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STEPHEN COLLIS

The Middle of the Middle: Purgatory, Pilgrimage, and Human and Plant Mobility in a Time of Climate Crisis

The middle of the road is trying to find me.

—The Pretenders

1

The deep middleness of things compels me—this fraught stretch of life between certain pasts (let's recall, if only a few, colonial land grabs, empires in their always new clothes, vast carbon incinerations) and uncertain futures (can we yet dream, with a utopian lack of guilt, of a time all will come to have a relationship to the earth that is welcoming and mutually sustaining?). I am writing this in a winged hut at the back of my mind, which is to say, deep in an imaginary forest I find whenever I'm surrounded by books and silence. That's a middle of things that necessarily feels like respite, an eddy in the flow, as opposed to the middleness that feels like a slow-motion tumbling—mid-fall—as the planet tips, and the turtle sloughs all that's been built off its back.

According to Nabokov, life is just a crack of light in the middle of two eternities of darkness. I think, the middle is not the still centre of a turning world, not fulcrum, but the active and tensed dialectical space created by the energy of polarized opposites, within which we all move, pushed pulled driven and desiring. The middle is thus a space of almost perpetual mobility, where the go-between—goes between—as well as the space of possibility (in which direction could still be changed). But we all know that the middle is not nearly as sexy as either End Times or New Dawns. Middlebrow. Middling talent. The middle of the road. Stuck in the middle with you. One should avoid changing horses mid-stream. Or sitting on a fence. Both-sidesing any issue has its limits, and a centrist, I've often thought, is the worst possible thing: the politically indecisive middle of ideological nowhere. But middles are not centres—they are too shifty, too fluid, too fraught for that. Our critical attention is so often focused on the post—postmodern, poststructural, postcolonial, posthuman—but we so rarely stop to consider what we are in the shifting middle of. I don't think, to take one example, that we are posthuman—yet—but we can see that we are indeed on a long mid-human trek between imagined angelic

hierarchies behind us (linking us high in a Great Chain of Being) and the welling but long thought incidental more-than-human community pressing creaturely round our thinking toward available tomorrows. To be in the middle is to be in relation, moving between. When it is declared that we are now "post" any given concept or condition, what is really going on is that what we are in the middle of, what we are moving through, has been recognized at last. The "post" is a sighting of the far shore towards which we might be moving, a moment where it becomes possible to triangulate our current position.

Where we are is in the middle of a crisis, or smack in the middle of the intersection of several compounding crises. Climate change is happening in real time, there are more displaced people in the world now than at any point in recorded history (over one hundred million globally), and nation-states are building more impenetrable borders, doubling down on even more authoritarian and nationalist forms of exclusion—just at the point when planetary collaboration is most desperately needed. "Human movement on a scale never before seen will dominate this century and remake our world," Gaia Vince writes in *Nomad Century* (xii); there could be as many as 1.5 billion climate migrants in the next thirty years. But it is not just human beings that are on the move: all planetary life is currently in motion, fleeing the rising heat, heading north or south, towards the poles, at measurable rates. This can't be overstated. All. Life. Mammals, fish, crustaceans, reptiles, rodents, birds, insects, plants, grasses, trees—everything. Our human mobility is part and parcel of a planet-wide movement. Benjamin Von Brackel, in *Nowhere Left to Go*, describes this mass movement of life, the "great redistribution" or "exodus of species," as "global warming made flesh" (Von Brackel 10). How much of a reality check do we need? Is it enough that even the trees are on the move, like some incarnation of the Ents of Middle Earth?

What I am also in the middle of is the writing of a long poem called, appropriately, *The Middle*. The poem takes the middle lines from Dante's tercets, from *Purgatorio*, the middle book of the *Comedy*, carves away the medieval Catholicism, and reveals a new poem about human and more-than-human movement. A quotation found in a review of a new translation sent me seeking: "It's the middle section of Purgatory that speaks most directly to the self-inflicted wounds of our present condition" (Harrison, "Labors of Love"). Where the *Inferno* and *Paradiso* are the realms of fixity and stasis (time does not pass, and everyone has their final place of either torment or rest), in the *Purgatorio* all is in motion, as Teodolinda Barolini writes in *The Undivine Comedy*, "In Purgatory all the intersecting lifelines are in motion, voyaging in time—just as on earth all parties in any encounter are moving forward along their respective lines of becoming" (Barolini 99). There are other things I might note here—that Dante himself was "living the life of a refugee" (Black, *Purgatorio* xv), exiled from his home in Florence, the whole time he was writing the *Comedy*, and that *Purgatory* is where the poet expresses "a love of the planet and everything that makes it our cosmic homeland" (Harrison, *Purgatorio* xi).

I was brought up short by my friend Elee Kraljii Gardiner who, when I explained the process of my poem's composition, asked, "what's in the *middle* of *The Middle*?" I'm still thinking about this. But there is one relatively straightforward answer, found by turning to Dante: across the three middle cantos of the *Purgatorio*, at the very centre of the entire *Commedia*, stretches a disquisition on love and free will. Love is the seed in all things, so that, as we read in Canto XVII,

"The natural is always without error" (*Lo naturale è sempre sanza errore*)—"but the heart can err by choosing a wrong object / or by excessive or too little ardor" (*Purgatorio* 203). All is love and all is natural, but balance and relation are key, and we have choice and agency here, the poet argues, over how we love. "You have inborn a power of discernment," Virgil tells Dante in Canto XVIII, "So though we may believe the loves aroused / in you are kindled by necessity, / in you too is the power to restrain them" (215). In Canto XVI, it is the spirit of Marco Lombardo who holds forth, contending that "you, although free, are subject" (*liberi soggiacete*) (189). I don't think we are far from Marx here, and the idea that we make history, just not under conditions of our own choosing.

I want to give Dante's thought a climatological reading, a reading attuned to this era of geophysical capitalism. Let us say that we are free to choose to submit to planetary limits, our entanglement with the more-than-human, and the relationships and responsibilities we have, materially, with the rest of planetary life—*and* we are free to choose to ignore and even defy our entanglement, pursue exclusively human ends (and indeed the ends of only certain human beings), feed energy relentlessly into boundless consumption, and fall into cosmic ruin. In Marco Lombardo's telling, in Canto XVI, that which upsets the balance of freedom and limitations is quite simply "bad governance" (*mala condotta*—literally "bad guidance") (191)—or as Robert Pogue Harrison glosses, "forms of government that promote rather than restrain human cupidity" (ix). And so today bad governance still enables and encourages the defiance of planetary limits, and nation-states, captured by the interests of capital, negotiate their responses to the climate and migration emergencies largely in bad faith.

This is part of what I want to say here: that one dramatic form that the climate crisis takes is in the redistribution of all life on earth—that is, all life lucky and capable enough to turn pilgrim and out distance the velocity of climate change; that mobility in this context is a crucial shared quality and condition of life as such, and throws the human and more-than-human into the same stark ecological exile, where all that's solid melts into air—a shifting ground within which, perhaps, new forms of interspecies solidarity might yet be found; and lastly, that in the middle of the tensed space where free will and bad governance meet to form, deform and reform planetary possibility, stumbling and not knowing more than any other as to what is to be done, of middling talent and already past mid-life, I return year after year to a company of migrant walkers, certain only of the joy of our mobile companionship—a wandering refugia in a time of borders, deportations, and incarcerations.

2

Are we in the middle of war

A war with the sea, a war with

the air

—Erin Robinsong

My grandfather's First World War flight log book shows that he was in the air over Arras, France, flying a SPAD at 3000 feet, on April 9 1917, when the English poet Edward Thomas, somewhere in the field beneath him, was killed by a stray shell, as he stood beside his artillery piece, lighting his pipe. The shell missed Thomas, but the percussion of its passing so close stopped his heart; his body fell to the earth, without a mark on it. "It is a characteristic of our species, in evolutionary terms, that we are a species in despair," Max Sebald tells Eleanor Wachtel in a CBC Radio interview. "Because we have created an environment [...] which isn't what it should be. And we're out of our depth all the time," he continues, "living on the borderline between the natural world and that other world which is generated by our brain cells" (Sebald 56). Throughout April my grandfather's log book mentioned the weather more than anything else: *visibility very bad, very misty; weather bad, fog; windy, low clouds*. Yet he continued to fly almost every day, the Battle of Arras unfolding below, Bloody April, it was called, with the RFC losing half of its available flyers. Thomas, all of whose 140 extant poems were written between the start of the war and his own departure for the front in early 1917, kept his own journal in the field, which betrays an effort to observe the war from the perspective of natural history. When Thomas looks out at the battle-scarred terrain, he mostly takes note of the wildlife that is somehow still there: "hare, partridges and wild duck in field S. E. of guns"—"The shelling must have slaughtered many jackdaws but has made home for many more," in the half destroyed hulks of blasted farmhouses and barns—"Chaffinches and partridges, moles working on surface"—"moorhens in clear chalk stream by incinerator, blackbirds too, but no song except hedge-sparrow"—"Larks singing over No Man's Land"—"Blackbirds singing far off—a spatter of our machine guns—the spit of one enemy bullet—a little rain—no wind—only far-off artillery" (Thomas, Collected 154-64). Thomas's ornithological observations become part of the structure of military routine: "Up at 4:30. Blackbirds sing at battery at 5:45—shooting at 6:30" (170). Even the air is animate, the engines of war and the energies of creatures in flight blurring: "Enemy plane like pale moth among shrapnel bursts"—"Four or five planes hovering and wheeling like kestrels"—"listened to larks and watched aeroplane fights. 2 planes down, one in flames" (153-62). For the poet, the war was one waged against the natural world as much as anything else, his true "co-nationals," as he once said, being the migratory birds.

I want to pursue intersecting and entangling lines, triangulating to find what lies in the middle. In the summer of 2022, the walk I join every year in solidarity with refugees, asylum seekers, and immigration detainees followed the Pilgrim's Way, west, through Dorking, Guildford, Farnham, and Alton, to arrive at Winchester. The path runs parallel to the road Edward Thomas followed on his bicycle in 1913, a journey he records in his book *In Pursuit of Spring*—an extended ode to the seasonal return of migrant birds. Thomas writes, "the earth was the rooks', the heaven was the larks', and I rode easily along the good level road between the two" (Thomas, *Pursuit* 163). A key event is the poet purchasing a "dingy chaffinch" in a bird-shop he'd taken shelter in from the rain, only to release it from its paper bag a short distance down the road.

Our yearly walk, known as the Refugee Tales, involves a week afoot, sharing the stories of migrants from town to town as we cross the countryside. The community includes refugees and

people with lived experience of detention and their supporters and allies. Over time, walking together since 2015, we have decidedly become a sort of family. When we gather each summer, it feels as though we had only just paused walking for a short breather, and when we adjourn for another year, we know it will be to take up the walk again the following summer, as though we had never stopped. We call for an end to indefinite immigration detention, but our walk itself has taken on the qualities of a *perpetuum mobil*e, a walk we are forever in the middle of.

Perhaps my closest companion on these walks is Osman, at whose side I often find myself. Every time I want to write something *about* Osman I hesitate, demur, wonder who am I to say anything about this man's life—though he himself would push me forward, insist I speak. If I do so, it is because these past eight years I can only think through the complexity of contemporary displacement and human movement *with* Osman—in conversation with his own thoughts and words and presence, with him as my guide. Claudia Rankine has written that "there is really no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply being black." So I try to write here not from empathy alone, but in solidarity, in friendship, and with love.

I will not retell Osman's entire journey, from Eritrea, where he was held in an underground dungeon, his flight from there through Sudan and eventually to Libya. Christina Sharpe writes that "to be *in* the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding" (13-14). Osman endured a year of forced labour in Libya to "earn" his place on an over-crowded and barely seaworthy boat, which was scuttled in the Mediterranean—a middle sea of continuing middle passages. "In the wake," Sharpe writes, "the semiotics of the slave ship continue: from the forced movements of the enslaved to the forced movements of the migrant and the refugee [...] to those ongoing crossings of and drownings in the Mediterranean Sea" (21).

Osman agrees that the wars that set him in motion—wars, as all wars are in our technological age, against the earth as well as human and more-than-human beings—were provoked by bad government (both those of colonial powers past, and current dictators). Such organized madness set my grandfather in motion too, and sent me in pursuit of his tracks in Europe over 100 years later. Shot down and taken prisoner in August 1917, my grandfather was held first in the city zoo in Karlsruhe, a clearinghouse for POWs, then moved to Heidelberg, and at last to the east to the tiny spa village of Bad Colberg. There his repeated attempts to escape landed him in "fortress confinement," held in a tower basement where pigs were sometimes kept. When Europe went to war with itself in the past century, it employed techniques of strategic dehumanization, mass confinement, and genocide perfected in its treatment of colonized peoples around the world. Only on the losing end of such an internal conflict, thrust into camps and abandoned on decimated battlefields, held in pens and abattoirs, can the European experience what it is to be Europe's enemy.

I am still triangulating, still trying to find what is at the middle of these diverse lines of becoming. As my grandfather set off for war in 1915, his parents gave him a copy of Kipling's

poems—a worn leather bound volume still in our family. The gift of the white man's burden. He was off to do the Empire's bidding. On the flyleaf he has scrawled some lines of verse in an exaggerated patois, lines for which I have found several possible sources, including a minstrel play. "When people dehumanize others," David Livingstone Smith writes, "they think of them as both human and subhuman at the same time, and as violating the categorical distinctions that underpin the natural and social order. That's why dehumanized people are seen as harbingers of disorder, pollution, and disease" (Smith 155). Almost every refugee's attempt to tell the difficulties of their experiences includes a comparison to the station or treatment of animals—as Osman himself says, he felt like "a stray dog among humans." Sharpe also notes that "those Black people transmigrating the African continent toward the Mediterranean and then to Europe'' are repeatedly "imagined as insects, swarms, vectors of disease" (Sharpe 15). I think, processes of dehumanization are so difficult to counter because the very notion of the "human" as a privileged category apart is predicated on the difference and debasement of the non-human—thus there is a living space reserved below the human—like the hold of a ship—into which some portion of the human fold can be cut loose and dropped—conceptually removed, made animal, made waste. I think, to walk the human back from the dehumanizing abyss, we must walk the human back *in* and *into* the community of the more-than-human—the vibrating pilgrimage of planetary life to which all beings belong, all beings have their one and only home.

3

If we take the Italian word for paradise—*paradiso*—and rearrange the letters, we get diaspora. [...] A whole new exercise could be inherent in this anagram, one that might slowly shift the address of paradise.

—Inger Christensen

Today we are in the middle of the complete redistribution of life on earth. And I think the only ethical response—given where we are now, in the midst of at least 2 and likely 3-4 degrees global warming this century—is to enable, rather than resist, this total mobility—in all its varied socio-biotic forms. Human exceptionalism got us into this mess, and it cannot, formulated in the same way at least, get us out of it. I will say it again, this is because the human, as a category, is never stable when founded on artificially lifting human "difference" above and away from non-human life. If, as James Bridle argues, we are in the midst of "the increasingly evident and pressing reality of our utter entanglement with *the more-than-human world*" (11), we nonetheless need, as they go on to write, a continuing effort to conceptually "override our human tendency to separate ourselves from the natural world" (17). This essay is part of my contribution to that effort.

I focus on the human/plant relation because it is the less obvious partnership in mobility. As Paco Calvo writers in *Planta Sapiens*, "Plants underpin much of life on this planet, yet our animal speed makes them invisible to us" (42). Plants move, as ecologist Louis Pitelka writes, "by creep of root and shower of seed," but half of all plant species rely on animals to disperse their seeds. Due to human intervention, plants have already lost sixty percent of their capacity

to track climate change globally due to “defaunation”—the loss of the animals whose guts they used to ride within. And this in a context where many plant species need to shift hundreds and sometimes thousands of meters per year to track their climate niche, which is steadily shifting poleward. In ecological terms, plant mobility is referred to as “seed dispersal”: “a high dispersal capacity diminishes the extinction risks from climate warming over ecological timescales,” but, “many species are trapped inside a restricted range where they display limited dispersal capacities” (Le Galliard et al). Such range restriction is formed by a complex of geography and the narrowness of a given species’ niche, but it is also, and increasingly so, a matter of the scale and nature of the space human activity takes up on the planet’s surface.

Whenever I refer to “human activity” I actually mean “capitalism”—the “human” in this equation is kept in focus in order to think relationally, one species with another. For capital, there are only “resources,” human or natural, thus it is less a question of dehumanization than it is the commodification of life, although the end result is often the same. I am speaking around the problem. The journey is long and sometimes we must skirt what lies in the middle as we make our way north.

That human and plant migrants might be facing the same obstacles is worth considering. Take, for example, the seeming fixity of both nation-states and ecosystems.

> Migration made us. This might be hard to see in the context of today’s geopolitical identities and constraints, where it can feel like an aberration, but, viewed historically, it is our national identities and borders that are the anomaly (Vince 31).
>
> [The current groupings] of species on earth … were nothing but temporary communities of convenience…. What we consider to be stable communities are actually artifacts of earlier climate events…. The makeup of species that live together is largely dictated by chance (Von Brackel 9).

The nationalist who wants to keep the borders of their sacrosanct nation closed and the conservationist who wants to keep “invasive” species out, and restore or preserve an ecosystem’s historical integrity, meet here at the frightful borderlands of mobility. Neither human nor any other species stays still for long—they never have. One illusion the Holocene has produced is that stability might be a planetary norm.

And so I come back to Osman. When I see him each year in the UK, one of the first things I will notice is a sprig of lavender tucked in his hat. Osman has a history of insomnia, and while he has tried any number of medications and remedies, he is convinced that for him, only lavender works, the oils of *lavendula* being known for their general relaxing effect. Its name perhaps derives from the Latin *lavare*, to wash; the Greeks and Romans used lavender in their baths, and the Egyptians perfumed corpses with it in the embalming process. In 1629, English herbalist John Parkinson recommended lavender for “all griefes and paines of the head and brain.” Originally found along the Mediterranean coasts, and growing from the Canary Islands in the west to the Arabian and African borders of the Red Sea in the east, the entirety of Osman’s

journey, from Africa and across the Mediterranean and Europe, was a walk through lavender's expanding biome.

I want to call the relationship between Osman and lavender an example of inter-species solidarity. Plants join themselves to people as much as people to plants. The point is not to devalue any specifically human suffering, nor is it to champion some form of absolute and epoch-making posthumanism; the point is to work *with* and *within* the stretching biocommons to which we properly belong—to rise *with* an ascendant biotariat. What is clear is that our fate is tied up with the whole of life—a new definition of the term Holocene: one planet, one fate.

French gardener Gilles Clément has something similar in mind, which he calls the "Planetary Garden:" "The feeling of ecological finiteness makes the limits of the biosphere appear like the enclosure of living beings" (Clément, *Manifesto* 4). Clément is working with the etymology of the word "garden" here, which like "paradise" means an enclosure or walled space: the enclosure of the planet, then, refers to the absolute biospheric limits we have reached—"ecological finiteness," in his terms—and which defines what many are calling the Anthropocene. If the entire planet is now enclosed, why would the gardener not approach it as one vast garden? This creates, for Clément, an opportunity "to work with (rather than against) the powerful flux of life" (Skinner 260), provoking him to imagine a kind of utopian ecology "where all of life together, including humanity, interacts without borders" (Clément, "Vagabonds" 281). This prompts Clément to refer to mobile plants as "vagabonds" which decamp to abandoned zones that he calls "undocumented" tracts. He also calls these abandoned zones a "Third Landscape:" "Third Landscape is a territory of the many species that cannot find a place elsewhere" (*Manifesto* 9). Such spaces—which we have often called "wastes" and which are characterized by a dereliction that speaks at once of both "ruin" and "development"—are everywhere humans have been: "The borders of the Third Landscape are the borders of the Planetary Garden, the limits of the biosphere" (8).

It is the Third Landscape through which and into which plants and animals—including human beings—migrate, as their ranges shift poleward. It is typically the only space open to them: the space of neglect, the space human activity has used, exhausted, and abandoned—or which capital might yet re-develop, should the market prove favourable. It is also the space that might be in question when we consider whether or not to assist mobile beings, opening pathways for the redistribution of life. Considering specifically human movement in *Nomad Century*, Vince suggests "We can survive [the climate catastrophe], but to do so will require a planned and deliberate migration of a kind humanity has never before undertaken" (xi); she imagines the decommissioning of major cities threatened by heat and rising sea levels, the building of vast new cities from scratch in northern Canada and Russia. Von Brackel considers similar discussions occurring around plant and animal movement: "some biologists recommend at least considering assisted migration," however controversial—and it is controversial (86). The arguments against assisted migration boil down to fears of playing god and unforeseen consequences. Wasn't it our meddling that got us into this mess in the first place anyway? Arguments in favour run something like this: we have already carried out—are already in the deep and spreading middle of carrying out—a vast experiment on the entire biosphere. Can we

stop mid-way, in medias res, and let things follow their own trajectories from here? Or do we bear some responsibility to alter the experiment, change the inputs, guide it towards the best possible resolution? Do we abandon? Or do we remediate? Or is abandonment actually a particular kind of remediation?

Indeed, a third pathway, for the Third Landscape, might argue that we need, perhaps, not to intervene further (despite having caused the crisis), but to get out of the way at last. Make space. Create migration corridors. Leave alone so the natural world can adjust and expand once again. In Clément's *Manifesto of the Third Landscape*, this is exactly what the planetary gardener suggests: "Create as many gateways as necessary, [a] permeable network of land" (*Manifesto* 33). Such a "demand" presumes a sort of human exceptionalism that I have been arguing against. As Clément quips, "Today, the ecological fortune of the planet depends on the human species and elections" (*Planetary* 9). This also presumes a form of inverted free will—a choice of what not to do, a choice to stand back, stand down, give way, make space for the more-than-human—find our *freedom* in that *limitation* of entangled and interdependent planetary life. A Dantean love such as we find in *Purgatorio*—a terraphilia that is the seed of "a common space of the future" (Clément, *Manifesto* 33)—these are the capacities we need to traverse the broken ground that lies ahead of us. Diaspora becomes a recalibrated *paradiso* only when we imagine the entire planet as a mobile garden—a *jardin en mouvement*. It is this of which I see Osman and his lavender as the harbingers—this irrepressible man, my guide, a gardener of the future planetary garden.

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