

Two short extracts from the work of Sophie Strand.

These are associated with the Borrowed Time conversation with Sophie on September 29.

Details are at <https://art-earth.org.uk/in-conversation-with-sophie-strand/>

### **Confessions of a Compost Heap (Sophie Strand)**

“And so from hour to hour we ripe and ripe, and then from hour to hour we rot and rot; and thereby hangs a tale,” laments the melancholy Jacques in Shakespeare’s comedy “As You Like It”, hinting at something the playwright understood intimately: disorder and decay are just as crucial to a narrative as are order and fecundity. The story does not exist in a single pole of experience, but is articulated between ripeness and rot. The tragic play flows from fertility into rot, while the comedy reverses the causality, sprouting ripeness from initial decay.

This question was looping in my head in the doctor’s office. She was the main expert of my genetic condition and without much grace she was explaining to me the predictable course of my body’s disintegration. “Okay, you need a surgeon to look at your neck because your skull is essentially collapsing into your spine. Not that the surgeries are very effective. And with your lung functioning being what it is, we can expect your heart to begin to feel the effects so we need to get you back to the cardiologist...”

I could feel myself start to disassociate. My hands were tingling. I felt my being condense into a nucleus of intensity between my eyes. The doctor’s voice was glitching, moving up in pitch until it was too high for me to even hear. “And then from hour to hour we rot and rot...” I thought, staring down at the pronounced veins in my hands that the doctor had informed me were a “typical expression of connective tissue disease”. My skin was too soft. My bones didn’t want to stay in a solid shape. My heart was growing lazy. I was melting. I was breaking down.

I imagined myself amorphous as a compost heap. And instead of talking the doctor was circling me, pouring in water, tossing in a handful of lemon rinds, pulling out a worm and inspecting it with pleasure, every once in a while, taking a trowel and flipping some of my moist soil.

“You’re moving along well,” I imagined her congratulating me. “You’re past the Thermophilic phase and fulling maturing. I’m seeing a lot of earthworms, a lot of millipedes. This is really good news.”

Evidence of intentional composting goes back as far as 12,000 years ago in Scotland when fields filled with manure and human excrement were used to plant crops. There are examples of recycled organic waste for agricultural purposes in Ancient India, China, and across the Middle East. The first written tract about composting can be found in a set of clay tablets dating back to King Sargon’s reign during the Akkadian Dynasty (2320 BCE). In Egypt, composting was so esteemed that Cleopatra declared the compost heap’s hero, the worm, sacred. In 160 BCE, the retired Roman General Cato the Elder wrote instructions on best practices for composting in his agricultural tract “De Agri Cultura”.

Composting is the process whereby plant and food waste decompose into a rich, nutritious soil filled with fungi, bacteria, and organisms. The soil produced from composting creates a nutritious and vibrant matrix for agricultural planting with the added benefit that it also produces compounds that kill off and suppress pathogens that could harm crops. “Greens” and “browns” are the main ingredients of a good compost heap. Greens are characterized as being rich in nitrogen: moldy leaves, mowed grass, table scraps. Browns are richer in carbon: stalks, woody material, paper. The process is easy enough. Add water. Put outside. Let the heat, the moisture, the spores and pollen diffused through the air do their jobs. Of course you can be more precise about it: shredding matter to increase surface area and “aerating” the pile. But decay is a process that winks playfully at human control. Even the attempt to create an “ingredient” list is a modern innovation as demonstrated by the anarchic “shit fields” of the ancient Scots. Human and animal excrement combined with discarded food and plant waste

provided an alchemical mix that needed little organization. The most important work is done by a decidedly inhuman force, or perhaps it's very human given that our bodies are composed of more bacterial cells than human cells: bacteria, fungi, and insects. These decomposers turn a compost heap into a web of appetites, chewing through waste, excreting nutrients and soil, producing heat that further encourages the decay process. A heap of inert matter is soon a pulsing, humming, sweating community of creation.

What then is decay? Watching a compost heap transform into fertile soil it can see like decay is genesis. Decay is the first scene in a comedy of mycelial threads and millipedes and sprouting wildflowers, seeds invisibly deposited by a bird flying overhead. Sometimes I think about death as being the transition from a solitary aliveness to an anarchic polyphony of aliveness. Years ago, a deer, hit by a car, managed to struggle into the woods at the periphery of my parent's property where it died. It was high summer, frying-pan hot, the peeling birch bark almost crisping into cinders under unrelenting sunshine. Day after day I would visit the carcass and watch as one life melted into a riot of lives. Worms. Ants. Maggots. Beetles. Mushrooms. Death was almost the moment when life overflowed its cup. Death wasn't an end of life. It was the end of the singular. The deer decayed out of its shape into explosive, generative plurality. One narrative diverged into four hundred narratives.

Somedays I ask myself, tenderly, curiously, "What is happening to me?" What is happening to this self? This body? I never returned to that doctor, despite her prestige. I felt her prognosis was a bad story. A story I didn't want to hear and didn't want to tell. I know that words are spells. And every day I wake up and tell a different story about what health and vitality and miracles are available to me.

But it is also important to honor what often, bodily, intimately, feels like a slow decay. When old diets, herbs, physical therapy routines no longer work, it can feel like I'm melting. When a holiday passes and I'm reminded to look back at myself, I can suddenly see, for a moment, how much has changed physically.

Am I decaying? Well, yes. But decay is always a day, a microbe, a rootlet, away from sprouting. Maybe I'm losing touch with a self, and melting into a more-than-human mind.

I look at Shakespeare's catalogue of plays. Every comedy begins with strife and break down. Every tragedy begins with health and well-being. If you played any narrative out longer, it would tip into its opposite. As Shakespeare's Jacques notes, it is between the ripe and the rot that "thereby hangs a tale". If I feel myself, like the compost heap, beginning to melt, it means that I am also melting into another story. A bigger story. A wider cast of characters. Let me dance between ripe and rot.

I don't know what act in the play comes next. But I know what my prayer is. Make me bigger than an "I". Make me good soil.

## Living Between Stories (Sophie Strand)

What does it feel like to lose the plot? What does it feel like to wake up, one morning, smoke flattening the sun into a clementine penny, and realize you do not recognize the shape of your narrative? Everything is gelatinized. Formless.

For those with illness, for those experiencing dramatic loss and grief, for refugees, for those exiting marriages, for survivors of assault, the experience is not fluid. One story does not neatly pour itself into the shape of another. In Tibetan Buddhism, the term **Bardo** refers to the liminal realm between death and rebirth. A soul confronts and works through issues before entering into a new body. The experience of narrative **Bardo**, though, happens firmly and uncomfortably within life. You don't get a new body. Or if you do, it is often the body you accidentally arrive at through unexpected illness or accident. The people around you don't necessarily understand that, while waking and eating and participating in daily tasks, you are between stories.

Today, I sit in my living room and I sit between stories. A potato bug on my windowsill crackles and jumps like a spark loosed from a campfire. I pull a card from my Tarot deck. The Fool. The Fool Card is the zero of the Tarot, standing outside of linearity and organization. The Fool Card is both the first and the last card, living interstitially, a non-participant in the dramatic narrative of the Tarot. I close my eyes, imagining my foot hung in void air like the figure in the card. "As if there were a story. As if it could be told," reads one of the final lines in Ann Lauterbach's poem "Company". What a fool I was to think that there would always be another chapter. The Fool card tells me to jump, but I insist that illness, that heartache, that ecological collapse, have already pushed me before I ever chose to jump. Who can help me navigate the **Bardo** realm between different lives that, paradoxically, exists within a single life? When we receive a diagnosis, when we fall ill, when a partner leaves, we feel the cards fall out of our hands. We are not holding a book. A story. We are holding the zero, the empty air past the cliff of the Fool Card.

I think of the hermit crab with a fleshy stomach, a delicate structure, and the dire need for a shell that its body cannot independently produce. These little crustaceans make do with snail

shells that they eventually outgrow. The curious moment occurs when a hermit crab, spilling out of its shell, exceeding its narrative, finds another shell, a little too big. Instead of trying to enter into this spacious shell, it waits patiently, sometimes for up to eight hours, for another, slightly bigger hermit crab to arrive and take the big shell, discarding a protective home more suited to the original hermit crab. Sometimes as many as twenty crabs will congregate and perform a truly amazing ritual called a vacancy chain. When they have finally assembled, the crabs will quickly evacuate and exchange shells, each claiming the new one that best suits their size. What does it feel like to be that first hermit crab, overflowing its shell, waiting beside another shell that it also cannot properly inhabit? What does it feel like to be so soft, unprotected, and incapable of immediately producing a new story? The hermit crab says wait. And he also says, we never reach the next story on our own. We need a group. A group of people all willing to vacate and exchange their stories. Even more wildly, these stories do not belong to any single one of us. They were produced by something outside of our species. A snail. The story that will fit your new body, your new desires, your new needs, will be intimately excreted by a being living well outside the bounds of the human.

Perhaps when we are jelly-like, formless, without a guide, we should look outside the bounds of human culture and narrative for our new shape, our new shell. What beings have left behind their shells for me? Shall I wear the skin of the mountain, the creek, the blue heron, for a while? What feral, furred, horned, lichenized stories can I live inside briefly, while I navigate this narrative Bardo? Hermit crabs, when at a loss for snail shells, have been known to live inside pieces of wood and stone. Shall I be a tree today? A moonlight streak of quartzite in the cliff face? I stare hard at the Fool card once again. Into the zero hovering above his handsome head. I think of the electron swooping around a nucleus, denying a single story, living between classifications as a particle and a wave. One of the most intriguing aspects of the electrons, the study of which led to quantum physics, is the electron's ability to "hop" orbits around a nucleus without being traced. The only way we can locate where the electron has gone is by the photon it emits when it jumps orbits.

I think of the Fool card beginning to jump off the cliff. I think of the electron jumping between orbits, between the solidity of the particle and the oscillation of the wave. What if there was something beautiful that happened when we jumped between stories? I'm less interested in the particular science right now, and more in the poetry of the imagined electron. What if we, too, emitted a photon of light as we navigated the gray realm between narratives. It's only initiation if you survive. This is something I've been telling people lately. It's only meaningful if you safely get to the other side. But living in uncertainty, I do think there is something incandescent and unclassifiable about the experience of refusing to immediately enter the next story. You show other people that we don't have to know immediately. We don't have to produce or progress or move immediately.

Yes, shells protect and guide us through the oceans. Stories deliver us into events and relationships that create meaning and movement. But sometimes we must expose our soft bodies. We must sit outside the shells. We must jump between orbits in order to produce light.