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Kindness in the Bardo

Empathy as a Catalyst for Healing in Victims of Dissociation

Julia Chopelas

In George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo*, a host of undead characters find themselves in a spiritual limbo based on the bardo, the Tibetan term for transitional state. Although they won't admit it to themselves, Roger Bevins III and Hans Vollman, best friends in the graveyard, are most certainly dead. The exact parameters of what constitutes the bardo for Bevins, Vollman, and the other ghosts remain hazy, but discovering what the ghosts are rather than where they are is the key to their eventual liberation. Despite their supernatural makeup as ghosts, Bevins and Vollman bear strong psychological resonance with the living: they are human, heartbroken, and lost. Bevins slit his wrists during a heartbreak-induced suicide (25), and Vollman died just before a long-awaited consummation with his wife (5). A breaking of the bardo stasis occurs as the ghosts watch in awe as President Abraham Lincoln returns to the crypt in the graveyard where his young son Willie is entombed to hold him one last time, "cradling his son's body like a Pietà" (Grady). Such a powerful expression of affection that reaches beyond the bounds of death demonstrates to the ghosts that "we were perhaps not so unlovable as we had come to believe" (70). Emboldened by "Lincoln's empathy, and his ability to treat the dead with respect and affection," Bevins, Vollman, and the Reverend Everly Thomas "resolve to save Willie's soul and convince him to pass on to the afterlife" (Grady). At the novel's climax,

the ghosts rush inside of Lincoln, trying to connect him back to Willie, but something else happens that they didn't expect. Within this mass possession, they discover the same empathy Lincoln demonstrated but for each other. They see and feel each other's experiences as one and reassociate their lost memories of trauma which bind them in the bardo. Bevins' and Vollman's psychological healing leads to spiritual deliverance from the bardo state.

For the ghosts of Oak Hills Cemetery, the inefficient coping mechanism of dissociation perpetuates their afterlife imprisonment. For ghosts who stay in the bardo, "the results are catastrophic: They deteriorate, mentally and physically, and become entrapped by a carapace of demonic souls that slowly drives them mad" (Grady). Bevins and Vollman suffer from a variety of dissociative symptoms, their minds' psychological defense against the trauma that has unfortunately carried itself far beyond the grave. A common yet bewildering reaction to trauma, "dissociation is a disconnection between a person's thoughts, memories, feelings, actions or sense of who she or he is" (Wang). The state of Bevins and Vollman as ghosts possesses psychological as well as physiological implications consistent with dissociative disorders. Saunders explains, "They're stuck kind of in the condition they were in at the moment of death . . . if they were worried about something or feeling shortchanged, or in love or in hate, they suddenly are in this other place . . . and desperately trying to stay there" ("George Saunders' new novel"). This "other place" is the bardo, and "there" refers to the state of mind or condition in which they died. Whether it be "in love or hate," these ghosts carry their unresolved trauma with them into the afterlife and, as a coping mechanism, have dissociated from the reality of what happened to them. In order to leave the bardo, Bevins and Vollman must first come to terms with the reality of their deaths and then recover and resolve whatever painful memory binds them there.

Understanding dissociation requires a little background on where it exists in the realm of contemporary psychiatry. While a typical DSM-5 diagnosis of PTSD still generally stems from extreme experiences like exposure to war, physical assault, sexual violence, or torture ("Dissociative Disorders"), experiences with trauma are common and dissociation often occurs in individuals who don't have a clinical diagnosis of PTSD. John Barnhill explains that the symptoms associated with dissociative disorders often seriously impact the "consciousness, memory, identity, emotion, perception, body representation, and behavior" of the individuals who suffer

from them. For Bevins and Vollman, their deepest trauma comes from one of the most common distresses of human nature: heartbreak. Dissociative experiences are likely to affect “half the population at some point,” and it is precisely because they are so common that they often go unnoticed by both clinicians and patients, Barnhill states. Rather than ignoring their symptoms because they may not indicate a full-scale PTSD diagnosis, understanding the psychological implications of dissociation enables us to read Bevins and Vollman not just as spirits having a supernaturally induced memory lapse, but as humans like us having a common psychological reaction to everyday trauma. In his work on the effects of trauma on individuals and populations, Dominick LaCapra explains that “the radically disorienting experience of trauma often involves a dissociation between cognition and affect” (117), which can be both incredibly disorienting for the victim as well as nearly impossible to explain or convey. Ezra Klein says that Saunders' work “is very centrally concerned” with a particular question that sheds light into the motivation behind Saunders' dysfunctional yet incredibly human ghosts: “How are we kind to each other in a world that does not always create space for that?” (“Transcript”). Bevins and Vollman create that space for kindness in their own world of the bardo as they meet each other where they stand as victims of trauma and dissociation, lending them the empathy required to help each other reassociate and heal.

For the ghosts in the graveyard, the concept of “sick boxes” aligns with a dissociative unreality response to trauma, a psychological disorientation of mind, self, and body. The ones who tarry refer to their coffins as their “sick boxes.” If they convince themselves that they're only sick and not dead, there's hope for recovery and a return to their past life to resolve what they left behind. After fatally cutting himself, Bevins throws himself down the stairs hoping to be discovered by one of the servants “so that [he] may be revived, and rise” (Saunders 27). Similarly, Vollman believes he is only laying in his “sick box” until he can recover from his head injury, the only thing standing between him and a long-awaited consummation with his wife. Bevins and Vollman's inability to admit that they are dead can be explained by understanding dissociative reactions to trauma. Dissociative disorders are divided into three basic categories, dissociative identity disorder, dissociative amnesia, or depersonalization or derealization disorder (Wang). Bevins and Vollman's belief that they are still alive is consistent with the derealization disorder of dissociation, “experiences of unreality or detachment from one's

mind, self, or body." The predominant feeling associated with dissociative unreality is of the "split self, with one part observing and one participating" ("Dissociative Disorders"). Bevins and Vollman know that whatever entity possesses their ghost forms can no longer animate the bodies that lie in their coffins, but they also don't recognize that they're dead. This is one of the ways they "desperately [try] to stay 'there,'" in the condition in which they died, allowing them to tarry in the bardo ("George Saunders' new novel").

Dissociative unreality has physiological as well as psychological implications, and Bevins and Vollman's unresolved trauma has a startling effect on the visual appearance of their ghost forms. Vollman's body bears the physiological manifestations of his traumatic death. His head still bears the "awful dent" where the beam hit him, his nose flattened out from the same strike, "body like a dumpling," pinched and disformed (28). As Willie Lincoln describes him, "'Bevins' had several sets of eyes / all darting to and fro / Several noses / all sniffing / he had multiple sets of hands, or else his hands were so quick they seemed to be many." Most hauntingly, Bevins' ghost form still bears "slashes on every one of his wrists." The slashes remain as a physiological indication of the physical trauma of his suicide just as psychological trauma sears itself into the mind. Sometimes Bevins' extra eyes, noses, and hands multiply and cover his form so that his body is no longer visible. Bevins' ghostly form bears an excess of appendages that are desperate at a chance to feel again. Because he had "come so close to losing everything," Bevins the ghost now intends to "devoutly wander the earth . . . touching, tasting, standing very still among the beautiful things of the earth" (Saunders 27). Detached from his human body, his ghost form has adapted itself to catch any hint of sensory pleasure it can, but to no avail. His ghostly form bears no resemblance to his body in life as dissociative unreality takes over and shapes the physiological appearance of his ghost form. Bennet Braun emphasizes that dissociation is "a powerful concept for looking at human coping mechanisms," but that the side effects can make this particular coping mechanism a stumbling block in patients' lives long-term. He says, "The escape is often maladaptive, and that leads the patient to the therapist, to prison, or to a life of misery" (5). The trauma Vollman and Bevins experienced has quite literally determined the physiological conditions of their ghost forms as they dissociate from the painful reality that they are now dead, a physical indication that extensive psychological healing

and reassociation are still desperately needed before Bevins and Vollman will be well enough to escape the bardo.

Despite the distortion of their bodies and the psychological loss of self that comes with it, Bevins and Vollman are intent on remaining in the bardo. Together with the Reverend Everly Thomas, Bevins and Vollman have managed to remain in the bardo longer than anyone else. As Saunders explains, they do this by “repeating their grievances” (“George Saunders’ new novel”). Later on in the novel, Bevins realizes that they were able to stay so long by “deeply and continuously [dwelling] upon one’s primary reason for staying; even to the exclusion of all else . . . constantly looking for opportunities to tell one’s story” (Saunders 255–56). In this way, Bevins and Vollman exemplify what LaCapra identifies as an “acting out” of trauma, defined largely by its “compulsive repetition” (119). He explains the tendency in trauma victims to transform their trauma into “a foundational experience,” one which defines the “very basis of an existence” for the victim and can dangerously sacralize a traumatic event into the sublime (115). This eradicates any desire in the victim to overcome or reassociate the traumatic memory but rather cling to it desperately as a way of clinging to their sense of self. Throughout the novel, Bevins and Vollman have a sympathetic listener in each other as they retell the accounts of their deaths, demonstrating this maladaptive form of coping. Bevins and Vollman are fixated on sharing and resharing their traumatic memories, because, as LaCapra points out, moving on can feel like a betrayal to either the experience or “those who were destroyed by the events,” (123) in this case, themselves. Their pain has become foundational to their existence in the bardo and who they are as post-humans, but this “acting out” of trauma forestalls the necessary cognitive restructuring they need to escape the miserable feedback loop of the bardo.

Underscoring the centrality of this concept to the novel as a whole—that a hyperfocus on your unsatisfactory life and pain will keep you in the bardo—the novel opens with Vollman’s backstory. After the death of his first wife, Hans Vollman feared that he would never fall in love or be wanted again. He was a “lonely middle-aged fellow, with no hopes at all, who only worked and drank” (328). Against the heartbreak of his first wife’s passing and his fears of loneliness, Vollman saw his second wife for the first time, “a radiant young woman,” yet he was a “heavy-set, limping wooden toothed forty-six-year-old printer.” But “for the first time in years, [Vollman] felt he had something to offer, and someone to whom he hoped he might be allowed

to offer it" (328). Vollman realized that their marriage was "strange," and "had its roots not in love but expedience." Because of this, Vollman didn't expect an intimate relationship with his second wife. They became "Dear friends. That was all. And yet that was so much" (3). With time, however, their affection for each other grew and she expressed her desire to "expand the frontiers of our happiness together in that intimate way to which I am, as yet, a stranger." On the very day they decided to explore their new and intimate relationship, Vollman was struck over the head with a beam at his printing office and killed before they had the chance. As his story reaches its conclusion, the ending of which is unavoidably the fact that he has died, Vollman struggles to speak clearly. He's confused, still suffering from dissociative unreality; he realizes neither that he is actually dead nor why his story ends here. He hesitates, tripping over his thoughts: "Per the advice of my physician, I took to my—/ A sort of sick-box was judged—was judged to be—" "Efficacious," Bevins jumps in, "Efficacious, yes. Thank you, friend." "Always a pleasure," Bevins responds. "Always" indicates that this is a common occurrence. Bevins and Vollman swap stories, specifically these same two stories, frequently. When either Vollman or Bevins loses track of where they were going, the other jumps in to help finish their thoughts because they already know every detail. Together, they make a conscious effort to repeat them aloud, always keeping the tragedy they left behind at the forefront of their minds. As Vollman expresses his frustration and disappointment, Bevins comforts him: "And yet all things may be borne" (4-5). Rather than encouraging Vollman to move on, Bevins urges him to bear this period of waiting with patience. Bevins' attempt to comfort Vollman only encourages his dissociative unreality, giving him false hope that he might still recover and leave his "sick box," when the truth is that Vollman will never have the chance to return to his wife.

This narrative concept is repeated with the roles reversed as Bevins relates the story of his death to Vollman and Willie Lincoln. As a young boy, Bevins had "a certain predilection" which to him "felt quite natural and even wonderful," but to his family, his teachers, and the clergy, perverse and unacceptable. He found acceptance in a secret romantic relationship with another young man, Gilbert. In what Bevins describes as "stops-and-starts, and fresh beginnings, and heartfelt resolutions, and betrayals of those resolutions," Gilbert and Bevins' relationship eventually crumbles. Gilbert tells Bevins that Gilbert must "live correctly." Citing the impossibility of

being with Gilbert as his motivation, Bevins recollects, "I took a butcher knife to my room and . . . I slit my wrists rather savagely over a porcelain tub" (Saunders 25). Bevins also struggles when he reaches the death point of his narrative because, like Vollman, he has dissociated himself from the reality of his death. Dodging the moment of his death, Bevins has a habit of launching into monologues about the beauty of life, something Vollman tries to stop him from doing. "I settled myself woozily down on the floor, at which time . . . *I changed my mind.*" Starting here, Bevins falls into his familiar habit of marveling at the wonders of life but Vollman jumps in: "Sir. Friend . . . Am I—am I doing it again? . . . You are. / Take a breath. All is well" (26). But all is certainly not well in the bardo for Bevins and Vollman. They don't even look like themselves anymore, with their bodies distorted into physiological manifestations of their trauma and pain. Enabling each other's tendencies to dissociate from reality, they are in a constant feedback loop of telling the same stories, unable to recognize that they are not in their "sick boxes" waiting to recover, but are, in fact, irrevocably dead. Vollman has to settle these little "coagiations" (137) by ensuring that Bevins does not focus on what was good in life. Dwelling too deeply on anything other than "one's primary reason for staying" can lead to a departure from the bardo, something Bevins and Vollman avoid at all costs.

As veterans of the bardo, Bevins and Vollman hold the other ghosts who depart in open contempt, resentful of their lack of trauma or perhaps their ability to deal with it more constructively. According to them, these souls have foolishly "Surrendered / Succumbed / Capitulated" (Saunders 144) by leaving the bardo, "And for what?" Bevins asks, "You do not know. / A most intelligent wager" (140). Bevins and Vollman are unsure of what lies beyond the bardo and are not willing to risk finding out. Is the next sphere like this place, or is there a possibility that it might be even worse? Because the pain in their mortal lives was so significant and still remains unresolved, the thought of moving on to any existence other than the one they now inhabit terrifies Bevins and Vollman.

The ghost of a young soldier, Captain William Prince, represents in miniature the process necessary to escape the bardo. He enters in high emotional distress but discovers quickly what binds him there, enabling him to leave the bardo almost immediately. Speaking beyond the grave to his wife, he says: "I feel I must not linger. In this place of great sadness . . . But am Confin'd, Mind & Body, and unable, as if manacled, to leave" (Saunders 137).

Saunders explains that if the ghosts “can recognize that they’re dead, they can leave” (“In Conversation”). Prince still believes he is waiting for a nurse after a frightening battle of “unholy slaughter and fear.” Looking down at his body in its coffin, Prince comes to the painful, more accurate conclusion: “It is uncomfortable to behold,” noting the “sad look on the (burned!) face” (Saunders 137–38). Referring to his own face as *the* face rather than *my* face demonstrates his psychological distancing from the dead body and his spirit. He realizes there is no hope for that mangled body to live again and effectively comes to terms with his death. Unlike Bevins and Vollman, Prince is able to overcome the dissociative unreality that other ghosts in the bardo still suffer from, the idea that they might yet rise from their “sick boxes” and return to life as they left it. Coming to terms with the reality of their death is the first necessary step in escaping the bardo, but this alone is not sufficient for a full departure.

After Captain William Prince recognizes that he is dead, he still needs to resolve whatever was distressing him in his moment of death in order to leave the bardo. While accepting death is the first step for the ghosts, Saunders explains that it also requires “some insight into the fact that their attachment to life is really not meaningful” for them to successfully depart (“In Conversation”). While the ghosts’ attachments may be misguided, “not meaningful” does not equate to being insignificant. Their attachments to life are so overwhelming that they perform dissociative mental acrobatics to avoid even thinking about them. Carrying his unresolved trauma with him, Prince arrives in the condition he was in at death, hating himself for cheating on his wife.

Because Captain Prince is so ashamed of his behavior, it takes some effort for him to retrieve and therefore reassociate that particular traumatic memory into his conscious present. This traumatic memory is the key memory he needs to move on from the bardo. Individuals often dissociate from traumatic memories “because part or all of the event overwhelmed the individual’s capacity to process it” (Sachs 478), often leading to dissociative amnesia. A trauma-induced erasure of memory, dissociative amnesia is characterized by an “inability to recall important information, usually of a traumatic or stressful nature, that cannot be explained with ordinary forgetfulness” (“Dissociative Disorders”). Victims of dissociative amnesia describe various feelings: “I cannot remember anything about certain important events in my life, such as my final examinations or wedding day,” or that “entire blocks of time drop

out and that I cannot remember what I did then” (Vanderlinden 41–46). While this reaction may initially seem strange, it makes sense that trauma may be pushed to the back of our minds or even erased until we are strong enough to deal with it. The pioneering psychologist in the field of dissociation, Pierre Janet, “was the first to show clearly and systematically how [dissociation] is the most direct psychological defense against overwhelming traumatic experiences” (Van Der Hart 1). Unfortunately, these memories can be pushed back so far that we lose them completely unless we can recover them.

For Prince, recovering and processing his traumatic memories is essential to escaping the bardo. Struggling to orient himself, he remarks, “I must seek & seek: What is it that keeps me in this abismal Sad place?” (Saunders 138). LaCapra argues that “while we may work on its symptoms, trauma, once it occurs, is a cause that we cannot directly change or heal” (119). However, psychologists have found that while being careful to “[honor] the dissociative defense” by taking steps gradually, planned memory retrieval sessions can in fact “facilitate cognitive restructuring,” (Sachs 480) which can reverse the symptoms of dissociative amnesia. This kind of memory processing is exactly what Captain Prince does next. After viewing his body in its coffin, Prince realizes “what [he] must do to get free . . . Which is tell the TRUTH” (Saunders 138). No longer dissociating from whatever reality he was in when he first arrived, Prince does the psychological work to “seek & seek.” While Prince first wondered “What it is that keeps [him]” here, he now recalls what was upsetting him at his moment of death. Speaking to his wife, Prince says, “Laura send the little ones away & see that they cannot hear what comes next” (139). This line indicates both Prince’s shame at recalling this memory as well as his mental preparation to return to a painful moment of trauma he doesn’t want to relive again. If retraumatization occurs, efforts at memory processing can cause more harm than good, as some victims state: “I can remember so vividly something that happened formerly, that I have the feeling I am reliving it” (Vanderlinden 33). Despite the risks, many psychologists insist that memory processing is “key to the treatment of trauma victims,” and that “*reassociating* the events that were originally dissociated during the trauma is essential for the recovery of the client” (Sachs 476). Prince bravely pushes on, confessing to Laura that “[he] consorted with the smaller of the two” prostitutes in a moment of weakness on the battlefield far from home. Bevins watches as Prince frantically paces, when “the familiar, yet always bone-chilling, firesound associated with the matterlightblooming phenomenon”

(Saunders 139–40) was heard, and Prince was gone. Prince moved this painful event from “a traumatic remembrance to a place in narrative memory wherein [he] knows it occurred in the past and has a good cognitive understanding of the event” (Sachs 480), allowing him “now to leave this wretched [place]” (Saunders 140). Effectively recognizing his death and then taking the steps to restore and process his traumatic memories, Captain William leaves the bardo almost as swiftly as he entered it.

Unlike Captain William Prince, Bevins and Vollman have yet to recover the lost traumatic memories that bind them in the bardo. While personal determination and mental grit were sufficient for Captain William Prince to recover and process his most painful memory, it takes an entire host of other ghosts’ memories, emotions, and perspectives to recover what Bevins and Vollman have lost to trauma. A visit from Abraham Lincoln to the crypt to see his son Willie becomes the catalyst for their desperately needed memory retrieval, as a mass possession of Lincoln’s body works as a psychological incubator with the right conditions for the ghosts to discover the true realities of both their lives and deaths.

While most children leave the bardo within minutes, Willie Lincoln has been there all night. Like Bevins and Vollman, Willie’s condition as a ghost also reflects his pain at the moment of death. Feeling “short changed” (“George Saunders’ new novel”), Willie doesn’t think he should have left his mortal life yet. Despite the Reverend’s entreaties to Willie to move on as other children do, he yearns to go back: “It is soon to be spring / The Christmas toys barely played with . . . Soon flowers will bloom.” Willie feels he must wait for his mother and father and that “they will come shortly. To collect [him]” (Saunders 29–30). Afraid of what will happen if Willie stays, the Reverend, Bevins, and Vollman conclude that they must bring Lincoln to a reunion with Willie that will enable the young boy to let go (31–33). By virtue of being ghosts, they have the ability to possess and therefore influence the thoughts and actions of the living, and Vollman enters Lincoln via this *l’occupation* (230). Inside Lincoln’s mind, Vollman hears his thoughts as he finally acknowledges that Willie’s body is not him anymore, “The essential thing (that which was bourne, that which we loved) is gone” (245). Lincoln is about to leave the cemetery, but the ghosts are desperate to detain him in order to free Willie while “his eternity lies in the balance” (246). Vollman quickly realizes that his influence alone “was insufficient,” and asks Bevins and the Reverend to enter Lincoln as well (249). Other ghosts watching in

the graveyard, desperate for something to shift their existence in the bardo, suddenly “leap” into the President as well. As dozens of spirits possess Lincoln’s body all at once, “So many wills, memories, complaints, desires” combined, a miracle occurs. “We were normally so alone. / Fighting to stay. / Afraid to err” Vollman says, as they “instantaneously [recollect]” their lost memories (254). Bevins describes this sensation “like flowers from which placed rocks had just been removed” (256). Within this mass *l’occupation*, the ghosts access “glimpses of one another’s minds,” no longer just listening to each other’s stories but expanding far beyond their individual and limited capacities. They are able to see and feel each other’s experiences as if they were their own.

The collective consciousness of other ghosts in the graveyard lends Bevins and Vollman an ability they couldn’t muster on their own to recover and reassociate the memories that they had previously lost. As this cognitive restructuring unfolds, Bevins and Vollman even begin to look like themselves again, their psychological healing restoring their physiological appearance “somewhat to our natural fullness.” Looking at Bevins, Vollman no longer sees “a difficult-to-look-at clustering of eyes, noses, hands,” but rather “an appealing young fellow, with the proper number of everything” (Saunders 256–57). A supernatural power for empathy now possible, Bevins and Vollman see each other in a new light not just as their appearances change but as they tap into each other’s lost memory banks.

As Bevins and Vollman achieve the ability to see into the minds and hearts of others inside of Lincoln, they are also granted a keener insight into the truth behind their own memories, but the memory processing required to leave the bardo proves as painful for them as it was for William Prince. Vollman notices that “suddenly Mr. Bevins did not look well. / His flesh was thin as parchment. Tremors ran through his body” (326), as he recalls the painful truth that drove him to his suicide, a memory he had dissociated from completely. Gilbert didn’t choose Bevins as his lover; he was now in a relationship with another man that he found more handsome and exciting. Bevins staggeringly recalls, “The morning of my— / The morning that I— / I had seen Gilbert. At the baker’s. / Yes. Yes I had. / My God.” His thoughts’ coming in short bursts, communicated as short, separate lines of text, conveys Bevins’ painful struggle to recall this memory. Repeating certain phrases, telling himself, “Yes. Yes I had,” as he tries to verify the information from the only place he can: his own memory banks. “The morning *of my*” refers to his

suicide; we know now that he killed himself the same day of this meeting. Bevins forgot this memory existed. He hasn't neglected to share it because it's too painful, but as a coping mechanism, he dissociated and forgot it even happened. "Gilbert whispered something to him and they shared a laugh. At my expense, it seemed. The world went flat . . . me, crest fallen in that baker's doorway, loaf in hand." Here, Bevins questions their entire relationship. Had Gilbert lied to him about his decision to "live rightly," or had he had just chosen someone else he loved more? As the couple approaches Bevins, he sees "this new fellow (he was so beautiful) raising an eyebrow, as if to say, *That? That is him?* . . . Then another killing laugh-burst" (326–27). The "killing laugh-burst" suggests that this moment killed whatever motivation Bevins had to live psychologically and more powerfully than even his suicide had physically killed him. As the cognitive restructuring takes place, Bevins' form "flickered between the various selves he had been in that previous place," the last one a physiological manifestation of the aftermath of seeing Gilbert with someone else, indicating its position as Bevins' most painful memory. Bevins appeared now as "a red-faced distraught disaster, tears rolling down his face, butcher knife in hand, porcelain tub in his lap." Despite the gory, painful, and sensory elements of Bevins' memory of his suicide right *after* he had cut himself, Bevins remembers those details. It's the memory of what drove him to it in the first place that hurt him the most.

Although Bevins' recollection of Gilbert's betrayal is significantly painful for him, he is able to reassociate the event and cognitively restructure it into the past, just as memory processing works for victims of dissociation. Bevins remembers when he first arrived in the bardo, telling Vollman, "You were so kind to me . . . Calmed me down. Convinced me to stay" (327). The best way he knew how to avoid further pain, Vollman tried to comfort Bevins by not allowing him to think too deeply on what he left behind, a dissociative coping mechanism he uses himself. As things become clearer, Bevins suddenly remembers that Vollman's wife came to visit the graveyard, but Vollman insists it never happened. Though he has pushed it so far back in his mind that it is almost irretrievable, Vollman's most heartbreaking memory must be recovered too, in order to escape the bardo. Gingerly encouraging him, Bevins addresses Vollman's apprehensions: "Friend . . . Enough. Let us speak honestly. I am remembering many things. And I suspect you are too" (327). While the mass *l'occupation* became the catalyst for this final, essential memory retrieval, this line from Bevins indicates that perhaps Bevins and

Vollman have simultaneously been each other's shoulder to cry on and stumbling blocks all along. They have been in the bardo for long "Enough" and must be honest about their realities, even if it requires revisiting some significant pain.

Unlike Bevins, Hans Vollman had his heart broken not once but twice, his second heartbreak intensified beyond the grave. Bevins recalls to Vollman the time his second wife came to the graveyard to thank Vollman for his "early kindness towards her." Bevins heard her express her gratitude, that Vollman's graciousness "allowed me to deliver myself, unsullied, to he who would prove to be the great love of my life" (327). This memory is excruciating for Vollman, and "tears were rolling down [his] face" as Bevins speaks. Losing his chance to share his dearly sought and finally returned affection with his wife in an intimate way is the very fact that she is most grateful for. Because they never consummated their marriage, she was able to have her first intimate experience with someone she loved more, "the great love" of her life, "unsullied." She only came to say goodbye, to tell Vollman that she would be unable to join him in the next life because she will "lie beside this new fellow, her husband, who was—" Here, Vollman begs Bevin to stop: "Please," he implores, this memory is too painful for him to bear. Just like Bevins, Vollman's flesh "grew thin as parchment, and tremors ran through his body" as his form "flickered" between his previous selves. One form manifests the trauma of his first heartbreak, as he appears as a "young widower, wiping away tears for his first wife," but the last form indicates the source of his deepest pain as Bevins' final form did for him. Devastatingly, Vollman lost his second love in addition to his first, with no hope of being with her in the hereafter.

Explaining the ghosts' bardo entrapment, Colson Whitehead says, "They are tied to their former existences, trapped by an idea of themselves, and can't leave until they are ready." Saunders explains, "If you recognize *what* you are you can—you can sort of free the demons a little bit" ("In Conversation," emphasis added). This "what" is more than just a reality of being dead; "what" comprises everything they have been through and everything they are. "The knowledge of *what* we were was strong with us now" (329, emphasis added), Bevins and Vollman realize. Having "flickered" through their most painful memories in life and let go of the physiological "idea of themselves" they'd held on to so tightly, Vollman and Bevins are finally ready to escape the bardo.

Demonstrated almost exactly parallel to Saunders' conception of kindness, Bevins and Vollman's ability to show empathy for each other enables them to finally escape their misery in the afterlife. For Saunders, "Kindness is the only non-delusional response to the human condition." Explaining this concept further, he says, "Imagine if somebody saw in all the wrong colors and all the shapes that he saw were incorrect . . . if you are in that kind of flawed thinking machine, and you see another flawed thinking machine. . . . You might more reasonably say, oh, wow, you too." This is exactly how Bevins and Vollman have tackled their existence in the bardo. Their dissociation has caused them to see "in all the wrong colors," quite literally losing touch with the true reality of their body, mind, and selves. If you are a "flawed thinking machine," Saunders adds, "the data's coming in, and he's messing it up." All this time, Bevins and Vollman have been distorting the data or reality of their existence in the bardo through their dissociative reactions to trauma. They are the blind leading the blind. But despite their delusions, Bevins and Vollman stand together because they have the shared experience of heartbreak. Recognizing that same stumbling within themselves enabled them to show real empathy for each other even before the mass *l'occupation*. This is Bevins and Vollman's *non-delusional* response to the human condition. This meeting a fellow "flawed thinking machine" and trying to aid one another, in all their dysfunction, is for Saunders "what human beings are doing in our little, sweet, pathetic way" ("Transcript"). In all its inefficiency, what Bevins and Vollman do for each other is the heart of exactly what Saunders defines as kindness.

The demonstration of compassion that Bevins and Vollman show each other throughout the novel is a beautiful depiction of human empathy at work. But while the concept of Saunders' ghosts as victims of dissociation has inspiring implications, are those implications strong enough to draw accurate conclusions regarding dissociative disorders if we're evaluating them within the supernatural experience of ghosts? Is it too much of a stretch to assume that Bevins and Vollman's experience is actually anything like ours in the land of the living? When writing the novel, Saunders was keenly aware of the difficulty for readers to relate to a ghost story. "In any fictive enterprise," he says, "you're sort of in an engagement with the reader's skepticism" ("In Conversation"). As a short story writer, Saunders was anxious about creating something as long as a novel. For him, "honoring the reader" is to say: "I know you're busy, I know you're smart, I know you've lived; let me not waste

your time by just merely being performative.” This insight suggests that despite the fantastical and supernatural nature of the bardo, every element of Saunders’ work is infused with some kind of meaning for the reader and is not just there for optics. He didn’t choose ghosts because he wanted to do something strange and experimental, he chose them because he wanted the narrative to be engaging enough to “raise the questions” that readers really care about (“George Saunders | Lincoln in the Bardo”). Using ghosts instead of real humans, Saunders is able to explore how individuals deal with their trauma in a much more compelling and thought-provoking way. Of course, many of the concepts within the bardo don’t have a real-world psychological parallel. We don’t have the option of possessing other humans collectively to enable us to see directly into each other’s minds and hearts, we aren’t trapped in a limbo state, and our physiological manifestations of trauma don’t take on bizarre, sometimes monstrous, representations. While the catalyst for Bevins and Vollman to retrieve their memories via *l’occupation* is perhaps the most difficult concept to directly apply to the psychology behind dissociation, this idea of “expansiveness instead of shrinkage” is precisely the quality in Lincoln that inspired Saunders to write the book. Inspired by the fact that he was a real man with limited capabilities just like us, “somehow he was able to transform all that sorrow into expanding empathy, for everybody” (“George Saunders’ new novel”).

For Saunders, just like Lincoln, the ghosts in *Lincoln in the Bardo* are actually quite human. They are “in the same situation we are. They think they’re alive and they’re dead. Likewise . . . we think we’re alive, we think we’re central, we think we’re permanent, we think we’ll be here 6,000 years from now.” Saunders explains that the “historical snippets” within the novel function as a “counterweight to the Reader’s innate disbelief in ghosts” (“Transcript”). Juxtaposing the supernatural with real facts about Lincoln’s life and history, this ghost story feels a little more grounded in reality. In a similar vein of thought, we can apply what we know in psychology about dissociative disorders as a counterbalance to the disbelief towards the more supernatural elements of the bardo. Instead of looking for direct, one-to-one comparisons between dissociative disorders and Saunders’ ghosts, we can focus instead on the humanist similarities that occur between them rather than their more obvious differences. “Perhaps you recognize their dilemma from your own life,” Whitehead says, and to escape your own bardo in life “all you need is the right push.” Roger Bevins and Hans Vollman’s experience

with trauma as ghosts in the bardo, inhabiting a sphere so far removed from our own physical reality, demonstrates an emotional reality not as far away that readers can respond to. Saunders' flawed but loveable characters, who demonstrate compassion for and an urgency to mend each others' mental maladies despite their own inefficiencies, are a reminder that we don't need to be high-functioning or even mentally or emotionally stable to be kind. This model of empathy lies at the very heart of the resolution within *Lincoln in the Bardo* and might just be "the right push" to show us how to create space for victims of trauma in ways we hadn't considered before.

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