Officer or Chief Medical Officer, though he is clearly both. He stands to profit from the distress of others. “*Ration* is a beautiful / word or so the CMO / thinks. Key to a / disciplined life. Latin / *ratio* / ‘reason.’ Rationality” (67). The predictability and regularity of military pre-packaged meals are an example for

CMO of how life should function. He does not believe in 4NO's "prophet status"; CMO uses a strictly psychoanalytical framework to understand his patients. He says, "Do I think his / brain chemistry is unusual / yes. Do I credit the *all / white all the time /* visionary stuff no that's a / dodge. What's he dodging / says G. Same thing as / your friend the superhero. / Those pesky traumatic / memories" (70). There is a near flippancy in the word "pesky," and the implication that Sad and 4NO are repressing what they should be revealing, probably in therapy. On the other end of the spectrum, Captain M'Hek (a military officer assigned to monitor Sad's well-being) justifies his value of his therapeutic aid to Sad in this way: "what do you do / talk / does that help him / one test for this question / what test / did he cap himself yesterday / no / did he cap himself today / no / so talk helps" (29). The bar for healing is much lower here than in a clinical setting – Sad needs only to make it from one day to the next without committing suicide to be progressing.

Though he does not experience the trauma of war, G's agony takes precedence at the narrative's close when his mother passes away. Just as Herakles began to pull away from Geryon before ending their relationship in *Autobiography of Red*, in *Red Doc* G's mother has been distancing herself from him for some time. "Ever she said to G / and his brother after their / father died. I don't want / to live with either of you / ever. I'll move some place / hard for you to get to. / And she had" (9).<sup>15</sup> G's mother's attempts to maintain control are ultimately thwarted, as they are for each of us, by mortality. Her resistance anticipates the sorrowful observation G makes, as she is dying, that "the / reason he cannot bear her / dying is not the loss of her / (which is the future) but / that dying puts the two of / them (now) into this / nakedness together that is / unforgivable. They do not / forgive it" (154). They cannot be vulnerable together in this way because it is so excruciating. There is no logic for this, no center of control, recalling Butler's notion that grief is a space of unknowing and surrender. And so they do not forgive, and "he turns away. / This roaring air in his / arms. She is released."

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<sup>15</sup> This is another echo from *Autobiography of Red*: the mother's mastery of the word "each."



Compared to the “stones” they lift together in her dying, the “stones” that are her “lungs,” there is a weightlessness to G’s life after his mother’s death (146). He ponders this: “Say a / man has been carrying a / mother on the front of his / life all these years now / she is ripped off now his / life is light as air – should / he believe it?” (155). However, without him knowing it, that mother in the front had been a guide, had done some steering (just as power is passed from hand to hand elsewhere), and her death leaves G to a drenching torrent of grief. He is left to “a / rain with no instructions” (160). With his mother gone, G undergoes mourning reminiscent of his agony over losing Herakles in *Autobiography of Red*. In a style similar to the “Water” chapter in that first book, in *Red Doc*, rain falls and G thinks “how strange all / its surfaces sound like / they’re sliding *up*. How / strange his mother is lying / out there in her little / soaked Chanel suit. The / weeping has been arriving / about every seven minutes. In the days to / come it will grow less” (161).

*Red Doc*’s last section is also told from a female perspective, though it is unclear whose. The voice could be Io’s, Ida’s, G’s mother’s, Carson’s, Nature’s. We know only that a “she” is observing, “she / with her unspilled cup of / love her perfect stench her / vague knowledge” (163). The book’s final lines seem to imply some degree of expectant change, as she “notices a man in his / yard in his undershirt, standing looking up at the / rain. Well not every day / can be a masterpiece. / This one sails out and out / and out” (163-4). The speaker sees G contemplating his grief in the constant rain, remarking on both the expansiveness of pain and time. This endlessness seems to imply that the limitless imperfection of existence might be a gift. Scranton notes that “the power of Carson’s work coheres out of many factors, but the most central is the two-handed engine of estranged pain: Carson’s subject is loss, transformed” (214).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Carson does not shy away from this pain; in fact, she directs herself toward it. When Aitken remarks on her line “I want to be unbearable” (*Decreation*), Carson responds thus: “I remember that sentence driving at me in the dark like a glacier. I felt like a ship going toward the South Pole and then all of a sudden a glacier comes zooming out of the dark, and I just took it down.” As a result of seemingly mystical forces embedded in an icy environment familiar to *Red Doc*,

It could be argued, however, that although Carson's *subject* and *method* are deeply concerned with the transformation of loss by way of art, *Red Doc* is decidedly less hopeful than *Autobiography of Red* about *characters* succeeding in this type of transformation. Carson may have accomplished it for herself in this disturbing and heart-wrenching book, filled with black humor and eccentric charm – she might have found just the right outlet for her own suffering, over the death of her parents and brother. However, those she selects to write about are left in a story state. At *Red Doc*'s close, the strange cast (once united, at the very least, in their pain and necessity for escape) has dispersed. G has given up his photography and is trapped in mourning, 4NO has locked himself away in a hotel room, and Sad has lost the creative art of his youthful creative exuberance (not to mention his mind). Whoever is speaking in the final passage is the only one holding the dim light of her attention on the scene, and in this way, she is the bearer of some slim optimism, though she does observe that “Caution is best. Luck / essential. Hope a / question” (Carson *Red Doc* 163). If, as her “perfect smell” seems to imply, this speaker is Io<sup>17</sup>, we are reminded of G's deepest connection, the one that seems to bring him, if not happiness, some small degree of satisfaction: his bond with animals. In this way, perhaps *Red Doc* implies that art is only one possible answer to the inevitable suffering of human existence, and that we might look to the environment around us for others.

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Carson found words that spoke for her art.

<sup>17</sup> Another intimations of Io, is the following, which recalls “Good morning, good Io” (27): “Her history hums along / the veins and balanced on / the beam of her. Familiar / by now with the / neckbones of night as they / shift into yet another old / dawn” (163).

Nature is on the Inside:  
Concluding Thoughts on Carson and Ecology

Of Carson's personal elusiveness in texts, of her consistent reliance on outside materials, Bedient claims: "it isn't that she can't bear to write about herself...it's that, having nothing but the sharp world, she wants to be (and be abraded by) all of it." Her insistence on the "sharp world's" continual unhinging of characters seems significant both in terms of internal and external ruptures, including those pertaining to nature. The volcanoes and aquarium animals in *Autobiography of Red*, and the glacier, musk-oxen, deer and wind in *Red Doc*, not to mention Geryon's own part-animal physique, invite the use of ecocriticism, if not also queer ecology. The following discussion details considerations from which future studies of Carson might draw. Though an ecocritical framework provides insight into both texts, *Red Doc* is especially compelling in this regard and Sara Nolan's argument for a new eco-poetics provides particular insight.

Nolan examines an eco-poetics she designates "unnatural," such that it might respond to contemporary environments, such as those informed by "technology, globalization, politics, and cultural shifts" (89). According to Nolan, a poetics of ecology should respond not only to the untouched natural world but also to culture. She proposes that, "rather than separating nature from other aspects of real experience, this understanding of the term eco-poetics focuses on various situations in which individual memory, personal experience, ideology, and the limitations of the senses intermingle with natural elements of experience," resulting in "new forms and experimentation with language" that endeavor to most accurately depict this experience (88). Though her criticism specifically addresses Carson's *Nox*, Nolan's observations are certainly relevant to considerations in *Autobiography of Red* and *Red Doc*, imbued as these texts are with formal innovation and a blurring of traditional boundaries related to one's negotiations with their environment.

Further, Nolan argues that eco-poetics ought to consider those authors using "experimental forms and meta-poetic commentary on language itself" in their "attempt to express the disjointed and

nonlinear aspects of experience while simultaneously moving the inherent limitations of the text to the fore.” Nolan proposes of *Nox* that “while it is seemingly absent of any connection to the natural world, it projects a lived moment in which a human perceiver constructs a textual environment with memories, images, people, words, and places that compose the time and space of her experience” (94). *Nox* is quite literally a collage of visual and textual expressions, but certainly all of Carson’s work functions, to some degree, as a pastiche of voices, present and past, many of which struggle to articulate experience.

According to Nolan, in *Nox* Carson shows that “the textual world is a valid site for the same types of encounters that other poets have with the physical world” (95). Though the characters in *Red Doc* move through distinct and surprising physical environments, Carson is clearly more concerned with their internal landscapes than their engagement with wind, cold or heat. “Environments are revealed as all around us,” Nolan observes, “ranging from our own bodies to the textual places we construct” (96).

For Nolan, unnatural ecopoetics demonstrates that “even interactions with the most un-natural environments bring with them responsibility for both the natural and cultural elements that are irreversibly intertwined within them” (96). This idea seems relevant, as well, to Timothy Morton’s conceptions regarding collaboration, meshes, hyperobjects and queer ecology. According to Morton, in the modern age (an age in which he contends that the “world” as we might know it has already ended), “art becomes a collaboration between humans and nonhumans,” such that “when you write a poem you are making a deal with some paper, some ink, word processing software, trees, editors, and air”; destructive forces, such as global warming, might speak through your text (*Hyperobjects* 174-5). He argues that creative invention is inherently the product of multiple forces, and as such endows art with rare effects. In examining Chris Wainwright’s image *Red Ice 3*, an image of an iceberg captured in red light, Morton asserts that by “heightening the artificiality, Keats-style, something of the object as such intrudes into human social and psychic space,” and that “without a background, without Nature, without a world, the iceberg haunts us. There is a weird affect of withdrawal and disturbing intimacy at once” (189).

Morton also focuses heavily on the significance of binaries, especially in considering a queer ecology that is relevant to the botched queer love in *Red Doc*. “Worlds have horizons: here and there, inside and outside,” he observes, whereas “queer ecology would undermine worlds” (“Guest Column” 278). CMO tells Ida that “nature is on the *inside*” (77). Life permeates life, material and otherwise, in a manner that defies limitations and makes the even divisions of time untenable. Morton further asserts that “to contemplate ecology’s unfathomable intimacies is to imagine pleasures that are not heteronormative, not genital, not geared to ideologies about where the body starts and stops” (280). *Red Doc* enters inside Io’s mind and describes the world from her creature thinking. Because “every day she / every day forgets,” experience is circular for Io: “Reds leap / the clouds in a wind stirring / everything tall all the way / out over the river and / pinwheeling back...the heavens are perfect. / Perfections sounds round” (27). This type of blurring suits Morton’s understanding of what he also terms a “mesh,” drawing on Sedgwick’s idea. In Morton’s queer ecology, “life-forms constitute a mesh, a nontotalizable, open-ended concatenation of interrelations that blur and confound boundaries,” including “between species, between the living and the nonliving, between organism and environment” (275-6). Here we might refer to Geryon’s fascination with beluga whales (*Autobiography of Red* 103)<sup>18</sup> or G’s disturbance at Sad’s story about Hannibal’s lit up oxen in war (*Red Doc* > 26).

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<sup>18</sup> While in Argentina, Geryon recalls visiting “a pair of beluga whales newly captured” during elementary school. He remembers thinking that they were “as alive as he was / on their side / of the terrible slopes of time” (90). Later, Geryon contemplates the nature of captivity in a conversation with a tango singer. He asks her, “Do you ever / wonder about beluga whales” (103)? He’s interested in these creatures not because they might be endangered but because they are “in captivity just floating.” The whales are trapped as Geryon is by a large unwieldy body and a trapped suspension that was brought upon them. According to Moreen Gifney & Myra J. Hird, the contemplation of animals with anthropomorphic potential moves spectators to reflectively challenge “binaries pertaining to nature/culture, living/dead, beautiful/grotesque, desire/disgust, subject/object, presence/absence and human/nonhuman” (2). Geryon wants to know what the whales are thinking about and the singer tells him “nothing,” an answer he cannot accept (*Autobiography of Red* 103). The conversation proceeds: “You can’t be alive and think nothing. *You* can’t but you’re not a whale. / Why should it be different? / Why should it be the same? But I look in their eyes and I see them thinking. / Nonsense. It is yourself you see – it’s guilt. / Guilt? Why would I be guilty about whales? Not my fault they’re in a tank. / Exactly. So why are you guilty – whose / tank are you in?” Though he may relate to notions of captivity and drift, Geryon sees the whale’s existence (and internal state) as interesting apart from his own potential projection. As Mortimer-Sandilands observes, the existence of aquariums like the one Geryon refers to implies a necessarily melancholic relationship between humans and nature. Two pictures in the book’s last section explore this relationship, entitled “The Meek” and “I am a beast” (138-9). The former features a burros that compel Geryon for a reason he can’t identify, and the latter a “guinea

These overlaps, however, do not correspond with a holistic, perfectionist conception of ecology. As Morton asserts, although “meshes are potent metaphors for the strange interconnectedness of things,” this concept does not “allow for perfect, lossless transmission of information, but is instead full of gaps and absences” (*Hyperobjects* 83). Alongside the mesh, Morton considers the idea of “rift,” such that “a thing just is a rift between what it is and how it appears, for any entity whatsoever, not simply for the special entity called the (human) subject” (*Hyperobjects* 18). Breaks in the mesh are a result of limitations in naming (language) and conceptions of time. Directly after Io jumps off the cliff above Sad’s car, one of *Red Doc*’s most intriguing passages appears. “Between us and / animals is a namelessness,” Carson writes. As Io and G float high about the ground, we are told that humans “flail around / generically...or get the / category wrong – a musk / ox isn’t a musk ox at all” and “when / choosing to name / individual animals we / pretend they are objects / (Spot) or virtues (Beauty) / or just other selves (Bob)” (136). Carson acknowledges the seemingly insurmountable chasm between language and experience, between nature and humans.

Material objects that challenge the characters’ sense of reality also take on special significance in *Red Doc*, including the white plastic bag,<sup>19</sup> a fake gun, and SPAM. At the book’s outset, G’s mother reminisces about a car accident the two shared. “I thought I saw a / deer racing / out a driveway,” she recalls, “so I start to just them my brain flashes / on it being a wooden lawn ornament not a real one / WATCH OUT FOR THE WOODEN DEER I / yelled so loud you drove / off the road” (5). Their crash is the unnecessary result of confusion due to a simulation of animal life. What could have been a near accident with a real deer in *Red Doc* becomes a confusion resulting from G’s mother yelling about a fake deer they have already passed. The figure of the deer returns, in conjunction with another significant

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pig lying on her right side on a plate,” with “two perfect tiny white teeth / [that] project over her blackened lower lip” and her left eye “looking straight up at Geryon.” He cannot eat her.

<sup>19</sup> “She hit the ground / ,” Sad recalls, “75 saw the white bag 75 / bullets tore her head off I / saw her hand” (25). 4NO warns G, “don’t ask about the / woman don’t ask about the / crossroads don’t ask about / the plastic shopping bag” (65), and Sad tells Ida “nothing else was left / not even what I / said not even the / stupidfuck white plastic / shopping nothing her / family could. Bury / identify keep” (94).

object, when G decides to throw away his TV by the overpass near his red hut. There, he sees and hears an actual deer, described as a “wild cracky sound” that moves “up / first in birds overhead” and then “the deer / has it four times like a / a rock sneezing,” (7). G is so intent on observing the animal and listening for noise that he fails to realize that Ida is about to hit him with a 2X4, fearing that G has come to take her hiding spot (8). TV figures later in the text, since the clinic televises certain activities and people, including 4NO. The deer (simulated and real), as well as the TV, simulations of the real, are associated with violence. The simulated deer results in a crash, the real deer precedes a “whack” to G’s head (“down he goes his poor / poppystalk bent oddly / sideways”), and television (an object G was trying to throw away because “everyone [is] always angry on / TV”) reframes a moment of hopeful community (singing) as a riot (7-8, 115).

In Carson's work, the blurring of internal and external boundaries, as well as the prominence of objects that twist reality, both suggest an intersection, often painful, between the present and past. As Catroina Mortimer-Sandilands argues, “rather than renounce loss as *past* in an ongoing search for new cathexes, melancholia suggests a present that is not only haunted but constituted by the past: literally built of ruins and rejections” (340). Indeed, the critical frameworks of most importance to both *Autobiography* and *Red Doc*, to the fragmentation and hybridity Carson implies mark us all, are rooted in queer theory and grief. Carson’s texts indicate both the inevitably tattered point from which we begin, as well as the potential for an incorporation of loss and brokenness in the service of art. There is a similar hopefulness in queer theory, in that, increasingly, there is space for identities that do not conform with traditional and constrictive sexual and gender norms. Difference does not have to mean broken. Broken does not even have to mean broken, since humans are necessarily hybrid, build of the present and past, the loved and the lost. As Butler acknowledges, “it may be that what is right and what is good consists in staying open to the tensions that beset the most fundamental categories we require, in knowing unknowingness at the

core of what we know, and what we need, and in recognizing the sign of life in what we undergo without certainty about what will come” (*Undoing Gender* 39).



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