Re-memory and the self-fragmentation of the dying subject in Max Ritvo's *Four Reincarnations*

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Abstract: This paper discusses *Four Reincarnations* by Max Ritvo as a poem of death, memory, and disintegration of self under terminal illness. The research is placed in the framework of the theory of trauma, the philosophy of illness and memory studies and offers an interdisciplinary approach to the interpretation of how the work by Ritvo reinvents identity in crisis states. Trauma theory sheds light on the recursivity and fractured quality of his voice, in which traumatic experiences reappear in fragmented ways. The philosophy of illness emphasises the intrusion and vulnerability of the body that explains why Ritvo makes pain and decay disruptive and transformative. Memory studies and concept of narrative identity, position the poems as recursive interactions with the past which disrupt linear time but facilitate the ongoing reorganization of self. Close reading reveals that the article uses reincarnation, memory looping, and self-splitting as poetic devices that both dissolve and resist. It is argued that Ritvo makes dying a poetics of survival and creative reconstruction, in which fragmentation itself becomes a survival strategy. The article is an addition to the modern literature on illness and literature, which introduces the work by Ritvo as an influential intervention in the trauma, mortality and power of art to recreate identity discourses.

Keywords: re-memory, self-fragmentation, dying, philosophy of illness, Max Ritvo, *Four Reincarnations*

Introduction

Literature and illness intersectionality is a crucial location of interest in the medical humanities, providing a platform where human experiences of suffering, mortality and memory become sensible through aesthetic formulation (Wong 2023 & Awogu-Maduagwu

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2021). Sickness cannot be simply reduced to the biomedical line of definition: sickness is also an existential and psychological condition that redefines relationships between the subject and body, time, and self (Greco 2019; Osimen, Ehibor, Daudu & Alofun 2025). It is primarily in poetry, as a privileged location in the symbolic articulation, that it becomes particularly powerful. It serves both as a witness and as imaginative therapy: it documents the immediacy of corporeal crisis and recreates the crisis in the metaphorical and aesthetic frames that render endurance, however precarious, a possibility (McNichols & Witt 2018; Ilogho et al. 2020). An example of this duality is to be found in Max Ritvo's *Four Reincarnations*. Composed during the immediacy of terminal illness, the collection shows how lyric form can investigate the precariousness of embodiment, recursiveness of memory and splintering of selfhood in manners that do not succumb to reductive pathographies of despair.

Four Reincarnations cannot be reduced to a chronicle of pain. Rather, it stages a sustained meditation on mortality and the persistence of identity under the threat of annihilation. Composed in what may be described as the "strange light of dying young"; the poems chart the oscillation of selfhood between coherence and fracture (Tronson 2017, 55). A crucial conceptual lens for apprehending this oscillation is Toni Morrison's theory of *re-memory*, which conceives of the past not as a linear archive but as a recursive force that insistently reorganises the present (Sy 2021, 241). Ritvo's lyric voice dramatizes this very dynamic: memory dislocates and returns, disrupts and rebuilds, dissolves identity and simultaneously reconstitutes it.

Within this aesthetic economy, reincarnation operates less as metaphysical doctrine than as a generative poetic metaphor. It becomes a trope for imagining the survival of selfhood amid catastrophic change. In "Dawn of Man", the haunting persistence of "phantom wings" signifies transformation without resolution, while in "Poem to My Litter" the self is grotesquely multiplied into fragile namesakes that externalise risk, finitude, and legacy. Across such instances, the body ceases to function as a coherent container of identity, emerging instead as a porous field in which selfhood strains toward continuity. Memory inscribes itself upon this body, whether through intrusive sensations that shadow pleasure in The Senses or through the spectral imagery of shared breath in "Living It Up". Humor and irony, in this context, are not diversions but strategies of survival: gestures through which the poetic voice reclaims agency in the face of dissolution. The

result is a poetics where corporeal decay and metaphysical speculation coexist, creating a dialectic between suffering and imaginative resilience (Onwuka, Uba & Fortress 2019).

This study is anchored in three theoretical frameworks. They are trauma theory, the philosophy of illness, and memory studies. Trauma theory elucidates how Ritvo's lyricism enacts the belated, recursive return of unassimilated experience, fracturing linear temporality and destabilising identity (Caruth 1997). The philosophy of illness foregrounds the intrusive presence of the body in pain, emphasising how language both strains against and extends the limits of articulating embodiment. Memory studies, particularly Paul Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity alongside Morrison's *re-memory*, underscore how the self is perpetually refigured through acts of storytelling and recollection (Ricoeur 1988; Pettersson 2024; Udoette 2023). Collectively, these frameworks situate Ritvo's work within broader discourses of suffering, identity, and the transformative capacity of language.

The research advances the argument that *Four Reincarnations* does not narrate closure but persistence. Ritvo transforms dying into a poetics of imaginative survival, wherein fragmentation itself becomes the condition of endurance. This study demonstrates how poetry not only represents but reconfigures the experience of illness. In doing so, it contributes to scholarship at the intersection of literature, trauma studies, and medical humanities, illuminating how lyric expression expands cultural understandings of mortality, vulnerability, and the resilience of the human spirit.

Reincarnation as poetic and psychological metaphor

Max Ritvo's *Four Reincarnations* employs the notion of reincarnation as a flexible metaphor for fragmentation, repetition, and the continual remaking of the self within the experience of terminal illness. Rather than a doctrine of religious rebirth, reincarnation functions as a way of imagining identity that is undone and reconstituted in cycles of dissolution and recovery. In "Dawn of Man", the speaker recalls a metamorphosis:

> After the cocoon I was in a human body
> instead of a butterfly's. … I called that time,
> overwhelmed with the ghosts of my wings, sleep. (Ritvo 2016, 81)

The image of phantom wings highlights how remnants of a former self linger, echoing trauma's recursive return. Ritvo's language suggests that the self never stabilizes; instead, it fractures, remembers, and remakes itself, mirroring the processes of illness where continuity is constantly threatened yet reasserted in altered forms.

This recursive sense of rebirth extends to the manifestation of multiple selves within the collection: child, lover, patient, witness, and ghost. The "child" self emerges in moments of innocent wonder that sit uneasily against the backdrop of suffering. In "Dawn of Man," the speaker confesses, "My thoughts remained those of a caterpillar, I took pleasure in climbing trees" (Ritvo 2016, 81), revealing a yearning for simplicity even while acknowledging the body's broken transformation. The "lover" self is present in "Hi, Melissa," where intimacy becomes prophetic:

> When I kiss your ankle I am silencing an oracle.
> The oracle speaks from the hill of your ankle. (Ritvo 2016, 41)

Here affection entwines with mortality, suggesting love as both anchor and revelation. The "patient" self comes through in "The Senses," where heightened bodily awareness is immediately undermined:

> Everything feels so good to me:
> my wool hat,
> the cocoon of dryness in my throat. … But I keep having thoughts—
> this thought always holding at bay the next thought
> until it sours into yet
> another picture of dissatisfaction. (Ritvo 2016, 23)

Pleasure turns to anxiety, capturing illness as both sensory and cognitive disruption. Meanwhile, the "witness" self observes with dark humor, exposing suffering through irony. In "Poem to My Litter," Ritvo describes lab mice carrying his tumors:

> I don't have any children.
> I named them all Max. First they were Max 1, Max 2,
> but now they're all just Max." (Ritvo 2016, 35)

This grotesque humor distances pain while acknowledging its inescapable reality, turning clinical experience into a metaphor for self-multiplication and loss. This spectral voice lingers between presence and absence, embodying the anticipation of nonexistence. The "ghost" self appears in poems such as "Afternoon," where death is spoken from its threshold:

> When I was about to die
> my body lit up … And I am missing everything living
> that won't come with me
> into this sunny afternoon. (Ritvo 2016, 109)

Literalized reincarnation through embodied persistence beyond the human

Reincarnation in *Four Reincarnation*s is not merely a spiritual or metaphorical cycle but often literalized as consciousness persisting in altered forms, a response to the body's betrayal by cancer. This literalization allows Ritvo to explore survival beyond physical dissolution. In "Dawn of Man," the speaker undergoes a jarring transformation:

> After the cocoon I was in a human body
> instead of a butterfly's. All along my back
> there was great pain—I groped to my feet
> where I felt wings behind me, trying to tilt me back. (Ritvo 2016, 33)

This reincarnation is visceral, marked by a painful mismatch between caterpillar consciousness and human form, critiquing embodiment as an absurd, ill-fitting vessel, akin to Camus's existential absurdity. The speaker's "thoughts remained those of a caterpillar" (Ritvo 2016, 33), suggesting a literal carryover of prior identity, where reincarnation becomes a defiant act against bodily annihilation. This persistence, though uncomfortable, underscores resilience: the self-endures through imaginative reformation (LaCapra, 2014, 32).

A more clinical literalisation emerges in "Poem to My Litter," where the speaker's tumours are transplanted into mice:

> My genes are in mice, and not in the banal way
> that Man's old genes are in the Beasts.
> My doctors split my tumors up and scattered them
> into the bones of twelve mice. (Ritvo 2016, 30)

This scientific reincarnation extends identity into animal proxies: "We watch each mouse like a crystal ball" (Ritvo 2016, 30). The speaker names the mice "Max," hoping "some good in you is of me" (Ibid., 31), blending irony with tenderness. Critically, this literalizes reincarnation as genetic dispersal, a biotech proxy for spiritual continuity, but it also critiques medical futility:

> I wish it was perfect, but sometimes the death we see

doesn't happen when we try it again in my body. (Ritvo 2016, 30)

The mice "bleed to death" while the speaker retains "both my legs" (Ritvo 2016, 31), highlighting the gap between proxy and reality. Ritvo's vision transforms reincarnation into a "hard-won" survival mechanism, where consciousness clings to fragmented vessels, echoing posthumanist ideas of distributed identity (McNeil & Haraway 1992).

Memory looping through the cyclical haunting of past and future

Memory looping, where past experiences and future anxieties cycle non-linearly, is a key mechanism in Ritvo's poetry, reflecting the temporal disorientation of illness. Triggered by bodily decay, these loops trap the self in recursive patterns, serving as both torment and tether. In "Plush Bunny," the speaker confronts a shrinking future:

My poor little future,
you could practically fit in a shoebox
like the one I kept 'pecial bunny in
when I decided I was too old to sleep with her. (Ritvo 2016, 73)

The memory of enclosing the stuffed bunny loops into anxieties about death:

I'd put a lid on the box every night.
I knew she couldn't breathe—she was stuffed,
but I thought she'd like the dark, the quiet (Ritvo 2016, 73)

This act mirrors the speaker's entrapment in cyclical memory, projecting into an afterlife where "the eye traps it so where heaven should be / you see shadows" (Ritvo 2016, 73). Critically, this looping aligns with Freud's repetition compulsion, where trauma (here, illness) demands replay, preserving identity but fragmenting it across time (Freud 2015). The poem's cosmic dispersal, "space falls apart when you have unlimited time" (Ritvo 2016, 73) suggests that memory looping ensures continuity at the cost of coherence, feeding into reincarnative forms.

In "Poem in Which My Shrink Is a Little Boy," memory looping takes a cosmic dimension:

You're the reincarnation of my psychoanalyst.
For all eternity we've switched off as patient and doctor. (Ritvo 2016, 56)

Past lives invade the present "Last life, you were at the zoo, and a monkey / tied your laces together" (Ritvo 2016, 57) blurring temporal boundaries. The poem's irony, reducing divine order to "Velcro shoes" (Ibid., 57), critiques therapy as an endless cycle of unresolved trauma, while the looping structure "our souls twinned through countless bodies" (Ibid., 56) ties memory to reincarnation. This cyclical haunting, where "our chats are as important to God / as your thalamus is to you" (Ibidem), underscores how memory looping sustains the self but exhausts it, suspending identity in a "complex, multi-layered present" (Ibid., 51).

Fragmentation as imaginative survival

Self-splitting, where the consciousness fragments across forms, is the culmination of literalized reincarnation and memory looping, reflecting illness's assault on wholeness. In "The Curve," the speaker grapples with a cosmic force, "call it X," that creates inadequate bodies:

> gum around the bones,
> a rash of gold or black,
> eyes like blisters
> leaking fondness. (Ritvo 2016, 19)

Language splinters the self looping into memories of a bicycle ride where sheens blur like "two bodies making love" (Ritvo 2016, 20). The speaker becomes "Skinny, hairy-chested, / made of pellets of rice" (Ibidem), a fragmented vessel embodying complication:

> We imagine a vertical meadow
> complicated into our world needlessly
> but complication is all X ever wanted for us. (Ritvo 2016, 20)

Critically, this splitting rejects purity as illusion, aligning with Butler's notion of identity as performative multiplicity. The self's dispersal across forms ensures survival through fragmentation, a resilient response to bodily decay. In "Touching the Floor," splitting is corporeal:

> I touch my palms to the floor
> and granite bulls surge up my arms
> and lock in my shoulders. (Ritvo 2016, 85)

The body yields to mindwith bulls falling "into a well, / their faces falling apart" (Ritvo 2016, 85). Memory loops in futile longing while reincarnation emerges in the speaker's shift: "I used to want infinite

time with my thoughts. / Now I'd prefer to give all my time / to a body that's dying from cancer" (Ibidem). This critiques Cartesian dualism, favoring bodily persistence, and ties self-splitting to reincarnation as imaginative dispersal, where the self reforms in new vessels to transcend physical limits (Kirmayer 2024, 18)

Temporal collapse and broader context

Ritvo's poetry situates themes within a broader exploration of temporal disruption, where illness obliterates linear time, forcing past, present, and future into collision. In "Afternoon," the sensation of impending deathtriggers a looping query: "What am I missing?" (Ritvo 2016, 69). This blurs past vitality and present decay, with life flashing as 'all the wishes being granted in a fountain / at the same instant" (Ibidem). The future is imagined grimly in "The End," where the moon is "dark / like it had taken too many pills" and "all the animals went blind" (Ibid., 83), looping into existential doubt: "I wondered, at one point, / if I had in fact killed myself— / if death just meant spending / all your time with your past" (Ibidem). This temporal collapse, echoing Morrison's "re-memory", underscores identity's fragility, suspending the self in a fractured, multi-layered present. Irony and dark humour amplify this disruption, as in "Poem to My Litter," where the grim setup of tumor-bearing mice becomes absurdly tender: "I want my mice to be just like me. I don't have any children. / I named them all Max" (Ibid., 31). Medical imagery vividly captures deterioration, yet humor deflates despair, critiquing survival's absurdity. Ritvo's work transforms annihilation into imaginative rebirth, with self-splitting, memory looping, and literalized reincarnation affirming resilience: the fragmented self endures, endlessly reforming across forms and times (Scarry, 1985).

Irony and dark humour in Ritvo's poetry function as psychological armour, allowing the speaker to confront immense pain and the certainty of death with a semblance of control. Facing a body ravaged by cancer, the speaker wields wit to mock the absurdity of his condition, creating distance from despair while simultaneously exposing it. In "Poem to My Litter," the speaker describes transplanting his tumours into mice named "Max":

> My genes are in mice, and not in the banal way
> that Man's old genes are in the Beasts.
> My doctors split my tumors up and scattered them
> into the bones of twelve mice. (Ritvo 2016, 30)

The dark humour peaks as the speaker notes, “They bust open the legs of the mice. Who bleed to death” (Ritvo 2016, 31), anthropomorphizing the mice as “little Maxes” and ironically aligning their fate with his own:

> I want my mice to be just like me. I don’t have any children.
> I named them all Max. (Ritvo 2016, 31)

This self-referential jest mocks medical hubris and the inevitability of death, aligning with Freud’s view of humour as a defense against suffering, where laughter sublimates pain into rebellion. Yet, the humour is transparent: naming the mice “Max” humanizes the experiment, revealing the speaker’s longing for legacy and connection, thus exposing vulnerability beneath the wit. This transparency underscores how irony serves as a conduit for anguish. In “Zyprexa, the Snow Pills,” the speaker’s brain becomes “a suit of zippers, / soberly shutting” (Ritvo 2016, 87), a surreal image that mocks the numbing effects of medication while hinting at mental fragmentation. The humour barely conceals the desperation of a consciousness “too many wounds to zip up” (Ibidem). It is also noted that illness often forces a confrontation with absurdity, where humor becomes a way to “say the unsayable” (Sontag 1978, 45). Ritvo’s irony invites empathy by straining under the weight of reality, revealing a “profound emotional landscape” where pain is too raw for direct expression (Ritvo 2016, 30). The absurdity of joking about death highlights the speaker’s attempt to reclaim agency, making the reader complicit in both the laughter and the underlying grief.

Medical imagery and bodily deterioration as memory triggers and narrative devices

Medical imagery and bodily deterioration in *Four Reincarnations* are not mere descriptors but structural elements that drive memory and narrative, grounding the collection’s metaphysical explorations in the visceral reality of illness. The clinical details of cancer treatment become a somatic vocabulary, triggering memories that redefine the speaker’s past through the lens of present decay. In “Radiation in New Jersey, Convalescence in New York,” a medical procedure sparks a memory loop:

> I awoke on a table with a blue cylinder pressed to my neck.
> From deep inside the cylinder I heard a sound

like a trembling man
opening the smallest can of soup
a can with only one green bean in it. (Ritvo 2016, 59)

The sensory detail of the cylinder evokes a surreal memory, blending clinical sterility with emotional isolation, as the "green bean" symbolizes diminished vitality. This aligns with Toni Morrison's concept of "re-memory," where physical sensations summon past experiences that invade the present. The body's pain thus becomes a portal, collapsing temporal boundaries and forcing the speaker to relive healthier selves or lost connections through illness's distorting lens.

Bodily deterioration also serves as a narrative device, charting the speaker's journey toward death with clinical precision filtered through lyrical subjectivity. In "The End," the speaker observes, "I have a dark bruise on my body / where a tail would come. / If I put pure water in my mouth / and cough it out, it's mud" (Ritvo 2016, 84). This vivid imagery of decay maps the body's decline as a narrative arc, echoing Susan Sontag's observation that illness becomes a "metaphor for mortality" (Sontag 1978, 13). The physical progression dictates the emotional and philosophical landscape, as in "Touching the Floor," where "granite bulls surge up my arms / and lock in my shoulders" (Ritvo 2016, 85), signaling bodily failure that prompts existential reflection:

I used to want infinite time with my thoughts.
Now I'd prefer to give all my time
toa body that's dying from cancer. (Ritvo 2016, 85)

This corporeal focus grounds abstract themes in the undeniable reality of a dying body, ensuring reader connection to the speaker's visceral truth.

Ritvo's interplay of irony, dark humour, and medical imagery constructs a portrait of a self under siege, where psychological defenses and bodily realities converge to confront dissolution. Irony shields but reveals vulnerability, as in the tender absurdity of naming mice "Max" (Ritvo 2016, 31). Medical imagery, as in the "blue cylinder" or "dark bruise" (Ibid., 59, 84), triggers memories and drives narrative, anchoring the speaker's fragmented identity in the corporeal. Ritvo's poetry masterfully depicts a self-unmoored from conventional temporal progression, where the past, present, and imagined future converge and collide. The experience of illness frequently obliterates the seamless flow of time, forcing the speaker into a fragmented

existence where memory becomes fluid and predictive anxieties loom large. The past does not simply recede but actively invades the present, often triggered by bodily sensations or internal states. This "re-memory," as theorized by Toni Morrison, where personal history insists on its presence, is palpable in poems where a current physical discomfort might suddenly transport the speaker to a moment of past vitality or trauma. For example, a fleeting sensation might unlock a vivid childhood memory, blurring the boundaries between healthy past and ailing present. Simultaneously, the dying self frequently projects into an imagined future, speculating on post-death existence or the impact of their absence. This future can be fantastical, grim, or ironically mundane, as seen in the various "reincarnations" where the self is imagined as something else entirely. This temporal collapse underscores the fragility of identity, demonstrating how the linear narrative of a life is fractured by the immediacy of illness and the impending end, leaving the self-suspended in a complex, multi-layered present.

In "Poem to My Litter," the speaker anticipates death by adopting a darkly humorous, detached perspective on his own mortality, imagining a future where his 'progeny' (mice named Max) also face their demise. The line, "they bust open the legs of the mice. Who bleed to death" (Ritvo 2016, 31), speaks from a present observation that collapses into a generalized, almost biological inevitability, while projecting forward:

> Next time the doctors plan to cut off the legs
> in the nick of time so the tumors will spread. (Ritvo 2016, 31)

This is a speaker simultaneously in the present (observing the mice) and inhabiting a future beyond his own death. "Living It Up" similarly plays with temporal shifts, reflecting on immediate bodily sensations while always aware of the encroaching future. The poem notes "we must learn to share a bed, / we must learn to share a body" (Ritvo 2016, 18), shifting from a present of shared vitality to an intimate coexistence with an intangible, encroaching emptiness, suggesting a future state of bodily dissolution:

> The money is running out.
> We will have to split one needle
> this winter—one end for me,
> one end for air. (Ritvo 2016, 18)

Irony and dark humor as psychological defences

One of the most striking features of Ritvo's poetics is his adept use of irony and dark humour, which function as sophisticated psychological defenses that simultaneously expose profound vulnerability. Facing immense physical pain and the certainty of death, the speaker often employs wit as a shield, a means of asserting agency and maintaining a semblance of control over an uncontrollable reality. This humour is rarely light; it is often acerbic, surreal, and tinged with a deep awareness of absurdity. For instance, in "Poem to My Litter," the speaker's grotesque experiment with the mice, followed by his detached observation of their death, allows him to externalize and process his own mortality with a chilling, yet oddly comforting, irony:

> I want my mice to be just like me. I don't have any children.
> I named them all Max. (Ritvo 2016, 31)

The humour here functions as a protective layer, allowing the speaker to mock his own fate and transform the tragic into the darkly comedic. However, these defenses are transparent. The irony exposes, rather than conceals, the underlying pain, fear, and desperation. The humour often serves as a conduit for vulnerability, allowing the reader to glimpse the raw anguish that necessitates such a strong psychological barrier. It is a way of saying, "This is too painful to speak of directly, so I will make it absurd." The speaker reveals his profound emotional landscape, inviting empathy precisely because the defense mechanism is so visibly strained by the weight of his reality.

Psychic disarray and non-linearity of memory

Ritvo's formal choices mirror the psychic disarray and non-linear memory of a self-grappling with mortality. Enjambment and stanza breaks emulate the recursive, insistent force of memory, aligning with Toni Morrison's "re-memory," where past experiences invade the present unbidden (Morrison 1987). In "Living It Up," enjambed lines connect bodily sensation to existential dread:

> The bed is on fire, and are you laughing?
> You leave the bed
> and leave me without thought. (Ritvo 2016, 17)

The break after "bed" shifts from visceral imagery to emotional abandonment, echoing how illness triggers memories of loss. Stanza

breaks, as in "The Senses," leap from sensory pleasure to mental fragmentation:

> my mind
> like a black glove
> you mistake for a man
> in the middle of a blizzard. (Ritvo 2016, 23)

This abrupt shift mirrors memory's non-linear intrusions, where physical sensation summons disjointed thoughts, denying the reader stable footing.

Surreal imagery amplifies this effect, externalizing internal turmoil. In "Holding a Freshwater Fish in a Pail above the Sea," the speaker's struggle to protect a koimorphs into a dreamlike absence:

> You aren't here
> but I'm aware
> that somewhere
> you have moved. (Ritvo 2016, 26)

The enjambed, halting lines and surreal fish imagery reflect a consciousness fractured by illness, where memory loops between present pain and past connections, collapsing temporal boundaries. These formal disruptions immerse readers in the speaker's disoriented landscape, embodying the non-linearity of a mind under duress.

Structure of the collection as a reincarnatory spiral

The collection's structure eschews linear progression for a reincarnatory spiral, reflecting the speaker's cyclical journey through multiple selves. Rather than a chronological or thematic arc, *Four Reincarnations* revisits motifs like bodily decay, love, and existential musings with variations, suggesting continuous dying and becoming. The titular "four" implies multiple iterations, yet the collection's four sections do not resolve neatly; instead, images like bulls, birds, or tumors recur with altered tonalities. For example, the "three black bulls" in "Black Bulls" (Ritvo 2016, 35) echo the "granite bulls" in "Touching the Floor" (Ibid., 2016, 85), but shift from mental anguish to physical failure, spiraling through different facets of collapse. This cyclical structure aligns with Judith Butler's view of identity as performative and iterative, constantly re-formed through repetition with difference (McIntosh & Butler, 1991).

Poems like "The Watercolor Eulogy" and "Poem to My Litter" revisit love and legacy, but through shifting lenses—e.g., a "glowing

shroud" (Ibid., 27) versus "Max" mice (Ibid., 31) suggesting the self as a composite, "re-stitched" across incarnations. The collection's non-linear progression invites readers to experience this recursive unfolding, not as a journey to a singular end but as a spiral of re-membering and re-imagining. This structure reinforces the resilience of identity, which, as Timothy Donnelly notes, "haunts" through its multiplicity, becoming "a necessary and sustaining part" of the reader's understanding of life (Ibid., 6). Ritvo's poetic form embodies the fragmented, non-linear experience of illness. Ritvo constructs a portrait of a self that persists through fragmentation, defying mortality with imaginative resilience.

Conclusion

Max Ritvo's *Four Reincarnations* is a remarkable testament to a poetics of dying, where the poet navigates the terrain of terminal illness with rare intellectual sharpness and emotional honesty. The collection is deeply engaged with memory, presenting it as both a source of solace and an instrument of dissolution. Ritvo's voice is distinctive in its combination of candour, dark humor, and inventive form, shaping a narrative of selfhood that is at once fragmenting under the weight of disease and persistently reforming through art. The poems embody a tension between continuity and collapse, reminding readers that the self in the face of mortality is both unstable and enduring. Memory is central to Ritvo's exploration of dying, operating as a recursive force that grounds the speaker while simultaneously unsettling him. It offers comfort by recalling moments of intimacy, vitality, and human connection, anchoring the speaker to a past self that precedes the devastations of illness. At the same time, memory disintegrates stability, as recollections return in distorted and fragmented forms, breaking down coherent identity. Ritvo's treatment of "re-memory" exemplifies this tension, highlighting how the insistent resurfacing of personal history reshapes the present in unexpected and often painful ways.

Beyond personal testimony, *Four Reincarnations* reveals broader implications for how poetry confronts mortality. Ritvo offers a linguistic framework for articulating experiences often deemed beyond words, exposing the psychic disarray and temporal collapse of chronic illness. His use of irony and humor is not merely defensive but serves as a shared lens of vulnerability, making the unbearable bearable through the absurd. Even as the body deteriorates, memory enables the

refiguration of identity in fractured but meaningful ways, demonstrating that life's story can be continually reimagined through art. This assertion ensures the endurance of the self in its very fragmentation. Future studies could situate Ritvo alongside poets of illness such as Jane Kenyon or Jack Gilbert, illuminating varied treatments of pain, spiritual struggle, and mortality. His place among posthumous voices also raises critical questions about reception, legacy, and the ethics of reading a final statement of life.

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