

“A Tangle of Vegetation”: Suffering in Margaret Avison’s “Jo Poems”

by John C. Van Rys

*Such sharpnes shows the sweetest fend:
Such cuttings rather heal then rend:
And such beginnings touch their end.*
—George Herbert, “Paradise”

In his review of Margaret Avison’s 1989 collection of poems, *No Time*, David Kent comments that “the entire book is suffused with the elegiac” (“Whole-Hearted” 69). The elegiac tone of the volume, though not completely foreign to Avison’s poetry, is remarkable here for its intensity, particularly in the long-poem lyrical sequence, “The Jo Poems,” which opens the collection. Claiming that this poem sequence “will one day be a standard,” George Bowering describes “The Jo Poems” as “a prayer and a paeon [*sic*] and a beautiful long poem that can do only as much as those two things can do, and now do them for us, mortal, too” (“Curious Encounter” 106). Avison’s varied readers have long recognized her as a Christian-conversion poet—a poet whose pre-conversion poetry is metaphysical, dense and difficult, exalting the imagination in a cold, urban landscape, and whose post-conversion poetry (January 4, 1963) is filled with Incarnational awe; celebration of the creating, saving, and empowering God; and a looking outwards away from the self. This is a highly simplified scheme for her poetry, but it does lead to this question: how does Avison, a poet of the Incarnation, express pain, suffering, and death poetically? The answer in “The Jo Poems” is that she looks straight at them with her characteristically complex perception. Avison neither brushes aside suffering, minimizes it, nor pietistically glosses it over. Instead, she wrestles elegiacally, whole-heartedly with suffering, taking poetic risks to stare steadily at pain in the context of God’s Light, to work through the suffering and bear witness to it. As Avison herself claims of the poetic effort, “The poem can no more be a ‘safe’ venture than a direct human encounter can. Here, too, the

believer is fully involved, all the more fully because of his faith” (“Muse” 145).

The shortest lyric in “The Jo Poems,” the ninth out of ten, comments on Avison’s attitude and approach to suffering in these poems, and thus these four lines offer us an entrance into her sense of the elegiac:

Only all looking to the core
of life’s forever Fire
–no more centrifugally–
can any be.

(AN 2.136)

This lyric is both a statement of faith and an injunction. Being can be found, according to the poet, only in looking directly at the source of life—an eternal Fire that illuminates, heats, and purifies—even through suffering. And this core must be sought directly. The centrifugal approach is an evasion, a spinning off and away from the center, a distancing, signaled by the setting-off dashes. The poet is forceful and adamant in this statement of faith: this gaze is the only way; it’s all or nothing for any person; any being depends on it. Here, then, Avison articulates the approach at work in the rest of her poems on suffering. She expresses the elegiac, a mournful meditation on death, a lament that seeks out, through the tangled vegetation, being as solution, as consolation. This paper explores Avison’s and the reader’s encounter with such tangled vegetation through, first, a look at the critical context and the background of “The Jo Poems,” and, second, a reading of the lyrics themselves in terms of their documenting of suffering, their reflecting on it, and their pressing toward vital consolation.

1. Critical Context and Background for “The Jo Poems”

When “The Jo Poems” appeared at the beginning of *No Time*, Avison’s first collection in more than a decade, readers expressed surprise at Avison’s turn to the personal elegy. Nevertheless, the presence of elegy and a concern for suffering predate this poem, and this poem prefigures a continuing concern with these forms and topics since its publication. For example, in *Winter Sun*, we find “Unfinished After-Portrait or Stages of Mourning,” “R.I.P.,” and “On the Death of France Darte Scott.” Pre-conversion, these poems question whether death has “capped that smile,” has left the heart “deadset,” yet they affirm that “There is a human / presence” (AN 1.90-91). In *The Dumbfounding* and *sunblue*, the poet approaches elegy post-conversion, now associating pure suffering and consolation with Christ. Yet, in a poem such as “A Lament,” where “A gizzard and

some ruby inner parts / glisten here on the path where wind has parted / the fall field's silken ashblonde," the poet laments that "Crumbling comes, / voracious, mild as loam- / but not restoring. Death has us glassed in" (*AN* 2.38). Conversion has not negated suffering and death. In *No Time* itself, "The Jo Poems" is complemented by several individual elegies, as well as a second elegiac sequence entitled "My Mother's Death" (*AN* 2.170-77). For example, in "Heavy-hearted Hope," the poet speaks of hope as "a firm condition / established by one absolute hurt / till the encompassing joy." Meditating on fear, growing cells and cancer, Chernobyl's children, she can only conclude, "May Your own grieving heart / instruct my cry" (*AN* 2.258-59). The poet's pain requires God's instruction, instruction rooted in God's own grief for this world's groaning. And her most recent collections continue this concern for suffering, most notably in the *Not Yet but Still* long poem, "Job: Word and Action" (*AN* 3.102-15). Taken together, these and other poems demonstrate the poet's decades-long engagement with suffering in all its forms, pointing simply to its focused, intensive, and extensive treatment in "The Jo Poems."

Critics, if not repeating George Bowering's estimation of "The Jo Poems," have been quick to recognize its significance and distinctiveness. In the same review of *No Time* where he identifies the collection as "suffused with the elegiac," David Kent relates this development to a shift in Avison toward the personal in her poetry, a shift brought about by personal losses and personal suffering (the deaths of "fellow poets and friends," as well as illness). Kent continues, "*No Time* is thus partly about those for whom time is no more because it has run out. Mortality means no time left" ("Whole-Hearted" 68-69). Speaking particularly of "The Jo Poems," he concludes that "[i]n confronting the suffering and loss this experience brought with it, [Avison] also faced the mystery of time and a challenge to her faith" (69). In his review of *No Time*, J.M. Kertzer explains that the volume "expresses the passion of age" in its elegiac emphasis, that in her religious impulse Avison "approaches death, contemplates it, and searches beyond it" ("Passion" 195). Jean Mallinson also expresses appreciation for "The Jo Poems" sequence, claiming that "the reality of human experience is never undercut by premature solace" (14).

Nevertheless, this admiration has not translated into sustained critical attention to "The Jo Poems," with one exception. In her dissertation on contemporary elegy in four Canadian women poets, "*There is No Sadness / I Can't Enter*," Sara Jamieson dedicates a chapter to Avison and "The Jo Poems." Using as her critical framework a psychological, feminist, and social understanding of elegy as a genre, Jamieson effectively traces the

poem's tangle as a form of public commemoration as opposed to private grieving. As she explains, "my reading emphasises the way in which the details of the poet's relationship with her college friend Jo Grimshaw in fact receive less attention than does the importance of Jo's work as a labour economist. By linking her own personal grief to a large social problem such as the unequal distribution of wealth, Avison contributes to an ongoing twentieth-century reshaping of the public elegy" (10). Jamieson then proceeds to elucidate "the way in which Avison draws subtle distinctions between private and public mourning, repeatedly privileging the urgency of communal losses above her own private grief," a form of displacement that functions as a problematic "consolatory strategy" revealing elegy's troubling relationship to power and submission. Avison's way out of this impasse, argues Jamieson, is to imagine "a paradoxical version of elegiac submission to authority which gestures toward the transformation rather than the acceptance of the hierarchies that limit our existence" (105). Here, I propose to offer a complementary (not contradictory) reading of "The Jo Poems," focusing less on the gendered, social, political, and public aspects of elegy as genre and more on the religious and ontological implications of the suffering the poem presents.

If critical attention to "The Jo Poems" has thus far been limited, it is true that critics have nevertheless frequently touched upon Avison's concern for suffering, mortality, and elegy. For example, Christine Somerville offers a reading of another elegy from *No Time*, the poem "Just Left or The Night Margaret Laurence Died." This is a poem, explains Somerville, where "[t]he voice is that of a companion to sorrow, not a superior who has gained the high ground of unswerving belief," where "Avison gives grief full weight" (56). Arguing that the poem "dramatizes a spiritual struggle between grief and hope," Somerville concludes that "[j]ust as the Christian story incorporates birth, death, and rebirth, Avison, as Christian poet, incorporates this cyclical pattern both in the individual poem and in the entire collection" (59). In a second critical example, Deborah Bowen examines Avison's use of parodic elegy in the poem "Having Stopped Smoking," a Bakhtinian parody that "generates a contemporary mourning of doubled meanings and doubled selves" (46). In the end, argues Bowen, "Avison's poem enacts the movement from melancholia to mourning as self-construction" (54). Bowen's attention to doubling and self-construction alerts us to the perhaps more serious ontological crises of "The Jo Poems."

Even prior to the publication of this sequence, however, critics had recognized Avison's approaches to death and suffering. For example, Ofelia

Cohen-Sfetcu points out that Avison's post-conversion poetry "explores nihilism" but "resists its temptation." Instead, Avison establishes love as the pivot point for understanding life. Cohen-Sfetcu concludes, "Temporality is no longer so threatening, for, despite mortality, man can reveal his authenticity in love. 'Cogito,' she seems to say, may mean that one exists; 'I love' is the proof that one lives" (342). Again before the publication of "The Jo Poems," David Kent characterizes the "quieter confidence" of Avison's post-conversion poetry, noting that "[h]er faith does not guarantee immunity from psychic pain, but it can help to consecrate it" ("Margaret Avison" 48). Kent concludes that Avison's "Christian experience thus embraces both the new life in Christ as well as the mysteries of evil, suffering, and death" (62). Writing in 1979 of the power of Avison's poetry, J.M. Kertzer claims that Avison's words "illuminate feeling and sense, broaden perspectives, and both expose and soothe the wounds of our lives" ("Margaret Avison" 37). Cohen-Sfetcu, Kent, and Kertzer all anticipate, in other words, Avison's attention to the tangled vegetation of grief in "The Jo Poems."

Since the publication of *No Time*, Avison's readers have continued to focus on suffering in her poetry, if not explicitly in "The Jo Poems." Jean Mallinson, for example, in her 1991 *Poetry Canada* article claims that "Margaret Avison's poetry has from the beginning acknowledged the threats under which we live, what might be called, in the literary sense, the 'matter' of the twentieth century. To every poem she brings the burden of what it means to be alive, now, in our shared plight" (12). Mallinson underlines the communal suffering central to Avison's poems, Avison's concern with "what it means to be human: to mourn each individual death" (12), her attention to "perennial human stations in narrative like departures and arrivals, including the final sundering of death" (13). Like John Donne, Avison expresses the truth that no one is an island, that each death affects all the living. In the same year (1991), Rosemary Sullivan focused on the pattern in Avison's poetry of "waking through a 'living danger' to a new *I*," on Avison's expression of the human condition as one of "vulnerability and pain to which...the only response is faith" (51). More recently (2001), William Butt dedicated a section of his study on *Not Yet but Still* to suffering. "Individual injury," he writes, "has fullest meaning when understood as part of a larger process: a passing-through of suffering-time on the way to fulfilment impossible by any other path. The fulfilment is the knowledge that each partakes in that oneness" (852). Avison's readers, then, continue to see suffering as central to her broader poetic, as part of both a continuum of and dividing line between her pre-conversion and post-conversion

poems, as a journey through and communion with life's troubles. It is within this broader scheme that "The Jo Poems" fits.

2. Avison on Jo, Suffering, and Poetry

Where exactly do these poems, "The Jo Poems," come from, and where is Avison coming from in them? Do the specific events in which the poems originate help us understand the approach to suffering that we find within them? Avison's own comments, both directly about "The Jo Poems" and more broadly about poetry and faith, provide us with useful background to the elegiac poetic that she is working out.

In an unusual move for a usually reticent poet, Avison has written a preface to this poem sequence. The preface, entitled "So Many Years Later," makes plain who Jo was, why she is important to Avison, and what Avison the poet wrestled with in writing the poems. "The Jo Poems" commemorates Josephine Grimshaw, a close friend of Avison's for 31 years, who died in 1967. Jo's death was clearly a shock for Avison and others. She contrasts Jo's death, for example, with her mother's lingering death at the age of 102, kept alive artificially until June, 1985. "Death," writes Avison, "looks very different when viewed from the end of life, death of contemporaries: quiet, a kind of fulfillment" (*AN* 2.115). In 1967, Jo's death did not reflect such fulfillment. Instead, says Avison, it was an "abrupt cataclysm" that left "everything altered." She proceeds to describe the grieving process that she went through 20 years before:

At first comes the obsessive rehearsing of the final terrible days—everybody will have their own equivalents—and then, gradually, cherished times and occasions gleaming out three-dimensionally, not a remembering, not turning the pages of an old photograph album, but a refreshed shining out of the person clear now of time, and unforgettable. (115)

This is the suffering Avison went through when Jo died, and this is the suffering articulated in "The Jo Poems," first written in the wake of this cataclysm. As Avison suggests at the end of the preface, however, these poems work through the suffering to "something to be openly commemorated." An important question remains both for us and for Avison: why delay publishing the sequence for 20 years? Avison answers that she wanted perspective. In other words, she asks, "was the initial version just therapeutic writing, an effort to relieve my own grief? If not, what was the source of uneasiness every time I re-considered it? Had Jo's death uprooted a whole tangle of vegetation that only time could sort out?" Avison wants the sequence to be genuine poetry, not private venting; she wants the poems to

voice that tangle of vegetation that is an authentic thinking through and wrestling with suffering in the largest sense. And in their directness, “The Jo Poems” do so, not in spite of but because that tangle of vegetation is intact. “In the end,” Avison writes, “that initial version, most of it, is here, tangle and all” while “parallel griefs go on” (117).

In the year following Jo’s death, Avison published a short essay on the relationship between poetry and Christian faith. This manifesto, “Muse of Danger,” provides us with oblique insights into Avison’s poetic of suffering—that tangle of vegetation. As the title of the essay suggests, Avison sees poetry as dangerous—but productively, not negatively. Poetry writing and reading are human activities filled with both risk and reward. “The impulse to write a poem,” she argues, “occurs in human context—and can be a pulsation in darkness or in light.... No fool-proof formula exists for using a poetic impulse to God’s glory” (“Muse” 144). Moreover, she points to “acute conflict in the experience of most Christian writers” and the temptation to stay within a safe verbal universe (145); yet, she claims, “there is no set of ‘safe’ or ‘preferred’ daily experiences” (146). The Christian poet should not set those limits on the gift-giver—limits that would preclude an authentic inquiring into grief. Avison ends the essay with this powerful invitation:

Poetry is the *whole-hearted* use of language, then. Let the Christian plunge in if he is given potentialities in reading and writing—and so discover.

The practice of poetry is as dangerous as this next hour of life, whoever you are. Yet its advantages are great. (149)

In the year following Jo’s cataclysmic death, Avison could write these words of faith and hope. She could affirm poetry’s heart power in the midst of dangers, trials, and death; indeed, she could claim its role in discovery for both writer and reader. As Avison could say in an interview six months before her mother’s death, “Literature demands involvement” (“Margaret Avison: Conversion” 9).

Even more recently, in her 1993 Pascal lectures published as *A Kind of Perseverance*, Avison offers perhaps her most extensive meditations on suffering, faith, and poetry. Particularly in her first lecture, “Misunderstanding Is Damaging,” she proposes that growth requires suffering. Among several propositions she offers at the start of her lecture, here are two: “*A growing person keeps facing misunderstanding, and keeps breaking through. The old is damaged, but ahead is new understanding—of self or of another*” and “*Do all of us grow? Well. It takes some doing...risking further damage, facing the danger, not ducking it*” (*Kind* 20; italics hers).

Growth requires breaking through misunderstanding (violently, courageously) toward understanding. Later in the lecture, Avison reflects on our blind spots, our existence in time, and our need for help: “we are of our time, not outside it; we are in the miasma of this violent, headlong, desperate, fragmenting world. The salt that checks corruption has to be rubbed against the corruptible” (35). The metaphor of salt as healing, preserving, and preventing destruction, decay, and death has, of course, strong biblical as well as historical and practical roots. Avison pitches all of us here into this life-and-death struggle for understanding. As a poet, she herself employs “verbal tactics against misunderstanding” in this struggle (41).

In her second lecture, “Understanding is Costly,” she returns to this miasma, to the experience of suffering, framing it in a scriptural context:

Pain, loss, is defined as a beginning-point in the Gospels. You must spend all, i.e., lose all, to gain more than all, qualitatively speaking. Love defined himself (‘God is love’) by total loss—of privacy, of reputation, of friends, of all freedom and all rights, loss of physical life and of any supernatural rescue—even of any hope of rescue. It was deliberate. The stranger truth, even: he wants us to share this loss, for love’s sake. (55)

Suffering, losing, is where one starts, paradoxically, to gain, to move outwards from our self and self-owning to rescue, in love. At the end of her second lecture, in fact, Avison confronts her audience and her readers with the further paradox of pain, that both understanding and misunderstanding are rooted in it:

Pain will not fit within the bounds of our reason, of our understanding—as each of us discovers first-hand in time; no theory will explain it to our honest satisfaction.

Have I spent two evenings to say that misunderstanding and understanding alike lead to damage and pain? But is that surprising, since our understanding is always partial, a step forward into another part of what we sometimes feel is a maze? It will never be *our* understanding or intelligence that will rescue us. Oddly, that is the shining hope. (74)

Four years after publishing “The Jo Poems” and more than twenty-five after experiencing the loss of her friend, Avison arrives at the mysteries of pain and damage, at the bereavements that we all experience in the context of our understandings and misunderstandings. Her theme, as in much of her poetry, both pre- and post-conversion, is the need for rescue, the hope rooted in the belief that we cannot rescue ourselves.

3. Perceptions of Suffering in “The Jo Poems”

If literature demands a dangerous involvement that nevertheless is not a self-rescue, what sense of suffering does Avison create in “The Jo Poems”? What risks and wrestling with death does the poet undertake? The poet’s first impulse, it seems, is to document suffering. One way Avison does this is by commemorating or alluding to Jo’s work as a labour economist—a worker with statistics, administrative law, questionnaires, data. Through such work, paradoxically, Jo spent her life, herself from a blue collar background, working with words and numbers to lessen the suffering of people who all too easily become numbers. In the first lyric, entitled “*Thank God, somebody spoke plainly, but humanly,*” the poet claims that Jo’s plain skills lead through

to the step beyond quantity,
beyond measurables,
beyond concepts,

out where theory is
challenged by the existence
of persons

(AN 2.119)

Jo’s measured life of measuring, it seems, makes possible human dignity and the structures for such dignity.

The poet’s documentary urge also appears in her cataloguing the details surrounding death, bereavements gathered as fragments to construct a narrative of suffering. Particularly in lyrics three and four, the longest ones in the sequence, Avison dwells on portraits: Jo prostrate and in pain at home alone with the family dog; the poet’s discovery of her in this state; the hospital “waiting / room” (121); phone calls with friends hearing the news for the first time; the bald truth of the refrain “My friend is dead” (126). The poet seeks to see the suffering for what it is; in fact, at one point she examines her own position “in the odd march / of these developments,” practical, sensible, up and down emotionally, yet also “evasive, looking not quite at / their suffering” (124). The poet seems to chide herself for failing to look directly at pain, but in other spots she provides a literal mathematics of suffering:

A handful of nurses and record-keepers and
one or two doctors. People
sharing dimes to make their calls and

telling each his own story and
helping each other find the washrooms and
apprehensive:

(‘if you have your own doctor’ it
‘helps’). So few to help too many
hurt, to answer so
many anxious.

The youthful doctor knows two things:
his human sense of what one being feels,
even the other, the not-himself;
his range of competence, the immediate basis
for making rush decisions on
three ‘cases’ at once (and hundreds ‘outside’
‘waiting for beds’).

One clouds the other; he feels he must deny
his feeling.

(121-22)

Numbers, records, money, options, cases—these lines construct an equation of suffering, documented with quotation marks and felt in the very form of the verse, with its contrasting run-on and end-stopped lines in the shift from the suffering of the patient’s friends and family to the suffering of the feeling-torn doctor. In the accumulation of details, the cataloguing of fragments, the poet both faces and presents the face of pain.

Nevertheless, in her desire to wrestle with the tangled vegetation of suffering, Avison goes beyond documentation to reflection, to imaginative inquiry and interrogation. That reflection is in part a facing of hard truth and harder questions. As Sara Jamieson argues, even the poet’s description of Jo’s socially-driven statistical work and the presentation of the hospital scene are problematic, in that they point to “disillusionment in the work of a lifetime” (110), the fundamental injustice in “the economy of work and compensation” (112), and the “failed protection” offered by the medical system (113). These social concerns are, in the end, heart concerns. “The Jo Poems,” in fact, is made up of cries from the heart. In effect, the poet herself feels the weight of pain, like Jo “locked in, flat down, / overwhelmed (alone) with / waves of total pain” (121). Particularly in lyrics three, four, and five of the sequence, the poet recounts the dark night of the soul. As Jo herself moves toward death, the poet struggles whole-heartedly with the witnessing of suffering and death, with faith, hope, and love under attack, as it were. In lyric three, where the focus is on the night of Jo’s admittance to the hospital, “Word spreads. Concern / rises. Helplessness /

paralyses” (123). The poet seeks to affirm resurrection power amid the mathematics of pain and death,

Yet my heart chokes on earth.
My questions choke me.
Who could discard any who cry
‘I can’t believe’ – an only mortal truth
spoken in death’s presence,
airless in its silence.

(122)

Choking on the dirt of death and questions born of the dust, the poet wrestles with issues of faith and unbelief, of mortal truths. Similarly, in lyric four the poet faces the conflict of Jo’s life and death, the “Thank God” of relief, the literal relief that Jo feels when the ambulance arrives, and the “O Christ” (126) of Jo’s suffering, the physical pain of a wracked body. For the poet, these simple but profound exclamations are also prayers that alert readers to the metaphysical context of bodily pain. With these painful prayer words echoing, with her own pain running parallel to but distinct from Jo’s, the poet turns to God for answers:

My Lord, in horrible need I
turn to the Book, and see
sin and death, life in thee
only, and cannot see,
O living Word, I cannot see to see.

I love this friend we’ve lost.
And the two-dimensional good
that was all I knew
 apart so long from you,
I cannot now dishonour, nor belie.

But the truth brooks no denying.
There is a word, are words,
that do not lie.

(127)

The poet’s horrible conflict resides in her desire to be faithful to God’s goodness, mercy, and justice, to the full three-dimensional good that she has come to know after conversion, while still being true to the good of Jo’s life, a human two-dimensional good, a good that is partial and flat, apart

from God's good. Her questioning leads her to meditate too on the body and bodily extinction: "Surely this is beyond / analogy, beyond any blunt / ending or comprehending" (128). Because of the poet's uncertainty, this statement takes on the tone of a question.

Finally, in lyric five, entitled "On the doorsill of her death, afraid," the poet articulates thoroughly her own unknowing. She explains how she had prayed for Jo and felt "pain-brilliant joy, holy accord," and thus was confident that Jo had taken a "healthward / turn." When she calls the hospital, however, she learns that Jo's condition continues to be poor. The poet seeks an explanation without certainty:

I do not know. The lift
was real, for me.
And yet I'm not the one
to tidy up a sum as though a
life of intricate bright and dark
and the huge mystery
of loving work, evasions, tactics,
home emergencies, and
sudden sickness, and dying shut off
by the sense-dimming ice-floes
where no one could follow
that I can know –
as though this, in my friend,
or in the lives 'lost' from any 'view'
that truly knows,
as though for them some passages were not part
of the all including.

(130)

The poet remains unable to sum up a life (Jo's life and the life of others) so much of which is hidden, known only to God, the "all including" (130). She is left with the mystery of life's river carving channels, with "YES. BUT." both affirmation and questioning, with words that must be spoken: "These human words burst out / and will" (131). Avison's documentation of suffering turns to cries from the heart, a whole heart that seeks to praise but is burdened with pain.

4. Searching and Sounding

In her reflections on documented suffering, does the poet, as is traditional in elegy, discover solace, comfort, or hope? Do her questions remain unanswered, unattended to by God? Avison's search for answers by look-

ing to the core of life's forever Fire takes her in three directions: meditations on time, searchings of nature, and communing with the Word.

In the face of death, Time becomes deeply meaningful to the poet—a means, in fact, of understanding life. As the title to the whole volume of poetry indicates, *No Time*, Avison's sense of time is double. We, as flesh and blood creatures, exist in time and disappear from it in death; we run out of time, like Jo, like Avison herself. Yet the title can also be understood in terms of a victory over time, a denial of its final say. In "The Jo Poems," Avison attends to both these meanings. For example, the second lyric celebrates a Wordsworthian spot of time, a simple family meal where "time expanded, / time to be there" (120). By the end of the poem, however, we are reminded that time's flow resumes: "After good hours, the coffee pot / glued up the oilcloth. / Our cups went cold. Ashtrays overflowed" (120). These final lines of the poem focus on the negative byproducts of time's flow—heat that melts, liquid that loses heat, ashtrays that fill with butt ends. Other lyrics in the sequence also explore time's flexibility and plasticity, life in time and promised timelessness. Lyric three, taking us into the valley of the shadow of death, begins, "Today, July 18, 1967, / one troubled night beyond / the time-freeze" (121). The careful attention to the date, part of the poet's documenting impulse, contrasts the notion that for the sufferers Time is frozen, a stand-still thing in the face of death. Terror polarizes "at the moment" (122); Jo's father keeps praying "all the time"; "The body of death is judged now, will not stay"; Christ comes to "that hour" in Gethsemane. The poet herself is

dimly aware of the
strange pressure of a Presence, of a
prince of this brute, bald,
groan-choked, clammy
time, or of all
in time and out.

(124)

These lines both lament the pain of this time and yet affirm God's kingship over it, over all time, over what is out of time.

Avison's meditations on the time of suffering are complemented by a consideration of nature and natural processes in relation to life, death, and the Creator. The poet seeks to read the created revelation for an affirmation of life and resurrection power. For example, in the seventh lyric, "Pruning," the poet reflects on the scene before her: city workers having trimmed trees, loading their truck with "fragrant / branch-loppings in / full leaf"

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(134). In the middle part of the poem, she questions why these limbs, clearly healthy, “squeaking with juices,” needed to be trimmed. She has options without clear answers. The final section of the poem, with no explicit reference to God or to Jo’s death, turns pruning into a metaphor, a troubling one:

Pruning. The
new air
washes in, almost
visual, with
the beautiful, bitter green.

(134)

Pruning, it seems, like death in life, is two-edged, beautiful and bitter, needed and resented, cleaning through cutting. In these lines, we can hear Avison’s echo of George Herbert’s lines in the epigraph to this study—and her simultaneous questioning of that trimming vision. As Jamieson argues, “this airy current suggests...an elegiac construction of presence in absence” (130).

Other lyrics also voice this doubleness through natural images, particularly through a matrix of images well known to readers of Avison’s poetry, namely the sun in all its seasons. In the third lyric, the groan-choked, clammy time finds a partial response in nature, where “Lake blue through / blowing lilacs / deepens skybloom” (124). Nevertheless, in the luminous landscape “One dead Lombardy / brooms up among / greenness fresh-billowing” (124-25). Similarly, in the sixth lyric, “Daily and lifelong, Josephine,” the poet meditates on “having”—what we are given and give—in the context of Jo’s work for the poor. The poet describes dying red tulips, their “splayed out” petals “unable to / breathe out the light that falls on them” (133). She describes spring’s chestnut “candles” with “swollen wicks” (133). She envisages a winter scene filled with promise:

On the empty-handed earth
the snow stars blot and fur and dwell
 roughing eyelashes of winter grass
 and on the open gaze touching, muffling.
On the snow the slow, rich sun, in time
Seeds roots coolness
 through a new sundeep season.

The heart listens.

(132)

The present landscape is impoverished, yet beautiful and gently luminous; in time, the summer sun of healing will fulfill its promise of plenty. To this promise, the poet's open, healing heart listens. Even in perhaps the darkest lyric, the fourth, with its refrain of "My friend is dead," the poet hears the promise of healing in time in nature in the flesh:

A place of wrangling roots
 moves the young to petal forth
 nitrogen-breathers on shrunk curly shores with a
 pulse other than
 our lung-cleared veins' and arteries' –

listening, I almost hear.

The air flows, lighted and strange, through
 my nostrils, is
 my present
 but now not our
 present.

(129)

The note of lament is still sounded in the lyric's final lines, for the poet's present life, her now, is a time of parting from a dead friend; and yet this separation exists in the context of breath, of *spiritus*, of growing vegetation—whether tangled or not. In such lines, "intensity of physical experience bespeaks spiritual power" (Quinsey 29); or as Jamieson puts it, "Avison writes against that contempt of the physical which so often permeates elegiac writing" (126); instead, she offers what Mallinson calls a "cartography of the spirit" (12).

If Avison finds food for thought in this knottedness of Time and Nature, in the creation and our creatureliness, she seeks outright answers in the Word. Death and pain are not magically erased here but are placed in a context that transforms them with promise, with hope. Within the constraints of language and understanding, the poet hears the Word affirm life, and hence these lyrics, filled with pain, are also illumined with joy and a call to involvement in life. Staring at the core of life's forever Fire, she hears healing words. Most often, Avison hears this hope by turning in her suffering to Christ's suffering, his choosing to die. For example, in the third lyric, the poet affirms resurrection power in the full knowledge of Christ's suffering:

The body of death is judged now, will not stay:
newness will come, at one touch,
aliveness; – but
there's worse than nothing, any other way.

Coming to that hour
meant choosing to endure
these groanings, too, so choosing, rather than
letting a grave-cloth-and-clay body be
no worse than simple death's, eternally –
(122-23)

For the poet, suffering and resurrection cannot be imagined apart from each other, and together they define Christ's victory and humanity's possible victory over death through Him. Similarly, the fourth lyric focuses on the death of the body, the flesh, and answers that bodily death with the news of a "death most shameful, / most grisly, long-drawn-out"; but grisly death is not the final word: "A glory nonetheless / shepherded the lacerated clay / from beyond stone to / move and speak, on the roads, / on the shore sands, in where / we are" (128). Through allusion to Christ's appearances on the road to Emmaus and shores of Galilee, the poet claims a continuing presence for the resurrected Christ in the here and now of suffering.

In essence, Avison's meditations on the Word lead her to a subtle hope and understanding. She can say, then, "Long suffering is an ongoing loving / *unto* health ('how long, / O Lord')?" (128). Here, suffering and loving are both ontologically and syntactically related. These words are both affirmation and question, the hope and the cry of the suffering one. This mixture is again voiced at the end of the sixth lyric:

Dying is fall
of leaf, or day.
A body sculptures desuetude,
outguttering. And yet, it will,
in time, know everlasting awe.
(133)

In these lines, the poet connects cyclical death in nature with the body's death, a body hardening into disuse, and with a candle burning out, spent of its fuel. In spite of these images, however, she affirms (in time, not out of it) resurrection power. She trusts God firmly even in her unknowing. In the poem's final image, "Sky and earth seem to strike each other." We wit-

ness a violent yoking or clashing of two realms, the realms of light and dust.

Perhaps Avison's answer-seeking through wrestling with the Word can best be seen through the final lyric of "The Jo Poems," entitled "Once there was a court." Nowhere in the poem does the poet allude to Jo's death. Indeed, the poem is a retelling of a biblical story. But the word and Avison's facing up to the Word are entirely relevant to the struggles of the preceding nine lyrics in the sequence. The story is, as Avison notes, from 2 Kings 8.8ff. In the story, the sick King Benhadad of Syria sends Hazael to the prophet Elisha for a word on whether the king will recover. Elisha tells Hazael to say "yes, you will recover" to the king, but Elisha also informs Hazael that the king will actually die. Indeed, Elisha knows that Hazael plans to assassinate Benhadad, take the throne, and make God's people suffer. Elisha stares Hazael in the face until that face shows shame. Elisha then weeps for the suffering to come. What does Avison make of this story? She retells it poetically, with the rest of the Jo poems within earshot. She tells of this "court / doomed, and a scheming / truth-anointed, cold / assassin" (137). The poet recounts the "long look," the weeping of Elisha, "racked / by his people's coming suffering" (137), and his speaking the words he was called to speak:

But he spoke, he submitted in truth
to the Purposer of
what was to be,
weeping, bowed at His knee, not suppliant but
in ever-deepening love knowing
he was not in control
could not be, would not want to
foreknow more than he must.
He clung to love as the end and so
could honour both truth, and trust.

(137)

In these lines, the poet sketches Elisha's relationship with his master and maker. Like the poet, Elisha is deeply familiar with suffering; in fact, death and suffering are staring him in the face. Yet he must in love cling to love as God's "end" or purpose through this suffering, and thereby speak truth. The poet, meditating on suffering in the wake of Jo's death, clearly identifies with the suffering, truth-telling prophet. She too stares death in the face and weeps.

In a sense, this final lyric drives us back to the sequence's beginning. Between Avison's preface and the first lyric lies an untitled epigraph:

Taking sides against destructiveness
brings on the very evil of destructiveness
unless it is clear that
no two persons
will or should
entirely agree,

i.e.

one must so take sides.

(118)

Here, Avison frames her elegy, her lament for Jo and for the human condition, with the riddle of violence, destruction, and evil, and hence of suffering. The idea is both imperative and puzzling: facing destruction seems to draw destruction closer, like a magnet. The "unless," however, appears to offer an escape through "agreeing to disagree," as the cliché would have it. Yet in the end one must choose difference, antagonism, identification—there's no choice in the matter, except dependence, for Avison, on the Word. This is a "getting to be where Christ's suffering goes, terribly on," as Avison has put it in another context (qtd. in Bowering, "Avison's Imitation" 6).

To put it another way, the rhetoric of "The Jo Poems" constantly confronts readers with misunderstanding, pulling them into the tangle of vegetation in order to experience a painful growing. In a well known story, Avison recounts how her grade-nine teacher Gladys Story convinced the young poet "to write nothing using the first person" for at least ten years. While the elderly Avison admits that she may have taken the advice too far, she does profess that "If you feel, you should feel for the people out there to whom you're writing, as well as for yourself" ("Conversation" 75). That poetic feeling is at the heart of the rhetoric in "The Jo Poems," where the poet, even when addressing Jo, God, or her own spirit, has the reader as listener within earshot. "It isn't a poem," Avison says, "until it is received" ("Conversation" 66), and we are pressed throughout these lyrics to indeed receive. Even in such poems derived from private grieving, Avison puts herself in the background, effaces herself, in order to engage the reader. "Part of Avison's vocation," writes David Kent, "has always been to encourage her reader to awaken, to sense, to see with the heart" ("Whole-

Hearted” 70). Or as J.M. Kertzer argues, Avison challenges us with the parabolic, with “poems as parables in which skeletal situations point to a moral or divine pattern,” poems also parabolic because they map “an emblematic arc from the known to the unknown” (“Passion” 195-96). Seeing with the heart, tracing the arc between misunderstanding and understanding—fully knowing that growing and suffering continue together—this is the invitation Avison offers for readers of “The Jo Poems.”

For Avison, poetry indeed is the whole-hearted use of language—both for writer and reader. In “The Jo Poems,” perhaps her most personal yet universal lyrics, she invites her readers to face suffering, to see it, know it, and feel it with the heart directed at the core of life’s forever Fire—the living, creating, and saving Word. To return to George Bowering’s praise of Avison, these are poems that “cannot simply be consumed, as people’s lives should not be” (“Curious Encounter” 106). In this challenging, moving poem sequence, Avison calls us, as she says elsewhere, to “Grip, heart, upon like fear / with theirs, and weep, and know” (*AN* 2.175). As readers, we too are called to document suffering where we meet it, not just our own but the other’s, to know it and to own it. Avison’s reflections on suffering in the context of Time, Creation, and the creating Word offer us a paradigm for the very suffering that wracks this creation redeemed by “even-here-unfrustratable / love” (*AN* 2.171).

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