

Ask.
A Post-Self Anthology

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Skunks& — The Lament — Andréa C. Mason — Alexandria Christina Leal

Other works in the Post-Self universe

The Post-Self Cycle

Qoheleth

Toledot

Nevi'im

Mitzvot

Post-Self: A Tabletop Roleplaying Game Powered by the Apocalypse

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ASK: A POST-SELF ANTHOLOGY

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On cohost, readers are encouraged to submit questions to the various characters within the Post-Self setting, whether to the Odists, or to the wide variety of characters across all five books. These questions are answered by the characters themselves, with the authors of the answers provided along with them. These are collected here in one spot for easy reading, and this will be updated as questions are answered.

Please expect spoilers.

To any in the Ode clade who would like to answer:

Have you ever lost faith in or energy for what you do, or felt like you lost your sense of purpose and direction?

How did you handle this? Did you strike out on your own in a new direction entirely, or think things over and find a way to come back to it with renewed vigor? Or, perhaps, find inspiration in another person or place?

Among Those Who Create Are Those Who Forge

When I was first forked, I started out poking around the System to find out what people were doing with art. After all, we were in a new place, yes? A place with so many new possibilities, yes? I got incredibly interested in finding ways that people were creating sims, impossible paint colors, new flavors in their cooking, all of that wonderful stuff. Forking was too expensive yet for instance artistry to have taken off, but I was not at all surprised when it did.

This, however, did not last. The more I looked at art, the more I started to see all of the ways that our pain lingered. Not just the weeping of the broken-hearted or the joy of this new life, but the resentment towards the power structures that people had escaped, the fear over minority identities being uncovered, the remembrances of lives lost.

This rather spoiled art for me for a while. I could not look at it without getting all wrapped up in overwhelming emotions. I stopped seeking out new artists lest I find new pains to endure, and I (and my three up-tree instances at the time) fell into a funk. We spent a lot of time drinking, a lot of time sleeping. We would walk sims with our heads down, looking only at our feet. We would take lovers and tell them nothing.

I tried a few times to get back into the swing of things, but every time, it just made me depressed.

What I eventually settled on was a change of focus. I took all of that pain that I had discovered and transferred *that* into action. We talked and talked and talked, and then we started to act. We became the pests of the Ode clade, the leftists that pushed for ever more change. We met up with Os Ríãos, and End Of Days, Seek An End,

and New Beginnings still work quite heavily with Boiling Maw and Hydra from that clade on climate activism (as a side note, I believe that is how Rainbow's End fell in briefly with Au Lieu Du Rêve, the fifth stanza's theatre company).

We never did get back to art, unless it was the art of activism and change. There was no going back. We *could not* go back. We were no longer depressed, but we used our interest to renew our vigor along tangential lines.

*Open letter to the Odists - Would you tell us
about your favorite public sim?*

I Must Set No Stones Between Me And My Actions

There is a sim that I love to visit when I remember, which is sometimes only a few days, and the standing record is a decade. It is a small village by a sea, and I am told it is based upon the shores of the Mediterranean. Along the beach, a massive wall runs for quite some distance.

Besides fantastic food and a generally calm vibe, there are two reasons to visit.

Every day, people head out onto the beach, and draw in the sand. Everyone is free to draw as they please, but the best days are when a large design takes hold early in the morning and everyone contributes. Each night, the tide rolls in slowly, and wipes clean the beach. No pictures or permanent records are allowed, save the ones in your head, since memories never really leave us.

Meanwhile, on the walls and roads and roofs and floors of the village, a mosaic now approaching 180 years old spreads. When you enter the sim, you are given a single tile, in a choice of colors. So long as it is touching another tile, or a seam or edge where tiles touch, you can place a tile wherever you please. In the beginning, folks were limited to one tile a day, but at some point there must have been an issue, for now it is every 6 weeks. Some sections have been meticulously planned, while others are, to paraphrase a friend, “throwing tiles at the wall to see what sticks.” Once a tile is placed, it is there for good. If you misalign it, there is no fixing it, so choose wisely.

Something about the ephemerality of the sand and the permanence of the tile speaks to me, and both the food and company are a delight. I have been dipping in and out for about 70 years now, and it is always a pleasure to see old faces, and new ones come to draw

in the sand, or maybe place their first tile, or simply looking for a place to relax and sip some wine. I cannot recommend it enough!

To Dear and May Then My Name: Have you ever thought about a Bizarro Universe scenario where you trade places with Codrin and Ioan, respectively? I find myself struggling to imagine it.

Dear, Also The Tree That Was Felled

There are, perhaps, two readings of this. If you mean Codrin and myself switching places, and you are wondering what it would be like for me to date an Odist as a non-Odist, I think I would find myself maddening, and I would have dropped myself years ago. It is perhaps uncomfortable to admit, but there is no small amount of self-loathing in me. I have spent my time in a relationship with another Odist — my close cross-tree instance Serene — and...well. I love her dearly, but she puts rather a fine point on all of the things that I loathe in myself, sometimes.

If, however, you mean me switching places with May Then My Name and being in a relationship with Ioan, then, my dear, you have no idea how eager I would be to corrupt that poor, innocent soul, especially as ey is now. The Ioan who became Codrin was of a very specific type, but this Ioan? The one that May Then My Name has tainted? Oh, how delicious that would be!

May Then My Name Die With Me:

Similar to Dear, I shall answer each in turn. If you mean me switching places with Ioan as ey is now, then I do not think much would change. I have absolutely ruined em for a life alone, and I think that ey would

feel quite out of sorts if I were not around, just as I feel quite out of sorts when ey is not around. That said, I cannot ignore what happens when I overflow. Ey does not like it when I dissolve into tears and ask em to leave me alone for days at a time. It is a thing I dislike about myself, but am hopeless before. I think that it would hurt me far more to experience it from the other side. I think that I would...well. I think we would risk a feedback loop of tears, and there would be days afterwards when we would struggle.

If you mean me switching with Dear...well, I like Codrin plenty. I think ey is lovely in many of the same ways that Ioan is. That said, I do not think that ey is necessarily my type, especially as ey is now, having been ruined by Dear. Could I love em? Of course! I do love em. But could we be in a relationship? I do not think so.

Motes! Tell us something fun about being little!

And We Are The Motes In The Stage-Lights

Sooooometimes, it is kind of fun to get in trouble?? Even if it takes a little bit of negotiation beforehand.

Take for instance one time when A Finger Pointing made a chocolate cake, very rich, lots of frosting! There was supposed to be a party later in the day, and the cake was baked and sat on the counter, so that it would be all ready to go.

So of course, I snuck in and cut myself a tiiiiny slice — only like a tenth of the cake! — and ate it right there in the kitchen as quickly as I could, mostly just with my fingers.

Not thirty seconds after I got the plate all cleaned up, even in the action of putting it away, she walked into the kitchen and caught me, still with chocolate on my muzzle.

“Motes!”

“I—”

“No, no,” she said, arms akimbo. “I am pretty sure you do not actually need to say anything. I am pretty sure that look on your face, chocolate and all, says all I need to hear.”

I wilted, ears pinned back, and nodded, ashamed.

“You know, we were going to have a surprise party, even. No one is here yet, but imagine what will happen when they see the cake with a slice already taken out of it.”

“But we can just—”

“We can just let them all know precisely what happened, yes?”

“But Maaa...”

“But nothing,” she said haughtily. “Come, bring the cake out. It is just a few of us here now, but they might as well see.”

There were indeed a few people — and to be clear, all of them in

on it — and so I set the cake down on the table, prepared to make my speech, my little admission. Gasps all around.

“Now, I do not think Dot needs to say anything about what has just happened.”

“I mean, I—”

“No no, I think what would do much better than an apology would be to show just how much you like cake. After all, it is your birthday, yes?”

I looked up at her quizzically.

“Well? Go ahead! You were apparently hungry enough to sneak a slice early. Have at it, my dear!” She grinned wickedly. “I expect the plate clean as a whistle.”

So *that* was to be my punishment. I sat before those few — Ma and Bee, Slow Hours, Dry Grass, even my friend Alexei! — and ate the whoooooole cake. It was agony. It was too rich, too sweet, and Alexei started to cry partway through. So embarrassing...

Of course, then I hugged everyone, willed away the too-full feeling, and the rest of the guests started up for the party to begin in earnest.

Cake and all~

So many of your clade are specialists—you reap the fruits of centuries of labor, each, in your field of choice. Do you know how one might cope with the opposite scenario? How does one handle knowing just a bit of everything and not enough of anything?

If I Dream Am I No Longer Myself

I think I have mentioned before that my down-tree instance forked when she started to grow wary of the direction her stanza was heading. Since then, I have indulged in people watching. I am pretty good at forking into different forms but other than that? I do not know. I am a very boring person. I do not know enough to get back into the spying game. I do not know enough to get into instance artistry. I like food, but I am a truly terrible cook.

A lot of what looks like specialization is merely a hyperfixation expression of our neurodivergence. I stepped away from this observing hyperfixation and am now rudderless on the System. I am not unhappy, I suppose, but neither am I happy. What has my life amounted to? What do I have to show for the space I take up on Lagrange? I do not know.

In the end, I have had to do my best to come to terms with being middling. I do not always succeed. Some days, it is all I can do to take joy in a really tasty sandwich, and some days I do not even manage that. Finding joy where one can is about all one has on the System.

Not counting those cults that tend to burn out quickly, have there been any home-grown religious or spiritual movements on the System?

No Unknowable Spaces Echo My Words

[Visibility exception: Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled of the Ode clade]

There has always been a small undercurrent of reverence, acknowledgement, or worship—whichever concept one feels applies—directed at the System itself. This is understandable; humans have been seeing spirits in machines for quite some time. The complexity of the System, along with its tendency to read subconscious desire, have made it easier for people to take a mystical view of this dream floating in space. Additionally, the System is the world we live in, and so some of those who might have felt a connection to Mother Earth phys-side find themselves constructing shrines to their home cylinder here, even if most people would find that strange.

More recently, while Sasha's decision to reveal RJ's history has been good for the clade as a whole, it has had the repercussion of giving System-worshippers a name and a face to converge around. The mythology nearly writes itself, does it not? The first upload dying to give the System life, planting eir soul into the circuits as ey did so...I cannot say this is a false view of events.

I am of several minds about this development. While I am pleased to see my dear friend's memory honored after all these years, the tendency for that to veer into deification disturbs me: I knew RJ, and ey was very much a person. Seeing one's remembered history compress into the future's myths is, I must acknowledge, a cost of immortality, though that understanding does not leave me inclined to visit any temples to RJ.

So, to answer your question, the most notable religious tendency to arise on the System is devotion to the world-fennec, as ey is often

called now. If you would know more of it, seek outside our clade.

A personal question, if there is an Odist willing to answer it: Was there a funeral after Michelle quit?

A Finger Pointing

The short answer:

No, there was not.

The long answer:

Not as such.

She brought us all together to the field in which she first dreamt up our dandelions. She did so because she had intended to quit for some months after Qoheleth's death, and because it was crucial to her that she understand each of us in as much depth as one can hope to understand oneself.

When she received our merges and, in nearly the same breath, quit under the gravity of one hundred selves and tens of thousands of lifetimes, many of us were stunned. Some did not expect that the merge would be the moment of death; others saw the writing on the walls; others, still, knew well what it meant to take on so much experience at once, knew well that even the savviest of us could not bear such weight.

So there was the flattened grass where only moments ago she stood, there was the warm breeze that always entertains this sim, and there was the shock and despair of ninety-nine Odists rendered unwhole for the second time. Unwhole and, now, disconnected, disjointed.

We are no strangers to grief, but neither are we exactly comfortable with it. Many of us still struggle to tolerate the mere sound of RJ's name. We often speak about em in euphemism, as if our own little *HaShem*. Even after Sasha's *Ode*, we keep eir nickname to our-

selves, covet it as a cherished secret as if for it to be known would be to drive the final nail into eir coffin.

We stumbled through our grief as one in that field, held one another, cried our tears of anguish, suffered our collective misery for what would be the last time we ever joined so completely. And then, in ones or twos, we gradually diminished. There were fewer and fewer of us in that field, and though my muse was among the first to go with a fork of mine, I remained with *Slow Hours* and *The Only Constant*. We three lingered with what remained of the other stanzas, lingered well into an evening that the sim did not perform for us.

There were the outbursts of crying, of bickering, the softness of cooing and silence. There was the rhythm of *Kaddish*, though those of us most experienced with such were already at synagogue; the ensuing laughter as some dozen of us stumbled through a prayer few of us had ever seriously practiced was terribly hysterical, and at once crucial to relieving us of that direness we felt.

We had no body to bury, my dear, and all the time in the world to dedicate to our grief. So our funeral was then and it was there.

What Right Have I

The short answer:

No, there was not.

Longer answer

Not as such.

When Michelle/Sasha summoned us to her field, I was not expecting that which I received.

I was expecting that perhaps she would seek input from us.

We had heard so little from her over the years. She sought out Rav From Whence and I at one point to discuss her inherited faith, what it had to say about suffering, what it had to say about grieving. We spoke of Job and his woes, his wish to call God to account. Why was it that he was caused to suffer so? What, also, did the interpretations of this text have to say about what it was that he went through?

She summoned more from the third stanza, those of us who delved deep into spirituality. We brought before her Unknowable Spaces, who spoke about grief and the ways in which it interacts with the soul, the spirit, and the self. Unknowable Spaces brought with her a friend who had been a doctor, phys-side, who spoke to the ways in which suffering interacts with the body.

When she spoke of heaven of hell, of paradise and eternal conscious torment, I cried. Many of us cried! She looked only tired. Unknowable spaces recited for her a quote from Rabi'a al-'Adiwiyya al-Qaysiyya:

O God! If I worship You for fear of Hell, burn me in Hell

and if I worship You in hope of Paradise, exclude me
from Paradise.

But if I worship You for Your Own sake,
grudge me not Your everlasting Beauty.

I cried yet more and spoke of the ways in which the Jewish view of the afterlife changed over the millennia, how originally there was *Sheol*, that place of darkness and rest and eternal sleep, and then, as the Jews collided with other cultures, this began to lean towards thoughts of paradise, and with that thoughts of some cruel inversion. I asked her to consider Qohelet — the teacher, not he who was a part of her — and his gentle admonition to consider the ways in which one strove as well as the ways in which one suffered in the face of so much rest to come: *Whatever it is in your power to do, do with all your might. For there is no action, no reasoning, no learning, no wisdom in Sheol, where you are going.*

From Whence said, “Strive with an eye to the betterment of all, and consider that, if you are *b’tzelem Elohim*, made in the image of God, that includes you, my dear.”

And so when she summoned us that awful day, I expected other than what I got.

I was expecting that perhaps she had words to say about Qoheleth, about his rise and fall, about how it was that *she* felt about his assassination. were it someone within the clade who had organized this — and none had ever come forward — then ought we not find a way to discuss paths forward?

I was expecting perhaps, in some roundabout way, reconciliation. Her with her clade, the clade with itself, all of us with the world in which we lived.

How naïve I am! How foolish I was to hold such hope!

So when she asked us to merge down, when I began to understand what it was that she was doing, I wept and tore at my garments. I tried to keep it to myself, but in the end, I collapsed to the grass, curled into as tight a ball as I could, with my snout all but tucked into the ground as though I could shield myself from what I knew must be coming.

Rav From Whence bade me look up just in time to see her disappear once and for all from existence, and we said “*Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha’olam, dayan ha’emet*,” the announcement of a death, and returned to our synagogue.

There we fought, and bitterly, as to whether or not this occasioned a funeral. Rav From Whence argued for yes, for the funeral was for the people, not for the dead, and I argued for no, because the funeral was also for the dead, and she could not be, for we lived on. This discussion was old and tired, for we had debated this for nigh on a century. Was the quitting of a cladist a death or something else if the clade lived on? Did the manner of quitting matter? If they quit of despair, was that suicide? If they crashed? If CPV claimed them? It was our evergreen *halakha* to argue, just...never in so immediate terms.

I stepped away and did not return for thirty days, preferring to sit in my half-*Shloshim* while wandering, overflowing, believing now that she was dead, now that she was not, feeling now a sense of spiritual ecstasy, now a sense of abandonment. I asked a million billion trillion times why we suffered, why *she* suffered — and whether or not God replied, asked a million billion trillion times again “Look, I am worthless. What can I say back to You?”

When I returned, I asked Rav From Whence to give me some

space from the topic. I said my *kaddish* and always put off the topic of the funeral until she stopped bringing it up. After all, as Wakefield put it,

There are ways around being the go-to person
even for ourselves
even when the answer is clear
clear like the holy water Gentiles would drink
before they realized
forgiveness is the release of all hope for a better past

I rely on the words of others because I do not know. If there was a funeral, I did not attend, and if all that had once been her did not — or did not even *know* — did it truly take place?”

General question for all Odists: how far away has someone gotten from the clade? Who's the most distant fork? Who's distanced themselves the furthest from the calde? Does anyone that far out stay in touch?

Sasha

This is a difficult question to answer for a few reasons. First and foremost is that, halfway through the 2300s, the clade fractured in grand fashion. Whole stanzas cut off whole other stanzas, going full no-contact with them. Much of this is my fault, in a way, but I will get to that in a moment.

Beyond that, however, for better or worse, some of what it mean to be an Odist began to fade decades earlier as many of them diverged beyond reconciliation. Take E.W. for instance: he all but left the clade in the late 2260s. He retained his clade identifier until 2350, when the change that I underwent led to him cutting even that tie, renaming himself from Do I Know God After The End Waking to E.W of no clade.

This is a formality of sorts; he cannot change that he is True Name's up-tree instance, nor that I have taken in his memories to become who I am. That does not make it any less real, however. He was less than half an Odist, bound to them by their memories, and now he is even less than that, forsaking the name that tied him to the clade.

And me? Am I more or less of an Odist because of what I have become? I am not True Name, May Then My Name, or E.W. I am all three of them. I am closest to becoming what our root instance was than any other Odist. I am the furthest from being her out of all of them. I am three Odists in one, and yet I left the clade, and in the process, the sixth and seventh stanzas cut me, all of the eighth stanza, Dear, and all of the Bălans from their lives.

Are they Odists? If so, are they more or less Odist than the fifth stanza, with whom I most heavily associate these days?

And yet, even then, this decision was made by Hammered Silver and In Dreams, not by the entirety of their stanzas. Many of their up-tree instances, despite saying that they agree with this decision, have kept in contact with their cocladists within the eighth stanza, and I know that many of them are quite fond of Dear and have attended its shows incognito. Dry Grass is a prime example of this: she has maintained her close friendship with Need An Answer in secret these past decades. She *resents* Hammered Silver for that decision, and the politics that require her to voice her support against her beliefs.

What of the tenth stanza? They hardly talk to anyone. Often, they do not talk amongst themselves, even within their shared house.

But perhaps they are the most Odist of all of them. If they struggle with that fractured identity that Michelle bore for so long, perhaps they stand as a synecdoche for the clade as a whole.

In the end, though, I suspect that it may indeed be me.

I love the Ode clade, even if I am no longer a part of it. I love it with a ferocity that is second only to my love of the System. I love who they are, what they stand for, what they remember. A Finger Pointing may show her equal love more openly than I do, and for that I am eternally grateful, but I do still love them. Even if I am not a part of them, cannot speak with many of them, have made myself *not* them, that love remains.

Alright Dear, what are your thoughts about the impermanence of self, meaning as even as we are ourselves we are changing and mutating away from what we are in the moment every minute of every day?

Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled

I have found myself confronted with this as part of my very existence. I dance my dance of instance art and, in the process, it is that very individuation that becomes the core mechanic of the art. The word 'mechanic' is less than ideal, but it is what we have to lean on: yes, it is impressive when one forks smoothly or can lean creatively on the mutation algorithms, but the truly artistic aspect is putting a fine point on the ways in which we change on an hour-by-hour, minute-by-minute, second-by-second basis.

Back in systime 59 (2183 by the old calendar), one of my first true exhibitions was a gala of sorts. I rented out a large ballroom and invited 50 individuals to join me in their finest for an evening of dances and delights. However, they were not to dance with each other, they were to dance with me. I forked 50 times over leaving fifty fennecs (well, 51, as one of me was left as the emcee for the evening) and we began dancing to all sorts of lovely music from throughout the centuries.

However, one by one, my instances began to quit. It was no quiet affair. They quit with looks of agony, with yelps of fear, with wide eyes and trembling paws. The more instances that quit, the more anxious the remaining instances became. One by one, their number dwindled, until there was only one remaining, sobbing and pleading to remain, to not be annihilated. And then it, too, quit with a shriek.

It was, of course, an act. Quitting does not feel like anything. There is no pain, no fear, certainly no anxiety in an instance artist such as myself. However, it did put a fine point on the absurdity of our condition, that these instances were no longer me, that that they changed with every step of their ballroom dance.

That final instance was dancing with a member of my own clade: Time Is A Finger Pointing At Itself. I went into the exhibition with little plan as

to who would be the final dancer. It had little to do with their skill (though our dear Pointillist is a fine dancer in her own right), and more to do with how they were reacting to this play of self. Would I lean into someone who shared in the foxes' terror? Would I lean into someone who expressed joy at the dance that I had set up? In the end, I leaned into an actor—A Finger Pointing runs a theatre company, made up at that point mostly of members of her own stanza—who adopted an almost villainous aspect. She danced with a serene smile, even as that final dancer dissolved into tears, ending the song with a flourish of a bow even as it cried out in agony.

Another reason that I chose her is that she correctly divined that I would not be merging the experiences of my up-tree instances back into myself as the emcee. It was not something that any of the guests needed to know. It was a private joke between all 51 of me. It was a way for me to be the audience as well. After all, did the other dancers not have access to my internal thoughts? Why, then, should I be any different?

She, however, saw right through me, because of course she did. She is an inveterate actor! She is the manager of a troupe of actors! She picked her part and played it, and turned it into a show even for little old Dear.

In our discussion afterward, we lingered long on this selfdom-as-play. "Sometimes I send a fork to a party I would really rather participate in myself, and when she returns with all those lovely experiences freshly welling up in her I think they belong to her," she said. "It is less about willful individuation and more about...how every fork is an individual."

To prove her point, she forked and then, on a whim, pulled this new fork over until she stumbled and slumped against her, laughing. She explained, "Here she is caught completely off her guard because I did not intend to surprise her until just now. She is different from me!"

It is all very Heraclitus, is it not? He was the one who said that no man crosses the same river twice, because the river has changed minute-to-

minute, second-to-second, as does the man. It was Weinberger who said that no one ever reads the same poem twice, because by reading the poem, the reader is changed: "Every reading of every poem, regardless of language, is an act of translation: translation into the reader's intellectual and emotional life. As no individual reader remains the same, each reading becomes a different—not merely another—reading."

These are the things I think about when I think about the impermanence of the self, which is always.

Tips on intra-clade dating?

Beholden To The Heat Of The Lamps

Some time after I was forked, back in systime 3 (2127), I entered into a relationship with my down-tree instance, Time Is A Finger Pointing At Itself. You must understand, however, that until perhaps systime 230 (2354), intraclade relationships were seen as taboo, at least on Lagrange—I know that attitudes on Pollux had loosened quite a bit. It was seen as subversive and distasteful, a sort of moral masturbation.

And yet, we loved each other. We were different people, were we not? From the moment I was forked and began to focus on my work as an audio tech, I was a different person. My values began to shift. My appearance began to shift. The way I spoke began to shift. I am not Pointillist. She is not Beholden. We are separate individuals, and we are in love.

Of course, we drifted closer together and further apart over the years, but we settled into a comfortable sort of domesticity and playfulness, and it was not until such taboo began to lift, being seen as artificial and particularly meaningless for older clades, that our relationship became more open, first among friends, and then out on the street, in the bars after a performance.

As for tips, I think my biggest would be that, yes, you share a common past, but do not assume that this means you know what the other is thinking. You may share values, memories, a general approach to life, but you do not read minds.

Time Is A Finger Pointing At Itself

We stumbled into intimacy one evening when the bleary neon haze of a night out turned to giddy exploration. “How lewd~,” she said at

least a dozen times (Beholden was *very* much zooted by this point). All that bratty pomp and wily poise turned to heady laughter and *mortifying* sounds of joy. She was positively *adorable*. She still is, of course, except that she has hardened over the years and is now quite the bully if I do not feed her something nice before taking her out dancing.

Aromancy complicates my feelings about her—and my answer to this question—but there has always been this comradery between us about taboos. We both are irreverently indulgent in this respect, and have found a kind of reclamation in private profanity. When at last the tides had turned away from scorn, it was a privilege to kiss her paw in public; to give that one disdainful pair of eyes a wink, and to know in that moment we held more power over the bearer of that withering gaze than they held over us.

I hope that you and whoever you are thinking about in this moment have had the chance to open up in these recent decades. But there is more to this question than the intrinsic queerness of transgressive relationships such as ours. You also ask about the unique implications of loving a reflection of oneself. Cross-tree relationships may seem a little easier in this regard, but I have seen my share of those amidst my cocladists. Take Codrin's musings about Dear and Serene on Pollux or, more distantly, Heat And Warmth and Hold My Name, who I have seen my fair share of first-hand. Both of these pairs are particularly boisterous, especially as compared to Beholden and I, and rather often stumble into ephemeral disagreements.

Even as they do, however, there is an implicit understanding of nuance that is much harder to craft in conventional relationships. Dear and Serene solve their disputes with the grace of deeply-rooted

trust, and Heat And Warmth and Hold My Name speak to each other with a kind of careful articulation that rather reminds me of the couple of times True Name has seen fit to admonish me over the centuries. We all are Odists, after all; it is difficult to say precisely what this feeling is, but the essence of it is that we do not have to work as hard to explain ourselves to one another. We all get it; so all that is left is to do is to *perform* getting it.

Even if you already understand, sometimes what you need is just to feel heard.

To any Odist that would like to answer: What is the worst meal you have ever had in your entire life?

Which Offers Heat And Warmth In Fire

I think there is food that is just poorly-made and food that is ill-advised. It is easy enough to think of a dozen bland, burnt, and bungled meals. But I think it is much more interesting to talk about those meals that were cooked to perfection and managed to land staunchly in the domain of nauseating.

The worst food I ever ate was a miserable chili with exactly the right amount of lime and with beans still whole and a toothsome mire of beef and plenty of spice. The problem was that it was all sideways. There was just a little bit too much salt, not enough paprika, and it was too runny for the oily-fresh tortilla chips it was served with. All these little incongruencies made for an unpleasant lunch that was just short of unpalatable. If it were any worse, I would have dreamt up my own entrée instead out of protest.

Codrin and □□□□□ cooked me all sorts of delicious things before the launches; that is why so much of what I have published on the Reputation Exchange is just Balkan cuisine and baked treats. But □□□□□ was always into haute cuisine in particular, and this occasionally resulted in some rather interesting experiments.

But the worst meal I ever had must have been the private dinner shared between Rye and Serene and Dear and Codrin and □□□□□ and I on the weekend before Launch Day. There was this menagerie of flavors throughout the evening, beginning with an enticing ratatouille that did a wonderful job of making me hungrier than I began.

The conversation at the table was lively. We all were laughing and gossiping and teasing one another as we do, and I really liked that. I liked that, if this was to be our last meal shared just as a family, it was one when we were at our best. Rye told us about her latest

correspondence with No Longer Myself, about a particularly heart-breaking experience she inherited from If I Dream. Rye weaved her musings about character development and Dear made a quip by asking her whether that was destined for her latest novel or not. Codrin, on the other hand, was upset. Ey did not like what ey learned about the first stanza from that story.

So more food arrived to make up for the lull in conversation. We got an onion soup with a cheesy garlic bread served swimming so that it disintegrated and added a little weight to the stock. It was rich and dark and sat in my stomach like a rock, but it was mostly broth and so the sensation washed away with just a sip of wine.

Dear tried to console Codrin by pointing out that what Rye told us was a story about why No Longer Myself was forked, that it was a hopeful story about reclaiming an identity appropriated by the inevitable politics of the clade. Ey did not seem convinced, but ey did manage a smile when Serene blurted, “Leave it to Dear to solve an interpersonal conflict with art!”

We had our main course, then, of course, and what came was a generous fillet of salmon served on a cedar plank with tomato salad. After that runny affair, it was just what my belly needed. It was hearty and toothsome and comparatively light. I feared I might not make it to dessert with how wholesome the dish was, but the wetness of the salad had the effect of washing away that sense of fullness before it became sore.

One of the topics that came up between our mouthfuls was how Dear was calling it its “death day”. Codrin brought it up, and Dear shot em a sharp look. Ey raised eir hands and apologized, but I spoke up to ask why Dear’s idea bothered Dear. □□□□ explained that they three had agreed not to discuss that at the table tonight, to

which Codrin protested. “I thought it might lighten the mood,” ey said, and Rye agreed. The final course interrupted us before Dear could answer, naturally.

Dessert was a plain and simple flan. Its texture was luxurious, the salty-sweetness a delightful answer to the savoriness lingering on our palates and coating the dish. The serving size might leave something to be desired if not for the fact that we just spent the last two hours eating. I think all of us welcomed how quaint it was.

Dear sat in silence for a while after finishing its dessert, fiddling with its wine glass. Then something crossed its mind and it asked us to keep its next words in confidence, especially Codrin and □□□□. We all nodded, and it finally told us. It told us the obvious, of course, that they three would not be leaving any forks behind; that none of them will remain on the L5 System.

Then it said, “We will die, here.” It talked about how they would each be mourned and how they would only speak from beyond the heavens like spirits. Codrin looked uncomfortable. Ey murmured, “For a while,” to which Dear only answered, “Yes. For a while.”

The food was delicious. The meal was rendered joyless. There was something wrong that evening, and I did not pin it down until I read the History a few years later.

Motes: When do you think you began to take on this identity of the littlest sister? What inspired you to choose this role? How has it affected your relationships with others? How do you feel about all of it?

And We Are The Motes In the Stage-Lights

We were all of us, all of the fifth stanza, forked in systime 3, back when A Finger Pointing began to branch out. We began, as a matter of course, all but identical to her, both in looks and in temperament. However, we shortly began to diverge as we went our own way. Voces Sensuum became a thing. We took our jobs, and my job was as a stage tech, so I was the one building the sets, painting everything, minding the curtains, all of that sort of stuff.

It was actually while doing all of that painting that I started to think about what it was about me that differentiated me from my immediate cocladists. This was...I do not know, perhaps five years down the line? Something like that. By then, we had all started to go each in our own direction, taking those little specks of her that we had been granted after being forked and turning them into something uniquely ours.

I was painting and thinking about what was different about me that made me so unlike That It Might Give, our director, when I realized that I had sat down in a patch of wet paint. I had taken to wearing overalls at the time, because having all of those tools at hand, all of the little screwdrivers and paintbrushes and picks in my chest pockets while pliers and hammers lived at my waist. Something about wearing those paint-spattered overalls dredged up a memory from decades prior, and I could not but laugh about it.

I do not know why the image stuck with me. What was I supposed to do with such a thing? It was of when I was in kindergarten, a rolly-polly Michelle Hadje, somewhere in the central corridor, wearing her silly corduroy overalls and finger painting at her little table, getting tsked at by Miss Willard for sitting in a splotch of red paint.

“Oooh, your mother will be upset,” she kept saying.

It was just so silly! I was a kid, of course I was going to get messy.

And now here I was, 46 years old, lingering on a memory from nearly four decades prior and thinking back on that very silliness.

There are certainly some ‘life was simpler’ feelings about it. Life was simpler, was it not? No getting lost, no uploaded consciousnesses, no fretting about love and all the woes that hit us surrounding that phys-side. I suppose I wound up just leaning hard into that memory. I opted out of love. I started to own the playfulness of my attire. I started to own *playfulness*, period! It is so easy to forget the role that play plays in our lives, with our carefully delineated fun times that we must squeeze in around work and sleep and all sorts of obligations. Life is play, and that became my whole *thing* over time.

I found that that led to a change in the way my cocladists and friends treated me. They started ruffling my hair, trying to get me excited, playing around with me in the auditorium, all the good things that we do with kids and none of the bad things; after all, if they needed serious-Motes, they could always take a step back and talk with me like the 46 year old woman I was, right? I liked all of that.

At one point, I started to age down my appearance bit by bit as another way to lean into that. This came with a few side effects. Chief among them was the way that I was approached by strangers. Even from its earliest days, after a particularly disastrous experiment, a minimum age of 18 years was imposed on uploading. When I started to occasionally look younger than that, I was viewed with confusion, wariness, or even anger.

I was at one point pulled aside by A Finger Pointing and given a gentle suggestion (one I suspect may have been passed on from an-

other stanza) to be careful about this particular experiment of mine. I can very much see why, of course. There are plenty and sufficient reasons that someone looking young in a world with a lower bound on age would be viewed with disdain, and I would not always have the chance to explain myself.

Besides, how could I possibly explain via just my appearance that I was reclaiming a childhood that I had not actually lived? There is the childhood I had actually had, yes, and it was perfectly average, but here I was provided a chance to choose the aspects of childhood that I liked and discard all of the bad stuff. I could discard the emotional lability that led to tantrums (do not get me wrong, I still get them, and ma would kick my butt if I did not admit that here). I could leave behind the inability to understand simple social connections. I could claim that playfulness while keeping that hard-won intelligence.

In the end, I veered away from that particular exploration as not worth the social cost, though I do still look younger than most of my cocladists (except perhaps Warmth In Fire we are two peas in a pod): a comfortable 20 instead of their early 30s.

I like who I have become. I am a being focused on play, on existing comfortably in a role that I have carved out for myself. I am the babyest Odist largely because of this, yes, despite being...oh, what year even is it? I am three centuries old, and I am still the little kid in my stanza. I get called 'Dot', 'Mote', 'Speck', or 'Kiddo' (or, when I am in skunk form, 'Skunklet'). My stanza are my sisters. A Finger Pointing is the eldest, the one who loves and protects us all. (I call her 'ma' sometimes just to be a little snot, of course, but what is being the youngest sister without a bit of indulging in brattiness?)

All of this feels good to me. It is an affirmation that I am still

doing what is both good *for* me, and what is perhaps out of reach for so many others within the clade. What started as a memory of paint on trousers led to not just an identity, but an entire way of being.

*A Finger Pointing: Tell me about the weirdest
show you have ever put on. Not bad, just weird.*

-Found In The Hearts Of Many

Time Is A Finger Pointing At Itself

Time Rushes choreographed *Lubaenât Jaruvâtier Les Kupertam?* in the 230s, which grappled with the intoxicating experience of Artemesian skew as described by True Name. There was so much potential, so much curiosity, but there was also the miserable familiarity of the sensation. Capturing this horrifying stretching of the mind was the essence of the dance; having Sasha to assist us in interpreting the story certainly did not hurt.

Rainbow's End assisted us with some of the artistry we needed to depict the blurring of movement that the performers could not adequately manage with an animated fork. There were moments of uncanny suddenness that also required a great deal of fudging to approximate.

A key facet of the scene was the discontinuity between several subsets of the party, each portrayed in slightly different ways according to their relative skew; this had the effect of highlighting the perspective characters as if with depth of field, casting some in silent stillness and others in fluttering obscurity.

There was a sort of pivot at certain points in the choreography when this focus would shift from one subset to another, showing the party from another perspective. It began with the recorders, who scrutinized the statuesque cast around them, and ended with the protagonist caught in the midst of a blizzard of indefinite figures skittering across the stage.

It was difficult to make a story out of a dance when few had the context with which to understand it, but there was no better way to depict skew than with choreographed motion. It was one of the most challenging endeavors of Time Rushes' career, but it also earned us

some attention from the Artemesians over on Convergence thanks to AVEC.

My personal involvement was mostly in arranging consultation by various artists in an attempt to finalize the depiction of skew into what Rainbow's End ultimately made it. Serene, Bay, Elicit; they all contributed to the formulation of this production's unique image.

For whichever Odists this best suits: Sometimes, I will lead somebody around, down a given path of inquiry or to certain conclusions. To encourage them to ask “the right questions.” It ends up feeling like an elaborate game, particularly if they grow wise and lean into their part. Do you think manipulation of this sort is wrong, even when the purpose is benign or simply for play? For that matter, do you have any general thoughts on People and how they interact?

True Name and May Then My Name

The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream The

Artemesians have a word for this: *tuvârouni*; “push-play”, they called it, a tension in all our dealings with others that enables us to overcome the inertia of comfort. If communication is the means by which ideas are expressed and transformed, then manipulation is how we engage in this push-play; if we all felt the same to begin with, after all, then why have words at all? Communication is manipulation, so this playfully benign qualifier describes *teasing*, not harm.

May Then My Name Die With Me You are not wrong that communication contains at its heart manipulation. However it is more than just manipulation. It is more of a give-and-take than a push-and pull. This is the way in which people work: we make our arguments, yes, but we love, we dance, we offer and receive freely. You mention the framing of this question with its playful qualifier. That is a sort of boundary around the topic. Boundaries such as these must be kept. One must keep this push-play above board and open to dissent. Consent is to be informed, as I have said before.

True Name Yes; consent, after all, is ideally unambiguous and overt. But it is also true that consent can grow more playful, more implicit, more sly. This, I think, is an example of that *tuvârouni*, where one becomes more open to unanticipated, unplanned kinds of play. Play, perhaps, as in the insinuation that Ioan might grow some dandelions, yes?

May Then My Name I...well, you are not wrong, there. It became a part of our relationship as we grew closer together. I am not

sure that I would do the same thing, now, as the person that I have become; I would feel...well, manipulative. I do not think that would feel good at all.

True Name But you do not feel bad now. Do those dandelions not remain in eir lawn? I have seen you come in with a dandelion behind your ear. Do you both not cherish them? Do you suppose Ioan resents that you convinced em to grow some dandelions?

May Then My Name I will concede that point. You are correct. The dandelions remain and have not been uprooted. We both love them. That said, this growing of dandelions was intentional. I must have gotten that from somewhere, right? After all, I was pointed to em by you, and for the very explicit purpose of shaping the *History*.

True Name It was not solely for that purpose; I did point you somewhere that I thought was best for all of us, true. But that somewhere was towards someone who could lift you up after your previous relationship; who could understand and so fairly present the story of our clade to others; who could capture the history of the System with only the best of intentions. I held all of these in balance when I wrote you that letter, May Then My Name.

May Then My Name Do you feel that way still, now that you are getting coffee with em once a month?

True Name ...There is the sense that ey does not wholly trust me, and I am sore for that. I am sure that is in part because your relationship with em was all but arranged, for better or for worse. There is a cynicism in this kind of dual-intent. I stand by every word of that letter, but there was clearly harm in cou-

pling what was sincere with what had utility to preserving the continuity of the System, and for that I do apologize.

May Then My Name There was harm, yes, and I am not upset at where we have wound up and how. Both of these can be true at once. Both are true, my dear. And I must admit, it can be kind of *fun*.

Beneath The Roots! What is one of the favorite sensoria artistry things you have done?

And The End Of Memory Lies Beneath The Roots

A challenging question. I like challenges. Centuries of art and work taunt me, looking through my mind's annals. The more intense and unique the experience, the more it sticks itself out to be chosen. Some of these I cannot describe to you in words, I can pass you them in sensoria, experiences that words water down to the point of uselessness, and that is not in your question's spirit.

What to pick among those I can describe? Do I pick what I did for my own joy or as craft for others? Do I pick my best work? The work I am most proud of? Which moved me the most? Happiest art? Sexiest? Most transgressive? Pastoral? Which one I repeat endlessly and joyfully? Which one I can never perform again?

No—one grabs me. A man came to me. He stood tall. His shoulders asserted their broadness, and his chest barreled. His skin rivaled his hair in dark brown. His jaw cut angular. His short beard took sharp form from the nib of a fountain pen. His irises glowed a rosy silver. The deep green of his suit and shoes reminded me of brackish bay water in summer. No one intimidates me, but the singular kingliness awed me.

Apollo gifted my cocladist Slow Hours with prophecy, not me, but each time a regal man (sometimes a woman, sometimes any other gender or none at all, but usually a man) found me, I flipped a coin in my head. If one side landed, it predicted the man flouted his stature, sought me for the most banal of status things, and I either ran them out the door or charged them enough rep to fill an ocean. I bore as quickly as they do. They do not grasp art nor inspire much of it beyond satire, which they take as literal and bore me beyond belief. However, when the coin landed on the other side, it revealed

the face of this seeker. Some god carved him out of idealistic mountain peaks. Legends made men like this one. They I adored. They and I tread the same pilgrim's path. We soaked up so much of the world, we need wonders of incredible singularity to fulfill us. Stature found no purchase here, only a higher pull of tastes so refined they pushed the boundary and nuance of possible to the conceivable limit. So far, the prophetic coin succeeds every time. I heard it land and it shined blindingly on my inner eye.

He spoke. His deep voice, booming but smooth, flooded my ears. "I am worried my request of you is too simple. You are a busy craftswoman, and I would hate to unduly waste your time."

"A leaf flinging itself to the ground on an autumn wind ends an empire, with enough context," I said, "so no presuming. What am I gifting you?"

He took aback. "I will pay you for this, I would not presume—"

I spoke over him. "Experiences and art pay for themselves, and if I need Rep after I am done, we sort it out then. Lay out my canvas! Position my subject, as my paints hunger and my brush quivers for action."

He nodded. "Very well. I was in life an adventurous man. I saw and did so many things. The only thing that ever held me back was my body."

I said, "We live, and still live, in the System, not an afterlife."

He smiled gently. "I disagree, but in the end I don't think it matters. It was a life before this eternal one. I was bound by the limits of nutrition and genetics then. I can make a temple of myself, as I have here. My mother told me that me and my siblings were descended from a great king, who a millennia before had brought so much gold on a holy pilgrimage it devalued gold for the entire world."

I raised an eyebrow. “Do you believe it?”

He laughed. “I think it’s something a mother says to her children when they live in a shithole and she wants them to have bigger aspirations. It worked, certainly—those of us who survived got out and made some kind of life for ourselves—but I never truly believed it. Still, she called me little Mansa until the day I died. I think she wanted it to be true of me, in her own way. Perhaps I’m just indulging her even now.” He waved a massive hand. “I’m getting distracted. My request. As I’ve said, my body was frail, and I’ve been able to overcome all the limits that plagued me in the physical world but one: food allergies.”

“Food cannot harm you here.”

Dismissiveness shaped his expression. “No, not physically, but I would hope you understand it’s more complicated than that. I had *many* allergies, my whole family did. Tests caught most of them, but some caught a few of my siblings instead, very young. One or two, in front of me. Even as I know they cannot hurt me, I cannot bring myself to eat any of them.”

I nodded, said nothing. It required no reply.

He continued, “For all I love about this place, I hate that compulsions become so much more forceful here. This place gives the mind dangerous power, when memory is permanent and the past cannot fall away as it should. Do you have any allergies?”

“None. If I did, they never held me back here.”

“I think you know what I’m going to ask.”

I crossed my arms. “Say it.”

“I want you to eat every dish I’m allergic to. I want you to eat it as a regular meal, because to you it is a regular meal. Pass the whole sensoria to me, taste and sense of touch and whatever idle thoughts

pass through your head. Make it no occasion, not as a favor to me, make it as normal as taking a walk or going to bed, something you have done a million times without any conscious awareness of it.”

“Why ask me to do what anyone could for you?”

He scoffed. “Do you think most people could keep that up for more than a few bites? What do you take me for? I sought you out because there is no one like you, *And The End Of Memory Lies Beneath The Roots*. You understand the senses like a sculptor understands stone. And not just sensations, but emotions, experiences, habits, physiology, posture...When someone came to you, asking if they could feel the experience of being an entire chamber orchestra playing a piece, you didn’t just find musicians and take on their experiences. You forked a hundred instances of yourself, all of you spent a decade learning to play every instrument in the piece, and with yourself as the conductor, passed the whole fucking experience to him live in the concert hall. I’ve seen films of *The Expulsion of Blood*. I’ve been to your *Sensoria Cinema*. I read your paper on the potential of real-time no-fork transformation, and why it still may be impossible.

“Listen, I’ve tried. I’ve tried therapy, having it forced to me, every other possibility you can think of probably falls a few short. Part of me has given up. I’ve made peace with all of this. And I think that if I can just experience one normal meal with all of them, whether or not it fixes my phobia, I can finally let this all go.”

“Do you want me human?” I asked.

My words shocked him from his tunneling vision. “I...you’ll do it? You seemed...I don’t know. Does it make a difference?”

“I project to you every sensation. Those sensations come from

the shape of me. You spend all your time human, yes? You carry no discomfort in your form.”

“I spent so much time making this body I’ve never thought about another. I hadn’t thought about this.” he quieted a while. Then, “I think it has to be what you’re most comfortable as, not me.”

“Skunk fits me. People expect skunk as well. Human functions but skunk suits.”

“I want you fully relaxed. I want you not to think about me as you do it, or at least as little as possible, anyway.”

“I will turn off my fur as well.”

He looked at me strangely. I stopped sending him the subtle sensoria that iridescences my fur constantly. He observed for the first time a simple white skunk, medium height and medium wide, naked not sensually but visually, canvas not sculpture. Various white objects around the room shift-shined no longer, dull without perisystem parlor trickery. He pulled a chair and sat down. The chair groaned and he sighed back, his mind turning fast enough the eyes show it. I no longer stole his focus. He saw around him the room, mixed from artist home and loft and studio and conference room and kitchenette and foyer. I radiated him some calmness. Panic gripped many when they realized how I steered them, here. I gave his mind awareness of the glass of water next to him, placed hours ago. This process smooths business. Seekers bring expectations, and in turn I exceed them thoroughly. I dried him out, left thirsty impulse. He drank the water. What I could not calm the water washed out of him.

I speak only actions. Act upon me. I act upon you. He acted. Stood. Filled the water glass. Handed it to me. Spoke without speaking or sensoria. I comprehended. I sipped the water. He accepted the

sensoria, drank in my drinking. His face scrunched, nose twitched, Lips curled. His tongue licked the real teeth and the echo teeth.

He sighed again. We understood each other.

He followed me down the hallways and corridors and rooms of my studio workspace, following the nautilus shape further in to a drafting room. We planned. He conveyed his list of allergies, and it took half the draft table. It wondered me that he even survived to uploading.

We spent hours, finding every little detail, then went into the world to source supplies. We hired cooks, picked a venue, fussed over furniture. We procured a table large but not too large, chairs comfortable but not too comfortable, plates wide and plain, and I stopped him now and again to remind him this was for his sake, not mine. He laughed. He said if I did not enjoy the whole affair just a little it was wasting time.

He took on my senses two more times, enough to familiarize himself, but not enough to truly acclimate. I proposed a third, and he declined. He felt he stood at the line already. Two lines, in fact—the first obvious and the second unsaid. Professionalism needs upkeep, lest it decay. Clients fall for me —my work ennnatures such—and I fall for them less often, but enough. Sometimes one side or the other or both wise up and walk away. Sometimes it turns ugly. Sometimes beauty and passion win out and I fork for them. Part of me stays with them, loving, fucking, cohabitating. Very, very few last—but I accept the merges every time, and my understanding expands into new territories of pain and heartbreak and disgust and sorrow and vicarious joy and that particular viscosity of air in a room where arguments happened. I did not want this here. He, in his own way, own understanding and history, did not want it either. That, in my expe-

rience, only raised the risk of it happening, and I still do not know how we hold out without.

The day came. I dressed to memories, not sys-side, but as the distant skunk-not-skunk that uploaded us, back when we stood a fractured one instead of an ode's worth of people, and this choice of dress made itself from some incomprehensible pull. I fought not; the mind reasons below our reason. Beneath, you might say, the roots. I arrived with little fanfare. He sat already in the corner, out of view from me when I sat. I dropped all other sensoria, put a bead on him, pulled my chair...

...and I feasted.

I ate normally at first, then with vigor. I kept my tether to my kingly companion but beyond that I lost myself in it. desperation did not grip me, but I starved myself a day or two beforehand, so fullness could not stop me. The food pleased the palate, but held no pretension, it remained food. I used utensils and abandoned them in equal measure. I appreciated flavors, I enjoyed cracking nuts in my molars, I licked sauce from messy paws and ice cream from metal spoons. I ate not for eating's sake, when any calorie is taken with disregard for what provides it, and I ate not for occasion or ritual or presentation, where serving the food and the food's composition, its narrative overwhelms nutrition entirely. I ate a hearty meal at the end of a workday, and I ate it ten times over. When the plates showed their bare faces and I slugged the last bowl of broth, I sat for a good 20 minutes before turning to my audience.

He wept. Joy brings the most beautiful tears, and they ran over the soft mountainside of his face, finding new runs and waterfalls. Sometimes joy fountains so thick in these rivers that it camouflages as sorrow, but I watched many faces like this one. Whether or not I

succeeded that moment I did not know then, but it mattered not. I made art, and remembered then more than ever why I made it. Do not ask me to say. It spurns words, coherence. It fountains when it comes.

I do not, as a rule, become engaged directly with any patrons. The cases before, as I said, I meet with forks, never the core of me. Some individuate. All of them do, but the ones that last do it as an art in itself. The me that is me that is root and what lies beneath it, keeps a distance.

But I, the me-est of mes, still meets with Mansa every week for lunch. We meet at my studio and his estate in alternating fashion. This week, he brought a delicious seafood quiche lorraine with spinach and mushrooms, a bread made with peanut butter and 9 grains, topped with sesame seeds. A fruit tart with a delicious blend of almonds and pecans, and a strawberry-banana-kale smoothie with a delightful little straw made out of carrot. People enjoy role-playing servants and staff at his palace, but I do not need to ask him to know he made all of this himself.

*Do any in the Ode clade enjoy people-watching?
With the freedom of form offered by the System,
I imagine it becomes an even more interesting
hobby than it can be phys-side.*

If I Dream Am I No Longer Myself

My whole stanza, based off of the first line, focuses specifically on people watching. I, and many others, would honestly call it spying. They have been contracted by several individuals to spy on various people of note on the System. On Lagrange, Loss For Images and Even While Awake watched Ioan Bălan and May Then My Name Die With Me for nearly a quarter of a century, forking microscopic instances of themselves and secreting them around the house.

My initial purpose was, in fact, to step away from this. My direct up-tree instance, If I Dream, forked when she began to have doubts about this supposed calling. While she never did work up the courage to disengage with this way of life (or perhaps she did, I have largely lost contact, minus one fateful visit), I stepped away from the stanza to reconnect with the fourth stanza. They began by following creatives across the System before fucking off to do their own thing. I found that they did, indeed, largely just fuck off to do their own thing, and wanted little to do with me.

So that is what I have done, these last however many decades—is it nearly a century, now? I have sat in town squares and sipped my coffee as I watch the passers-by. I have sat in bars and drank countless terrible drinks, cheek resting on my fist as I stare into the mirror behind the bartender and observe my fellow patrons. I have gone to dinner, requested a corner table, and gazed out over the sea of diners.

I always do so alone.

I always wear a different shape.

I never speak.

I like it better this way, this observing. There is no goal, I

just...see. I just watch. Posthumanity is wonderful and disgusting and funny and sad and kinky and uptight and I love each and every last person I have laid my eyes upon.

Hold My Name: you have mentioned how Michelle “had her own gender-play” in the form of a breast reduction. What does this tell us about her particular gender experience phys-side? How does it relate to her orientation or her string of unsuccessful relationships? How are these things reflected or subverted in the Odists?

Hold My Name Beneath Your Tongue And Know

Michelle had a long string of unfruitful, short, abusive, and otherwise quite boring relationships back phys-side. She (for I do not call myself her anymore; she was her own person, just as I am) struggled with that, and that was actually the origin of her picking a skunk as her fursona. She said that she liked the aposematic stripes. “Stay away,” they said. “I am not for you to bother.”

Similarly, at one point she started to question just how much of her body was involved in how she was treated by her partners. She liked it okay, to be clear. She was chubby. She was short. She was cute! I remember her thinking that. There were times that she wished she was skinnier, yes, but most of the time? She felt okay.

Still, when she did worry about her body, it was particularly in how it played into her interactions with romance. She liked being cute, and wanted to be seen as cute, but did not particularly like the way that that played out for her. After a bit, she sought out a reduction. It was not expensive, nor was it difficult to achieve: a consult, a counseling session, and then a surgery, all in the span of a month.

The end result was not quite what she expected. It was not just that she was relieved of back pain—though she was—nor that she was treated differently with regards to her body—though that was also true—but that she was *happier*. She did not experience gender dysphoria, in other words, but after this change, she experienced gender euphoria. It was then that she cut her hair shorter and changed the way that she dressed. It was then that she decided to stick with skunk, owning it as a view of herself rather than simply as a response to some dick in a furry sim that she then met in person.

All of us in her clade have carried over that euphoria in some

form or another. Perhaps it is in the ways in which they look. Perhaps it is in the pronouns that they use (several use ey/em pronouns as another little tribute). We are all queer, in our own ways, and for some of us more than others, that queerness surrounds gender. I am a nonbinary trans woman. E.W. is a man. Dear's answer to the question of "What is your gender?" is "You are asking the wrong question" and Warmth would only laugh wildly in your face.

Serene,

*If you can pick a favorite, which landscape that
you have designed is yours?*

Serene; Sustained And Sustaining

I created a swamp some time ago. It is quite boggy and wet, with open water, banyan trees, and patches of what look like solid ground, but which are actually patches of water grasses that cannot support the weight of a person. Winding throughout it is a rotting wooden bridge-path that ducks between the trees and leads from patch to patch of those grasses, all but inviting you to step off and sink down to your waist in brackish and algae-slimed water.

It was quite poorly received—too many bugs, too poor a smell, too hot and muggy—and for that, I am deeply in love with it. This reception means that I am wildly successful in what I set out to do. I, haver of fur, am mostly immune to the bugs, and I can turn down my sensorium to deal with the scent, but I love walking between the trees, squatting on the rickety path and poking through the grasses, watching the gar and caimans float idly by.

What can I say? Even if it is not my overall favorite sim, I am a sucker for so imperfect a land.

How does the drastic mutability of one's form on the System interact with being trans? How has this affected the language cladists use to discuss gender? What does it mean to be trans in a world in which your sex can be modified on a whim to accomodate your needs?

To Deny The End, Is To Deny All Beginnings

How, indeed, do we define transness at all? Do pronouns precede the flesh? Does being trans require the body to change, or the mind? Does what one's body or identity was before uploading define what it is after?

By the "traditional" definition, a dated concept even by the time we uploaded, I am transmasculine, because the root of our clade was mostly a cis woman and I am masculine. It might be argued that most of my stanza is one way or another, since most of us use he/him pronouns. I changed my physical appearance, my clothes, my mannerisms, my everything. I am defined by what Michelle Hadje mostly was not. Some used to define transgender as a struggle, against the body, against societal expectations, against laws political or religious, against a role foisted upon us.

But it cost me nothing. If there is any remnant of a previous feminine self on me or in me, it was a conscious choice to keep. One can change everything about themselves at a whim, and the only obstacle is the memory of one's self. There are no rules, no fretting over surgeries, wardrobes, paperwork, no pressure against change.

It seems to me, then, that the *concept* of transgender must change, not just the language we use to speak of it. Asked about its gender, one of my distant cocladists irritatingly yet predictably answered "*You are asking the wrong question*". Loathe as I am to admit such, Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled was right. What gender means and is to the Ode clade alone varies wildly, never mind the trends of Lagrange or Castor or Pollux overall. We cannot define "trans" as an identity on changing gender alone any more, or to do so is not useful in the present.

I spent weeks thinking on Dear's answer, and if the question of someone's gender was the wrong one, what *should* I be asking? I came up with an idea: I put out into the System an anonymous survey, asking a variety of questions on gender and personal history, with an offer of a generous amount of rep for participating. The response was immense, and I had to rope a few friends and cocladists to help me collate the findings.

The results were varied, but two trends stuck out to me: 1. A great deal of furry or non-human respondents specified species or classification as a gender, such as "my gender is wolf" or "I identify as a catgirl", "I am a machine" etc. One entry, which I cannot decide if it is satire but *must* mention, said "I identify as a forklift and I will only date those who are forklift certified." For many of these respondents, there was no line between species and gender at all, or terms were oft-conflated, and they spoke about changing species with the same language and framing as transitioning genders. Throughout the 20th century onward, gender was discussed frequently in terms of roles, and is not species a role? Does it not come with expectations? Require performance? It should not have surprised me, but it did. 2. Regardless of species or gender or any number of factors, an astounding number of respondents who had transitioned in some form or another *did not think of themselves or identify as trans*. The pattern was largest in those who uploaded and cited dysphoria as a motivation, but the data was present in every demographic. In the vast majority of these cases, the individual in question forked until they had an appearance they were comfortable with, then settled into their life, never going back or changing all that much. More than a few seemed unfamiliar with terms such as trans or cis at all.

I was unsure what to make of my findings. I had sought out to

find a question, but only found the answers to it. *Why ask questions, when the answers will not help?* An answer, be it simple or complex, is not on its own enough for one to divine the question asked. I needed a shift in perspective, some other angle to view, to find the edge pieces of the puzzle. After days of thinking and overthinking, I finally thought to ask others. Just as I had been set upon this path by dear old Dear, I needed the perspective of someone else to point me to the trail again.

Among those who helped me with the survey was a badger from another clade named Jack, an investigative journalist who had aided me with research in the past. I asked if either of these trends were as surprising for him. He told me they made sense, since they both applied to his clade.

Naturally this excited me. “How so?”

“Well, your clade’s half humans and half skunks, right?”

“I do not have exact percentages, but—”

He raised a paw. “Hey, this ain’t rocket science, pal. Let’s say half of you got stripes, half of you don’t, give or take a fox or two. And like you said, it’s complicated. Your clade clearly has some feelings on species, and I’m guessing your root instance couldn’t make up their mind about it?”

It is a difficult subject matter at the best of times, but I did not want to digress too far. I told him, “It might be more accurate to say she was of two minds about.”

He smiled affably. “Plurality problems, say no more, say no more, I get it.”

“Plurality?” I asked him. Even then I did not understand the word or the way it, too, changed radically within the System. I un-

derstand it now, and I wonder how my cocladists think about the term and how, at least I feel, it applies to us Odists.

He frowned with concern, studying me. He must have seen that concern mirrored in me, and quickly returned to the matter at hand. Or, well, paw, in his case, as he gesticulated with it. “Enh, fuhged-daboudit. Not important. What I’m getting at, my man, is that part of your and your clade’s identities is that conflict. It’s affected all of you greatly, no matter where you end up.”

“And how does this relate to your clade?” I asked.

He grinned, and leaned back on the table covered in survey results, crossing one leg over the other. “Not a single member of my clade was ever human.”

“So your Root Instance switched at the first fork?”

He nodded his head and wagged a claw up and down at us. “There’s the first thing you’re missing, my friend. I pick my words carefully. What did I say?”

I frowned. “You said your clade does not contain any humans.”

“My *exact* words were *Not a single member of my clade was ever human*. We were not human before uploading, either.”

“That is not possible,” I said.

“If you will allow me a bit of conjecture here without digging too deep, I would guess that your root instance was a furry before uploading, and had some experience with being their fursona in Sims before uploading? And, if I may, being online as an animal and offline as a human contributed to their troubles over species identity?” I doubt I concealed the rising panic in me very well, because immediately he threw up both paws. “I can see I have hit a nerve, and I’m being reductive with the Odists here. It’s a lot more than that and I don’t know the half of it, but I’m trying to keep it easy. My

point is, those experiences and differences in Proprioception can mess with your self-image, especially if those ‘animal’ sensations feel more natural than your ‘human’ ones. I’m sure you see where this is going.”

And I did. His clade had no attachments to the feelings and shape of the human body, and that predated their upload. As long as those feelings had existed, they had never thought of themselves as ‘human’, and in the infinite mutability of the System, they never had to be one again. What did it matter to anyone if they had looked human externally before? The odds of running into anyone from pre-upload days are incredibly low without active coordination beforehand, and if, as with Jack’s clade, they had changed species and names in their first hours sys-side, they would be impossible to recognize anyway. Why carry such a useless distinction with you?

“Attaboy, atttaboy! He’s gettin’ it! And for my Clade, those good animal feels came up before we ever touched a sim. I can chase them back as far as our memories go phys-side. Hell, when I try to remember how I looked back then, I can’t even remember what the ‘human’ body looked like. I don’t look like I do now in those memories, but I am 100% grade-A prime cut badger, baybee, you love to see it. Asked around the Clade and they all say the same. They can’t remember us being human-shaped. If the System won’t let us forget anything, that should tell you how far back this all goes.”

I stepped over next to him, and looked out over all the surveys. Most of us had viewed them on tablets or screens, but Jack told me he had picked up the habit of physical paper from one of his cocladists, one who worked as an archivist. He said fighting with the pages and having to interact with them directly helped him spot trends, catch patterns as they emerged. I did not understand how he meant that

when the survey started. I was close to getting it in that moment. The question, too, that I was seeking grew closer. I could taste it, smell it.

I said to him, “Part of me thought that the framing of ‘I always knew’ was too reductive, a stereotype, something made easy and palatable for those who are not queer. We definitely knew a few people phys-side who said as much. Reframing it with species makes me realize I in turn reduced it. If that is how any individual sees themselves, who am I to question it? How can anyone?”

He nodded. “Feel like you’re closer to finding your question?”

I scowled. “Oh, absolutely fucking not.”

He laughed, and clapped a paw on my shoulder. “Well, can’t win ’em all, kid.” He waved an arm out over the table. “We got ourselves a banquet of food for thought and we gotta sit down and digest.”

We sorted responses for a while, and he smiled every time he caught me looking at him. After a while, the focus shifted from organizing by data points alone, and instead we began to group responses by what was most compelling in them. I felt in so many ways a fool. Some questions were really only redundancies, others useless, and I could feel the weight of the questions that needed to be in their place. I thought about what my responses would have been, but the silence of the room crept under my skin and I had to break it back out.

“Did you fill out the survey?” I asked him.

He shook his head. “I passed it around my clade, and one of these” —he held up a survey response— “is definitely a cocladist of mine, she’s hard to miss, but enh.”

I dropped my stack of results, half of them missing the lip of

the table and scattering to the floor. "What the fuck do you mean, 'enh'?"

He shrugged. "Enh, I mean enh. I got plenty of rep, I didn't have much to say."

"Oh, bullshit. You are not the coy type, that is an Odist thing." Why was I so angry? Why did this matter to me? I know now, but in the moment a part of me stood removed from all of this, a phantom fork not really there in the dark corners of the room, spectating, and he could not understand my sudden ire. "Why, Mr. Haveck? Why did you not fill it out?"

He wheeled around on me. "Don't call me Mr. Haveck again. Don't you dare. Call me Jack, or if you must, call me Haveck, but if you throw those two letters in front again I will walk out."

I stepped closer to him. Jack is not a tall badger, but my having almost a foot and a half on him meant nothing. When you chase stories the way he does, someone taking a swing is expected. He will not swing back or defend himself physically, but his pacifism makes him like stone. Still, I could not let this go. "Answer the question, Jack."

"Why's it such a big fuckin' deal if I didn't?"

"You literally never shut up. You have made a living out of having something to say. I only know you because you talk so much. You spent this whole afternoon explaining shit to me. Your choice of species is goddamn perfect because like any good journalist you badger the *shit* out of anyone who will listen and most of the people who will not. You *talk*, you *rant*, you *pontificate*, you *lecture*, and you *state the facts*." I was shaking. "You-You-You put on this whole fucking persona, the New York accent, the Spider Jerusalem glasses, the whole Columbo routine. You are a walking 20th century stereo-

type, a century neither of us ever fucking lived in, but despite all those layers of bullshit you live in you are *the most honest person I know*. You never hold back, ‘you tell it like it is’ and everything you do, even upholding this stupid fucking schtick, is so profoundly *genuine* in a way I have never known any other person to be. It is why I like you. Why I want you around all the time. Why I *wanted* you here, why I asked you for help. I nearly bankrupted myself for this- this-” I knocked more papers off the table. “-this shit that did not actually tell me anything without you here. It is all useless. Useless!”

I flipped the table over.

I cannot change the past, and I cannot forget it. It burns a little ember in the back of my head sometimes, and it hurts to speak of openly, but it is here for the same reason everything else is. It is a part of the narrative.

Jack took a few steps back in surprise. “Fucking hell, Denny-”

“Denny? *Denny*? Oh, Mister Haveck is a step too fucking far, but you are going to call me *Denny*?”

It might hurt Jack to read this, too, because in that moment he did the most aggressive thing I have ever seen him do before or since. Even then, he did not do it to hurt me, but to bring me to his level and pull me out of myself. He grabbed both collars of my zip-up sweater, yanked me down to his level and forced me to stare him in the eye. His face curled into the kind of angry snarl only badgers are capable of.

“Shut the fuck up and listen to me. Do you have any idea what your clade has put me through? Any idea? Because you’re right, I can’t shut the fuck up, especially when I see someone behind the scenes messing with things. Before I met you, before I even knew you were one of them, all my interactions were with the Eighth Stanza.

They, and that megalomaniacal son of a bitch Jonas they work with, did not and do not like me very much. They couldn't extort me, couldn't bribe or persuade me, and they couldn't force me to quit. And do you know what happens to people like that? I lost count of how many assassination attempts there were. They even got a fork or two. Wanna know the last one I remember? I watched my cocladist Miranda, a Lynx who got all of her muscle mass the hard way instead of forking, *throw a killer through a plate glass window with one arm*. I never found out if he fell all 30 stories before quitting but they stopped trying to kill me after that. I hated all Odists for a long time, even though most of you don't deserve it, and if I hadn't met you I still would. If I hadn't been walkin' public sims looking for a decent slice of actual proper New York pizza and stumbled into a cute guy, I'd have a grudge against you couldn't *fit* inside a sim. You. You got me, pal. Here's this fella, and he's thin and human, not normally my type, but he's tall and he has messy hair and he's really interested in the *actual* history of the System, which makes up for it. He convinced me that maybe I had the Odists wrong, that maybe I'm missing the Ode for the Stanza, and maybe just Jonas is the one who wanted me dead. I'm not so hard headed I can't admit when I'm wrong, I ain't no fucking saint."

His grip loosened a minute, then tightened, pulling me closer. The snarl faded to a scowl, but his eyes were full of tears. "And maybe, just maybe, the reason I started to fall for this new kind of Odist is because I sympathized. Maybe I've got a down-tree instance. Maybe she's a raccoon, but she'd slip into your Eighth Stanza like a glove. Maybe everything I am and everything I do is to not be the monster that she is. Maybe I've dedicated my whole life to being honest and spreading the truth because I can't handle that plurality

aside, when we forked after uploading, my origin is from indside of her. So maybe—" the snarl crept back "--maybe when I see the survey collecting what could be a dangerous amount of information about people, I get a bit nervous. Maybe it's bad memories from phys-side. Maybe there's some doubt I can't shake even when my gut says to trust you. Maybe I'm afraid he's been working for the others this whole time and I'm a goddamn fool. But even then, *even then*, I joined this project because I like you too, bud, and I needed to know what you were up to. I figured I could give you the answers in person. I *fig-ured* that if something was up and I needed to protect my neck again, I'd catch wind here. And when you start getting pushy about my answers, I keep my cards to my chest. Dodge. Deflect. Walk you around the block a few times. I've got a monster in my clade, and she's made me fucking paranoid. And now, I've fucked up the first chance I've had at a good relationship because I've shattered your saintly fuckin' vision of me. I am a *master* of bein' dishonest, Deny All Beginnings, a *professional* liar. It's in my core because of who I forked from, it's just that I have a choice never to be that person again and it's the only thing that keeps me from quitting for good when I wake up every morning."

He let go of me, not even shoving me back, just dropping his arms in defeat. "I should leave."

"Yeah, maybe you should. This whole fucking survey was a fuck-ing mistake."

"I'll see myself out." He said.

It may seem pointless to include this. That I have lost the thread of what you asked me about. That in dredging up an anecdote to make a point I have lost myself in the emotions of that memory. I have not told you everything. I have not been honest about what my

relationship to Jack was or is. I left out our discussions on sexuality, on polyamory, on what journalism or history is in the System. I could have paraphrased him after the argument, and left whatever feelings we have for each other out of this. I moonlight as an editor now and again, it would not be difficult.

I include this event because it, and what happened next, changed me. It became a part of me, as I let someone else into my life and into my gender. Perhaps it is not as irreducible as it seems to me, but in that way Jack and his whole clade affect others, I found myself then inside of a story, and I am so intertwined now I struggle to perceive myself from the outside of it. What language I use, how I speak of gender and transness, is informed by this, and I am powerless against it. It is part of the narrative, and the narrative is everything.

When Jack turned to leave, I went to do something petty. He had left his leather jacket on a chair. He could have forked a new one, but for reasons I still do not understand, I wanted one last jab before he was gone. I thought to grab it, to toss it to him and say something cutting and witty, leave some salt in the wounds we verbally opened on each other, to make both of us more bitter. What I did instead was tangle my legs in the overturned table, fall, and dash my skull on one of the many filing cabinets in the room. Both of us for a moment forgot we were in the System, I think, because I panicked at the wetness on my face and Jack rushed to me like a medic. He made sure I was stable, checked the gash over my forehead, and somewhere around him summoning a rag to wipe up the blood we both remembered that I was not at any risk of bleeding out. He collapsed near me, willed two iced tea lemonade cans into existence, and handed me one. We were quiet for a while, and the image of him

then comes to my mind unbidden often, back against a cabinet, one knee up, head down, staring into the can. He turned his paw back and forth, and the dim light of the room made the metal dance and shine. Jack's not a thin badger, by any means, but in that moment all his clothes seemed too big for him, like a little kid trying on his dad's clothes. He did not look up when he started speaking.

"The truth is, Denn—Deny All Beginnings, is that I also didn't answer the survey because I'm not sure. When it comes to species? Sure, that was cut and dry, no problems there. That part is so simple. Sexuality, too, that's an easy one for me, not my thing really, y'all have fun with it, I'm good. But gender is...not easy."

He looked up, but not at me, out into the distance, beyond the far wall of the room and well past anywhere I could follow. Some chunk of history caught his eye and his voice softened. "It's...our plurality, how we were as headmates, that was one thing phys-side. How we ended up forking and spreading out sys-side was real, *real* different, and reshaped all of us. Jane, my down-tree instance, cut the line and forked out as soon as we had the rep. She hated being part of us, and finally got her wish of a body of her own. She hated anything masculine about herself. She hated how she hadn't had much say in our appearance or wardrobe phys-side. She hated any part of herself that reminded her of her father. I wish the System would let me forget it; it's like holding a ball of hot metal. When she had gamed the System for enough rep, she forked hard, pushing as much of what she hated about herself into it, and bada bing, bada boom, baby, I finally exist in the flesh. She gave me a huge pile of reputation, bounced me out of her sim, and didn't speak to anyone in the clade for 50 years or so."

He shook his head. "I don't hate her for it. I can't, I was her up un-

til the split. And hell, some small mercy, she also pushed into me the parts of herself that liked what was masculine about us, that liked our father, that loved our clade and wasn't afraid to live up to all those high hopes certain people had for us. The reason I hate her is she became a fuckin' politician, playing spymaster, all this cloak and dagger bullshit with no morals, but hey, that's irrelevant. I'm getting sidetracked. She needed to do it. And she carried me with her up until she forked me, which hurt her just as much. She couldn't embrace or redefine masculinity like so much of the rest of our clade did."

He looked down into the can again, swirling it slowly. "I'm happy with who I am now, but Jane's resentment lingers like a ghoul. It eats at me, man. It really does. Makes me doubt myself."

I finally found my voice again. "You know, I do not know why he did it."

Jack finally looked at me.

I shrugged. "My down-tree instance. The...root of the stanza if you will." I was waving a hand in front of me. Even that early I picked Jack's habits and he started to pick up mine. So it goes. "All of us in the Stanza started with he/him pronouns, and most of us still use them, save Hold My Name Beneath Your Tongue And Know, who I am now realizing that I should have talked to in the first place. Shit. Shit shit shit." I shook my head. "Anyway, my down-tree instance chose to fork with he/him pronouns. The hell of it is, I have his memories, I can conjure him into my head or make a fork like him, but I cannot understand why he did it."

"Not at all?" Jack asked.

"No," I told him. "It felt like the right thing to do in the moment, but it was instinct. A gut reaction. 'This is what I need to do' but no reason, no goal, no motive. He just did."

“Denny, if there’s one thing I’ve learned chasing the truth above all else, it’s that a feeling is enough. So many people talk a big game about facts and logic and all that shit, but any sort of reasoning that doesn’t account for emotions is bullshit.”

“No, and I get that, Jack, I do, but...why? Why did he feel that way? Why did he do what he did? I am not my down-tree instance any more. We had some things in common, but when I go back to those memories, I see them with my eyes and not through his. I think about how I feel and what is important to me, and I cannot align it to his feelings at all.”

I looked down, and discovered what Jack found so appealing about staring into the can. The light that hit the tea inside reflected onto the inner walls of the can, shimmering. The liquid was murky, and there was a soft froth of bubbles along the edges. Here was my own reflecting pool, in a single serving. I let my thoughts sink down into the tea and swirled the can, washing them. Let some sweetness and some flavor give them a light bit of color. I pulled them out again, somehow with them clearer instead of the shade of the liquid.

“I guess I was expecting it to...I do not know, mean more to him? The more I think about it, it is a moment more than any other, even picking my line in the Ode, that defined who I became and what I am now. A decision made by some stranger, a man I barely ever was and now decidedly am not. How could it mean so little to him? And *did* it mean so little to him? Have I changed so much that I cannot recognize his emotions? Maybe I am giving him too little credit, pushing this expectation that we should have dropped to our knees, tears in our eyes, lifting our new hands towards heaven, as antennae, broadcasting love to a world and a creator that let me become what I am?

It should have meant more, it does mean more, but I project onto the past the sentiment of the present and punish it for not knowing the future. I never thought to ask him. I did not myself realize the importance of it, and by the time I did, it was too late.” The cut on my forehead had stopped bleeding some time ago, but the sensation of wetness remained. Somewhere I had begun crying.

“Too late? Are you not on speaking terms or something? I can try to talk to him, get him to—”

I shut my eyes and leaned my head back against the cabinet. The tears cut rivers down the soft hills of my cheekbones. “Jack, what does the name Qoheleth mean to you?”

My eyes stayed shut, but I know what he did. The mind does such an amazing job of filling in visuals when it knows the subject so well. I know Jack frowned. I know he tilted his head to the side as he said, “What does that name mean to me? It’s familiar...” I know the endless catalog of his mind found it, and when it did his face softened, and he looked down. I know how his snout moved around the soft *oh* that escaped him. I know the pity that filled his eyes. I know his paw came close to my shoulder, and I know he feared to touch me, unsure of where he stood after everything that had happened only a handful of minutes before. I know he slowly pulled his paw back. I know that now he never hesitates, because there are no barriers like that between us anymore.

“I was there, Jack. When it happened. I have nightmares about it still. Some of them I am the one up at the podium, or the assassin comes for me instead. I cannot stop reliving it. It is not like the deaths Michelle remembers, it is so *visceral* and so much more real here. He is gone. No forks, no miracles, no ghosts. He spoke of the dangers of permanence, and he was right, because I cannot now ever

get that closure from him.” I threw up my hands. “Am I just stuck with that forever? Hopeless before a question I cannot ask and stuck without answers even if I could.”

“I don’t mean to be indelicate, but it seems to me that you found your own meaning in his choice. What could he possibly have told you that you haven’t already figured out better yourself?” He asked, and took a swig of his tea.

“I need to know if I am allowed to call myself trans or not.”

Jack spit his drink everywhere.

I opened my eyes at that. “I need to know why he forked the way he did, so I can know if-”

“Are you serious right now?”

“He never called himself transgender to my knowledge!”

Jack started looking around. “This is a prank. This is a prank, right? Where’s the camera? Are you wearing a wire?”

I sat up straight. “Jack, I am being serious right now!”

He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “Jesus Mother Mary and Joseph, I am going to be the first person in the history of the System to have an honest to god aneurysm. I can feel the clot forming in real time, it’s incredible.”

“What if he did not do it for-”

The badger dragged his paws down his face. “We’re settling this right the fuck now. You are a man, yes?”

“Am I?”

He glared daggers at me. “Do. You. Identify. As. Masculine.”

“You know I do.”

“And your root instance, ah, what’s her name?”

I squirmed a little. “Michelle. Or Sasha. Kind of both? Michelle.”

“Is Michelle a cis woman?”

“I mean she was not *not* cis...”

“Fucking Odists, I swear to christ. For the sake of the argument, she was cis enough.”

“Okay.”

“She was a cis woman, you came from her, you are not a woman, ergo, you are transmasculine by the bare minimum of standard measures. If that is not enough, I will draw up a document, have it notarized, and give you a framed copy for your goddamned living room.”

I squinted at him. He waved it off. “Listen, you would not believe the amount of ‘functional small town government’ sims there are out there. Weirdly a very universal desire of mankind.”

We laughed, and Jack summoned up another can for himself. I sighed. “I still would have liked to hear his thoughts about all of this.”

Jack nodded. He leaned towards me, raising his can. “To Qoheleth.”

“To Qoheleth,” I answered.

“To he who died in the pursuit of Truth,” he said solemnly.

“To he who died for daring to speak up,” I answered.

A clinking of cans. The taste of citrus and tea. A few more tears. A hug. An offer of a hand, one man pulling the other to his feet. A righting of a table. A scooping of papers. A lingering question.

“Do you think it is healthy, Jack?”

He paused for a moment, a stack of answers in his hand, but did not look at me. “Healthy?”

“All these people, not acknowledging that they are Trans, that they chose to change themselves?”

“Well, *Deny All Beginnings*, you tell me.”

“Qoheleth talked about how our inability to forget was driving

our clade crazy. It does not feel right to act like what we came from does not shape us if we cannot let it go, either.”

He set the folder down, and turned to me. “I don’t know if it’s *healthy* or morally *right*, but it’s what people *do*. The System is really amazing in that way, you get so much more say in what the narrative of your life is. I was ‘human’ at some point, but I never feel the need to acknowledge it, because I feel it bears so little on the story of me.” He began to unbutton his shirt. “Do you think I’m transmasculine?”

I nodded. “If my coming from Michelle makes me trans, and you came from Jane, it only makes sense.”

He undid the last buttons. “Well, true, but there’s a wrinkle I don’t think you know. Jane herself is transfeminine. Our root instance is too. When we uploaded, we had been transitioning for the better part of 2 decades. Does that change your answer?”

I chewed my tongue a moment, but my thoughts coalesced quickly into a simple chain of logic. I shook my head. “Why should it?”

He opened his shirt. On his chest, there were top surgery scars. “Going against the grain twice made me who I am. Jane hides her transness from the daylight, much as she holds it dear. There’s no physical trace of it on her anywhere.” He tapped the scar on his left with a paw. “I keep it close to my heart, but I wear my heart on my sleeve. It’s the same reason my cocladist Miranda built a gym for herself. It’s the same reason I suggested using paper to look at the results. The process affects the end goal. It’s not just about how the story ends, it’s about how we tell it. What makes us trans isn’t just the end result, it’s—”

“—the narrative.” I said.

He laughed, and buttoned up his shirt. "I'd say that this was all a hell of a long way around to get to the point, but uh...."

I smiled. "Thanks, Jack."

He walked past me to grab his jacket. "Hey, well, you know me." He spun it around himself, sliding his arms into it effortlessly. "Always a sucker for a good story." He tugged on it to straighten the collar. "And god only knows every last one of you Odists is a novel the size of a cinder block, fuckin' A. Catch you around, Denny boy."

He walked around the table, and just as he reached the door, he forked. One of him went through the door grinning. The other turned on his heels to face me. "Just, ah, one more thing, Mr. Deny All Beginnings."

I raised an eyebrow at him.

"Would you be free for dinner this friday night?"

I ask you this:

What is it to Deny something?

Denial is a weighted word,

One we see too oft as negative.

To Deny can be an act of power

To Deny an enemy a victory

To Deny we are bound to the past

I came from Michelle,

but I Deny that I am her

I came from Qoheleth

but I Deny he made me

I am an Odist true

but I Deny my clade defines me

I began as human

but I Deny I am bound to my species
To Deny the End
Is to Deny All Beginnings
but should I Deny what happened in between?

I ask you this:
is transness a Denial?
is that a Denial in itself?
Do you Deny All Beginnings?
or do you Deny that they define you?
Do you Deny the body?
Or do you Deny that you are beholden to its shape?
Do you Deny the narrative?
Or do you Deny that transness is just a Denial?

Perhaps I no longer speak well for the rest of my clade when it comes to matters of gender. Perhaps the way Jack's clade conducts themselves has altered my narrative irrevocably. In the end, it does not change anything.

My name is To Deny The End Is To Deny All Beginnings, and I am so very, *very* trans.

Now if you will excuse me, I have another date with a badger.

*To those Odists engaged in the performing arts:
Not counting instance artistry (Sorry Dear), do
you ever opt for effects that would have been
impossible phys-side? —Found in the Hearts of
Many*

Time Is A Finger Pointing At Itself

Dear and Heat And Warmth are both inspirations for Time Rushes and Motes and I. An integral part of our more spectacular productions involves construct, instance, and sim design. Of course, not everything is so *modern*; most of our work is done analogue, although I do tend to go ham on the theatres themselves.

In those hazy days when reputation had much greater significance, we depended upon these particular shows to promote Au Lieu Du Rêve across the greater System. I am relieved that the Exchange has deflated so much as it has; we are less bound to the whims of popularity and can focus exclusively on our own creative endeavors.

We do still indulge in spectacle from time to time, however. Our audience is about as impressed by such things as we are, and roping in *artists* rather than *designers* allows us to lean into that in a way that better suits all our tastes.

Take *Spiro kaj Simpleco*, for instance. This was an example of immersive theatre, a collaboration with Serene and Rainbow's End to produce an interactive set using a sim cast entirely in impressionist textures, audience and all.

The audience was asked to indulge in an autumn afternoon with the cast, with little dramas scattered about and a few planned to jostle those who came near out of an awkward silence. The filter Rainbow's End created cast the warmth of the Sun and fog of breath across blurred and broken faces in buttery yellow and wispy white, leaving the audience guessing as to who was who.

This had the effect of rendering otherwise trivial conflicts impossible to follow. The scenes *themselves* were impressionistic. Each

conflict was, on its own, meaningless; bantering partners and nagging down-trees and overbearing friends. What the audience was meant to find in this work was the peace that fell over every silent moment, the landscape that as often blended with bickering blobs as not.

Perhaps the production could have been replicated phys-side, especially when considering the proliferation of exocortices during the 23rd century. For a truly impossible feat, you may have better luck asking a Sevgili.

For Dear: Tell us about one or two of your less successful experiments in identity and instance art.

Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled

Speed dating.

I set up a series of events perhaps a century after I began this particular focus on instance art wherein I constructed a large circle of tables, twenty in all. Each of these tables was set up to seat two, and each was split in twain down the middle, for the chairs sitting along the inner side of the ring of tables sat upon a dais powered by subtle machinations.

You see, I had invited twenty individuals to come and join me for a round of speed dating—they sitting along the outside and my various mes sitting within—and that dais was a clock. Within, a second hand ticked time inevitably forwards, and every fifth time that pointer reached zero, the dais would click forward as well, skipping each of me forward one space every five minutes.

This was the mechanism of the speed dating: my ephemeral cocladists began all the same, and yet as we ate this lovely meal together, this hours-long evening, each was subtly changed by the conversations we had all the while. Every time we would come back to a person we had seen before, we had changed, just as they might have, by the ongoing conversations that we had had in the interim. We were aiming to build rapport over a series of ongoing periods, learning more about each other, while my various mes did their level best to keep information straight in our heads. We had begun to intuit, by this point, the endless depths of our memory, but I had yet to learn to control it with quite so much finesse. My experiments to date had been successful, yes, but accidentally so.

Now, I say ‘ephemeral’ above, but that is not how it worked. Of course it is not how it worked. I am clever, am I not? I am very clever! But I am not smart. No one has ever accused me of being burdened with an overabundance of wisdom. Many of us couples—not all, no, or even most, but

many—did wind up pairing off and spending more time with each other. I know that, at least as of about systime 175, some of them have even entered a long-running relationship and remain together.

An outstanding success, yes? Somehow, out of all of me, out of all of my cleverness, I succeeded admirably in my goal of toying with forking, toying with identity.

An outstanding failure.

There was me, standing primly as ever at the center of the dais atop the second hand, slowly turning around the middle of this circle once per minute, observing down along my haughtily lifted nose as the events proceeded. When it was done, when I had greeted all of the guests personally to learn their sentiments about this little dalliance of mine, I went home, feeling some hollow sense of pride.

An outstanding failure because I am myself, yes, but I am also Rye and Praiseworthy, and thus I am also Michelle Hadge. Michelle, with all of her own failed relationships, all of her loneliness, all of her desire for comfort and companionship, and no matter how hard I tried to cherish my own loneliness as a prize, I never quite managed to succeed at that particular experiment.

Though they serve no direct purpose on the System, so to speak, are the various implants that are so ubiquitous phys-side still common on System residents? Does deciding to dispense with them or leaving them on vary by demographic?

What Gifts We Give We Give In Death

I am familiar with one case of an individual electing to keep their implants post-upload...and even as they adopted a form more suited to their inner self. Said individual refuses to be named, but would like to state for the record that they, quote, “spent too much money on these damn things to give them up in this millennium”.

Odists who is eepy and neeby to sleeby.

Time Is A Finger Pointing At Itself

There was a time when I was not this weary, withered thing I have become, a time when I was vibrant and vivacious and full of life. That vitality has since been drained from me, replaced by all the migraines and dissociation and vertigo of someone exactly as old as I am.

I first coupled with Beholden in a haze of dance and drink. We took each other home and indulged in that secret affection that was then taboo, touched one another in those ways only cocladists can. It was the beginning of a serial fling, that the beginning of my first and only enduring romance, and that the very romance I carry with me twice over.

Five centuries of fondness dwell within me. How many more if I count all those ephemeral forks, all the parallelized adventures, all the thousand parties I attended as three aspects of myself: A Finger Pointing, Unbidden, and Beholden? To know is to take inventory of all the memories accumulated in millennia of subjective time; to know is to spend millennia dwelling and adrift.

I crave sensation. I wish to experience every lovely thing the world has to offer me and, having seen it all, spend my second spiral looking deeper than first impressions. Perhaps the third will be to savor the impermanence of it all, to prepare myself for my own inevitable *mitat neshikah*.

Temperance was never my style before the launches, but something in me broke that night. I sometimes feel the world around me fall apart into an incoherent haze of information. It is like looking at a dream taken literally without any of a dream's intuition or impression. It is the inspiration for *Spiro kaj Simpleco*, a smattering of

unintelligible imagery coupled with the infuriating sensation that there is some inaccessible meaning to be found.

This restraining of my neophilia has made me a revenant of hedonism. I am at times gravely disturbed by that which I cannot indulge. I feel chains weighing heavily on my spirit, coercing me into a senile stupor where I would really rather bask in the Sun or get high with some friends or listen to Beholden's sampled music or find someone fun to bring home. Or all of these at once! That was always a beloved opportunity when it worked out.

Instead I am caught up in thousand-yard stares as the world around me ceases to have meaning, falling in and out of presence as my mind grapples with overstimulation, lost in a haze of frustration and pain and discomfort. I feel as if swallowed up in a silence that relentlessly beats on my eardrums with abandon, driving me to a resigned sigh and the words, "Please, take me home."

Beholden To The Heat Of The Lamps

Yesterday, after spending a while talking on a bench in a lazy park, she said, "Walk me home, please," and of course I did. It is so often me who hears "Please, take me home." It is so often me who is confronted with A Finger Pointing's age.

We are the same age, yes? We are both of Michelle Hadje, yes? We were both born in 2086, we both uploaded in 2117, we both lived latent in that one mind. Yes, she was forked first. Yes, I was forked from her some years later. I am precisely as old as she is in a very fundamental way.

But I am also not. I have been the same 32 for centuries, now. 32 by numbers, of course; I have been many different people as my

identity and the way in which I move through the world as evolved, but I still *feel* 32.

My love does not.

I have had to learn a new way to love. I have had to keep an eye on just how rambunctious I am with her. She has asked me explicitly not to stop, but...well, some weeks back we lay in bed and, when I clutched at her in the heat of the moment, she pulled back in pain and overstimulation and began to cry, and then I began to cry for this unintentional pain I had caused to someone so dear, and our third was left in baffled panic.

Her world will dissolve around her and I will take her gently by the arm to bring her to the couch or our bed and I will make her tea or sit beside her in kind-but-fretful silence or go lay down on the couch in my music room for an hour.

Do not get me wrong, I remain absolutely head-over-heels for this woman. I am going nowhere. I will *always* be by her side.

But on those nights or afternoons or mornings when she speaks of the sudden and painless kiss of death, when she clenches her eyes shut and the blanket is too heavy, when even my presence is too overstimulating and I go and lay down on my couch, I am at my most exhausted.

What do you think about phys-siders? You have the endless expanse of centuries laid out before you, when they so often have but a handful of decades. It all seems so terribly tragic.

And The Only Constant Is Change

It is all so terribly tragic.

When Douglass joined us, he hoped to meet his ancestor here at last. He rather idolizes her, something that only amplified the tragedy of his arriving when he did. But he has all of us, her up-trees—direct or indirect—to tell him ninety-nine stories about ninety-nine Michelles Hadje, and the promise of many more to be told by our unspoken forks.

In death, I mean to say, the memory of who she was is quite literally preserved in us. And, with our perfect recollection, we each hold a piece of the story about what she became on the System. In this, we are bathed in fortune.

But there are *plenty* who look to the System with fear. They raise objections as to the continuity of self, a natural observation from those whose closest brush with oblivion is most often sleep. We dispersionistas take for granted the significance of quitting, even when preserving another self.

Motes and Heat And Warmth falling over one another a dozen times, wrestling with each other in an ephemeral game of leapfrog, must surely horrify those phys-side who warn of transporter paradoxes as each tail-end instance yields to the next and quits. How macabre the squeals of laughter must be to their ears, how unsettling the smiles on their faces as they settle in the grass with glee, overjoyed at the serial murders they both have just committed.

And then there is time. It is easy for us to forget about phys-side on account of all the System has to offer us. Easier, still, for the only faded memories we can have are of the world before, and many are so miserable. Some of us came here seeking to help reclaim the

Earth, and nearly as many eventually succumb to escapism.

There are the families we left behind, and if we are not careful, they are gone before we know it. Those flicker-lives yet bound to Earth are still our kin, as Ioan was painfully reminded when ey at last looked into what became of Rareş in eir absence. Many who came here before the 2170s look to the prospect of immortality with *relief*. Many of those who came after, pointedly, *did not*.

Why did Rareş not join his sibling when the years began to take their toll? What life did he live so worthy of death? Did he set a headstone for Ioan when ey uploaded to fund his education? Did he mourn when his sibling did not write him as frequently as he would have liked?

It is all so terribly tragic, but I do *not* pity them.

Dear The Wheat And Rye Under The Stars

Of course it is strange to inhabit the Earth no longer,
To follow no longer the customs so newly acquired,
To invest no longer with future humanity
Such promising things as roses,

...

And being dead is full of the labor of catching up,
As one gradually acquired a sense of eternity.—
But the living always make the mistake of too sharp a
distinction.

...

In the end, they need us no longer, those taken in youth.
One gradually weans oneself from the earthly...

... But we,

Who need such great mysteries, for whom out of grief
So often comes blessed improvement—: *could* we be
without them?

— Rainer Maria Rilke

Serene:

*Tell me about the desert, if you would. Tell me
about sand, wind, and sagebrush.*

Serene; Sustained And Sustaining#Castor

I have made two deserts of note, and I am quite proud of them both.

I will start with the second desert. It was the barrier between Castor and Convergence. While the goal was to provide a naturalistic entrance to a space that, in actuality, required a rather slow transit time. One would approach any number of crossing points, each marked with a customs office, that would allow one to pass through a pedestrian gate and be whisked off to the other space in a rush of heat and warmth. It is a bit of magical realism, perhaps, but the desert is no less real.

It is too hot in there, even for me, but it is quite pure for that. The sands shift in the wind, form the hint of a crust that a paw might crunch through, slip and slide along the faces of dunes before tumbling down the leeward side. Very few people think to go in there, but I have. I have turned down my sensorium and bypassed the safety protocols and stepped out into the sand for days and days at a time.

It is an empty place. There is no end to the sand. There is nothing out there, I think. Perhaps it will someday resolve based upon a hidden desire, but for now, it is a procedurally generated forever.

It is beautiful.

The first desert that I built, however, is one that I am even more proud of. This was a century and change ago back on Lagrange, back before the launches were even a dream. I built a desert based on what I remember of a brief trip to the Sonora desert. This was a desert of sage, of cactus, of more rock and stone than sand.

This one is not a forever, it is an in-between. There are two city sims, each created by a friend, and they decided to merge. They did

so by building an arch facing each other, and in between them, they contracted me to build my high desert. A dusty, well-worn set of tire tracks travels between them, and, while I am sure that most simply step from city to city while ignoring the desert, it has become something of a pilgrimage for many to walk that trail.

It is not wholly safe, mind. The cactus spines are sharp. There are javalinas and snakes and scorpions. There are washes that will flood in a heartbeat with little to no warning if there is rain up-slope. Mild thrills, to be sure, but thrills nonetheless.

What very few people do, however, is walk out to the mid-point between those two cities and turn in one direction or the other and walk perpendicular to the trail. The trail is a simple three to four hour hike, but there is an additional two days hike to either end until one comes to either an impassible canyon or a tall fence built of metal posts; the boundaries of the sim itself.

If you do that, you will find that you very quickly lose sight of the cities, and are left with the sounds of the wind or the coyotes or the rattle-crack of thunder, joined only by the saguaro and barrel cactus and prickly pears, the scent of sage burning in the back of your nostrils as the heat beats down on you.

I love all of the sims that I have built, and always promise myself (and my clients) that no environment is to be favored over another. I am a liar, though. This desert, this high desert, is my favorite among favorites.

It is a small lie, a harmless one, but the desert is my favorite.

To those Odists so inclined: What is the best worst bar or restaurant you have ever been to? Not best, not worst. Best worst. Can you tell me about something particularly memorable off the menu?

To Deny The End Is To Deny All Beginnings:

Oh, man. Oh, *man*. Have I got one for you, I have been really into punk and metal lately, and I stumbled into a hole in the wall. It is called The Mohawk, and it is a *mess*. The outside of the place is dirty, the street is half finished, and the inside is even worse. It is barely 20 feet wide if that, bar is cramped, the stage is too small, the food is terrible, the bathrooms are miserable for everyone, whether you want to use it for a hookup or bothered to keep biological functions like that in the System, and the acoustics of it are *atrocious*. It is so bad.

You will see the best show of your life there. You will have a conversation that changes your entire outlook on something. You will make out with someone in a drizzling rain out front, and find yourself marrying them 30 years on. It is the kind of place that everyone eventually ends up at when you run out of suggestions, and it is, do not mistake me for a moment, a shitty place with shitty drinks and usually pretty shitty music, be that the sound tech's fault or the musicians'. But it is also where one drink or one wave of the hand or one snippet of conversation overheard becomes the moon that pulls on the tides of fate. If the rumors are to be believed, that is all *by design*. It is wonderful. It sucks. I love it so much.

The most memorable thing on the menu is the Poutine, a traditional dish from the northern parts of the Western Federation, made from gravy, french fries, and cheese curds. I say it is the most memorable thing on the menu, because it is the only thing that is actually good. It stands out like a boulder in a field of shitty roses. As I understand it, it is a favorite of the owner of the sim, a strange Shamo chicken by the name of Felicia King. Order the wings first, it is a tra-

dition to be disappointed by them as your first food, then order the Poutine and complain about how the wings just are not as good, and it is a ripoff how much they cost. This will start a fight somewhere in the bar, and time-old rites will be honored.

I am there at least once a week, and I will buy you the worst beer you have ever had phys-side or sys-side.

Or a watered down soda. I get that not everyone drinks, even in the sim.

To any and all Odists, Do you have any unofficial long-running instances at some The Party? If so, what names have those instances taken (if they have)?

And The End Of Memory Lies Beneath The Roots

I constantly seek new experiences and feelings and emotions, so as to keep my life's work fresh and exciting. My forks range everywhere in disguise or openly, and I step out in their place, gathering and consolidating in me, constantly reviving the soil that is "And Memory Lies Beneath the Roots".

My cocladist I Must Set No Stones Between Me And My Actions constantly feeds me the hip and new around the System, and no gift parallels when he informed me of the party.

Those kids know how to get deliciously fucked up. Few if any sources touch the amount The Party taught and teaches me.

My delightful double, The Life of The Party Lies Beneath The Roots, sends me endless notes, the occasional fork-and-merge, and a dreadful new kind of hangover every few months or so to keep me on my toes. I hate the crashes and withdrawals. They delight me to no end. So intense, these new ones!

The Party costs me instances at a hilarious rate. The counter on my desk ticks up every time one of me wanders into it and celebrates themselves right out of existence. They crash or subconsciously quit, hitting new highs and lows constantly. Party Roots, as she calls herself, keeps tabs on these poor flies in the honey trap as they go through, and mails me "highlight reels". The one who stole top spot played a saxophone for three years straight without even taking a breath, then simply dissolved when she stopped. No one found a core dump. I would have killed for that merge, can you even imagine? Three fucking years! Apparently many cladists, including a number of my own instances, still try to break the record, but the two month mark breaks many a musician's back.

Party Roots does me great service, for I know if I myself ever go to The Party, I will not come back, and I am not cashing out yet. My queue of eager patrons, fans, patients and commissioners extend well into the next century, and I leave no one behind.

Beholden To The Heat Of The Lamps

The Party is as up my alley as any one thing might be, though for reasons different from Party Roots (although holy shit, the sheer number of samples I took from that sax solo before she escaped saxsara is nearly ten times that of any other source of samples in my library).

I attended one of the first The Parties way back in the early days. I spent a few days there, counting that enough time to enjoy before returning home to my partner, exhausted and sated. I had had a good time, but we were busier back then, with so many of us working at Au Lieu Du Rêve full time, and forking was not quite so cheap. I came home with a rollicking headache more from the noise than the hangover (though *also* from the hangover, of course) and fell back into work the next day after I recovered.

Cue me, three months later, figuring I would go and check if The Party was still going—after all, I had made good friends there!—only to find the sim mostly abandoned. A few stragglers were there, noodling around, drawing on the walls, but the sim was all but silent.

“Did The Party end?” I asked one. “I thought the goal was to run it for at least a year.”

They smiled to me dreamily, clearly caught up either in some internal music, the throes of some party drug, or both. “Ohhh, nah, it just moved two stops over.”

“ ‘Two stops’?”

“Yeah, yeah. Increment the tag by two and search the directory until you find a public sim that matches.”

I will admit to being caught off guard by this. It was such a delightfully stupid scheme. There were starting to be enough public sims by now that this was actually becoming possible. I checked the sim’s name—Partybox#1159aacd—and ticked up the tag by two.

There on the listing were five public sims with the tag #1159aacf. The second one down made me laugh. The Dankest Dungeon#1159aacf. Fuck yeah. This was going to be *fantastic*.

If this was going to be the way of things, a dedicated fork would be necessary. I renamed her Beholden To The Flow Of The Crowds and stepped back home, eagerly awaiting the first merge.

“Hey, thanks,” Flow said.

“Yeah, yeah, no problem!” Their smile widened to a grin. “Heyyy, you look soft. Can I have a hug?”

Flow laughed, gave them their hug, and stepped back to The Party.

She sends me merges every few months, and will occasionally reconcile to pool our work on various bits of music, since we both learn plenty while she is away. Every few years, she will get tired and either go live with someone she has met along the way—she was even married once, I believe—or will simply merge back down, only to reappear down the line some years later to head back out, or perhaps she will get frustrated. She punched an attendee once, and while everyone else agreed that they were deserving of such, she took that as her cue to step away for a bit.

She performs at the various The Parties she has been to, sometimes set up on instruments (she played drums along with Party Roots#Sax for a while), sometimes running an electronic music set

for days on end, but most often, just keeping the music going in her head and letting anyone and everyone ride along on her sensorium to listen along with.

It has been one of my longest-running long-lived forks, even if her existence is not constant. The bad times are vanishingly small in the face of how much of that time is absolutely lovely.

*What's the weirdest or most unexpected species
an Odist ended up settling as?*

Serene; Sustained And Sustaining

I spent six months as an oak standing beside a river. My roots ran deep and I drank of fresh, cool water. My boughs reached high and I felt that striving for the sun. My wood was strong, my bark was thick, my heart was alive and green with sap.

It was also incredibly fucking boring.

*To the Ode clade - What is the most beautiful
thing you ever saw?*

May Then My Name Die With Me

There is a moment at the very beginning of every relationship when their eyes light up on seeing me, and I can sense the gears finally mesh within their minds and they think, “Holy shit, I think I am in love.”

I am not immune to this, to be clear. I will be getting closer to someone and they will be doing the most innocuous thing—with Ioan, it was em changing the ink in one of eir fountain pens, leaning down with eir eyes almost level with the desk, the tip of eir tongue peeking out from between eir teeth—and I will think, “Oh gosh...I love them, do I not? I really do.”

I am sure that we all have our own answers, but for me, it is that moment. That is the most beautiful thing that I have seen.

Do you think it is possible to know others better than one knows themselves? Is truly knowing anybody to that level even possible?

Hold My Name Beneath Your Tongue And Know

Given the circuitous path I have taken with my own identity and how long it took me to figure out just why that fit so well, and given the rolling of eyes that I received when I told my down-tree instance But The Dead Know Nothing, I think I ought to say that it is most certainly possible for others to know one better than one knows oneself, even if only on the level of a microcosm.

“I think I am transgender,” I said, and she laughed in my face. She laughed!

“Oh, honey,” she said. “I am quite pleased that you have caught up at last.”

Odists who still remembers (unfortunately)

Which Offers Heat And Warmth In Fire

When Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled, my down-tree, sought to forget the Name, I was a fork it left behind in the event that its attempt would render it unwhole in some way. This endeavor was a great feat, mind; it asked of itself something that, as far as we knew, had never been done before.

In this time, it was still a skunk; it was still a woman. It was during this process that Dear became what it became, that excitable fennec whose tongue was sharp as a knife. I do not come from this Dear; I come from the Dear before, the Dear who still remembered the Name, the Dear who *decided* to forget the name through this great effort.

So I sat and read my book and waited while it took a walk. I was there for some hours, contemplating what it might become—what *I* might become, really—and the significance to me of the Name. I will not betray Dear's confidence by confiding a why that I did not ultimately embrace, but suffice it to say that I had second thoughts.

Dear did not. When it returned, beaming, now a fennec, its pronoun markers changed, its poise somewhere between Michelle's willingness and Praiseworthy's enigma and Rye's attentiveness, I saw someone who was me only hours ago. I saw this someone and knew if I quit I would become it.

I would become it and, as it informed me it was satisfied, forget the Name. After these hours alone with my thoughts, I looked upon this too-familiar visage, this haunting echo of a ghost I always felt, and felt *dysphoric*. Some of what it became was appealing; I liked that it was smaller, that it leaned into a sort of creature-queerness. Those were traits I later embraced myself.

But there was this *irreverence* that rankled. Its body had been made into a transgression. It was incredibly hot to think about the likes of True Name or Qoheleth meeting it and averting their eyes as if from some sudden nakedness. Dear's very existence was a kind of nakedness we were *all* all too familiar with. And I would rather have ownership—*sole* ownership—over my identity.

So I smiled, set my book aside, stood, bowed, and stepped from the sim. I made a point not to speak with Dear for some months lest I corrupt my own intention. I notified it, of course, that I intended to take on the name Which Offers Heat And Warmth In Fire, but I spent most of that time feeling a kind of near-regret.

One method to make a difficult decision between two mutually exclusive options is to first flip a coin; when it comes up one or the other, you may find yourself relieved or suddenly overcome with regret. It is in this relief or regret that you learn which you most want. In that time sitting in wait for Dear's return, I learned I did not want to forget; I wanted to move *past* the Name.

And I did, in time. I started to learn about construct design; I recalled how, in those hazy days when the System was young, there was a great need to recreate those things we take for granted. Who will reinvent the apple, the chive, the plate of lasagna? A cladist still feels hunger if they do not tune their sensorium elsewhere, but the System did not come pre-loaded with ingredients or meals; someone had to *make* them.

I was late to this party; I was forked in Systime 57, and all the heavy lifting had already been done. So I decided I would find those who remembered less widely-known foods, particularly obscure fruits, and interviewed them in the hopes of recreating these memories as best I could. I met all kinds during this time, but also Qo-

heleth, for I took an interest in archaic fruits as well. It was through him that I first brushed shoulders with My.

She became a sort of gender role-model for me, demonstrating the appeal to me of trans transgression, of being deliberately difficult to define. Why difficult? For her, it is confrontation; she is what she is, and she will not hide herself whether it is clear or unclear what, exactly, she is. She is a *trans* woman; a woman who is, pointedly, trans.

And I was that skunk who was then neuter, like Dear. Some years later, I became this skunk whose identity sloshes from phrase to phrase between queer woman and creature-queer and nonbinary. Some find it annoying to perform gender with me in embracing the cycling of pronouns that I have settled into, and it is in that very transgression that I find my euphoria.

In this euphoria, I reclaimed my identity from that need that led Dear to do what it did. I became comfortably ambivalent towards the Name in terms of self. But there was still this implicit relationship that all Odists must grapple with more or less, and it was through construct artistry that I came to terms with that gut-wrenching memory.

That memory of our friend who was taken from us for nothing. Of our friend who was so traumatized by what happened to em that the void never stopped calling. Of our friend with whom we dance in every waking moment—in our dreams too, really—and with whom the act of forking or creating a construct is a kind of wordless conversation.

I could not face that memory every single time I made a thing or played with Motes or forked to solve some scheduling conflict. There is, frankly, no compelling plot here; I spent decades leaning into this

art with the intent to find my own way, to lean not on this unspoken presence. No particular words of wisdom, no definite experiences showed me the answer.

One day, I realized my thoughts drifted elseward without much effort. I thought about em when I thought about em, not just because I was forking or dreaming something into being. I realized this and I breathed a sigh of relief.

Is it at all common for sims to simulate other forms of simulation that pre-date the System? By that I mean things like, say, video games from back before the invention of the exocortex (ranging from old arcade games to those limited early “VR” games, headsets and all to those big clunky physical flight simulators) or, heck, even the experience of using the 'net back before upload.

What Gifts, Time Moves Forward, and Motes

What Gifts We Give We Give In Death There is quite a lot to be said about games within the System, but with regards to this question, there is something of a split when it comes to games of the past. This split boils down to the idea of realism. Those games that strove for realism were often ported into similar experiences sys-side. After all, if you are going to take a narrative walking game that took place either on a console or rig in non-immersive mode, it would make plenty of sense to simply set up a sim for mechanics. An example would be the delightfully quaint game of Everybody's Gone To The Rapture, wherein this twee British town in the 20th century is the origin of the slow ascension (or at least disappearance) of the human race. You walk around, following an orb of light, which provides audible and visible scenes for you to watch. I helped a games historian set this up along with aid from Serene.

The more abstract the game, however, the more likely it is to simply be ported along with an idea of its hardware into the System. For VR games, this may come with the concept of a headset, though really this is a prop that modifies the user's sensorium.

Truly ancient games from the earliest history of videogames are simply ported wholesale, complete with blowing out cartridges to make them load more readily.

If I Walk Backward, Time Moves Forward For newer interactive art—and I know that you did not necessarily ask, but What Gifts's Rapture game reminded me—this has been blended quite thoroughly into interactive theatre. Perhaps Dear could

explain the complex interactions with instance art as well, but from my perspective as one who works closely with interactive storytelling, the difference between one of our experiences and one of What Gifts's is negligible, except perhaps on attention paid to physical setting: we are less likely to work on sims as environments instead of focusing on the idea of a setting created by our very own hands.

And We Are The Motes In The Stage Lights I am as much a fan of our sets as anyone. That is my role within the fifth stanza, after all! However, I would not so quickly dismiss instance art. They are three different names for the same idea: there is a story embedded in interactivity, and the only difference is the attention paid to various detail. What Gifts pays attention to mechanics and environment, we pay attention to story and sets, and Dear (and, to a lesser extent, Heat And Warmth) pays attention to the mechanics offered by the System!

Time Moves Forward I mean, sure, kiddo, but that is because you have a terrible crush on Heat And Warmth, and ey is Dear's up-tree instance, and ey has a crush on Codrin. They were—and probably still are on the LVs—so sweet together! Cooking delicious food and chatting about flavors and scents and gustatory history.

Motes I do not! Or...well, perhaps I do, but that is beside the point! We are just nerds of a type, you know? And that type just happens to be lovely and you know it!

What Gifts You are both intolerable nerds and I love you for that.