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A Post-Self story

Madison Rye Progress
with Samantha Yule Fireheart

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Motes Played

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Post-Self books

The Post-Self Cycle
by Madison Rye Progress (as Madison Scott-Clary)

I. *Qoheleth*
II. *Toledot*
III. *Nevi'im*
IV. *Mitzvot*

Clade — A Post-Self Anthology
Various authors

Unintended Tendencies
by JL Conway

Marsh
by Madison Rye Progress *et al.*

Motes Played
by Madison Rye Progress & Samantha Yule Fireheart

Ask. — An Odist Q&A
Various authors

Learn more at *post-self.ink*

Note: this book touches on the plots of The Post-Self Cycle, as well as that of *Marsh*. It is still a standalone novel, but might benefit from having read those works first. They may all be found *post-self.ink* as paperbacks, ebooks, and free to read in the browser.

Content notes: themes of suicide and poor mental health.

Dramatis Personae

Your Humble Narrator
Dear The Wheat And Rye Under The Stars

The Woman
To Pray For The End Of Endings

Her Friend
I Must Show No Hesitation When Speaking My Name

Her Therapist
Where I May Ever Dream

Her Cocladist
Should We Rejoice In The End Of Endings

Her Lover
Farai

The Oneirotect
Which Offers Heat And Warmth In Fire

The Child
And We Are The Motes In The Stage-Lights

The Instance Artist
Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled

The Blue Fairy
I Remember The Rattle Of Dry Grass

And am I born to die?
To lay this body down!
And must my trembling spirit fly
into a world unknown?
A land of deepest shade;
Unpierced by human thought.
The dreary regions of the dead,
Where all things are forgot.

Soon as from earth I go,
What will become of me?

— Charles Wesley

End Of Endings — 2403

×

Rye — 2409

1

Once upon a time there was–

"A king?" my little readers will immediately say.

No, children, you are mistaken. Once upon a time, there was a woman. She was not a fine woman, not a prize to adorn your arm or to set beside you at the head of a grand table, but a simple woman — the kind we pass on the street and imagine some plain home life for. She has a house, one might think. There are floors and walls and windows, there are tables and chairs and sofas and beds. There is a shower and a claw-footed bathtub. There is a creaky step — the eighth — that she always swears she will fix.

We must imagine such a woman happy. We must imagine that she has friends and that she goes and drinks okay wine or maybe strange cocktails with them at the most absurd bars. We must imagine that she comes home, wobbling slightly with each step, with some other simple woman on her arm. We must imagine sharing their kisses, being happy together.

We must imagine these things because they are not true.

I do not know how it happened, but one cloudy day, she was asking after her friend most pure and then her mind was turned all in on itself, was wrapped and folded three times, turned, and then wrapped and folded thrice more. Some malicious baker

kneaded and kneaded and kneaded, and when next she woke up, sixteen hours and twenty three minutes later, her mind remained in some unknown, integral way tied up into knots.

But that was three hundred years ago.

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The Woman wanders the world some few times a month, stepping out into unknown nowheres and known somewheres to be seen, to be perceived as still existing. I do not know why she does this, but it is important to her that someone witness her existing. It is a ritual she follows around like a little puppy: she will not know what will happen when she first does it properly, but she hopes it will be something wonderful.

The Woman has many rituals.

She has rituals for eating food, for feeding the vessel in which she makes her home. There is no order in which she properly consumes food, she may consume it in any order, but there is an order in which she must appreciate food. You must understand: she must do this for everything she takes into her body. She must look at it before she touches it, must touch it before she smells it, must smell it before she eats it, and before all of these she must say a prayer.

She has rituals for getting dressed, for clothing the form with which the world sees her. She must choose a garment that fits her body and one that fits her mood. You must understand: every time she gets dressed, there is a moment of scrying into her deepest self and estimating how it is that she feels that day. And should her mood change, should those feelings shift, she will find her clothing itchy and uncomfortable, and if her form

becomes not what it once was, her clothing will become uncomfortably tight or perhaps she will disappear down into the folds of fabric.

She has rituals for entering a room, for passing through a door. She must touch the door frame beside her shoulder, must brush her fingers against the wood or stone or metal or some more abstract substance. You must understand: she has to do this for every door she walks through, and for this reason, there is a door in the house where she lives that was built by a friend of Her Friend that leads directly out into a city. She opens the closest door and steps out onto a concrete sidewalk lined with trees and passers by, where the sun shines bright and the air burns cold in her nostrils and the dry leaves skitter anxiously about her feet. As she steps out, she can brush her hand to the door frame.

I do not know where these rituals come from, and perhaps some of my readers will immediately say, "OCD? Does The Woman have obsessive compulsive disorder?"

Perhaps she does, perhaps she does not. I do not know, friend. I *do* know that there are obsessions within her, yes, and I am sure that these rituals feel compulsory, but there is something different about The Woman. She is too present. She is too much herself, too human, too embodied within her vessel as it spirals out of control, too stuck in her mind as it twists in on itself. She is less struck by a disorder than she is struck by a constant overwhelm, a constant overflowing.

The Woman uploaded when she was overflowing. She lived within that overflow for years, for seven years she was overflowing, she was trapped within her mind and within the vessel of

her body, and she lived as best she could as her body spiraled out of control.

Readers, you must understand that she was in so many ways whole still!

She campaigned for herself and for the others as damaged as her, but I think this was borne out of trauma and desperation as much as it was care for her loved ones lost and found.

She campaigned after uploading for individual rights for uploaded minds, before they were even cladists, before forking and sensorium messages and all of the other benefits that the System has to offer.

She was whole because she maintained — even while overflowing, I think! — so many deeply held convictions that those around her need not suffer, even if she herself did. Especially, she would say, because she herself did.

I think that she would say, however, that she was *too* whole. I think she would say that she was *too* full, too much, too alive. I think she would say that almost three hundred years of a life that was lived as hers was, with her mind turned in on itself, was too much life. I think she would laugh that hoarse, dry laugh that always sounded like tears were on the way, and say that thirty years was probably too much for her.

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"I wish," The Woman said some decades after Michelle Hadje/Sasha uploaded, after she became End Of Endings of the Ode clade, of the tenth stanza, "I wish I could unbecome."

Her Friend frowned and replied, "Do you mean you wish you could die?"

"No, I specifically do not mean that."

"What do you mean by 'unbecome', then?"

"I mean that I wish I could go through the process of becoming backwards."

"I am guessing you do not mean that you wish you could come apart."

The Woman laughed and shook her head. "No, though if I had to line them all up on a scale, I would prefer coming apart to dying. I would just prefer to unbecome more than that."

Her Friend was a good person who always treated The Woman well. Ey knew just how to talk to her, just which questions to ask, just when it was okay to offer a hug and when to hold back. Ey was a therapist of sorts, or at least someone dedicated to understanding the vagaries of the mind, someone who sought ever to reclaim different aspects of a less-than-ideal life, a less-than-ideal past.

"Do you know what that looks like?" Her Friend asked.

"Not yet," The Woman said. "Not yet."

"Is there a time when you will, then?"

"I think so, just not quite yet."

×

Every few years, there would be a gathering on her birthday — their birthday, for Her Friend was also of the Ode clade, also of Michelle Hadje/Sasha — and they would sit somewhere, whether it was out on the porch of the home The Woman shared with the rest of the tenth stanza, or out on the dandelion-speckled lawn, or, once the door had been built into the house, on rickety chairs outside a cafe over identical coffees.

Every time they would meet up thus, The Woman and Her Friend would take a few minutes to themselves to have the same conversation:

Her Friend would ask, "Have you figured out what unbecoming looks like yet, my dear?"

"Not yet," The Woman would say. "Not yet."

"And have you any idea on when you might?"

"Not yet, no."

And then Her Friend would ask The Woman if ey could hug her, and she would usually say yes, for she saved up her energy for these parties, and ey would hug her and lean down to whisper gently beside her ear, "When you do, be sure that you tell me, End Of Endings. I want that you feel good above all things."

"Yes, No Hesitation," she would say. "I want you to be there with me, if ever I figure out just what I mean."

And after that, they would go to the rest of the party.

I think you would like to see these parties, friends. I think that they would not be quite as you would expect, of course. They are not the kinds of birthday parties that you or I might have. Where we might have cakes and singing and the blowing out of candles, they would gather together over simple foods — so many from the tenth stanza had such sensitive tastes, and it was so easy to make sure that everyone could eat everything! — and often they would simply sit silent. They would sit there, quiet, but present in each other's company.

They would not seem to be parties like you and I have because this was not all that different from what might happen once or twice a month at the house in which the tenth stanza all lived. While each lived their own lives, occasionally, their sched-

ules would coincide and they would all sit down together at the giant oak table together and eat, mostly in silence.

Some of them shared rooms, you see, but mostly, they kept to themselves. They lived together in that big Gothic house plopped right down in the middle of a prairie of green grass and yellow dandelions, out where the stoop stepped down directly into the grass, but I say 'lived together' in a very mechanical sense. They never shared meals intentionally, nor even spoke all that often to each other. It is just that, sometimes, they would all find themselves at table at the same time!

So the only difference between parties and those days when they all found themselves eating together was mostly that this time, they actually *meant* to, and these were the days when, most often, more than one of them would invite over a friend or a guest.

The Woman invites Her Friend over more than any of the other members of the tenth stanza invite others over, except perhaps back when Should We Forget was alive, and Warmth In Fire would come by to give her little gifts and toys, little trinkets and special snacks that she would divvy up and share with the rest of the stanza in little unlabeled envelopes.

But Should We Forget was no longer alive, not since the world had turned in on itself and had eaten so many of those who lived within, and now that meant that The Woman, out of all of those who lived together, there on the field, brought over company most often.

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When Michelle/Sasha had quit, there on a field so similar

to the one that she lived on, The Woman breathed out a sigh of relief, because she knew — though I do not think she know how — that Michelle/Sasha had found her own relief in those last moments. She had looked up to the sky, up to the Poet, up to the Dreamer who dreamed the world in which they lived, and in those moments she knew relief. She knew relief and she knew joy and she knew so, so much peace.

Peace! That was one of the things that The Woman craved. She wanted nothing more than to know a little bit of peace.

No rituals.

No overflowing.

None of this shifting of form that would strike unawares, for there she would be, sitting as pretty as could be, just this woman, just this short, round woman with a round, pale face and curly, black hair, and then with a cry or with a whimper or with a sigh of defeat, her very form would shift from beneath her. Her conception of herself would slip from her grasp and she would cease to be The Woman and instead be The Skunk or The Panther. It was always one of those three, for some days, she would be happily The Panther, and then a bee would land on her nose and tickle her whiskers and she would sneeze herself into a skunk.

I think it was cute sometimes, and I think she would say the same. I think she would say, "Oh! Oh! Look at that!" and then she would set to work brushing her tail. After all, what else is one to do if they found themselves to be in possession of such caudal beauty as is a skunk?

This is why The Woman had so much trouble with clothing, you see. She would try to look deep within herself at her moods to see what it is that she felt and how it was that the day might

go and she might come up with a pretty skirt that felt good on her legs and a lovely shirt she liked the look of, but then, some time later, the shirt would be puffy with fur and the skirt would not sit right with her tail.

No rituals. No overflowing. Just peace. It is hard to experience peace when one is too human, is it not?

2

The Woman decided to go walking one day. Perhaps she was driven by restlessness. She had an errand to run, sure, but this day she decided to go out rather than perform this task at home. Perhaps she was bored! I do not know.

Either way, she was feeling good and she was feeling stable and she was feeling feline, so she found herself a nice set of slacks to wear over her legs, ones that looped up over the base of her tail in such a way that the same would be just as possible with a skunk's tail, and yet which would not fall down for those moments when she does not have a tail.

She found herself a nice shirt that felt good on the fur and which would not look too weird if she poofed out into a skunk. It was not her favorite shirt, I am sure, otherwise maybe she would wear it every day, but it was good enough. It had the word 'fiend' scribbled across it in angular, glitchy graffiti, and The Woman is absolutely allowed to feel like a fiend some days.

Thus clothed, The Woman stood for a while in front of the mirror and admired herself. She felt good. She felt good, reader! It was not often that she felt more than just okay. Because even with all that I wrote about before, her life was not bad. It was an okay life. She liked this life in her own way. Her thoughts on

unbecoming were not thoughts on suicide, I do not think.

She stood before the mirror and preened for a moment, adjusting the way her shirt sat and fluffing out her slacks to see how they might fit with a thicker coat. She combed her claws through her short fur to straighten out some mussed-up spots and ensured that her whiskers were all neat and in those rows that cats have that she always found fascinating.

The trip to the city was as it ever was. She said to herself a little prayer and opened the door to her closet. Taking a deep breath, she stepped through, and as she did so, she brushed her fingertips against the jamb as ever, and today it felt right enough that she stepped lively out onto the city streets, out where the leaves skittered anxiously around her footpaws in the faint February breeze.

Stuffing her paws into her pockets, she made her way down the street, where her entrance was located, to the main drag. The city was on the small end — more large town than full on city — and so it was still the type of place to have a main drag, a street built for cars that it does not actually have, with wide sidewalks paved in brick and a trolley that ran down the middle.

The Woman waited for the next trolley car to come and stepped aboard, tucking her tail down and around her leg as she held onto one of the railings — she never sat, and never could tell you why — to ride it for three stops. This was part of the ritual. Even when the car was busy and she was not feeling so good, there was a part of her that was happy that she got to stand on this trolley and hold onto this railing and feel this rattle-buzz of the wheels rolling along the track through her feet or paws. It was not even particularly pleasant for her, I think, but it *was*

fulfilling.

She made it her three stops and stepped easily from the trolley to find herself before her usual coffee shop. There was so much comfort in routine sometimes. Not all routines are rituals, after all, sometimes there was just a coffee shop that you really like because it makes good mochas and always gives you extra whipped cream without being asked.

And so that was just the routine that she engaged with.

Once The Woman had her mocha with extra whip, once she had one of her usual tables over by the windows, once she had taken a seat, then at last she let her shoulders relax, let the tension drain out of the small of her back, let her tail curl around a leg of the chair so that she could simply exist out in public, just sit in her chair by the window and watch the life of the city roll by outside and listen to the rumble-chatter of the coffee shop and, in turn, be watched, be heard, be witnessed.

×

The Woman loved a good mocha — even I love a good mocha! — and so she was plenty happy to go to the coffee shop every now and then to pick one up, to sit by the window and watch and listen to the world go by, but this was not why she is here today. This was her errand.

That day, The Woman was here because Her Friend had asked to meet up.

This was not how this usually went, you understand. Usually, The Woman was upset and asked for Her Friend to visit her, or perhaps she was out anyway and simply desired company on this errand or that, a friend for dinner or coffee or a walk along

the shops to peruse the latest trends in fashion or oneirotecture or sensework. It had ever been the case that The Woman contacted Her Friend, and not the other way around.

Her Friend was always so stable, always so ready to speak and so ready to listen. Ey was the one who had long ago gotten in touch with her, with the whole of the tenth stanza, and started to talk to them and listen to what they had to say. Not the only one, no, but it was important to The Woman that Her Friend had sought her out, had cared enough to seek her out.

That had been in the context of learning more about The Woman and her stanza, though. It had been in the context of trying to understand what made the tenth stanza the tenth stanza. There had been an offer of help, but a very gentle one. The Woman had been the one to accept that offer, but more than that, Her Friend really did just want to learn, rather than teach, to listen rather than talk.

Her Friend really did just want a friend, too, for the seventh stanza were all friends with each other, she was promised, and yet they had their own struggles. In Dreams was, she was ever promised, eager to help, eager to teach and to learn and to listen and to talk. There was advice to be given and the knowledge of psychology gleaned over however many hundreds of years now on offer — was it really nearly 300? There was–

"End Of Endings?"

"Ah! My dear, my dear," The Woman said, pushing herself to her feet to bow. "A pleasure, a pleasure. Please, sit, if you would like, or I am also happy to walk."

Her Friend smiled faintly, bowed in turn, and pulled out the ratty chair across the table and fell into it heavily, eir own iden-

tical mocha set before em. "How are you feeling, my dear? Well, I hope?"

Returning to her own seat, The Woman nodded. "Quite well, yes. It was a quiet and comfortable morning, and it was an easy trip here. The house was calm and the coffee shop is calm. How are you, though? You sounded...well, I suppose you sounded uncomfortable. You sounded like you were trying to be quiet."

"I was, yes." Ey laughed, looking sheepish. "I do not know why. I was in a cone of silence. I suppose it must have been a mood thing."

"And how is your mood?"

"That is actually what I wanted to speak with you about."

The Woman furrowed her brow, whiskers and ears both canting back. "*You* wanted to speak with *me* about moods?"

Her Friend leaned forward, resting eir arms on the edge of the table. "Well, I wanted to speak with a friend about my moods, yes? That is what we are, yes? Friends?"

She laughed. "Of course, my dear. You are my best."

Her Friend's smile grew more earnest. "Thank you. That feels better to hear than I expected."

"So, tell me of your moods, then. Tell me why you were uncomfortable and felt the need to speak quietly."

"Well," ey began, blinking a cone of silence into being over the table. "I suppose it is In Dreams. It is a few of them, actually."

The Woman nodded, lifted her drink for a sip, sighed. "You have had mostly good things to say of them."

"Mostly, yes."

"But not always."

"Yes." Her Friend turned eir mug lazily from side to side

on the tabletop, not yet drinking. "Not always. There are times when we mesh quite well. Most times, even. There are times when we will go for morning runs and stay together in a group, but there are also times when we will lag behind, me and a few others. There are times when we will all eat together sitting around one table or having a picnic, talking about our days, and there are times when we will retreat to our own homes and eat by ourselves or with our partners."

The Woman averted her eyes, nodded. "As we do."

"As you and yours do, yes," Her Friend said cautiously.

The topic had been fraught for nearly sixty years now. Those meals were lovely, to be sure, as were the times when they would talk or sit in silence together, out there on the field, enjoying warmth and sun or perhaps the light of the moon.

It had not been all of them for sixty years, though. Not since Death Itself had died, her and I Do Not Know. Not since they had fallen into catatonia and then smiled, shrugged, and quit. Not five hours later, I Do Not Know had sighed comfortably, turned over in her bed, and then quit as well.

Fifty-eight years since the last meal they had all shared together.

Even so, The Woman — her and her whole stanza — insisted for years that it was all of them who ate together, when the remainder of the tenth ate together. *All* of them, all together. They insisted on that, friends, just as they insisted on leaving two empty chairs at the table, two plates of food set before them.

With a deliberate motion of sharp-clawed paws, The Woman drew a definitive line across the table, defining an arc around her. With this, she blocked the topic off, reflected the thoughts

of loss and trauma away from herself, out somewhere else. It was a practiced motion, smooth and careful, and one that Her Friend knew well.

Ey nodded, understanding, and continued. "The reasons we might not eat with each other or that some of us may fall behind on our runs are varied, of course. There are long-standing shifts in the way the stanza works together, yes? It has been a long time since we have been so alike. Sometimes, however, it is a little thing. One of us will say something that rubs another the wrong way and it will take us time to work it out. We will write our letters or have our conversations and it will be fine in time."

"Is that what happened this time?"

Her Friend hesitated. "Yes," ey said carefully. "I said something to In Dreams, I said that I was feeling unwell, that my stress had been high and that I was worried I might be overflowing — or at least on the brink of such — but also that I was feeling particularly rough about the Attack. I was feeling grief and loss."

The Woman's breath caught in her throat.

When I tell you that breath is important even sys-side, you must understand all of the different roles that it plays. We are built to breathe, you and I, and so is everyone else. We can turn that off, sure, but the vast majority of cladists find such uncomfortable. Not Breathing still feels like holding one's breath, yes? Even without the rising CO2 levels in our blood — blood that we must only imagine that we have — it is uncomfortable to feel like one is holding one's breath for too long.

We use breath for speaking, and even though I am not speaking to you right now, I am still breathing. I still feel the warmth of my breath against my paw as it brushes across the page with

each line of text. We use breath for gasping, for sighing, for even snoring!

So when I tell you that The Woman's breath caught in her throat, you must imagine the way your breath might catch in your own throat when suddenly you hear something that causes a rising tide of emotions that takes precedence even over that, even over breathing. You must picture the way that you feel when, if you were to breathe, you fear there might be a whine of fear or a moan of terror — or even pleasure, because we are no less susceptible to that.

And here, now, The Woman was feeling most of all grief. She feared that, were she to let her breath out, it would be that whine of fear, that moan of terror, a wave of tears.

The tenth had left two empty chairs and two full plates at meals until three years prior.

Now they left three.

Her Friend, either knowing or seeing this, averted her eyes, casting her gaze instead out to the street. "I am sorry, my dear. I was indeed feeling grief and loss over Should We Forget. No Longer Myself as well, yes, and Beckoning and more, but the one I knew best was Should We Forget. I am sorry."

The Woman let her breath out most carefully, not letting it shake, not letting her lip quiver. "I understand, yes. You knew her as well."

"Perhaps we can speak simply of the fallout."

She bowed. "I would appreciate that, yes."

"Of course, my dear," Her Friend said, smiling, nodding her acknowledgement. "The fallout of this conversation with In Dreams was that she told me that perhaps I ought to schedule

a session, either with her or In Memory, or, failing that, someone outside the clade."

"Is that what you wound up doing?"

Ey shook eir head. "I did not need that, my dear. I did not need to be told to go to therapy. I did not want to schedule an appointment." Ey finally took a sip of eir mocha, but this seemed to be less about the coffee than an opportunity to gather eir wits. "I just wanted a friend, honestly. I just wanted a hug — no, I understand, perhaps not your thing, but I must be earnest, yes? — but instead, I got told to find a way to *fix* this. Fix grief. Fix a very real pain."

The Woman's features softened and, steeling herself for the touch, she reached across the table to pat the back of Her Friend's paw. "I understand, No Hesitation. Would that I could offer more. I am happy to be a friend, though; I have no interest in telling you to go to therapy."

"Of course," ey said, smiling once more. "I trust you of all people in that. I know that you have mentioned — however kindly — in the past that you have worried that I am simply providing you with therapy on the sly, but I trust that you know that is not the nature of our friendship."

She nodded.

"All I wanted was to be close to someone who would not do those things."

"Yes, of course. There are many memories bound up in all of this, but there is also joy, yes? Joy that we are still here? That is what I have been trying to focus on."

"Oh? How so?"

"I do not know how healthy it is to treat those who are lost

as if they are still there, but I also do not know that this is what I am doing. I do not even know if that is what the others are doing, yes? They might very well be, given the open seats on the table that we leave, given the conversations I hear at night from my cocladists. Many of them talk with Death Itself in quiet whispers while laying in bed. Many of them talk with RJ, still. I myself have talked with Michelle and Sasha, when I remember days long ago on her field, listening to her speak of being a dead woman walking when she was having bad days or gushing about Debarre on her good ones. Many of us speak to the dead."

Her friend furrowed eir brow. "Do you want my opinion as a friend, or do you want my opinion as a therapist?"

The Woman shrugged.

"As a therapist, I would say that there is such a thing as an unhealthy attachment style, that holding onto past traumas makes it awfully easy to reinflict them on oneself." Her expression shifted kind as she continued, "As your friend, I would say that, if that helps, if there is, as you say, joy in it, then by all means, continue. If you can pray to the dead to feel joy, then perhaps you must."

"I see," she said, buying herself a moment to think by sipping her mocha. Ah, but she was a cat, yes? A panther? Perhaps you can imagine this with lapping tongue, the way a cat's tongue curls back and scoops up drink, drawing it up into their mouth. Or perhaps she is the type who has leaned into another aesthetic, the type who can chew with her mouth closed. Idle distractions, even for your humble narrator. "Then yes, there is joy in it. There is joy in those memories, is there not? One takes a moment of stillness..."

After a long few seconds, Her Friend tilted eir head. "Yes?"

"Ah, a fleeting thought. One takes a moment of stillness and parks in that quiet joy, even if it is one of separation."

"Is there joy in loss?"

"I do not know. Is there?"

Her Friend laughed, shaking eir head and leaning back with mocha in hand. "This is what I needed, my dear. I needed to speak with a friend. I needed chat about memories and watching the way you smile when you talk even these sad things, not sitting on some therapist's couch for the third time in as many weeks."

The Woman preened. This, you see, is more than just a brushing out of imperfections, but a shift in attitude. When The Woman preened — when her whole clade preened, even! — she would sit up a little straighter with a subtle shimmy, lift her snout, close her eyes, bristle her whiskers, and smile a smile that was just south of smug. It is *very* cute, reader, I can assure you of that.

They fell then into comfortable chatter over just the small things: the coffee, the weather, the chairs and how they were *almost* comfortable, but not quite. They fell into warmth and companionship, and all the while, the woman set that fleeting thought she had had just off to the side, where she could keep track of it without it distracting.

Perhaps this unbecoming that her mind circled around was simply the utmost in stillness.

3

The Woman rode the high of lovely friendship for days after that coffee date. For nearly a week, she reveled in the sense of camaraderie and coexistence. How lucky she was! How lucky that she had the chance to exist in the same universe as Her Friend! How lucky, how lucky.

Whenever The Woman felt this way, she would wander around the house and clean. She would take on extra cooking duties and make extra desserts for her cocladists and friends. She would stay in one form for far longer than was her usual, and remained now a panther. She would go for walks around the field, treating the house itself as a signpost at the center of widening circles. She would imagine that those circles might some day spread out across the entire world, never mind the varied infinities housed within the field itself. It was a thing to which she could give herself as she asked her high-minded questions: am I a falcon, a storm, or a great song?

These words of Rilke's would dance unblushing through her mind, linking arms on one side with the words of Dickinson which ever twined around those of her clade — *If I should die, And you should live, And time should gurgle on, And morn should beam, And noon should burn, As it has usual done...* — and on the other

with the lingering lines of the Ode that made up the names of her clade. "I remember the rattle of dry grass," she would explain to the bees as they buzzed in friendship around her ankles. "I remember the names of all things and forget them only when I wake."

And so she would cook her meals and walk in widening circles around this primordial tower that was her home, perhaps circling around God, though she did not care one way or the other if there was that of God in everything.

These were her joys to go along with the needs of ritual, of brushing her fingers along imagined *mezuzot*. To walk was her ritual, to spiral outward from her home in the warmth of sunlight and the dance of bees and the tickling of dandelions against her ankles was to cast that ritual in the light of pleasure.

I have never been quite so fond of walking, myself, kind readers. There is meditation in it, I am told. I am told there is the simple pleasure of the one-foot-in-front-of-the-other-ness of it. But friends, I am tired most of the time. I am old and I am tired and my pleasure lies in stillness and quiet. I love my mochas and I love sitting down before the page with pen in paw to put to paper, and I love bathing in story.

I say so often that stepping away from such a task is still writing. When I sit on the patio in front of our little bundle of townhouses and look out at the shared lawn, or when I step — *stepped,* for it is no longer here — out to the shortgrass prairie of my cocladist, to sit beside a cairn of stones or share a meal, that is still writing! Your narrator has written these words, this story, a hundred, a thousand times within her head. That is my joy, and graphomania my compulsion.

When The Woman overflows, she becomes ever more herself. She is — my attentive readers will remember this, of course — she is already too much herself, too present, too whole, too present. This is the nature of overflowing, you see: we become so much ourselves that it begins to ache, to press at our chest from the inside. For your humble narrator, that graphomania strikes with such force that meaning falls away from my words only gibberish comes forth, or perhaps I will write the same phrase over and over and over, unable to sate my own compulsions.

My astute readers will surely have picked up by now that I am riding that edge here, in these words.

But, ah! This story is not about me. I am not quite overflowing yet, and The Woman most certainly is not. She is reveling in the warmth of sunlight and the dance of bees and the tickling of dandelions against her ankles and the purringly soft touch of friendship.

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The turn away from joy was slow and, at first, unnoticeable.

The Woman did all that she could to hang onto joy whenever it slipped into her life. We all do, do we not? When I find a bakery that serves delectable treats, for instance, I will eat in the tiniest bites I can get away with — nearly crumbs! — just to let the joy of such a treat linger longer on my tongue. The woman did this with her own joy, you see: she would cook these lovely desserts for herself and her cocladists that she might store up joy in carefully sweetened and delicately decorated cupcakes or muffins or cookies or brownies. Joy, it seems, is stored in the chocolate, and

so she doles that out to those who deserve joy — and The Woman knows that even she deserves joy.

But even like me with my little tasty baked treats, The Woman's joy is parceled out bit by bit to herself and her co-cladists and, just like my little plates of carrot cake — I *do* love a good carrot cake! — there is never an infinite amount, much as she might wish, nor, it always seems, quite enough.

She hung onto joy and baked her goodies and went for her walks and awaited, with some trepidation, to the regularly scheduled therapy, because I think she knew that, being confronted with recounting emotions of the past or discussing emotions to come, her grasp on joy would be tested. Once every two weeks, unless she was overflowing, unless she was in pain, unless she simply could not bring herself to go, The Woman had an appointment for therapy, after all, and she knew there was good to be had in it, for it had proven its use time and again over the years, and yet it was a time for threshing, for harrowing. It was a time for throwing herself at the Work at one level of removing and watching the chaff fall away and the fruits of her labor lay exposed. It was a time for dragging the implements of tools dialectical and behaviors cognitive through the dirt of her to break up into clods her varied neuroses.

But as it goes, as it always goes, the morsels of joy meted gladly out soon began to run dry and the sense of happiness that she felt, those truly *good* days began to fade once more into merely okay.

It was the day of her appointment that The Woman sat up in her bed, bleary-eyed, and looked around her, around her plain and simple room with her plain and simple sheets and plain and

simple clothes folded neatly atop a plain and simple chair, ready for wear, and at last sighed, wondering, *Where is it that my joy has gone? Where has it gone?*

Today was therapy, and her joy was gone.

There was no relief within her that. There were no thoughts of, ah, today is therapy! Today she would get to talk to Ever Dream! Today she would get to explore this idea of a joy meted out slowly until it was nothing.

In fact, I would say that there was perhaps even a sort of protectiveness. I think that she felt some sort of ownership of this concept. I think that she felt like this ending of joy was hers and hers alone. Something to keep to herself until perhaps, some day, she might share it and become still at last, or perhaps even beyond then. It was hers to set before herself and admire or loathe. It was hers to wrap up in pretty paper or hide away in the back of a drawer. I think she may have felt jealousy.

And so it was that The Woman, today a human, today, as ever, dressed plainly, made herself a peanut butter and banana sandwich with the crusts cut off and poured herself a glass of soy milk and walked out into the field outside her house. She had to balance her sandwich atop her drink in order to complete the ritual of passing through the front door, but she had done this countless times before.

The table and chairs sat nearly a mile out from the tenth stanza's house, sprouting senselessly from the grass as easy and carefree as yet more dandelions. A simple square table with two chairs set before adjacent sides so that she need not look her therapist in the eye, so that they might each stair out into some similar distance, so that they may feel companionship, though

The Woman never could explain how that worked.

And so The Woman, today a human, walked the mile to the table and sat down her glass of soy milk and began to eat her sandwich. When, at last, there were only two bites left and the glass was half empty, she sent a delicate ping to Her Therapist, who appeared beside the table, paws folded and kind smile on her face. The visage of a skunk lasted no longer than a second before, with a rapid fork, a human stood before her — for her therapist endeavored always to mirror her species lest she influence The Woman's own, though she leaned far harder into gender-play, and one would be hard pressed to not also see her as a young man — and bowed, then pulled out the chair beside her and sat down.

"I will be finished in a moment, Ever Dream," The Woman said just as she did every session. "Just a few bites left."

"Of course, End Of Endings," Her Therapist echoed in the time-honored ritual. "Please take your time."

The Woman gave a hint of a bow and enjoyed the last two bites of her sandwich as well as she was able, following each with a sip of soy milk, all while Her Therapist made herself comfortable, sitting back in her chair and gazing out over the field of grass and dandelions, a half-smile on her face.

When at last she dusted her hands free of imagined crumbs, The Woman sat back in her chair, her drink held in both hands — she, like me, enjoys that she can create a drink that stays at precisely the most delicious temperature — Her Therapist smiled and nodded. "Tell me, my dear, how are you feeling?"

"I am feeling alright. I have been cleaning and cooking. I have been going out on walks and stepping away from the sim. I

spoke with my friend for several hours some days back, and that provided me with comfort and joy."

"That is delightful to hear," Her Therapist said. "Can you tell me of this joy? I love to hear what it is that makes you happy."

The Woman thought long on this. I would like to imagine she was turning her thoughts on jealousy and protectiveness over and over within her head, investigating them like some bauble, searching for cracks or imperfections, or simply admiring how the mirror-like surfaces never picked up her fingerprints. I think perhaps she was trying to derive the formulae that describe their shapes so that she could better understand them. I think, also, that she had to do her best to suppress a wince.

"Was it a complex sort of joy, End Of Endings?"

She sipped her soy milk in an attempt to maintain control over herself, as sometimes all you need is a thing that you can do deliberately. "It is, yes. It is a joy to see one's friends, is it not? To give energy and to receive in turn? We sat down at our favorite coffee shop and chatted about this and that. We talked of empty chairs at the table. We talked of moods and therapy. I believe– yes?"

Her therapist lowered her hand from where she had raised it. "I do not know No Hesitation as well as I might, for which I feel some regret, but In Dreams confided with In Memory, and my down-tree confided in me that she had some fears that she had offended em. Given the structure of our stanza, I think it perhaps unwise that I know too much of that particular conversation until No Hesitation speaks to me emself."

The Woman lingered again in silence, and her mind was aswirl with undefined thoughts that she could no longer pin

down, and where once she felt alright, she began to feel something far more tentative, and where once there was a bauble of thoughts on joy, there was now some rectilinear ember, sharp-edged, that she no longer wished to behold, which she quickly dropped and stepped away from in fear and in pain.

"Yes, Ever Dream. Of course. I will speak of other things."

And so they did. It was not an unproductive therapy session, and perhaps Her Therapist was even right. The seventh stanza was as they were, yes? They were the types to go for runs together, to eat together, to live as neighbors. The Woman did not know whether Her Therapist lived among them, but at this point, she supposed that she must, should such a prohibition be worried.

And so they did! They talked of other things, and The Woman did wind up sharing more about her joy, but only in the small ways. She discussed the feeling of making treats for those around her, of storing a little bit of her joy in each — though I believe she left out her feelings on that meting of joy being a depleting — and the ways in which a service such as that which she provided for her own household is a goodness in its own right, is an active participation in joy.

But all throughout, laying at her feet was an ember smoldering, a little cube with edges that could cut as quickly as they could burn, and though she was able to remain present for the remainder of her appointment, was able to remain human, was able to smile and bow to Her Therapist, The Woman was never wholly there, as all throughout, her gaze kept dropping to where at her feet lay an ember smoldering.

After therapy, after Her Therapist had left and the chairs had

been set beneath the table once more, after a long moment spent standing in the grass with her head hung low, The Woman waved away her empty glass and trudged back to the house.

There was a sense of falling-short within her, a sense of not meeting expectations. Perhaps it was a sense of shame that she had been so keen to hide this idea that she had happened upon, to keep the idea of the end of joy to herself. Perhaps it was because she had so easily let herself be talked out of sharing earnestly that which she would most liked to have discussed. Perhaps it was because — and here I am using words she herself would use — it was because she was a coward. Perhaps, when confronted with something that she believed to be worth talking about, to have such stopped before she could do so took the wind out of her sails, and she was too cowardly to do anything but let that happen. So many perhapses.

It was with these thoughts and these feelings filling her mind to overfull that The Woman walked back to the house, back up the stairs to the porch, back through the door with a brush of the fingers, back up the staircase, back to her room where she stripped and climbed back into bed.

Perhaps she slept, perhaps she dreamed.

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The Woman is a professional in napping in a way that I am not. Perhaps it is the felinity in her, or perhaps it is that she is not so easily claimed by such compulsions as I have — graphomania! Hah! — which lead to such fervent activity. Were I a smarter skunk, I might say to myself: "Rye, my dear, perhaps you can write your novels when you are caught in such throes, and spend

the months between practicing the fine art of napping!" But I am not a smart skunk. I am a simple beast who is single minded. I am an animal who does one thing and perhaps does it well. I do not know! I am perhaps too simple to disambiguate being doing a thing well and doing a lot of a thing.

Ah, but perhaps this is why I interpret The Woman at being a professional napper.

Either way, when she returned home and lay down, she immediately fell into a deep, deep slumber. It was a sleep of no dreams, nor perhaps even rest, but served well as a way to disconnect from contexts innumerable, to step away from the world unpleasant. She slept and slept and slept — and yet, she slept for only twenty minutes. Twenty minutes later, she opened her eyes and looked up to the ceiling, and spent another ten minutes picking out familiar patterns in the drywall texture beneath the paint. They were her familiar constellations. There! The fennec. There! The open hand. There! There! There! The swan and the cat and the light-footed opossum dancing around the maypole.

And then, at last, she stood up, and as her feet touched the ground she was, yes, whisked away into felinity, and so it was The Woman who was a cat who padded back downstairs, dressed now in billowy slacks and a flowing blouse. She dressed this way because she felt unstable, and knew that chances were better than not that she would wind up a skunk by that evening.

The living room was empty, but sitting on a stool in a kitchen with a thoughtful expression on her face was Her Cocladist. Her Cocladist, for reasons too complicated for me to pick apart in a fairytale, struggled with her form more even than The Woman

did. The Woman would occasionally blip from human to feline or from feline to skunk or from skunk to human, but, in ways that neither I nor The Woman remembered without fondness, Her cocladist lived in a constant superposition of forms. As she sat there on her stool, cheek resting in her palm while a pot bubbled lazily away on the stove, she wisped steadily between skunk and human. Skunk. Human. Skunk. Human. Her pale white skin, which had ever been so soft to the touch and borne such overwhelmingly kind smiles, would give way to black fur. Her hair, curly and dark that framed her face so well, would ghost into a tousled white mane. Behind her a luxurious tail would swish into being and then out again without a second thought.

I do mean that, friends. There is no thought behind this constant changing. When I experienced that, so many years ago, nearly three centuries ago, it was never a thing I could control, not well. I could swallow down a form for a while. I could gulp dryly and linger for a while in humanity, only for a cough or hiccup to come along and send little cookie ears to sprouting, send a white-striped-black muzzle stretching in front of my face.

And always when this happened, the slightest touch would lead to bile rising in my throat. It would feel like sunburn. It would feel like some awful beast letting its bulk settle against me, reminding me of its presence — a threat — with slow breaths.

I do not know if you have ever touched a skunk, dear readers, but they are not silky soft. Their fur is *soft*, yes, but in the plush, cushy way that a dog's might be, or perhaps a short-haired cat. We are truly lovely to pet, I can assure you of that! Why, I will pet my tail for hours as I sit and think and write in my head. In

fact, I am doing that right this very minute!

Skunks, I mean to say, are still lovely to pet. We can push our snouts up into your hands and tilt our heads to ensure you scratch in just the right spot behind one ear or another. More, we deserve that. All creatures deserve that which they cherish, and we cherish touch.

We all cherish touch, and in those moments when we were ghosting back and forth, when touch led to vertigo, that which we cherish was taken from us, and for some of us, for The Woman's cocladist, this was still true. It was not perhaps always true — perhaps there were stretches when she was able to settle into one form and exist in comfort and get gentle, doting pets from The Woman or some other cocladist or some perhaps lover, and perhaps she may yet still.

But for so much of her life, this lovely touch, this cherished thing, was out of reach for Her Cocladist, and so she sat on the stool before the stove while a pot bubbled lazily away.

"Rejoice," The Woman said quietly from the entrance to the kitchen, bowing to Her Cocladist.

Tired eyes swung around to meet her, and an equally tired smile graced both human face and skunk muzzle. "Ah, End Of Endings, my dear, my dear," Her cocladist said twice over. "Have you been well? Have you had a good nap? Did you have a productive therapy session?"

The Woman smiled as well — though her smile was not quite so tired, you understand; she just had her nap — and willed a stool into being some few feet away from Her Cocladist. "I have been well, yes, and my nap was as lovely as always. As for therapy, well..." She trailed off, shrugged.

Her Cocladist nodded. "I understand. I ought to perhaps consider picking such things back up once more. There are many therapists, yes? Not just within our own clade, yes? Perhaps I will seek one of them out some day when I am not so tired."

The Woman nodded. She knew what was coming next, but we all have our rituals, yes?

"But when will that be? Who knows. I am always tired, yes?" A dry chuckle, and then, "Such is our lot in life."

"Perhaps, Rejoice. I would like to think that there is something else. I have been thinking again on the process of unbecoming."

Her Cocladist sat up straighter. "Ah, yes, your dream."

The Woman nodded.

"You will have to tell me when you figure out what that is," Her Cocladist said, then returned to watching the pot. "That is, I think, something that I would be interested in, yes?" She waved a paw that was now a hand that was now a paw again demonstratively.

"Of course, my dear."

Once more, Her Cocladist rested her cheek carefully on her hand or paw or perhaps both. "If there is aught else aside from our lot in life, I would desperately like to know. I am not sure I believe that there is. If the seventh stanza exists to provide us with therapy, then we exist to give them clients. If they need suffering to fix, then we must suffer."

The Woman sat in silence along with Her Cocladist after that, and the house was as as silent as it ever was, and the only noise in the kitchen was the lazy bubbling of a pot on the stove wafting the scent of some mild curry throughout the kitchen, and The

Woman wrapped herself up in that scent and took what comfort she could from it as she thought on Her Friend's words some days ago, all but confirming Her Cocladist's sentiment about the seventh stanza, and what it meant that such might also be true for her stanza, the tenth, and her thoughts bubbled as lazily as the pot on the stove and The Woman sat in that silence with Her Cocladist, and the house was as silent as it ever was.

4

The Woman lingered long on the words of Her Cocladist: *aught else aside from our lot in life.*

What *was* her lot in life? What was *a* lot in life? Was she limited only to one thing? Was she bound to stasis? And what, then, of her thoughts on eternal stillness? What did it mean that a seed had been planted within her and had lately begun to sprout? She knew where they came from.

Her lot in life had at one point been to teach, to revel in the joy of acting and directing and sets and props and lights and sound and audience and her lovely, loving students who ached for nothing more than to be seen, to receive some perhaps hug from this person who they trusted and yet who could not give them such for fear of disease and regulation in equal measure, to receive some perhaps affection from their cohort and yet which their beloved teacher stopped them for fear of disease and regulation in unequal measure.

She knew the helplessness of having her agency ripped from her. She knew the feeling of being seen by something larger than mere personhood, a thing which saw her and said, "this here is a wretched and despicable thing," and then took her from the world. And then her lot in life was to campaign, for though she

still taught on occasion, still directed, she found she could not act as she wished, and still she had to refrain from hugging for fear of the discomfort of touch.

She knew the feeling of splitting herself into ten unequal parts so that she might at last rest. She knew that her lot in life then became to process what she had become, for that was the role *she* remembered of the tenth stanza, not simply to linger in suffering.

She lingered on these thoughts in her unjoy and pondered the meaning, the actions implied, and, with as firm a resolve as a woman who is too much herself could muster, decided that she would *not* lean into this idea of perpetuity as Her Cocladist dwelt within. She may have a lot in life for a time — for a year, for a decade, for a century — but not for the entirety of her existence.

It was within this lingering that she reached out to Her Friend: *"No Hesitation, would you like to meet for coffee? I have something I would like to speak with you about."*

There was a sensation of a tilted head, of a quiet *huh,* in the sensorium message. *"Of course, my dear. So soon after our last meeting, too. I am curious what has you reaching out! When would you like to meet?"*

"Now, if you are free."

A laugh, and then, *"I can be. I can send a fork. Same place?"*

"Yes, please."

Today, for the first time in she did not know how many years, The Woman passed through her secret door onto the street with a brush of her fingers on jamb, and then walked to the coffee shop. Walked! She skipped the trolley! She let go of a ritual, gently set it down on the corner of the street where usually the trol-

ley made its stop, and stuffed her paws in her pockets — for today was a day where she was apparently to be a skunk — and walked briskly to the coffee shop. Yes, the trolley passed her, yes she could have arrived much sooner, but there were the cobblestones beneath her feet-paws and there were the fallen leaves skittering anxiously about her and there was a gentle breeze tugging plaintively at her skirt and her shirt and her mane and her whiskers.

The Woman instructed herself to take joy in these things; or, if not joy, at least pleasure. She tried to feel the seams of cobblestones beneath her unclad feet for a block. She counted leaves for a block. She imagined the wind as gentle paws ensuring that she knew the bounds of her body for the last block. As she opened the door to the coffee shop, she considered her various success and failures in the exercise. The cobblestones were perhaps too cold, but the sensation more pleasing than she had imagined. The leaves made her anxious in turn, but she imagined them having errands to run, purpose before them. The wind proved to her just how thin her clothing was, and just how thin the fur beneath that was on her chest and belly, but it did indeed remind her of her bounds.

As her fingers brushed over the frame of the door and it shut behind her, she looked over to the bar to find Her Friend ordering the usual two mochas, tail looking quite frazzled.

I do not remember if I told you, dear readers, but The Woman's friend was *also* a skunk. Ey, along with ey stanza, had leaned firmly into that remembered identity. For, you see, we were furries before we uploaded, and we remain always furries. Even those who present as humans — plain and boring! Plain

and lovely! — still have that identity within them; metafurry, we have called it. Before we uploaded, before we arrived sys-side, Michelle Hadje spent all the time we could online, on the 'net, where she presented herself as Sasha, a skunk who dressed herself in a linen tunic and Thai fisherman's trousers. Prior to that, she had been a panther, too, a feline creature of dark pelt and flowing dresses never was brave enough to wear as Michelle.

This is the reason why The Woman was at times a skunk and at times a panther and at times a human, and why Her Friend and I are skunks. We remember being a human and then going online to share in our zoomorphic joys with those around us.

And so there as Her Friend, standing by the counter, trying to quickly brush out the frazzled fur of eir tail while the barista worked on the two mochas. On spotting The Woman, though, ey straightened up, smiled, and bowed. "End Of Endings. It is a pleasure to see you again."

The Woman bowed in turn. "Very much so, No Hesitation. Shall I find us a table?"

Her Friend nodded.

The Woman had no trouble in staking out her usual spot, as when one goes to a coffee shop in the middle of the afternoon, there are not quite so many who are hunting down drinks to help them wake up. That is not to say that there is any wrong time for a mocha, mind. I have mine right here, and I am writing this at nearly three in the morning.

"Now," Her Friend said after settling in in eir usual chair. "Tell me how you are feeling. Tell me about this topic you wanted to address."

The Woman smiled. "I am feeling okay. I was feeling quite

good after our last meeting, though that faded over time, and for some days, I was feeling rather bad."

Her Friend nodded. "You have mentioned such in the past, yes."

"I suppose I have. I was thinking this time about how I felt so much joy, and how I wanted to share that with my cocladists, so I started making them little treats. It felt like I was putting a little bit of joy into each, though, and that led to me running out."

"Oh? Is this a new thought?"

The Woman furrowed her brow. "Perhaps, yes. I was thinking about it during the lead-up to therapy. I was having several strangely-shaped feelings, actually." She laughed, shaking her head. "I was feeling a protectiveness over that. I feel comfortable sharing it with you, my dear, but I did not feel that way with Ever Dream."

"Can you tell me about that?" Ey smiled, adding, "Sorry. I try to stay away from therapeutic language in our discussions, but habits are habits. I really do just want to hear."

"I trust you, No Hesitation." The Woman brushed the longer fur of her mane out her eyes as she pieced together her words. "It felt like a thing to bear within me. I...well, I had considered sharing it, as well, but then Ever Dream requested that I stop. I told her of our meeting and the joy and was going to mention this sharing of joy, but I mentioned our conversation and she requested that I stop. She said that she would like to hear about it from you herself rather than from me."

Her Friend sighed. "She did not need to. I understand why, but she did not need to. I believe that I am your friend before I am her cocladist, but I do not think that she would agree with

that."

The Woman sat back in her seat, mocha clutched in her paws. "Alright. I believe you on that, too."

"Did you wish to talk about that? About joy diminishing?"

"No. I wanted to talk about a conversation that came up after the fact. I spoke with Rejoice, and she said that she felt that we are stuck with our lot in life, but the more I think about it, the less I believe that. We may have a lot we are dealt for a portion of our life, but not the whole of it."

"Are you thinking of your unbecoming, then?"

The Woman lapped at her whipped cream for a moment, considering. *Was* she? Perhaps she was. She had not connected those particular dots, but when it was stated aloud by someone other than herself, she felt truth in the worlds. "I suppose I am. I am wondering if reaching for something would be a sort of unbecoming of this static self."

"Ah! That does make sense," Her Friend said, smiling. "If becoming something new means unbecoming your current self, then I will gladly cheer you on, End Of Endings. You are one of my best friends on the System, and so I am happy to see you become ever more what you can be."

The two skunks smiled wide to each other, sharing in this sentiment, this mood, this, yes, joy. The Woman felt it now. She felt that the energy was perhaps not quite there, that she would have to truly exert herself, but that she could still reach for good things in her life. She would have to teach herself joy, and perhaps it would be much like what she had done on the walk here, a presentness or a deliberateness.

The Woman and Her Friend set to work, then, discussing

what she could do, what she could learn, what she could yet become.

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The Woman and Her Friend decided that her path forward would be one of intent and deliberate action. After all, that is how our System works, yes? We intend to be wearing a piece of clothing we like and we are. We intend to step from this sim to that, and we do. We intend to fork and, lo! There beside us stands another instance of ourself! They are a whole new us! They can live their own life, going their own separate way and making their own choices, or perhaps they can go out to do some task or another or visit some friend for coffee and then quit, merging themself back down into us.

They decided on a list of five things that she should try.

Why five, you ask? Well, I honestly do not know! Perhaps because of the five fingers we have on each paw. Perhaps it is because we have two arms, two legs, and a head protruding from our trunk. Or perhaps it has to do with the stars. Starfish? Little wandering doodles to replace the tittles above our 'i's and jots above our 'j's? Each an iota, a mote, a symbol to our future selves, a note for later. Asterisms and asterisks.

Ah, but I digress. The Woman and her friend chose a list of five things that she would try — should, you see, is a value judgment — in order to seek joy in small ways or in small places. The Woman knew that it would be hard. She knew that she would have to bundle up all of her energy and all of her patience with herself and all of her drive and use that to let her last through these explorations of joy.

You see, the first of these five was easy enough to do by herself. She decided first to try new foods. She decided that she would try all *kinds* of foods! She rooted around through the exchange to see what things she had never tried, whether because she was not brave enough or because it sounded like it would taste too strong or because she remembered not liking it back when she was Michelle, back before she had uploaded.

The whole of the clade is, in so many different ways, focused on hedonism. Such is the joy of maintaining a hyperfixation of sorts. That the tenth stanza seemed to have, each at their own point in time, let that hyperfixation on processing shift into a sort of stasis was an accident. None of them are so sad, of course, that they cannot still feel joy in their lives, as we have well seen. The Woman has shown us, yes, and even Her Cocladist, who held so poor a view of her lot in life had joys, for it was her who most often cooked to the peculiar tastes of her stanza.

And The Woman had her own particularities when it came to food. When she cut the crusts off her sandwiches, it was a way to ensure that each bite contained precisely what she wanted in the ratio of bread to filling. After all, one cannot always spread the peanut butter up to the edge of the sandwich! If you do, your fingers will wind up sticky with peanut butter and the oil it stains your fur with will leave behind a lasting scent — ask me how I know! — but if you do not, then you wind up with a whole mouthful of little else but bread. It is a balancing act, you see, and The Woman has found that if she spreads the peanut butter just so, then cuts the crusts off, she winds up with more perfect bites than not.

Particularities and peculiarities! The Woman has as many as

you or I, dear reader, and perhaps more, and so her first task was to seek that which her particularities and peculiarities had covered up. Was there a thing that she had missed? Was there a food that she had only ever tried bad approximations of and actually earnestly liked?

Yes and no, as is ever the case.

Yes, because, although her spice tolerance was quite low, her flavor tolerance was far higher than she had ever given herself credit for. She found in a Laotian restaurant a salad made with green papaya and soy sauce and fish sauce and mint and cilantro and the crispest lettuce leaves she had ever had a love of a new food. It was so *salty!* It was so *savory!* And yet it sat light on the tongue as mephit teeth struggled to crunch down on the slivers of unripe fruit well enough to macerate. It was sour with lime and tingling in the mouth with mint and coated the tongue with that pleasant soapiness cilantro seems so keen to provide.

The Woman fell in love immediately, and although the tom kha gai that followed was too spicy for her, she plowed through that as well, and set aside the sense of fullness as she worked next on mok pa, a dish of fish served steamed in banana leaves, and finished with a delightful plate of mango and sweet sticky rice, all drizzled with sweetened condensed milk. The fish was lovely, yes, and the dessert delicious, though it stuck in her teeth.

And no, because with each success shining as bright as that crunchy and flavorful tam mak hoong, there were dozens of nights of upset stomachs and burning taste buds. Pineapple, she found, was the fruit that ate you back. Chilies, she found, burned as hot as ever, and there were no ways in which she could com-

fortably consume them without being left in tears — she was left sobbing, my dears! On one memorable occasion, she was left sobbing, even after she forked with a clean mouth, even then, the remembered pain left her curled in a ball in the back room of the restaurant while the kindly owner doted on her with offerings of ice cream and soft pets and gentle, cooed reassurances.

No, because her limits were reinforced. For every victory, there was a reminder that she was unwhole. My friends, I think that *everyone* is unwhole. I know that I am. I know that I write and write and write, and that is lovely, yes, but I also know that I can be a prickly little terror when caught up in my emotions. I know that I spend my time at my books, at my desk, and, though I try to be a comfortable and comforting presence within my stanza, though I try to dote on my up-tree, I am never able to give quite as much as I would like. I think everyone is unwhole, and I think as well that, to us, our unwhole-ness is more evident, more dire than it is to those around us. You and I, friends, we see The Woman coming across a boundary in her tastes and nod and think to ourselves, "This is no moral failing! The Woman has done no wrong. She should feel no shame." But to her, it felt like a failure to reach joy.

She, too, understands dialectics, do not get me wrong. She, too, knows that these reassurances of boundaries also come with the discoveries that she made, all of the green papaya salads and savory Artemisian treats that Warmth In Fire and its ilk had set on the market that she fell in love with. But always before her was the goal of joy, and while she would count her successes, she would also count her failures — no, no, do not contradict her, she saw them as failures and there is now no changing of her mind,

not these many years later, not as she is now — and cluck her tongue and shake her head and go home and lay down in her bed and take one of those naps that she was so good at.

There was joy, yes, but it was not a complete joy. Her hedonism with food was a lovely hedonism and she cherished it, but it was not the hedonism she needed for this task.

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There was no simple way to approach this next form of joy for The Woman.

There had been times within her life where she struggled with touch, for when one is too much oneself, every touch is all that much more intense. When one is full to overflowing, each touch runs the risk of oversaturating sensation, pushing a gentle caress into the grating drag of sand over skin.

And yet touch remained important to her. It remains important to all of us! Even I who surrounds myself in words, constructs blankets of ink to wrap myself up in, even I relish my time spent with my cocladists and with my friends. I relish the time I spend with My Friend and how, on occasion, we will go for a walk and she will take my paw in her hand in companionship. Touch remained important to her and, to her, those moments when she was able to accept a hug from her friend shined bright in her memories when she hunted for this next form of joy.

"If," she reasoned to Her Friend over their mochas, "if so many have found joy in touch and sensuality and sexuality, might not I?"

"You may very well, yes," ey said, smiling. "What do you think you will do?"

"I am not sure where to start. Perhaps I shall work my way up from simple to complex, yes?"

Her Friend brightened, nodded. "If you are feeling like a skunk that day, I have an aesthetician I can recommend."

My hastier readers may be wondering: why does The Woman not simply fork herself groomed? Or perhaps: why does The Woman not get a massage or some similar form of touch that does not involve dragging a comb through fur?

The answer to this, at least from your humble narrator's limited point of view, is that there is loveliness in the touch, yes, but there is loveliness also in the way that one might ensure that another is well groomed. It is a way of coming closer. It is a way of sharing, and understanding that one is not alone. That is what I feel, at least, and I like that I can feel not alone at times, even if at other times I all but demand it.

And so it was that The Woman began simply, waiting until she was quite firmly a skunk before going to visit this contact Her Friend had given her.

The Aesthetician who greeted her at the door looked to be more than a hundred years old — more than a thousand! — and yet they moved with a sprightliness that surprised The Woman. They all but pranced around her as they guided her to a comfortably padded table, something that could just as easily be molded down into a seat or some more complicated contraption.

"A skunk! An Odist!" they chirped. "You were sent by No Hesitation?"

The Woman tamped down the burgeoning sense of overstimulation and bowed. "Yes. End Of Endings of the Ode clade."

"Lovely lovely lovely. Please, please come in and lay down. I do love grooming you and yours."

And so The Woman went inside and lay down and let The Aesthetician work through her mane and over her tail and through all the little nooks and crannies around her neck and limbs. All the while, they chatted quietly — for an aesthetician such as this reads their clients well and knew how to modulate their attitude that they not overwhelm someone such as The Woman. The brushing was calm and peaceful and felt lovely and delightful in all those ways that she appreciated when she was able to do it herself, and yet it came with a sense of companionship and camaraderie that left her feeling fulfilled and, yes, joyful. Joyful! The Woman and The Aesthetician talked and talked, and The Woman spoke more freely to her than she ever did to Her Therapist and, without being able to explain just how, she knew that the words she spoke would be kept in as close a confidence.

The Woman left refreshed, renewed, reinvigorated, and with this eye she set to looking into the escalation that she promised Her Friend.

We have seen such success already, have we not? We have seen the ways in which The Woman — she who does not have many friends — enjoys the touch of hugs or a paw rested atop hers. It is a sometimes food, yes? But then, it is for all of us. I do not always want to be hugged or touched — I do not now, here on the edge of overflow — and there are forms of touch I do not like at all! The woman here is considering intimacy, yes? Sensuality and sexuality? Those are not things that I do not like. I like *that* they exist, I am glad that they do, and I even like writing about

them — see, here! I am even about to do so! — but they are things that I hold at a distance from myself.

Ah, but my words are wandering. This touch, even the grooming, is a sometimes food for The Woman, and yet she had held herself at such a distance from such for who knows what reason. I do not think she knew, herself, my friends, for she is as we all are. She is a woman who craves touch and deserves touch and does not, on an intellectual level, wish that she were not touched. It is emotional, perhaps, or psychic, or spiritual, or on some other level than the intellectual desire to touch and be touched, or the physical need for fulfillment.

And so it was that The Woman began her slow climb up the ladder of escalation. She met once more with Her Friend and asked, kindly, perhaps a bit nervously, for a hug and for the chance to hold hands and paws — for she was a human that day, and Her Friend a skunk as ever — and well it took something of a force of will to let such touch linger, it was a pleasant sensation and a pleasant conversation that followed, an exploration — between friends, for Her Friend was always careful to specifically *not* be The Woman's therapist — of meanings and boundaries.

And so it was that The Woman sought out those who she knew, those who might have some affection for her beyond simple conversational friendship, those who had been sensual of old, partners and almost-partners from centuries ago who remained still on the System. She thought back through the years and years and years, and Her Lover was the one who leapt most readily to mind.

"*My dear, it has been some time since we have spoken,*" she sent over a sensorium message. "*For which I do apologize, much of that*

is on me. I did wish to reconnect, though; would you be amenable to that?"

The response was immediate. *"End Of Endings! Oh my god! You have no idea how happy I am to hear from you! I heard there were losses in your clade and was so worried I didn't even want to check if one of them was you."*

"Not me, no. Should We Forget and No Longer Myself are no more, though."

There was a long moment silence on the other end of the connection, though the sense of it lingering remained. *"I am sorry, love,"* Her Lover said at last. *"I haven't forgotten you, though, or my fondness, so yeah, I'd love to reconnect."*

If my more recently uploaded friends feel some sense of curiosity about how it is that someone with whom one has let contact language for decades might still feel fondness after so long, or how one might not forget, you must remember that those who live sys-side remain functionally immortal. If one leans into such a fact, then decades spent away may as well be a blink of an eye, yes? If one leans into the everlasting memory with which we are blessed or cursed or which is simply bestowed upon us without further thought, then a past lover away from whom one has simply drifted amicably is just as easily recalled.

We are very old, you see. Why, at this point, I am 323 years old! And The Woman is of the same clade, so the same is naturally true of her — if she lives still, that is. To us, we remember being mortal as only some distant thing from so long ago. We have our identity as those who may live life slowly. Things may still come at us quickly, yes, but we can deal with them in parallel, can we not? I could get a note from my dear up-tree

stating that it is lonely or bored or simply hungry and wants someone to eat with, and so I may continue writing while joining em in this simple pleasure. I did that just earlier today, when she mentioned wanting to eat something good, some comforting food she learned from eir own friend, so that good memories may also be cherished. When I did join it for a simple meal of *ciorbă de praz* and *ardei umpluți* — for you see, its friend was Romanian, and taught em so many dishes that she now loves — I sat and listened and remembered and talked and ate and perhaps also fretted over stepping away from work, but I allowed myself to take some slowness, too. Even I am allowed such things, yes? Even the terminally busy may let one self stay busy while the other comforts and is comforted by those they are close to.

Ah, dear readers, I am sorry that I cannot keep my thoughts from wandering an letting my pen trail after them like an eager puppy — yes, just like The Woman's rituals — and that such interrupts the story I am trying to tell!

All of this to say that The Woman and Her Lover spent some years together back in the first century of the System, back after secession but before she had fallen into her gentle stasis, before the goal of processing trauma was subsumed by the trauma itself. They had met — and you will not believe this, friends! — they had met at the very same cafe where The Woman and Her Friend met only days before. They had stumbled across each other in the most romantic way possible: by ordering the same coffees at the counter. They both asked for the same mocha with extra whipped cream, gave each other a strange look, and then fell into laughter.

As is the case with so many cladists — yes, perhaps especially

us — they orbited around each other eccentrically, coming now closer together, drifting now further apart. There would be a chaotic few weeks or months or years when they would dance or walk the field or sit and drink mochas or cook for each other or share a bed, and then, with a fond exchange of kisses, they would part ways with a promise to see each other again soon, for their lives were long and the System was wide.

Unlike so many other cladists, however, The Woman is too much herself. She is too human and she is full to overflowing, and she seemed ever to become more and more herself, to overflow in ways subtle and dramatic. For, you see, The Woman had simply been human — a furry, to be sure! She always maintained that identity — for decades after forking and had focused on that goal of processing, but as she had to expend more and more energy to keep her thoughts well-ordered, she started to lose control of her form and her rituals began to overwhelm the order in her life. Her Lover helped how she could, loved her when she was a skunk or a panther as much as when she was a human, would never stand in the way of her rituals, but the more control she spent, the more energy she was without, the more time she spent trying to remain a realistic amount of herself, the harder it was for her to take in love from the outside.

And so it was that, over the years, The Woman and Her Lover swung close together less and less often and for shorter and shorter intervals, and when The Woman requested time away, time to herself, Her Lover would kiss her on the cheek and smile and promise to see her again soon, and the smiles were more often sad, but The Woman held onto that promise, setting it up on her dresser or perhaps a high shelf where she might observe its

austere grace along with that of all of the other promises she had been given over the years, for her life was long and the System was wide.

My gentle readers, I would love to tell you that they met up at that selfsame cafe, but while life is poetic, not every meter is so strict. No, instead, they met up on a train.

A train! There are many things on Lagrange, this shared dream in which we live, and many things which have been perfected all the way down to their imperfections. When you collect so many minds all in one place and tell them to live their best and to live it forever, why, they will perfect precisely the things they love most and, my friends, I am sure I do not need to tell you that some people love trains.

As was their wont in decades passed, The Woman met Her Lover on board rather than on the platform. It was their habit for Her Lover to step aboard the train one stop after The Woman did, and for them to both hunt for a seat — no matter how empty the train was; for even if it was totally empty, the *perfect* seat is of the utmost importance — and to meet in the aisle. You see, when your relationship starts with a chance meeting, sometimes it feels nice to seek out those chance meetings again, yes? What better way to do so than on so linear a structure as a train? It certainly reduces the possibilities of near misses!

Somewhere near the front of the train, they met, and here they felt that welcome surprise. The chance meeting may have been deliberately constructed, and yet it was not without this sense of newness. The Woman was a familiar panther that day and Her Lover a human as always, but The Woman, who had been so focused on her stasis until now, realized at once that

she *had* changed over the years. Slowly, to be sure, and perhaps not in the ways that she wished, but she had changed. Today, she wore a silver-gray wrap of a shirt, all shot through with purple threads, and a gray-silver wrap of Thai fisherman's pants, all shot through with threads of blue. Her fur may have been the same black, short and glossy, and she may have lingered in suffering as the tenth stanza had in her own way, but she was hardly the type to fully languish, nor wear the same thing for years or decades at a time!

"Kitty," Her Lover said, leaning on old affections and wide smiles, "you look amazing. Never thought I'd see you in something quite so...so chic!"

The Woman, caught up in the infectious ebullience of the greeting, smiled and bowed, tail lashing about with delight. "Thank you, Farai. You are looking well."

And indeed she was! The Woman was pleased to see just how well. Her Lover she knew kept to warmer sims and hotter climes and these little jaunts onto this kindly juddering railway through the mountains were aberrations of a sort, so the fact that her outfit appeared to be a skirt and blouse in oranges and reds covered in part by some hastily acquired hoodie displaying the logo of a band The Woman *knew* no longer existed made sense. It made her ache in some intangible way to not see those smooth-skinned arms she had spent countless hours nestled within, brushing dull claws over or stroking soft fingertips along, her pale white skin in such stark contrast, signifiers of some more physical past.

Still, within her face was that vivacity that had originally drawn The Woman in. There lay warmth that put the colors

of her clothing to shame. There lay the kindness and wit in equal measure. There lay the lips she had kissed and the cheeks she had dotted her nose against and the high forehead she had touched her own to while they had shared quiet laughter and quieter I-love-yous.

The Woman cried, and Her Lover guided her to a seat that she might do so without standing, trying to balance herself against the kind juddering of the train.

When she could speak again, she said, "I have missed you, my dear. I am pleased that your patience holds as ever."

"Of course it does, End Of Endings," Her Lover said, laughing. "Our relationship is as it is, and I knew that going into it."

"Still, there have been times over the years that I wished I had contacted you, and did not."

"Why, do you think?"

"After Death Itself and I Do Not Know quit, at first, I was in pain, and then I was bitter, and then I was lonely and glad of it, and then I was too absorbed in being myself, and then..." The Woman shrugged and gestured around vaguely, not at anywhere specifically, but at a world now lessened by the loss of 23 billion souls.

"Yeah. And then," Her Lover said. "Is that why you got in touch?"

She shook her head. "Well, yes, but also, I have had some thoughts about joy and how to find it. I experienced it for a week or so, but it faded. I experienced it almost on accident, though, yes? And I wanted to be deliberate."

"Oh!" Her Lover sighed, slouching back in her seat with a smile on her face that was very nearly a silly grin. Not quite,

but very nearly. "It's been a *long* time since someone has said something that flattering to me."

The Woman preened — and we all know that is quite cute! — which earned her a kiss to the cheek in return. She marveled at how easy it was to fall back into such lovely habits and, yes, there was joy to be had, there, and to that she clung tightly. It seemed not the time for her to bring up the task of finding joy specifically in touch, in sensuality and sexuality, though she knew Her Lover felt that such were joys as well. It was a matter of enjoying *this* joy, first.

And enjoy she did! Friends, I have had precious few lovers in my life as I am now, but certainly none like this. I am not unhappy, of course; I like who and what I am and how I engage with the world. Still, if ever there were anything to make me jealous of particular friendship, it would be something like this. It would be the friendship that is particular to The Woman and Her Lover. There is touch that I like and touch that is distracting, but if I could hold the hand or paw of someone as tenderly as these two held hands and paws now, if I could share a moment of quiet conversation such as this, I would in a heartbeat. I am gripped by my own rituals and demands, though, and have not the strength to fight them.

So it was that The Woman and Her Lover rested their hand and paw with palms together, fingers only slightly curled, on The Woman's knee and spoke of joy.

"I'm a little surprised that you came to me for touch," Her Lover said, half-smile on her face. "Not in a bad way, not at all. You know me, I love that, but that wasn't something you ever sought out from me *this* directly."

The Woman shook her head. "I know, and it has taken me energy to even get to this point, but if there is pleasure to be had, and if pleasure is a part of joy, then I ought to look, yes? If joy is my goal?"

Her Lover laughed, voice musical. "I see you're still very much yourself, love. Never change."

With that, she leaned over to give The Woman another kiss to the cheek, and then another, this time at the hinge of her jaw, and then another and another, a meteor-shower down The Woman's neck, and there was joy in this, too, and purring to be heard.

They laughed together at their touches and their brazenness and their shared joy. They shared their nuzzles and their giggles and they, as the poet says, shared their oranges and gave their kisses like waves exchanging foam.

My lovely readers, there is more that happened — and I am going to tell you! I really will, because it is important to the story, of course, and because it is important to our life sys-side and to us as a clade and it was important to The Woman and Her Lover — but, dear ones, if you would like to skip ahead, to cover your eyes and curate your experience or to simply let them have their moment together, know that our life sys-side and our clade are complicated and that The Woman and Her Lover were complicated, too, and so was the joy they found. Know that they also, as the poet says, shared their limes and gave their kisses like clouds exchanging foam.

They leaned on each other as they stepped lightly from the train to the station, and, although the station was a loveliness in its own right, their conversation had spurred within them both

a desire to explore and gladly, rather than their feet hitting the cement of the platform, they landed instead on the cool, hardwood floor of Her Lover's home where The Woman brushed her fingertips featherlight against the still-familiar jamb.

There was no rush to their movements, for both The Woman and Her Lover had always been methodical in their sensuality. Perhaps it fit the mold of one of The Woman's rituals — she must touch here, first, and then she would kiss there, and only then would she brush her fingers there, across the cheek — and perhaps not — a logical progression remains a logical progression without the hint of ritual.

There was no rush to their movements, and so they sat first on the couch, sharing their kisses, refamiliarizing themselves with each other. The Woman felt within a subtle twisting, a stirring, a clockwise motion that dragged with it two colors of emotions. There was the love rekindled, there, yes, and there was along with it a growing anxiety: there was something less than worry and more than thought. In the middle, there was a spot between joy and fear, a place of too much meaning that she could not pin down. Arousal, perhaps? For there was that, there, too. That was perhaps of that clockwise turning: the slow swell of warmth low in her belly and the gentle pressure within her chest and bristle of whiskers. Excitement, maybe? Anticipation?

Here was another thing for The Woman to set before herself where she might observe it, describe its shape by the way the orange and blue of love and anxiety swirled around it.

But, ah! Here, too, was Her Lover. Here was a soul she treasured. Here was a body she cherished. Here was this spot — just beneath the chin — which, when kissed, elicited a shiver, and

this spot — at the hollow of the throat — which, when brushed with a fingerpad, elicited something both gasp and giggle. Here was arousal and excitement and anticipation in equal measure. Here was a thing for her to focus on that was not the cool blue of anxiety that warred with love remembered in unequal measure.

There was no rush to their movements, though, and arousal and excitement and anticipation in equal measure are a joy in their own, and so with some unspoken negotiation, The Woman leaned back and Her Lover leaned forward rather than the other way around. There was some careful tail maneuvering to accomplish this, but, my friends, we are used to it. There is *always* a careful maneuvering of our tails. Skunk tails, you see, are quite sizeable, and feline tails are less flexible at the base. It is a part of our lives, you see? There is still joy in having a tail, though, and with her tail out of the way, The Woman was once more able to relax, this time laid flat on her back, and Her Lover was once more able to provide that meteor shower of kisses down over the side of her neck, then over across her décolletage, and it was here where, as promised, here is where the complications arose, for it was at that moment, at the moment where Her Lover's kisses landed upon that lovely spot at the hollow of her throat that there was a bright flash amidst the blue of The Woman's anxiety and she was no longer The Woman who was a panther, but instead The Woman who was human.

Both The Woman and Her Lover let out a startled exclamation and both froze where they were. The Woman froze because suddenly her clothes fit different and her field of view no longer included the bridge of a wide muzzle and her ears were positioned differently and there was no longer any fur mediat-

ing touch. Her Lover froze because...well, I do not rightly know, friends. We can guess, yes? We can guess that there was the shock of a new form, yes, but they knew each other well, did they not? We can guess that there was a shift on the couch beneath her with a different shape, different size, different weight of lover, but they knew each other well, did they not? They knew each other well, and so we may guess that Her Lover knew that such a shift was not always a pleasantness for The Woman, not always a joy.

"You okay, love?"

"I do not know."

"Want me to stop?"

The Woman squeezed her eyes shut and looked closer at the point of too much meaning described by love and by anxiety, found it still indescribable.

"End Of Endings?"

"No," she said at last. "No, I do not want you to stop. I will tell you if I do."

"Should I avoid that spot?"

"Kiss me there again."

Her Lover did so, to no effect, other than a quiet huff from The Woman. They looked at each other, then both smiled and shrugged in unison, ever a loveliness between them.

And so they continued together with no rush to their movements.

The Woman shifted forms several times more. There were, they found, certain milestones that led to such, rather than certain places. There was the first hand on breast — and then she was a skunk. There was the first clutch of fingers at side — and

then she was back to human. There was the feeling of warm fingers slipping beneath a waistband — and, yes, she was back to being a panther.

Throughout it all, all those kisses — whether or not The Woman was able to return them, for giving kisses with a muzzle is not a thing she was able to do — and those squeezes and strokes and the gentle way Her Lover cupped her palm over The Woman's mons, throughout all those shifts, The Woman kept before her that ineffable point. Throughout all of the warmth of love and those stinging-cold flashes of anxiety and they way they swirled clockwise, she peered closer that she might scry some meaning out of this kernel of what was most certainly not joy. Even as the warm wave of climax pushed through her, rushing out from that spot low in her belly, even as she clutched at Her Lover's shoulders, fingertips and clawtips both tugging at skin, even as her cries smoothed out into whine-tinged breaths, she tried to name the unnamable.

They lay together for hours after, talking and touching. They moved to the bed and The Woman who was a skunk or a human or a panther brought such pleasure as she had been given to Her Lover, and at last they slept, and the undefinable remained undefined. There was joy in that touch, in that remembered love, and she knew that Her Lover would be by her side for some time to come if she let her — and she would let her — and that, too was a joy. And still, there between joy and fear...

There was joy, yes, but it was not a complete joy. Her hedonism with touch and sensuality and sexuality was a lovely hedonism and she cherished it, but it was not the hedonism she needed for this task.

5

Some of my readers may be wondering why it is that I know so much about The Woman.

"How does she know all of this?" some might be wondering. "Does she really know all these things that The Woman did? Does she know who the kindly shop owner is? The one who pet on The Woman as she sobbed from too spicy a chili?" Others might be wondering — and rightly so! — "How much of this is actually real? Surely she does not know The Woman's innermost thoughts! All this talk of ideas in shapes being set before her is quite silly."

My answer is that tired phrase: "It is complicated." Of course I do not know her innermost thoughts. I think it is a me thing to take abstract ideas and pretend they look like pretty baubles or hot coals or little statuettes to be placed upon a dresser. I cannot read minds, and I do not have any memories from The Woman. I do not even know quite what she is anymore! I would not know if she quit, since I am not down-tree from her — her down-tree instance is dead now, these last six decades, remember — and I do not believe she merged cross-tree with anyone except perhaps Ashes Denote That Fire Was, who is building in themself a gestalt of the clade as best they can. No, I do not know anything

so intimate.

What I do have, though, is a story. I have the story I learned from The Woman's Friend and Therapist and Cocladist and Lover, the one I learned from The Blue Fairy. I have all of that story that I learned, and I have that story that I lived.

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One day — I remember it being quite a warm one, though every sim has different weather, and we as a clade are not all that keen on cold — one day, The Woman came to me.

"Dear The Wheat And Rye Under The Stars," she said as she stood before my door, looking much the same as I do — though it bears repeating that she was *quite* stylish, and I promise you, friends, I am *not;* she wore a simple outfit of shifting colors that caught the eye without dazzling, one that made her look supremely comfortable as herself, and me? I wore a t-shirt and pajama pants! "I was pointed your way by Praiseworthy. Do you have a moment to speak?"

Readers, I do not think I need to tell you that I was caught off-guard by this! I had never met The Woman before, though I had certainly seen her once or twice. There were functions, yes? And perhaps she came to one of my readings or two, and certainly she was there, that day on the field as we watched Michelle who was also Sasha give herself up to the world and become one with the heart that perhaps beats at some imagined center of the System. The most recent time I had seen her, though, was in some unreadable and thus unwritable mood as some few dozen of us gathered on the first of what some are now calling *HaShichzur,* the day that Lagrange was restored after the Century Attack.

And now here she was, standing in the little courtyard created by the set of townhouses in which I and others within the ninth stanza live, with her paws clasped before her, bowing.

"Yes?" I said. I do not know why I asked it like a question, but that is what I did.

"I would like to ask you about your writing."

"Ah! Of course, my dear. Please, come in." I stood out of the way and gestured her inside, and this was the first time I saw her ritual of brushing her fingertips against the jamb of the door.

My place is clean and minimal. It is not clean because I am necessarily a clean person, nor is it minimal because I have any particular attachments to minimalism or its trappings. Friends, you have surely gathered by now that I am quite a bit more focused on writing than I am on most anything else. My home contains a simple kitchen and a simple dining table. There is a den in which there is a couch and a coffee table. There are two bedrooms, one of which contains a bed and the other of which is empty. The only room that is of any interest is perhaps my office, but even that is probably too minimal for most people's tastes! I have a desk. I have paper and pens and a keyboard on which I can type when that is the mood.

That is not to say that it is a boring place — at least, I do not think so! I have some paintings on the wall, some landscapes interrupted by hyper-black squares painted by The Child. There are several little decorations scattered around, as well; little objects that The Oneirotect has made in its explorations in oneirotecture and oneiro-impressionism. The most meaningful of these sits on my writing desk, and takes the form of a wireframe polyhedral fox about the size of my paw. While it is sil-

ver in color, it does not cast any shadows on itself and has constant luminosity, and so it looks like a two-dimensional shape that changes as your perspective does.

Ah, I am digressing again. My thoughts and words wander.

The Woman came in, looked around, and smiled to me. It was a very kind smile, very earnest, and I have no other words but to say that I felt blessed by such a smile. "Your home is so comfortable. It does not feel at all overwhelming."

I nodded, feeling a wave of relief. "I am pleased you think so! Can I get you anything?"

"I would not say no to a glass of water."

While I fetched us both such a glass, I said, "What is it that brings you here? I hope that Praiseworthy had nice things to say about me."

"Quite nice, yes, though I find her a very curious skunk. She is elusive, perhaps? Not in that she is hard to find, but it is hard to pin down her mood or her thoughts."

"Oh, very much so. I remember being her, yes, but that was nigh on three centuries ago, and I do not quite understand who she has become, myself." I handed over the glass of water and gestured toward the couch, where we sat on either end, half-facing each other.

"She was still pleasant to be around, at least," The Woman said. "She said that I should seek you out, along with Time Is A Finger Pointing At Itself, Where It Watches The Slow Hours Progress, and Beholden To The Heat Of The Lamps. You are the last on my list."

"That is curious. What was the reasoning for those names?"

"A writer, a poet, and a musician. I have been having some thoughts on joy that I would like to explore with each of you."

She told me her story, much as I have written it to you, readers. She spoke of the ways of seeking out joy, of diving into the pleasures of food — and I can tell you, friends, she is absolutely correct about tam mak hoong; it is *incredibly* delicious — and the pleasures of touch and sensuality and sexuality. She told me of how much joy she had found in such things, and the rekindled relationship with Her Lover, and she also told me of how these joys were lovely, but not the joys that she was seeking, and that she had three more items on her list of five. She had entertainment, creativity, and spiritual fulfilment yet to go.

"So, your goal with visiting is to read?"

She shook her head. "I have already read. That is why I was sent to visit Slow Hours. She is a very quiet person, and very comfortable to be around, as you are. You are inexact mirrors of each other, are you not? She reads and you write. She loves poetry most while you love prose. She is human and you are a skunk. She is a bit frumpy and tousled, and you are quite neat and put-together."

I will admit, friends, that I looked down at my pajama pants and t-shirt and laughed. "I do not feel put together."

"Perhaps one never does," she said, "and yet you exist so well contained. The whole of you exists within the person sitting before me. You are Rye, the author. You are Rye, the sincere. You are Rye who is kind. You are these things and you are none other."

My readers will know well that I have too many words in my. Why, just look at all that I have written already! I have gone on

at length about Laotian food and lovers and friends and family and mochas and melancholy. I have accused myself already a handful of times of intruding on my own story, of being helpless before the graphomania that guides my paw. So it is that you must believe me when I say that I was left speechless. All of this ceaseless torrent of words within me simply stopped.

I do not know if you have ever been complimented in just the right way by just the right person, but if you have, you well know that it is startling in its intensity. Had someone else said these things about me, even my beloved up-trees, I might well have blushed and stammered a thank you and felt good for the rest of the day.

The Woman, this skunk who sat before me with a glass of water held in her paws and her very chic outfit, the one who had smiled to me with such earnestness as to be a blessing, this woman who was too much herself, had just perceived me with such force as to leave me feeling bowled over. Even today, even these many years later, I remember that compliment and find breath catching in my throat, and we have already spoken on that, have we not?

We sat in silence, then, while I processed this. My friends, you may perhaps have picked up the sense that The Woman is in some fundamental way broken and perhaps unable to interact well with others. After all, she sits for so long in her room and in her home and on her field, and she sees Her Friend only with some frequency, and had only just recently gotten in touch with Her Lover, yes? And that is in many ways true. But it is not *wholly* true. She was too much herself, yes, and she would have said even then that she had lived for too long and that she was in

some fundamental way broken, but she was also so much more! I have shown you all that she was through her own perception, but from the outside...ah, she was hard not to love, my friends.

"Thank you, my dear," I said at last, bowing.

She smiled — another blessing! — and nodded to me.

"Tell me about your reading, then."

"I visited Slow Hours in her library," she began. "I know that it belongs to the whole of Au Lieu Du Rêve, but she has inhabited it quite thoroughly, has she not?"

"She has, at that," I said.

"We sat in the solarium and spoke about what reading *is.* She spoke of taking a story or a poem and wrapping oneself up in it. She gave me an example. She recited a poem:

"Too many suits move in too many lines.
They circle banquet tables, hawk-eyed,
hunting crudites, canapés, bruschetta.
Fingers ferry food — fish, perhaps — finding
slack-jawed mouths already open,
squawking at wayward children
or bemoaning The Market,
whatever that may be.

"At some point, who cares how long ago,
death surfaced, claimed one, submerged again.
Who knows how well they knew him,
their backs turned, studiously
deciding that he is no longer of them?

"One could never guess.

"We can say his suit was very fine, perhaps,
that the room is tastefully furnished,
the casket silver, the bar, open,
quite good, and none of them are drunk yet,
or at least none look it.

" "Good man, good man," they mutter,
doing all they can to convince each other
through well-rehearsed performances,
that this must be the case.

The silently bereaved already sit graveside."

I turned those words over and over in my head for a minute, since The Woman had seemed quite comfortable sitting in silence with me. She used that time to drink her water while I played back the words again and again, looking down at my paws, and then returned my gaze to hers. "There is a difference between the performance of grief and grieving, is there not?"

"It is as you say. There is performed grief and performative grief. We of the tenth stanza were quite sad when Lagrange came back with us but not Should We Forget. We received condolences from many, some flowers and many kind words. Ever Dream came over and spoke with me about grief as we sat out on the field, where she said,"It is quite sad, is it not? To lose someone you have known for so long is quite sad." I agreed, and then drew a line around the topic." She performed such a motion now, describing an arc before her with one of her well kept claws, before dismissing it with a wave. "This was grief performed."

I nodded, and in my heart, I think I knew what was coming next, for I found my muscles bunching up as if in preparation for something — flight, perhaps? I do not know, my friends.

"And Warmth In Fire came over, too, so that it could sit at our table and weep rather than eat. Ey wept, and then asked to retreat, and we guided her up to Should We Forget's room so that they could lay in her bed for a while in silence. When it came back downstairs, ey thanked us kindly and left, and when we went back upstairs to look, there was a flower wrought out of some subtly glowing metal left on Should We Forget's pillow. It lays there still."

"I remember that day," I said. "I will admit that I only met Should We Forget a handful of times, and always mediated

through Warmth, so I do not have the context for that grief, other than the fact that ey was left in pain for some time after the restoration."

"That was performative grief," The Woman said. "That was grief that, through its expression, was made real. Warmth In Fire's grieving allowed us to grieve as well. Ever Dream and all of those who sent us flowers performed a grief that was only intellectual. I appreciate them for that, but I love Warmth In Fire for what ey gave us."

We as a clade cry easily, and it is a thing that we all like about ourselves. I like the fact that I can cry! I like that I can cry over my own writing, go back and read a scene I wrote wherein a character experiences too many feelings or some form of growth and cry along with them.

So it is perhaps no surprise that I cried then, and that, for the third time, The Woman sat with me in silence.

When I was once more able to speak, after I had taken a moment to clean up, I asked, "You went into this experience with Slow Hours to explore joy, yes? What did you find, in the end?"

"I did not read only this one poem. I read several more with her that day, and took home several books to read in such a way. Slow Hours talked me through the joy of stories — even the small ones — and left me with some assignments.

"I did not like all of the books, but Slow Hours instructed me to read them anyway, unless they started to make me truly bored. None did, however, so I finished every book I took with me.

"Of the five books I brought home, one made me quite upset for how viscerally uncaring the protagonist was. I found them

acting for reasons that I did not understand, as though they were a being solely of habits and not of thoughts or emotions. One made me cry for the way the protagonist was torn down and yet built herself into someone new. The other three books I found quite enjoyable, and they were all engrossing to greater or lesser extent.

"I found this form of reading to be fulfilling, yes, but also all-encompassing. When I read in the manner that Slow Hours suggests, by wrapping myself up in the story and letting it play out in my head, I found that I became more easily engrossed, yes, but also I found myself wrung out at the end of each. I would finish a book and then have to lay in bed for ten hours straight, sleeping off and on. When I brought this up with Slow Hours, she only smiled, shrugged, and said that appreciation takes as much energy as creation.

"There *was* joy there, though. It has been many, many years since I had read something so thoroughly, had so completely taken it within myself. It was nothing so trite as feeling as though I was living there with the characters, nor that I was unable to put the book down. It was a relishing. It was a savoring. Each word became a part of my world, drifting into view to be cherished and then back out of it. By the third book, I saw what it was that Slow Hours meant by wrapping oneself up in a story, and I found comfort in this."

I stayed silent as I listened. After all, to hear so intriguing a person speak so eloquently on the act of reading was lovely! I never learned whether any of the books that she read were mine, and I was too afraid to ask. I do not know why, friends, but I was feeling quite outclassed. The Woman had a quiet force to her

personality that I cannot deny, and I wonder to this day whether she knew this about herself.

"You do not seem too pleased with this as an outcome," I said.

She shrugged. "It was a step on a path. I have also sought out entertainment in other forms. I spoke next with Beholden, who provided me a similar approach to listening to music. We spoke about active listening and what it means to actually hear a song, to, yes, wrap oneself up in it. We spoke about songs and albums, movements and pieces, and the stories that each of them can tell. Did you know that our dear Beholden has recently completed a concept album about the Century Attack? I did not listen to this for her assignments, per her request, but I did after the fact.

"I ran into a similar sensation, however. I *did* find joy in this type of listening, as I prowled through–" At this, the woman's form rolled over in a wave and, with a quiet sigh, she was no longer a skunk, but instead a panther, black and with shining fur. She readjusted her clothing and continued. "As I prowled through the music that Beholden suggested, I found a depth to the act that I had never before experienced. I was able to wrap myself up in sound and lose myself within it. Even with the music that I did not particularly like, I was able to find appreciation and tease out organization.

"Beholden's concept album, when I listened to it thus, left me in tears." She laughed quietly, and I felt comforted that I was present to hear such. "This is perhaps obvious, yes? A concept album surrounding the Century Attack, where we lost so many of our very own?

"There were no lyrics to this album, though, so it was not

the words that made me cry. I was not listening to words, but I *was* listening to voices. I was listening to the voices of her up-tree, Beholden To The Music Of The Spheres, and her partner's up tree, A Finger Curled. She had delved into her sample library and pulled together all of the clips that she had recorded of those two and built about an hour's worth of music out of them. A Finger Curled, who was lost in the Attack, and Beholden To The Music Of The Spheres, who quit out of despair one week later. It was her threnody. It was her wailing song."

Readers, I am not ashamed to say that I cried again. How could I not, after all? I had met Beckoning and Muse, before, myself. They had invited me over some few years before the Century Attack to let me research their gardens. They had fed me a dinner of pasta with zucchini, and a desert of zucchini bread, for their harvest was too large by far. We had sat out on the deck and looked out over the grass and the little raised beds that Beckoning had tended for a century or more and, although my paws itched to return home to write, we spoke until long after the sunset on our joys and sorrows, our hopes and fears.

I cried, and through it all, The Woman sat in kind silence.

When, now for the second time, I was able to sit up straight again, able breath slowly, able to look at The Woman instead of my paws as I covered my face, I bowed to her and said, "Thank you for telling me these things. I did not realize just how much I needed to hear them."

"Why?"

The Woman's simple question left me all the room in the world to admit that I did not know. I think that until she asked it, I was not quite sure why, myself. I *had* needed to hear those

things but, yes: why? I do not think I would have been able to tell her as part of my statement, but that syllable forced my thoughts into order in a way that they are not as I write this, six years later.

"Because I have not internalized the immediacy of the attack," I said. "I did not know Should We Forget. I never met No Longer Myself. I met and spoke with Beckoning and Muse, yes, but only once. You telling me these things — me hearing them — was enough to make me realize that I have not truly grieved them, not properly. Your story of Warmth grieving helped me understand em better, and your story of Beholden's music and how she told you not to listen to it for her assignments made me realize that I, too, am only just starting to process the loss."

"I understand. I was forced to confront the immediacy of Should We Forget no longer being with us from the very first day, and I am used to thinking of my stanza in terms of loss. We lost Death Itself and I Do Not Know, yes? We knew loss in a way more immediate within the clade except perhaps by those of the second stanza, who lost their first line, too, yes?"

"Was there a difference for you? Death Itself and I Do Not Know quit, but Should We Forget was taken from you."

The Woman tilted her head, then gazed out the sliding glass door that led out to my little patio. "I think I knew, on some level, that Death Itself would leave us. I certainly suspected when she went all but catatonic, yes? But I knew. I had no such foreknowledge of Should We Forget leaving us. I suspect that none did, except perhaps Slow Hours, and she told me that her dreams did not make sense until after the fact." She returned her gaze to me. "So yes. There was a difference. The feeling surrounding

Death Itself and I Do Not Know is a tired acceptance. They *were* a tired acceptance even immediately after. The feeling surrounding Should We Forget is a sharp and cold grief. It is a feeling of my world being upended and my footing no longer being sure."

"It did not feel stable after Lagrange came back, no."

"It did not. That, I am told, is why Beholden wrote her threnody: Beckoning was lost to the Attack and Muse quit out of grief one week later. Beholden, fearing that her life was unstable, declined the merge. She told me that she feared that accepting it would change who she was on a fundamental level, only for her to die, not loving her partner in the same way that she had for hundreds of years beforehand. A Finger Pointing has Beckoning's memories, but Muse is truly dead, now. Her memories have been dismissed and cannot be retrieved."

"I see," I said. "And so she memorialized what memories she did have in the form of her samples."

"There are many memorials now, are there not? There are many tokens. There are many metallic flowers and songs of laughter."

I smiled. "There is poetry in your words, my dear."

She bowed from where she sat, smiling. "And so I come to you, Rye."

"So you do. You have read with Slow Hours. What shall we do to help you on your path to joy?"

"Write."

I laughed. I do not think it was an unkind laugh, but it was a startled one. I am a writer, yes, but I do not fancy myself much of a teacher. I do not think I am much of a collaborator, either. I get quite protective of my work, and I can be something of

a bitch when it comes to having it challenged. "How shall we write, then?" I asked. "I write with A Finger Pointing. We send each other letters back and forth, telling stories."

"Perhaps that is a thing we can do, too, but this is a project that I would like to approach as a conversation. I do not have an agenda for how, simply that I must."

"Have you written before?"

She shook her head. "No, I have not. I have not created much since becoming who I am, I am sorry to say. My stanza will occasionally tell each other stories, however, and I always fancied myself quite good at that."

I nodded. "A story is a good place to start, yes. You really have made so little?"

"My last century has been spent focusing inwards and meting my time out carefully for reasons I cannot explain. I have been seeking a form of stillness, perhaps."

Ah! This was it! My friends, this was the point when I realized just what it was that made each of The Woman's smiles feel like blessings and what made it feel like she bore some power within her that I could not quite understand. It was her *stillness.* My astute readers will remember that she had a thought, some few thousand words ago: perhaps this unbecoming that her mind circled around was simply the utmost in stillness.

Now, your narrator did not know this at the time — I do not even know now that this was the thought she had that day, but I am a storyteller, and so that is part of her story — but at the time, it was a revelation. Stillness and stillness and stillness. What a dream to have! Would that I could find such, yes? Even now, even as I write this, I feel that the lucidity in my words is due only to

my recounting of a conversation I actually had, words anchored to moments in time that I pull out one right after the other and lay in a pretty row.

At the time, however, I said, "Have you found stillness in your endeavors so far? Was there stillness in active reading and active listening?"

"Not at all, no. I do not speak of physical stillness, but stillness of spirit. I shift forms, yes? I came to you as a skunk, yes? That is a physical restlessness that is evidence of an inner restlessness. My thoughts are unsettled. My feelings are unsettled. My mind is turbulent."

"That being the reason you did not feel the joy that you wanted?"

She nodded. "Yes. My thoughts became ordered, perhaps. That turbulence became a purposeful movement; rather than a stormy ocean, they were a river."

"I am sorry to say that I do not think my books would be any different."

"Oh, they are not," she said, chuckling. "They are quite good, of course, but they are hardly meditative."

I laughed as well. "Thank you, I think. I have a few that are labeled 'meditations on whatever', but even those probably do not fit the bill."

"I would assume not. No, I came to you because I wanted to talk to you about creating specifically because I watched And We Are The Motes In The Stage-Lights paint while visiting Beholden."

"Ah! Motes! What a delight!"

"She is, yes, though she is also quite a lot, is she not?"

I laughed, nodding.

"I will admit that, although I would agree that she is a delight. She was perhaps too much for me. When I first arrived at my visit to the house on the hill, she had just been swimming and was running around here and there."

"How old was she that day?"

"She said that she was seven," The Woman said. "I found her joy to be quite different from what I imagine for myself, though, as ought to be the case for someone who has chosen to live as a seven year old versus someone who has perhaps no choice but to love as a 317 year old, yes?"

"I will say that she is no less flighty or energetic when she chooses to live at older ages. When she is, say, twenty five, there is still no stopping her."

"So I am told. However, she is also a very good girl, is she not? Beholden saw the state that I was in — for when Motes started zipping around the house, I started shifting between forms — and suggested that she go and paint. She said quite simply"Okay!" and ran off to the next room where she simply sat on a stool and began painting."

I nodded up to the wall beside the couch, upon which a painting sat. The Woman smiled and nodded.

The painting was of my up-tree's house. The Instance Artist was one who decided that it had had quite enough of life in comfort, life here on Lagrange, life here honing, or perhaps forging new frontiers but in a familiar place, and up and left for the stars, back when humanity buckled down and decided to send out the two launch vehicles. Our very own twins, yes? Castor and Pollux? Those two half-sized Systems that even still race out of

the Solar System at some unimaginable speed, yes? The Instance Artist left us all behind with no fork to spare, and broke all of our hearts.

When it had lived here on Lagrange, it had contracted my other up-tree, The Sim Designer, to build for it an infinite short-grass prairie. It was a land of long, rolling hills and yet longer flat basins that always drank most thirstily from the seasonal storms that did their best to thrash the earth below. There, amid the countless acres, sat its house, low and flat, an echo of the plains around it all done up in concrete that matched so well the gray-tan stalks of the grass in fall, the gray-green stalks in spring, and glass.

And so there on my wall sat a painting that I had asked The Child to make, small by her standards at only the size of both of my paws held flat, wherein she had painted the house, the endless prairie, and the sky that somehow managed to be something beyond endless. There was the gray of the concrete that matched so well the gray-tan stalks of grass in fall, the gray-green stalks in spring, and glass. There was the plain, the sky.

And there, right in the center, hovering a scant claw-width above the house, a perfectly black perfect square.

Readers, you must understand that, when I say perfectly black, I do mean it! There is this color, or non-color, *Eigengrau* that is perhaps the darkest you are used to seeing. If you are in a perfectly dark room, or you are out beneath the stars at night and you close your eyes, or you are hiding under two layers of blankets from the monsters that haunt us still, even in this afterlife that we have built up into our nigh-perfection, what you see is not pure black, but *Eigengrau.* It is the darkest color, I am

told, that our eyes can see, phys-side! This is because, even when there is no light, the nerves of our eyes still fire occasionally. Perhaps it is because this is something that is required for nerve cells to feel healthy, and when those cells are in our muscles and it is just one or two at a time, it does not yank our hand away from our pen and paper like they were burning hot, but when they are in our eyes, every little firing is still perceived as a photon hitting this rod or that cone. Perhaps it is because there is some fundamental state of being for us that is *not* stillness, that is movement at some molecular level. Perhaps it is simply because they are lonely! I do not know, I do not know. I do not know.

This square is not *Eigengrau.* It is beyond that. It is beyond even black! It is deeper than *Eigengrau,* yes, but it is also a very thirsty black. If the ground of The Instance Artist's prairie drinks thirstily of the sky, so too does this black drink thirstily of all the light in the world. It draws light from the room, and when you look at the painting, the world seems dimmer. It is a hole in the world.

I am used to it, my friends, for it sits happily enough upon my wall, but I am told that it is unnerving to see.

"Her paintings have always struck me as bearing a sort of serenity that I have not actually seen in the world," I said after we had appreciated house and plain and sky and hole in the world. "It is more than just some moment of movement captured and frozen in time. It is like she records things that were never still to begin with."

"Yes, and that is what drew me to her," The Woman said, gaze lingering on the painting. "I begged Beholden's leave to sit and

watch Motes for nearly an hour. I claimed a spot in her studio once I received permission and watched as she worked. While I was there, she built up a scene of a mesa. I recognized it as Table Mountain. Do you remember?"

"Yes," I said, with some surprise. "I have not thought of that place in...well, likely not since we uploaded!"

She laughed. "Neither had I. We hiked there once and it seems to have left little enough impression, and Motes simply pulled it up from some deep recess, yes? Seeing that slowly take shape, though, as she worked with her paints, I felt like I was seeing some ancient behemoth who had never once woken laying asleep. It was a mountain that had never moved and never changed, even as a suburb sprawled at its base."

"Did she paint the shape while you were there?" I said, gesturing to the black-beyond-black square.

"No, not while I was looking. I did still have my errand, yes? I did not want to lose track of that. I wish now that I had."

"Having watched her paint this one, I can tell you that it is both more and less important than the rest of the painting. She paints it much as she paints the rest of the painting, yes? She brings one foot up onto her stool so that she can rest her chin on it and her tail drapes down behind her and she listens to her very strange music, and she paints the rectangle. Perhaps she sticks her tongue tip out as she does so, like she is concentrating very hard, yes?" I stuck my tongue tip out just so, furrowing my brow and squinting as though at some minute detail.

The woman laughed.

"So it is much like she paints the rest of the scene, yes? Except that it is not, because she is not adding to the picture, she

is taking away from it. I have tried to look at this painting from every angle, yes? I have looked up close and far away. I have touched it and smelled it and — yes, I will admit — tasted it, and it is in all ways just paint on canvas. But it is not on *top* of *anything,* it is *through everything,* I would say. I do not know how else to explain it. With all the calmness in the universe, she excised a part of the world from existence." I looked up to the painting again. "I feel that, were I able to visit Dear's prairie again, that very chunk of it would be missing. I fear it would be some sort of black hole hungrily gobbling up all of Lagrange from the inside. In my dreams, that is what the Century Attack looks like. In my dreams, we are all pulled through a null rectangle like that, and when the world is pulled back out, those like Should We Forget and No Longer Myself and Beckoning and Muse are left within."

We sat in silence — silences can be so comfortable sometimes! — while I looked up at the painting and The Woman looked out the sliding glass door that led out to my little patio. It must have been two or three minutes of just long, comfortable silence, of just a woman who was also a cat and a woman who was also a skunk, two women who were in some roundabout way the same, sitting together.

"How large do you suppose it would be?" The Woman said, startling me out of my reverie.

"Mm? The rectangle? The hole?"

She nodded.

"I go back and forth. Sometimes, I feel that it is right in front of me and the house is in the distance, and that it is painted to scale. Sometimes, I feel like it must be behind the house, or way out beyond the sky, and it is larger than the moon."

"I see we understand it in the same way. I cannot tell, either. I can tell you, though, that watching Motes brought me the closest to the joy that I have been seeking that I have ever been." She frowned down to her glass, now empty. When she continued, her speech was halting, slow, thoughtful. "Not...for me, not my own joy, and I think not even for her, though the little skunk certainly seems quite joyful. It is...adjacent to the joy. It brought me near to the joy, but did not necessarily bring the joy to me."

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We talked for some time more, The Woman and I, and discussed what it was that we could do to help her find joy. I am sorry to say, though, that we were not quite able to come up with something.

We circled for some time around meditative acts and how that might work with writing. Automatic writing, perhaps? Should The Woman set up with a note book and a pen and look into some deeper self and begin to write? Should she bid my demon of graphomania visit her, grab her by the wrist, drag her pen across the page that words may flow after it like eager puppies?

No, no. That was not it.

Should she journal? Should she write what she felt during the day? Should she boil the ceaseless moments of her life down to vignettes? Should she make those around her into caricatures that only showed those bits worthy of being set to paper?

No, no. That was not it, either.

Friends, I will note that, even though I got a little bit frustrated with myself, these *were* good discussions. I was frustrated

with myself because I wanted to help in this endeavor. It was a good idea! It was a good task. I wanted to help but I was not able to succeed, not that day.

So it was that The Woman returned home with the promise to come back the next day after we had both slept on it.

6

The Woman has always been The Woman. This is the way of the world.

The Woman was born Michelle Rachel Hadje in 2086. On a March night, she was born. Anna Judith Hadje screamed and screamed and breathed and breathed and breathed and, with a gasp or sigh or groan or moan, Michelle took a breath and, after a scant few seconds, wailed.

The Woman does not remember this, for how many of us remember our first breath, our first wail? She does not remember, but the fact is unassailable. From that point, she *was*.

The Woman was, for all intents and purposes, a normal, healthy child. She was wholly herself, and her parents loved her and her teachers teachers loved her and they all found her to be kind and empathetic, though prone to moodiness. "She is anxious," they said. "She is a people pleaser. She is autistic. She is bright and quick to laugh." And she was all of these things.

The Woman went to school, yes, as all unremarkable children do. Kindergarten came and went, and then grade school, where she sang and she dance and she acted in the little plays that grade-schoolers put on. High school then came, and it was there that she met RJ, and they fell in love, but it was not the

love that leads to romance, though they at one point tried. They did what high schoolers who fall in love do and kissed behind the bleachers and held hands even at one point had a sleepover, where RJ's mom peeked in on them at midnight to make sure that they did little else beyond kissing and holding hands, but it had never been RJ's wont to do aught else. Even romance was beyond em, and it was not the fit for the two of them. They were instead in love that took the form of a superlative friendship. Perhaps they were soul mates, should such a thing exist, but if so, it was not the arrangement that led to romance.

The Woman, like so many other anxious and autistic and quick children, like so many people pleasers who are quick to laugh, spent much of her time online. Her parents, when she was fifteen, as soon as such was allowed by law, paid for the procedure to get her the implants that allowed her to delve in to the shared immersion that was a reality separate from the world. They paid for this because she sat them down and made the argument that she had found friends online, too, online where people glommed together into heterogeneous groups surrounding shared interests.

The Woman, you see, had picked up on furry as a subculture, for when you are a child with an active imagination that loves to play pretend, it is only natural to pretend to be an animal, yes? She pretended to be a cat, for she loved the way they moved, and she loved especially the way their shoulder blades would stick up above their spine as they prowled along, low to the ground. A house cat at first for one breezy year, and then a panther. Something larger, something sleeker, something with big, soft-padded paws that still kneaded while she purred. She

was the panther who had named herself Sasha for reasons she could not quite articulate.

The Woman's superlative friend followed with her and then soon surpassed her. Ey picked not feline, but fennec fox, with ears too big and a brush of a tail and a short but pointy snout.

The Woman and her superlative friend moved together as one. They were the same person twice over, they would say. Michelle who was Sasha — a name chosen for who knows what reason — and RJ who was AwDae — a name that was a corruption of eir name — a name I feel no shame now in sharing. They were the pair who loved each other in their own way and who surrounded themselves with others. They were the pair who found each other and, when the world deemed them in some way unworthy of consideration, got lost together, for they fell among a crowd of politically active friends, as they were active themselves, and how inconvenient! Inconvenient people should be set aside, some bureaucrat thought. They should be put up high on a shelf in some forgotten storage. And so they were.

The Woman and her superlative friend, when next they clicked their implants into place and delved into the familiar second home that was the 'net, they were shunted away into dreams and left there to wilt, to languish, to desiccate and wither and be blown away by who cared what wind. They were both torn asunder in some ineffable way. For Michelle who was Sasha, those two identities were carved apart, though only halfway, and, when her superlative friend, her beloved RJ, gave of emself to create the world that was Lagrange, a System for those minds who chose to upload, she dove in as soon as she could afford.

The Woman and her superlative friend were ever bound up in each other, for they were the same person twice over, and since this world was in some ineffable way made *of* em, Michelle who was Sasha and The Woman who was Michelle felt she had no other choice, even if the unique trauma of getting lost meant that she ever felt that split that inextricable Sasha-ness and Michelle-ness that someone, some bureaucrat that wanted her lost, inadvertently tried to extricate, and it was not until the ability to fork was added to the System that she was able to alleviate herself of such. Or, if not herself, at least those new copies of herself, the Ode clade, would be without such pain.

The Woman and her clade were never wholly without, for such is the way of trauma, yes?

But I digress.

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The Woman wandered far from home. She picked a direction — east, if the entrance to that Gothic house on the field was due north — and began to walk. She walked for an hour. Then she walked for two, for four, for eight. She walked until the sun set and then she lay down in the grass and looked up to the stars and remembered all of these things and wept and smiled and laughed and sobbed.

She remembered these things, and I remember these things, just as I, in dreams, remember the sands beneath my fight and the rattle of dry grass in the wind and the names of all things and forget them only when I wake. She wandered the field and lay down and looked at the stars and bathed in memories and I pace the empty rooms of my home, listening to nothing, looking

at nothing, clenching and unclenching my fists as I struggle not to reach for my pen, my paper, and instead write in my head.

Why do we so often do this? Why are there times when, overflowing or not, we wrap ourselves up in our memories like the most comforting blanket in the world, and yet still cry? Why do we cry after loved ones? Why do we cry after ourselves? Why do we look up to the stars — stars we made! — and cry so bitterly? Why do the tears leave tracks in the fur on our cheeks or down over the skin of our faces? Why do birds, as the poet says, suddenly appear every time we feel such nearness as is left of our superlative friend?

The Woman lay in the grass of the field and dug her fingers down into the soil between the blades, clutching perhaps a dandelion.

When Michelle who was Sasha was lost, when she was set aside from the world as something undesirable, some anathema, she was placed within a dream and left to rot.

Within that dream, she saw a field very much like the one that she lay in, but also very much like so many other such fields sprinkled within Lagrange and Castor and Pollux, for we are many, are we not? We are, as we are so fond of saying, nominally one hundred, and yet we are thousands more, and so many of us have these fields, or perhaps snatches of field, that are speckled with dandelions. I have dandelions on the little moat of grass that surrounds my patio, just as did The Instance Artist who has since left Lagrange, but beyond the low fence that surrounds that patio lies a field, and that field is dotted liberally with them, and my beloved up-tree, The Oneirotect, will bring over her beloved friend, The Child, and they will race around yan

tan tethera in endless circles, playing leapfrog or tag or simply running for the sheer joy of it and then go all atumble, and the white fur of their stripes will wind up streaked with the yellow of those dandelions and green of that grass.

Within that dream, though, The Woman saw a field very much like the one that she lay in then, and her mind unwound and unraveled and began to fray and the sun rose and set and rose and set and rose and set and years passed and centuries passed and perhaps millennia, too, and then sixteen hours and twenty-three minutes later, she was lifted up up up out of the dream and set back into the real world. The bureaucrat was arrested, the world heaved a sigh of relief, and then set about doing its best to forget her.

But The Woman who was Michelle who was Sasha would not let that happen. She *could not* let that happen. She and the others who were thus transitively lost did not deserve to be lost again, forgotten by society, and nor did society itself deserve to forget that uncaring ones existed so prevalently. While she stayed as close to her superlative friend as she could, even after ey grew too terrified to delve in, to meet her as best they could as Sasha and AwDae, she campaigned for change, for greater protections from those who would view individuals as consumables to be chewed up and spit out

And then, one day, her superlative friend disappeared. Days went by, and weeks, and then before the month was out, she received a letter detailing the ways in which ey hoped to move forward how perhaps ey would die, but at least ey would die in the act of creation, of making a new world of utter freedom, where dreaming together was the warp of the world, and intent the

weft, and ey both succeeded and failed, for now the world in which we live is one woven from dreams and intent, but ey is absent. Ey became the weaver. Ey became the loom. Ey became the fabric. We feel em beneath our fingertips as they trace along the weave, but ey is not here.

But I digress.

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We are built to love, The Woman and I and all of our kin, and do not let any of us or anyone else try to convince you otherwise, for we *all* are built to love. We are built to love and to be loved.

We are also built of trauma, The Woman and I and all of our kin. We are built of trauma on trauma on trauma, and trauma and trauma. We are stacked brick by brick. We are built with logs stacked in a square, notches cut to make them fit. We are cabins. We are houses. We are buildings and skyscrapers. We are wobbly towers. We are smokestacks in the wind, and when the air passes over us a clockwise vortex will form and then a widdershins vortex and then a clockwise vortex and the air is life and the air is time and the vortex shedding tugs and pulls at us until we topple.

We must consider the most obvious trauma of them all, yes, when Michelle who was Sasha and her superlative friend were lost, along with however many hundreds of others, but we are not defined solely by that, are we? No one is defined solely by one thing. We are fully realized people, just as you and you and you and you and you are, dear readers. If you were to come up to me at some reading, some book signing, and say to me, "Rye! You have told me of the time that The Woman came to your house

and had that conversation that changed you in so many subtle ways, and you have told me of getting lost. Those must be the defining moments of your life," I would say to you, "You are forgetting that dinner that I had with The Instance Artist and its partners, and The Oneirotect, and The Sim Artist, where we ate so many wonderful foods and yet they all sat like lead in my belly as we realized that there was death in the air and death on The Instance Artist's tongue, for Launch was only a week away and to us it would be dead, and you are forgetting so many other joys and fears and so many other little traumas that make me *me!*"

We are built of trauma, and trauma and trauma on trauma and trauma and trauma, all stacked high like some wobbly tower, some smokestack that twists in the wind and then comes apart in overflow, The Woman and I and all of our kin.

The Woman was overflowing on that field, there, laying in the grass and flowers, staring up at the stars and the faintest outline of a new moon, laughing and weeping, far more herself than anyone person has any right to be, herself pressing against her chest from the inside, aching, rising up in her throat like bile, and I am overflowing right now, you see, or close enough to it, for even now, as I pace the empty rooms of my house, listening to nothing, looking at nothing, with my paws clenched into fists so that I do not grab my pen and paper to write and instead write this in my head, I feel how much of me there is, the way it aches, the way it presses against my chest from the inside and rises in my throat like bile, and I wonder what will become of me.

But I digress.

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We are built to love, yes, The Woman and I and all of our kin, and how complicated that is!

What is one to do when faced with the enormity of love? What subtle powers does such wield over one? Are we beholden to the fact that we deserve love? Had we not deserved love, were we not to deserve love, what would become of us? Would we be better off by choose-your-metric? Would I be better off if I could love beyond that familial love I feel for those in my stanza, for those in my clade? If I felt feelings of romance of desire of libido of attraction of soul-mate-ness of this-ness or that-ness would I be better off, or am I better for lacking such?

The Woman and I and all of our kin have not always had the best of luck with love, nor with standing up for ourselves. When I say that we have more traumas than simply getting lost, our unluck in love accounts for some sizeable portion of this.

We struggled with the role that our bodies played, yes? For Michelle who was Sasha was short — as we are — and she was fat — as many of us remain — and she was so-called blessed with breasts to match. So-called by those who wished to in some way claim ownership of them. When she pursued a reduction, her back thanked her and those who bestowed such praise wondered why why why we would withhold that goodness from them.

And yet even that did not stop such attention, for we were, it seems, worth a certain set of things to others — to those beyond our friends and our superlative friend with whom we remain in love — and so why would they hunt for aught else?

We are skunks for a reason. We bear these aposematic stripes for a reason.

We also bear these scars on our chest for a reason, a recla-

mation. We found new joy in this transgression on the gender we are told is worth X and Y and Z. We are more than short fat women, though we also find joy in that, for What Praise exists, yes? My cross-tree? Lovely, he is. And Hold My Name exists, yes? Tall and trans and woman the long way around and transgressive for it? And Deny All Beginnings exists, yes? Trans man that he is? There is queerness in us and that is the more that we love, that is the A and B and C that is not the X and Y and Z.

We are skunks for a reason and we bear these aposematic stripes to say: stay away. I am as I am and I will not be anything else.

It worked some of the time.

But I digress.

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We are skunks for a reason and we bear these aposematic stripes for a reason and we bear these scars on our chest for a reason and we also bear these scars on our thighs for a reason. Should you, dear, dear friends, be so thoroughly plagued by self loathing that the only option to move forward is to externalize that pain, that hatred of self, through blood through a knife through a hot wire, then can do naught else but beg you not to.

There is reclamation to be had there, yes, for so many of us have kept those subtle ridges on our thighs, marking skin or easily felt through our fur because they are a part of who we are entirely. I still bear them and will not fork them away.

There is also reason not to keep them, for we have moved beyond what we were, and that, too, is a loveliness for its very truth.

I do not know whether The Woman bears these still. I do not *know,* gentle readers, much about her. I do not know if she *actually* went out and walked east from the house for hours and hours and a day and lay down in the grass and dug her claws down beneath the roots and stared up to the stars and laughed and wept. I will say that she did.

Enough digressions.

We are all of us beings of balance. We live with one foot in two worlds. We live with our thoughts in life and in death. We live with our hearts here and also there. We are platonic minds and bodies, and we are unified in the both of them in a Blakean energetic hell.

We are those who have scars because we sought the self-fulfillment of a breast reduction and those who have scars because we hurt so much we took a knife or a hot wire to our skin where such might be easily hidden. We are these things because we love life with a ferocity that leaves others breathless and also, though there is only the faintest whiff of suicidality in us, yearn in some intangible way for that which is not life, whether it be void or rest or, yes, joy.

I feel that call now, yes, as I pace the empty rooms of my home, listening to nothing, looking at nothing, clenching and unclenching my fists as I struggle not to reach for my pen, my paper, and instead write in my head, and perhaps The Woman felt that, too, as she wandered east and lay down in the field and looked up to the stars and held that other, most peaceful life that plants dwell within in her paws.

And yet I feel that fearful love of life within me now, for the words that I am writing now, pacing my empty house with-

out senses but those bound up in my mind, stroke most softly along some part of me that is built to love, a silk dragged along skin and a soothing balm on bothersome scars and a cooling ice that runs through my veins to calm the fire of graphomania as though they were not actually a symptom of such, and perhaps The Woman felt that, too, as she overflowed beneath the stars and felt growth and growth and growth and growth and growth and growth beneath her paws and between her pads as blades of grass and achingly beautiful dandelions reached for the heavens where perhaps our superlative friend dwells.

Enough digressions.

The Woman is *whole,* my beloved friends, my dear readers. She is *whole!* She is *whole!* She has to be whole. I tell you, she is *whole.* I tell you as I write this with tears streaming down my face and blood soaking my paws from the way that my claws dig into my palms that she *has* to be whole. For all of our sakes, for *my* sake, she has to be whole she has to be whole she has to be whole I have to be whole she has to be whole, for otherwise, what will become of me?

7

When at last The Woman returned home, left my home and returned to her own, her mind was aswirl with possibilities and all the various endlessnesses thereof. She felt full. She felt *overfull.* She felt as though she had had poured into her several depths, oceans of possibilities and each as deep or deeper than the last. She was vast. She was limitless. She was these things, and yet she was infinitely smaller than the limitless endlessness of the void which still lay within and without.

She returned home after that talk with me and my beloved up-tree, with your humble narrator and The Oneirotect, and she did that which she is good at: she napped.

My dear, dear friends, the longer I go on, the more I pace around through quiet rooms the more these words swirl around me in some quiet maelstrom, the more I wish that I could do the same. Sleep brings no relief. Within my dreams there are yet more words. The boundary between waking and sleeping is so faint, now — I write even in my sleep! My dreams are of The Woman! My dreams are of me sitting at my desk with my pen in my paw and paper before me, of ink on page and words flowing after like an eager puppy! — the boundary is so faint now that I have more than once awoken from uneasy sleep to found

that I had indeed at some point sat down at my desk and written word after word after word, after word and word and word. I have found pages of endlessly repeating phrases. I have found scribbles that are doubtless words and yet which I cannot decipher, and I cannot remember my dreams well enough to say what they may have been.

Did The Woman dream, we may wonder? Did she lay down and sleep after that conversation and look up to the constellations in the texture of the ceiling, close her eyes, and then let play within her head some scene, some dream within a dream within a dream within a dream, some stream of meaning that the subconscious mind as dreamed by the dreamer of the world?

I do not know.

Let us suppose she had, though! Let us take a look at what has made up The Woman so far and extrapolate some perhaps dream.

When first we began, when first some saner me set pen to paper or claws to keyboard, The Woman was set within her ways. She was set, as with her cocladists within her stanza, as one of those who suffers. She had hopes for moving forward with her life, yes, and dreams, but there was some part of her that fell in alignment with Her Cocladist's assessment that it was her lot in life as a member of the tenth stanza to provide a client for the seventh, those therapists among us. That was the moment when I began this story, telling of who she was, of expressing her as she might express herself, as did Carlo Collodi with Pinocchio: once upon a time there was not-a-king.

For she is our Pinocchio, is she not? She is our Pinocchio in reverse. She is the one who was born into this world too real

and yet yearned for some of the stillness of so-called-inanimate wood.

The Woman then had her inciting incident, did she not? She had that moment when she met with Her Friend and felt after some form of joy that she could not quite put into words, and with that joy, against that joy, she felt the loss of joy over time, the way it was secreted within the treats that she delivered quietly to her cocladists and the way it seemed to trickle out of her life. And the second part of this incitation was the way that this fading of joy was cast against the stasis of her stanza, the suffering supposedly bestowed upon them. It showed to her plainly the impermanence of such joys, and thus, by omission, the possibility of a permanent pleasure.

She is and we are of a neurodivergent type, and so her approach to hunting for such joy as she imagined was of such a type as that: thorough and curious, methodical and whimsical. She set before herself by rule of fives five investigations: food, sex, entertainment, creation, and spirituality. The first four of these brought joy, and even superlative joy, but not the joy she sought, and before her lay the prospect of spirituality, and yet such a prospect was exhausting before she had even begun.

And so now we may only guess at the dreams of one such as her, one who lives within our consensual dream, one who is dreamed by the dreamer who was at one point our superlative friend.

Here is my supposition:

The Woman went walking. In her dream, she went walking, though it was not out on her field, the one we have seen so often. No, instead she went walking out her bedroom and through

her secret door, out through the door and onto the street of the city that had become so familiar to her over the years, that city with the brick pavers and the fallen leaves which skittered so anxiously around her feet. She went walking in her dream and made her way through the unnervingly empty city streets, walking and walking and walking. She passed the trolley stops. She passed the coffee shops. She passed, perhaps, the setting sun.

And at some final point — final! — she came across a square set within the cement of the sidewalk perhaps two meters on a side where the concrete gave way to a metal grate in the form of a sunburst, and in the middle there was a circle of soil, good and clean.

There, within her dream within a dream within a dream, she smiled. She smiled and she sank slowly to her knees in that ritual circle described in steel and dug her fingers down into the soil. Down and down and down she pushed, and as she did, she felt her fingers lengthen, stretching and twisting, seeking nutrients and water, seeking final — final! — purchase. They twisted and stretched down as roots and spiraling up her arms was a texture like bark and the bones of her neck and back elongated and her eyes sought *HaShem* or The Dreamer or some greater void and her hair greened to that of leaves and drank thirstily of the sunlight.

Finally — finally! — with one orgasmic flush of joy, The Woman became The Tree, and there was a joy everlasting in such stillness.

This is my supposition because this is my dream. This is a world I have seen and a world I have dreamed and it is a world that I have found a way still to love, even after it turned in on

itself and ate so many of its own, even as The Dreamer who dreams us all stumbled skinned eir palms and elbows on the brick pavers of this land. Since I have become myself, since your humble narrator was first called Dear The Wheat And Rye Under The Stars, that has been my dream. I have dreamed hundreds of times over the centuries that I have lived that I, too, fell to my knees and dug my fingers into the soil and became, in some pleasure-bound process, something still and sky-reaching, something earth-eating and water-drinking.

This is my supposition for The Woman and her dream after she came home from my house, because I think within her all along was that stillness, that sky-reachingness and earth-eatingness and water-drinkingness.

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The longer we live — and, my dear readers, I will remind you that I am now 333 years old! — the more evident it becomes to us that there is fractally cyclical nature to life: the years spiral up and the months spiral around and the days spiral forward — weeks are a construct borne out of our inherited faith — and so we live within a fractally cyclical tangle of time.

I know this. You know this, I am sure, on however instinctual a level, for you are clever and bright and you see the world with fresher eyes than I have. You are cleverer and brighter and fresher than your humble narrator who paces the empty rooms of her house and fills them with the quiet muttering of the mad.

The Woman knew this as well. When she woke from her nap — for my astute readers remember that that is how this rambling chapter began! — she could now — in a way she could not

before — feel and perhaps even see these spirals. She could see the way that her 227 years had spiraled up around her. She could see the way that time bound her, tied her up in coils and coils and coils and coils and coils. She could see these coils — however metaphorically — as they twine around her legs and torso. She can feel these coils — however metaphorically — slowing her down, holding her arms to her side and limiting her reach. They — these coils — obscure her.

Ah, my friends, I am struggling. I can feel and see these coils, yes, and am obscured.

I am going to lay down, and perhaps I will dream.

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I have slept now. I took a cue from The Woman and took a nap, and while it did not come quite so easily to me as it ever did to her, it still offered some rest.

I dreamed, though! I dreamed of words like leaves and sentences like branches and stories like trunks, standing solid, with premises like roots dug into logic like earth and drinking of emotions like water. There was the tree, yes, for there was the green of the words and the brown of the story and the deep darkness of logic and emotion.

And above was the sun which was also The Dreamer who dreams us all.

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"I want to unbecome," The Woman told Her Friend.

These two, these two skunks who were women who were both, at their very core, Michelle Hadje who was Sasha, these two sat around a small table not at the coffee shop but out on the field outside of the house where The Woman lived. My readers, most perceptive, will remember that this is where, once every two weeks, unless she was overflowing, unless she was in pain, unless she simply could not bring herself to go, she had an appointment for therapy.

The Woman had requested such, this time, and while it was far from the only time she had done so, the streak of good days, of those days when she felt up to stepping out of the house, out of the sim, out into the city so that they might meet up at a long-familiar coffee shop had been a long one. Her Friend had agreed readily, as ever ey did, but there was within that sensorium message the sense of an eyebrow raised, of a question unasked. And yet, ey said yes, and some ten minutes later arrived, standing out on the grass before the stoop with a mocha in each paw.

Waiting on the first step up from the grass, The Woman bowed and stepped down to greet her friend, and from there, they walked to the table in silence. They lifted down the chairs in silence. They sat down in silence, and sat in silence for some minutes after, until The Woman said, "I want to unbecome."

"So you have mentioned, my dear."

The Woman nodded.

"Have you grown any closer to finding out just what that entails?"

"I have, yes."

Her Friend smiled, raising her paper cup in a toast and tapping it gently to The Woman's own cup. "Congratulations, End

Of Endings. I am pleased to hear that. Is there more that you can tell me?"

"Of course, No Hesitation," The Woman said, sitting up straighter, as though by having her body more in order, her thoughts might be as well — would that this worked, my dear friends! Would that I could be so still and keep my thoughts like ducks: all in a row. Would that my emotions all faced the same direction. Ah, but The Woman continued, "If becoming was the act of going from stillness to movement, then unbecoming might well be the act of going from movement to stillness."

These words apparently caught Her Friend off guard, as ey, too, sat up straighter, furrowing eir brow. I am sure that you can see just how startling such an answer may be! We knew from the start, of course, that talk of unbecoming would be littered with little landmines labeled with such things as 'suicide' or 'self harm' or simply 'the void', of course, but The Woman's words spoke of something more complicated.

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And all of this makes me wonder and makes me tremble.

It makes me tremble and it makes my fur stand on end and my paws shake and my pen skitter anxiously across the page like those leaves that danced before the feet of The Woman I told you about so, so long ago, perhaps like those leaves that skitter within the city, that unreal city, that city full of dreams, where ghosts in broad daylight cling to passers-by.

Oh! And oh! The wonder of it all! She, then, like snow in a dark night fell secretly! She fell and fell and fell and we fell and fell and fell and fell and fell until falling was all we knew and within that fall we found some new kernel of truth but how hot that kernel was! It burned within our palm as we held it to our chest and for each of us it burned so, so hot and so, so differently that there she was, too much herself and here I am, too much myself, and the words come so fast and so thick that I am blinded! Ink in my eyes, scrabbling for any known thing! I press upon this and that with shaking fingertips to try and find something that is not yet more words, but that is all there is, because

this is it, my friends, the kernel of truth that we found. The truth we now know is that we are falling still! We fell into overflow and never really ever came back. We may slow down, we may catch a branch and be able to hold there for a little while, panting, struggling to catch our breath, until fire burns through our shoulders and we cannot hold any longer and we are forced to let go once more and fall and fall and fall just like I am falling and falling and falling and falling and falling.

And The Woman? This is what makes me wonder and makes me tremble: what of her? Is she alive still? Or did she quit and are we left not with a tree that is her but simply a tree? Simply that which drinks thirstily from this dream of a ground. Is that her or is it a dream of dumb matter? If she is still there, if she is still alive, if she is still that tree, then is she still at last? Is she merely herself at last? Has she landed at last upon the ground and sat up, dazed, and looked about her new life and said, "Oh! Oh, I do believe this is some plentiful enough for me"?

Because if that is so, what of us? My little readers may be rubbing the tears from their eyes or tilting their heads in confusion as I wonder at them: what of us? If that really *is* her, if she really *is* that tree, and if she really *is* at last at rest, then what does that mean for me, who cries ink down into her fur — a skunk! Is it really any wonder that black fur suits me so? What does that mean for my clade? For Her Friend, who struggles and strives to reclaim that which has failed and turn it into some bijou and yet who, when ey falls, feels that all the work ey has done is not just for naught, but has hurt those who ey sought to help?

My own Friend, who will most certainly read this and reach out to me to see if I am okay, she has said that she wonders

at times whether we are all doomed to die. She was with me, with all of us there on the field, as I watched my root instance look up to the sky, breathe in a million billion trillion years and then quit, and so now she wonders at times whether we are all doomed to do as she did, to look up to the sky, breathe in every year of our lives and the lives of all of our instances, and quit. If that is all that lays before us, what does that mean for us? If all that lies before every Odist and every hidden, forbidden self that we have spun out into the world is some forever death, then what does that mean for this time-bound now?

Is death within us? Perhaps. Is suicide within us? Perhaps.

Was this death? Was what The Woman did in seeking and finding her eternal stillness suicide? Perhaps! Perhaps perhaps perhaps perhaps my friends perhaps.

My little readers who are rubbing the tears from their eyes, do not fret! Do not fret. Do not fret. Do not fret. These are the questions that are part of life. Do not fret that you, too, may someday ask yourself this: is death within me? Am I born to die? Perhaps you will lose a friend to despair, as did so many after the world's heart skipped a beat and billions fell into oblivion. Perhaps you, yourself will despair and then come back up to feel the sun on your cheeks in some prosaic sim and wonder: am I born to die?

When, as now, I am blinded by ink that flows down my cheeks and stains my fur and my clothes and my paws and my paper and my pen and my desk or when, as now, I overflow and graphomania catches me up by the throat and bids me with unbitter sweetness to set the nib of my pen in the ink well, then touch it to the page, and then simply dance, that is when I am

forced to wonder, when I am pressed up against that overhot kernel of truth: is death within me? Is suicide within me? And am I born to die?

What will become of me?

Friends, I do not know, I do not know. Friends, all I can do is lock the door and make sure my mug of mocha will not empty and pick up my pen and put it to the paper and brush my cheek fondly against my graphomania's wrist and listen to its cloying words and simply dance. Do I need help? Should I seek out No Hesitation? Should I ask My Friend? Should I ask you, gentle readers? What will happen if I do? What will happen if I do not? What will become of me?

I am full of wonder and I am full of terror and I am trembling and I am asking myself you The Woman Her Friend My Friend my graphomania my pen my paper my dear, *dear* readers: what will become of me, and am I born to die? And am I born to die? And am I born to die? What will become of me? And am I born to die? What will become of me? What will become of me? What will become of me? What will become of me? And am I born to die? And am I born to die? What will become of me? And am I born to die? And am I born to die? And am I born to die? And am I born to die? And am I born to die? What will become of me? And am I born to die? And am I born to die? And am I born to die? And am I born to die? And am I born to die? And am I born to die? And am I born to die? And am I born to die? And am I born to die? And am I born to die? And am I born to die? And am I born to die? And am I born to die? And am I born to die? What will become of me? And am I born to die? What will become of me? And am I born to die? What will become of me?

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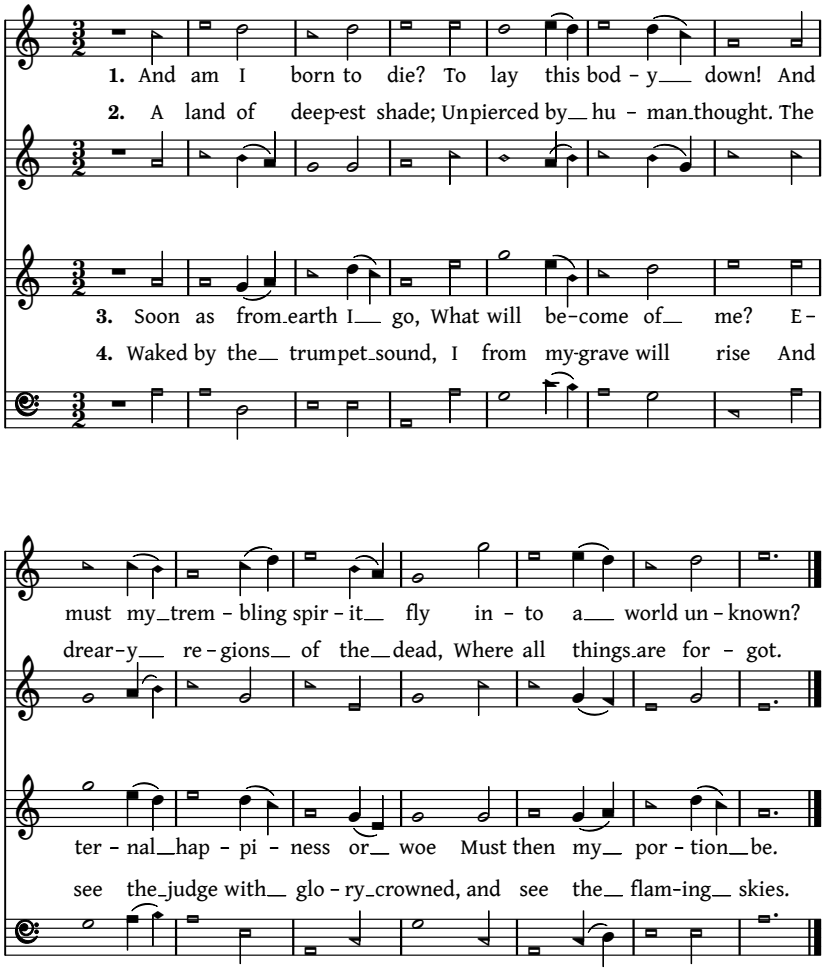
Afterword

IDUMEA. C.M.

"A time to be born and a time to die." — Eccl. 3:2

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