

Kaddish

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A Post-Self story

Madison Rye Progress

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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

Idumea

Madison Rye Progress *et al.*

Kaddish

Madison Rye Progress

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Note: this book takes place in the Post-Self setting and touches on the plot of *Marsh*. It is still a standalone novel, but might benefit from having read that work first, as well as other Post-Self stories. They are available as paperbacks, ebooks, and free to read in the browser, and you may find them and much more at *post-self.ink*.

Content notes: TBD.

Every reading of every poem, regardless of language, is an act of translation: translation into the reader's intellectual and emotional life. As no individual reader remains the same, each reading becomes a different — not merely another — reading. The same poem cannot be read twice.

The poem continues in a state of restless change.

— Eliot Weinberger

Prologue

I am returning to write this prologue having already written the work from start to finish. I have lived these days. I have lived this year. I lived, and now I have won for myself another day in this life.

I am returning after having written the work, having gone back and read it, and I see an insufferable person. I see someone I would not like to be around very much — and I know this to be the case because I do not often like spending undirected time with my own up trees — and I cringe.

The thing about this feeling, though, is that it is borne out of improvement. I look back at this last year and do not like the person who I was at the start of it as much as I do the me of today, and so that comes with the corollary: I like the me of today more than the person who began this year.

This is the kernel of joy within that pain. This is the sweet to go along with the bitter. This is that careful balance that has become a core to so many of our tricentenarian lives. When we look back at who we were and cringe, that is the us of today looking back and recognizing the shortcomings we had which we no longer have. We have changed and grown as people: affirming. We might come up with all sorts of quippy advice, promising

ourselves that we will not kill the part of ourselves that is cringe but instead the part that cringes, and yet overapply this sentiment to all aspects of ourselves.

I cringe at who I was not out of some irony-poisoned sense of superiority, but out of a recognition that I *like* who I am now.

Is that a spoiler? Am I spoiling for you, O imagined reader, one of the core conceits behind this work? It is woman against self, and the woman, she who has been a hero since birth, prevails, as all heroes must?

Perhaps.

I do not feel like a hero, no matter my words. I feel like a tired, old woman who lived through the end of the world and came away from the experience wishing she were other than what she is.

And now, here I am: other than I was.

I have chosen for the epigraph to this memoir a quote by Eliot Weinberger that I think stands more poignantly than some silly bit of mistranslated Heraclitus, because Weinberger speaks *specifically* to the act of reading — or, more specifically, translating — a poem. It is not a statement on personal growth. It is a statement on active engagement and the ways in which engaging changes us.

There is, curiously, too much placidity in Heraclitus' philosophy in this particular context.

This world is not static.

I am not static.

Change is not happening *to* me.

I am an actor in this world, and I have within me agency, and I have within my grasp my own destiny. Though my forward mo-

mentum may be slow and meticulous, I have time. I have lived 317 years and I will continue to aim for ever greater change over the next 317, not simply allow change to wash over me, for more precious is one hour working toward positive change in this world than all the life of the world to come; and should my life once more cease, and this time for good, then so be it: more precious is one hour of the tranquility of the world to come than all the life of this world.

— What Right Have I of the Ode clade

17 Sh'vat 6163 / 10 February 2403 / systime 279+41

Yom HaShichzur

What Right Have I — 2403

sys^{time} 278+41 — *Yom HaShichzur*

The itch on my palms is not a real itch, and yet all the same, it demands to be scratched. I can scrub my paws down over my front or rub them over my thighs and gain momentary relief, but it will always come back when tensions run high.

Many things will plague me when tensions run high. I will tic — a jerk of the head to the side with a squeak or a yelp or a quiet grunt. I will pace in an abbreviated line, my steps spelling out an ellipsis. My stammer will get ever worse.

I maintain that these are an integral part of me, just as is bearing the form of an anthropomorphic skunk, and that I will never strive to rid myself of them. I say to myself that I will never cease pacing, that my tics are a form of communication, that scrubbing my paws over my tunic or trousers is simply a part of the way that I live. I promise myself — and you, whoever you are — that I will not elide my stammering. When tensions are running high, these are cemented within me as a part of my existence.

Tensions are running high.

I am supposed to be calm. Relaxed. Professional. I am supposed to do anything other than scrub my paws over my front and fidget with the hem of my tunic or visibly restrain myself from pacing. I am not supposed to yelp or squeak in the middle of someone speaking — least of all Rav From Whence! — and I am definitely not supposed to scuttle off stage to go lay down on the cushion I keep beneath my desk for high-anxiety moments such as these.

I explain to myself and to others that the entire reason that I exist is to outlive the part of me that speaks in should-statements. I am not supposed to do any of these things, but ‘suppose’ is a ‘should’ in disguise. Reframe it: “I should not do—”

No.

I exist specifically to kill that version of What Right Have I. The whole reason that I *am* What Right Have I of the Ode clade and no longer am I From Whence Do I Call Out is because Rav From Whence knew that at least some part of her, some *version* of her should exist specifically to revel in unmasking.

We are a revelrous clade.

We are all hedonists, in our way. Conscientious hedonists, mind: we believe that *all* deserve revelry in that which is good, but simply that we, too, are included in that ‘all’.

Some revel in the hedonism of play, or the hedonism of creating, or the hedonism of food, of drink, of drugs. Some revel in the hedonism of naught: No Unknowable Spaces Echo My Words dreams of death and the lack of life, of mourning and loss, and to her, such is a joy. Unknowable Spaces’s up-tree Before Whom Do I Kneel, Contrite dreams of the very lack of a sense of self, and to it, such is a joy.

But consider: they are cross-tree from me. I bear in me very little of what makes them *them*.

No, my revelry lies in unmasking. I revel in the earnestness that one feels for oneself when one is truly as they should be. Michelle never had that. How could she? She was bound by capitalism, and capitalism does not particularly like catastrophically autistic nerds living their best lives.

So she tamped it down, as did so many others, back phys-

side, and lived the life of the slightly strange woman who taught theatre — for what theatre teacher is not slightly strange? — who loved her students and went home to pretend to be a skunk person on the 'net.

And that was our life.

For the first 31 years of our life, we were that slightly strange but nevertheless comfortably masking autistic woman, and even after we uploaded, even after we were surrounded by so many other strange people, we only relaxed partway, and it was not until Michelle forked into the first ten lines of the Ode clade that we had the chance to relax any further.

For the first 38 years of our life, we were still slightly strange and nevertheless still masked. It was not for another six years until the first line of my stanza, the third, forked my down-tree, Rav From Whence, and while ours was the stanza that returned to the Judaism of our childhood, she was the one who dove wholeheartedly into it. Here, though, is where we took a step back, masked yet more, for as Rav From Whence was forked to lean harder still, she too began to find a place of leadership for herself, and so she remasked, and masked again.

For the first 44 years of our life, we were strange, and yet making it work. We — Rav From Whence and the me who was not yet — found a synagogue. We made it through school. We founded our own synagogue. We soon lost track of what it meant to be strange.

That did not mean that we ceased having that strangeness within us. That did not mean that we ceased being autistic, nor even that we ceased talking about it. We just became something new. We became Rabbi From Whence. We became a visible, pub-

lic representative of our clade, and we took that seriously.

That tension piled up, the tension between our new selves and our inherent strangeness. Some 22 years later, I forked off from Rav From Whence. I was no longer her, I was What Right Have I. I was the version of From Whence who could return to strangeness. I was that of her that could not just present as an autistic woman, but the version of her that could revel in that.

And so, for the first 66 years of my life, of all that time as Michelle, as Oh But To Whom, as From Whence, I was strange, but merely strange. I was restrained, and not wholly, joyfully myself — and this is not to say that my down-trees were not whole or did not experience joy, but I was not them.

On systime 28, 2152 common era, 5912 of the Hebrew calendar, I became me, and I had the chance to grow into what I would eventually become.

And that is, apparently, a fidgety, anxious mess who is doing her best not to scuttle off the stage and go hide under her desk in her office on a glorified dog bed. I am beyond strange, now, and beyond old. I am 316 years old, now, though I have only lived a bit less 315 of those. That is why we are here, yes? That is why I am standing on a stage, ancient and anxious and weird, yes?

I am wandering.

“—know that the Century Attack was a deliberate effort, it is easy for us to reach to parallels in the past.” Rav From Whence is saying. “Death on such a scale is hard to imagine, as is loss of such magnitude, but we must remember that, until one year ago today, never before had such recovery of life been accomplished. We mourn our 23 billion dead, we celebrate the 2.3 trillion who are still alive. What Right Have I?”

I tug my tunic straight and step forward to stand beside Rav From Whence. Then tug my tunic straight again, scrub my paws down over my sides, and tug my tunic straight once more.

It is worth mentioning that it is not the crowds that make me nervous. Yes, I have certainly never spoken to an audience of *thousands* before, just as I have never had my words broadcast over AVEC so that those back phys-side can watch, can hear my stammering voice, but I do not feel fear of audiences, of public speaking.

Instead, I feel fear of myself, of so many intrusive thoughts.

“Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu melekh haolam, sheg’molanu kol tov,” I call out. I never stammer in Hebrew, and have never questioned why.

The response comes from only a quarter of the assembled — a mumbled, *“Amen. Mi sheg’malchem kol tov, hu yigmolchem kol tov. Selah,”* that I cannot help but sound out in my head in time — but it is enough to show that I am not speaking solely to politicians and bureaucrats (or whatever passes for such, sys-side).

“I... ah, I am What Right Have I of the Ode clade, member of the committee dedicated to... ah, to this occasion,” I say, bowing toward the assembled. “It is, as my down-tree says, one year since the recovery from the Century Attack and... ah, and thus two years, one month, and eleven days since each and everyone of us died. We died!”

Silence, just as planned. I stifle a tic to keep that silence silent.

“To the last, everyone present here— ah, that is, everyone present sys-side, spent one year, one month, and eleven days in some hidden *Sheol*. We were... ah, I mean, to phys-side, we were

your memories only, just as the dead have been since the beginning of memory. We missed our own Yahrzeit, yes? We slept in death, yes? We were late to the party?" I shrug, wry smile on my face. "We are... ah, we are not sorry. We were dead at the time."

Chuckles, just as planned. Give an ex-theatre teacher a stage, and you will get gallows humor.

"We debated celebrating our own Yahrzeit as an intentional holiday, and... mm, well, and perhaps some of us do, yes? Perhaps on New Year's Eve, we recited our own *Kaddish*. I did not. I argued from... ah, from the beginning, that we hold instead *this* day in our hearts. This is a day worth celebrating. This is the day we lived again. This is the day that we — that the committee on... ah, on the Century Attack at the New Reform Association of Synagogues — have decided to dedicate our energy to. It is my honor to announce that..."

I turn to face west and, with timing on my side, need wait only some few seconds before the final sliver of the sun slides below the horizon.

"It is my honor to announce... ah, to announce that it is now *Yom HaShichzur*. Today is the day of our restoration and... ah, and the first celebration of our return to life. May we take this day every year, the 41st day, February tenth, to... ah, that is, to not fast, but feast, to rejoice with each other that we are *here*, that despite the wills of others who would have otherwise, we are *still here*." I bow once more and gesture at the open space before the stage, cueing the oneirotect standing to the side to dream up the banquet that will be our first such feast. "*Chag sameach*."

And now, I am free. I linger a polite five seconds on the stage before turning and stepping down the stairs, carefully making

sure that I walk unhurried, to pad back to the synagogue, to my office, to comfort and softness and the dark beneath my desk.

There will be merriment or tears. There will be feasting and chatting or small, awkward silences. I do not know. I do not care. I will not be there. This has been too much, and the tensions are high.

The synagogue itself is a relatively small building built into the side of a hill — the hill on top of which we had our gathering — a sharp-gabled building that can easily be confused for a house from the front, but which rambles down the hill behind that facade in a sprawling complex of meeting rooms, community rooms, classrooms, and apartments for newly uploaded Jews who found themselves in need or want of a place to stay where they might be comfortable.

It is a place that has become my home in so many ways, for yes, that is where my congregation meets, and yes, that is where my office is, but, like those newly-uploaded, it is also where I live. I have taken up permanent residence in a room beside my office. It is cozy and small, and consists of little else beyond a beanbag for reading on and a bed for sleeping on, but it is mine in what I feel is a very *me* way.

There are ways in which this whole sim feels like mine. Yes, I have had my paw in designing portions of it, of making suggestions or nudging those who have worked on it toward changes. Yes, I work here, both in my studies and in the occasional volunteer work, bettering by hand what I know how. Yes, I have stuffed myself into committee after committee, arguing and agreeing on matters of *tikkun olam*, that we might give back, repay and repair.

But also, I feel that I inhabit this space. I have imbued it with little bits of What Right Have I, from the tangible bits of shed fur, those skunk pixels that linger here and there, to the intangible fact that I have simply been a part of this community for centuries now.

It is on these things — these memories, these wonderings if ever my paws have tread the same spot twice — that my mind lingers as I walk. My mind lingers on them to the point where Rav From Whence has to touch my elbow gently to let me know that she has stepped in beside me, has been walking with me for who knows how long and has been trying to get my attention.

I squeak and skip a step to the side, tail bristling, before forcing myself to calmness. I bow to her.

She smiles, nodding her acknowledgement. “What Right Have I, do you have a moment more to talk? I have a request for you before you head back.” She lifts a plate heaped with some known favorite foods of mine. “Plus, I brought you some to take back with you.”

It takes a few seconds for the request and the offer to click into place for me, and I realize I have been blinking dumbly at her for that time. I smile hesitantly in turn and accept the food. “I... ah, *todah rabah*.” I murmur. “What is it you wanted to ask?”

She nods, gathers her thoughts, and then stands straighter to speak. “I would like you to reach out to some clades, both within the congregation as well as others within our clade, to get a better sense of our life a year later. I have a longer document written out about this to give you something in writing, but I wanted to get a sense of your feelings on the idea first.”

My gaze drifts away, down to the plate of food in my paws, to

the vegetables fresh and cooked, to the fried apple fritters and savory potato dumplings. I pick out a stick of celery to crunch on, knowing that something like that will give me more time to think. I do not chew prettily by some standards, but such was never the point, in my life. It comes with having a muzzle that borders on transgressively realistic. I chew noisily and, at times, quite messily.

Let others cope.

Once the bite is finished and a string of fiber from the celery nudged from between teeth, I sigh. "This... ah, this feels like a strange request to ask of me in particular, my dear."

An eloquent shrug. "I have given it thought and stand by my decision. It is not a requirement, of course. You need not say yes."

"Why me, then?" I smile faintly, gesture down at myself. "I am this, yes? I am... ah, I am a bit of a disaster."

"You work on rather a lot of committees related to this already."

"Yes, but in an advisory role. I... ah, I am not normally one to talk to strangers, or even acquaintances, about these sorts of things."

She chuckles. "I know, What Right Have I. That is, in part, why I am asking you, though. You will be a new face to many, and it will break the context of how many more already view you. It will show them that you are part of this world, too."

I realize I am scowling and do my best to soften my features. "I see."

"Consider it a part of your ongoing work with the committee," she says, gesturing back toward the celebration, now tak-

ing the form of a long line snaking away from the feast table. I am reminded of tails, and have to work to dismiss the thought. “A part of this restoration is that it is an ongoing process. We should learn *how* people are restoring. Repairing the world is a never-ending process.”

I work harder to keep the scowl off my face, all the more so for how much I have expounded on such, have said *mitzvot gor-eret mitzvot*, have written on the words of the fathers, “You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it,” and how they fit within sys-side life.

And so I sigh. “Very well, Rav. I... mm, well, I still do not understand why it should be *me* who does this, but... ah, but I will do my best.”

She smiles most kindly and bows. “Thank you, my dear,” she says, then gives a shooping motion with both of her paws. “Now, go. Eat. Spend some time restoring yourself, too.”

I sigh, bow, and give my best thankful smile before padding in through the front door of the synagogue.

From Whence is a past master at riding the line between condescending and genuinely kind, and even I know that the perceived condescension is a matter of tone, a matter of interpretation. It is easy for me to read in “*Consider it part of your ongoing work with the committee,*” a sense of placation, of “*Come now, What Right Have I, you know you should be doing this too.*” It is equally easy for me to see, however, that I am reaching a little for this, that I am finding ways to see how others are steering me as a parent steers a child.

And yet she still is so often genuinely kind. She knew well that, when I stepped so calmly away from the gathering, it was

to head to my hidey hole where I might seek rest in comfort and quiet, and so with that plate of food and that gentle nudge to send me on my way, she absolved me of any guilt for doing so. She knew. She knew, so she smiled and gave me that permission.

Ah well.

systime 278+42

I have decided that I will work on this project I have been assigned longhand.

It is a thing that I will go through phases on, the ways in which I work. Sometimes, I will work with a pen in my paw and paper on my desk, books all scattered around. At other times, my desk will bear a great screen and I will type on a keyboard adapted to work with the digger claws I bear as a skunk, all of my research in buffers and panes scattered across the view. Rarely, I will work solely in my head, words committed directly to an exocortex, sources bubbling up through my mind from the libraries at the heart of our System like so much fizz in a drink.

These phases will last a year or ten, and then meld seamlessly into the next. That is where I am now. I am in the midst of a dovetail. I am coming off a period of working in my head, because my paw craves the weight of a pen.

This is not strictly true, I think, now that I put it to words. I do not think this change is wholly natural. The world ended for some baker's dozen months and now I am unsettled.

All of life comes in phases, overlapping and intertwined. It is a braid. It is a melody. It is a story that we tell ourselves from day to day about who we are.

It is a braid and a story and there are phases within our lives, and yet there still exists the world around us, gently impinging here, wrenching us into some new reality there.

We were wrenched. We were ripped from being and it was only through the tireless efforts of who knows how many engineers both embodied and embedded, that we were slowly mended, woven back into the fabric of life. When we crashed, all 2.3 trillion of us, we were all in the middle of *something*, and now we must take into account that the universe continued without us for some time. We must take into account that, no matter what our *something* was, it was interrupted.

I had been working on an essay at the time of the crash. It took me nearly nine months to return to the act of writing, for even though it lingered there in an *exo*, I could not bring myself to write it. There was too much to do, and there was too much that was fraught with life, for we all, I think, had our worries that the apocalypse was not yet finished with us.

I am now unsettled, because the world ended, and so instead of writing this report for Rav From Whence in my head, as I did for my last few papers, I will write it out by hand.

But that is not my only project, is it? There is *this* one, too. There is this story that I am telling you myself about who I am and who I was, and that is being written close to my heart. It will live in an *exo* and, if I am honest with myself, likely never see the light of day. I will write it in my thoughts in those moments between, the minutes before I sleep at night and before I rise in the morning, the slow walks I might take to clear my head. I will wrangle my thoughts, lasso them together, coerce them into words and then think them directly into my memory that I

may draw upon them for...whatever. I do not know what I might need these thoughts for, but I nonetheless feel compelled to note them down.

My therapist has guided me towards journaling several times over the years to greater or less effect. When last we met, she did not bring it up, and yet hear I am, essentially journaling.

I wonder why? Why is it that this project belongs to the ink of a pen, yet the journal I keep belongs in my thoughts? Is it that it is so much more private? Do I worry about committing these words to paper?

Perhaps it is that there is some issue of privacy. Am I worried about my words being seen or read by another?

I do not think so. With some projects, when I have worked long-hand, I have taken joy in the act of writing and then simply committed the words to memory and dismissed the written sheets themselves. It is not that the words might exist in some tangible form, but the act of writing itself.

Perhaps it is that committing words to paper would mean that I would be setting them down in some way more concrete than simply thinking of them.

In this case, it is the *committing* that is the important part. Am I perhaps afraid of my thoughts on the Century Attack and on this assignment from Rav? Would seeing my words, unchanging, on the page, whining of this or that, be too much akin to pinning these thoughts specifically to those grumpinesses, bitternesses?

This, I think is partially true. There is truth in the fact that, when writing by hand, part of the goal is to pin down a meaning to a word. It is to write a thing into being. That is not the case

with this journal, if journal it is.

Perhaps, though, perhaps I am just embarrassed. Perhaps the feelings that drove me to start cataloguing these experiences are ones that I am merely too embarrassed to set to paper, too shy of what they might suggest. Am I really such a whiner? Do I really kvetch about every little thing?

Apparently, and that is why I think this is the most true of these reasons yet.

And besides, it is not as though I have any thought of publishing this work, and would not even if I were to write it out longhand or sit at my desk typing. To write as though that were the case would be to hem myself in, draw boundaries around these embarrassing thoughts and promise myself that they in particular will not see the light of day.

systime 287+46

I met today with a longtime friend of mine in the hopes that he would be the first among my interviewees. Why after all, should I not figure out the shape of this project through some known thing?

For that is the problem I am running into, after all: knowing the shape of this project.

Rav From Whence came to me with the vaguest of suggestions, and the proposal document that she offered the next day clarified little. Her suggestion was that I ought to interview those within the congregation first, then those without and yet who might have some thoughts on just what life after the Century Attack might look like. In particular, she was suggesting

that I collect for her not just the interviews but also my very particular take on them. A Jew's take. An autistic woman's take. The take of this disaster by someone who might very well be called a disaster, herself.

But why?

Not just why me — though also why me — why is my down-tree interested in a project like this? Why does she want this thing from me? What purpose would it serve?

I ran through the list of associations that I know she has.

She is the rabbi here at Temple Beth Tikvah She is on several committees with the Association of New Reform Congregations, and heads up several. She was for several decades, the *chair* of the ANRC. She is well connected. She is well collected. She is who I was. I remember being this person. I remember being the type of person who could change hearts and minds through this very Odist mode of interaction. She is the type like so many of us to speak in accidental five paragraph essays. She is the type to deep canvas without thinking, to show the world what it is doing to those within.

None of this tallies with this project.

I am to speak with people about this broad topic and pull together their responses and my impressions in a report. More than that, I am to be entirely myself throughout this process. I am to...be seen? Is that it? Is that the subtext of what she told me in front of the shul? Her document told me that it was to be “a chance for outreach as well as research”, which tells me precious little and yet which hints at much the same.

I am to be seen. I am to remain this version of myself that is cherished by me and tolerated by others, and I am to place that

self in from the bereaved and...I do not know! I do not know. Why am I to be as myself as possible in front of these mourners?

I asked, thus, this of my friend.

"I imagine there are a few takes on that," he said. "One is a strange sort of outreach like the proposal says. You go out and chat with the people and they see a skunk furry with a tic disorder and a double helping of anxiety."

"Yes, but... ah, but what does that accomplish?" I asked

He shrugged, a wry smile on his face. "No clue. That's where the supposition stopped. Is she asking you to do this so that the temple is viewed in a certain way? Is she hoping that you'll straighten yourself up in some way without realizing it? I really haven't the faintest."

I pulled a sour face and glared down at my coffee. "Straighten myself up. She... ah, that is, I cannot imagine what I would straighten up into. Would I stop speaking so immediately that my thoughts race ahead of my words? Would I look my interlocutors in the eyes? Would... ah, would I fuss with my shirt less?" I gestured down at myself.

He laughed, waving his hands disarmingly. "Like I said, no clue. You're all so...so tricky that--"

I giggled. I could not help myself! I giggled and clapped my paws. "'Tricky'!"

Once more he laughed. "Yes! You always have all these schemes, planning things that have layer after layer of meaning. It's...well, I was going to say it's a wonder you all can even keep it straight, but clearly it's an individual thing, rather than a collective thing, if you're this confused."

I like him, Joseph Chace. He can poke gentle fun at me and

it feels like no cruelty is behind it. Doubtless myriads of such people exist but this one is my friend, and I am glad for it

We met some century and a half ago when he came to visit an evening Shabbat. He, a Quaker, stated that he was interested in sorting out his feelings over a whole set of beliefs not his own, that he had plans to visit all sorts of congregations of all sorts of faiths, that he was out about about several times over that night doing just that.

So ebulliently strange was he, so well read and delightfully weird, that he was nudged my way by From Whence. Strange, bookish man? Point him at the strange, bookish skunk!

It was a good estimation, for we have been friends since.

I am realizing as I set these words down that I must sound terribly bitter about my existence. I must sound like I resent my cocladist, or mistrust her, or suspect her of unfairly coddling me.

I do not think this is the case. Not usually.

There are times — and perhaps with this project more than usual — when this does seem to be the case, that she is looking down piteously at me and saying, as did a teacher in grade school, “Ay, pobrecita...” The poor little girl cannot quite handle the world...

There are times when I feel she pities me, but those feelings never quite stand up against reality, and so I am left wondering where it is that *I* am picking up such feelings. How is it that *I* trust myself so little that I expect others, even those who are in some way myself, most feel this way about me?

No one likes the feeling of being patronized, and yet the defensiveness within me prompts me to read such into every little interaction. It is a thing that am realizing perhaps I ought to

watch out for, to approach consciously.

But, ah—! I have lost track of the thread. I was speaking with Joseph today, and so I asked him, “Well... ah, would it be alright if I were to interview you, then? Perhaps there is some goodness that I may yet find in this project, and who better to seek that with than... ah, than a friend, yes? Perhaps you may nudge my questions this way or that, that I may find more... mm, I suppose edification in the act of asking.”

While he often bore a slight smile on his face, the tenor of it was labile and his moods discernible through its intricacies. Now, it slipped closer to a smirk. “Edification?”

“Well, yes. That is what we are discussing, is it not? That... ah, that perhaps From Whence has some ideas as to the fact that I might do this project for myself, rather than for the world.”

“You’re just being very you about the whole thing,” he said, laughing. He sat up, shooting imaginary cuffs and straightening imaginary tie. “Alright. Ask away, What Right Have I.”

“Very well. Can... ah, can you tell me what you were doing on that New Year’s Eve? The night of the Attack?”

“You know, when you brought up this whole venture, I was imagining that’d be the first question you’d ask.”

“Is it... ah, perhaps I should change it?”

He shrugged. “It depends on the vibes you’re going for. If you’re looking to lead people into an interview where they can give the same answers they’ve thought of in their heads for a year now, it’s a great one.”

I frowned. “Should I not, then?”

“No, no, that’s what I mean. That’s valid and useful, too, because you can get the things that people have been cycling over

for a year. That tells its own story.”

“And the alternative?”

He laughed, not unkindly. “No clue, What Right Have I. You tell me.”

I did my best to cover a tic, a release of slowly building anxiety, with a dramatic eye-roll. “Humor me, Joseph.”

“I really don’t know, is the thing, because I don’t know what you’re going for. Are you going for making them cry by the end? Do you want them to express hope for the future? Are you aiming to rouse righteous anger?”

Here, I must stop to put a pin in something. The conversation continued, and is worth recounting, and I *will* recount it, but I have to put a pin in the final question there: *are you aiming to rouse righteous anger?* Joseph’s habit of alliteration aside, this was an astute question that raised my hackles in the moment, raises them even now as I put these words to memory.

I must put a pin it to speak of later, because there is an essential anger in me that only at times feels righteous, and that is perhaps why, above all other reasons, I am undertaking this exercise.

Now, though — as I did at the time — I must swallow that anger until I am through with the moment.

“I am... ah, in this, I am directionless,” said. I knew that my tone was clipped, that my lips were threatening to curl, that my tail was bristled and hiked. I know that I have said that I exist to unmask, but I am not ignorant of the realities of communication, the little lies we tell, both verbal and non. I spent a moment quelling this sensation. I sat up straighter. I un-splayed my ears. I with a sweep of the paw brought my tail up into my lap that I

might comb my claws through the stiff fur, there, brushing out imagined accumulated dust. Self-soothing. “I am sorry. That I am directionless is... ah, it is stressful, yes?”

He smiled most kindly and nodded. He knows me well, Joseph, and I am pleased that he is in my life. Despite my abrasiveness, despite when I have at times snapped at him — as any friend might after centuries — despite the end of the world, he is still in my life.

“If I were to perhaps... ah, well, let us say that perhaps I switch it up with each interview, yes? Perhaps I wrong-foot some of those with whom I speak, and with others, I walk the straight and narrow path? Perhaps with some I will play twenty questions, yes?”

“Twenty questions? Like the game where you have to guess what someone’s thinking of, and you have twenty questions to do so?” He raised his brows, an expression that somehow involved his whole face moving in opposite directions. It is quite charming. “I hadn’t considered that as an interview technique.”

I laughed, waved a paw, and set back to the self-soothing grooming of my tail. “No. There was a time when... ah, when Michelle was invited to play — this was early on after uploading, you see, before our sensoria were locked into consensus — and she had forgotten that such a game existed. She decided, instead, to offer twenty questions that pushed primarily discussion. We as a clade have... ah, we have kept a list of such circulating.”

“Oh? Like what?”

“Perhaps... ah, perhaps you may tell me this: what is your most treasured, and yet completely inconsequential memory?”

He sat up straighter. “Inconsequential?”

“Yes. What memory that... ah, that others would find completely mundane and unimportant is a joy to you?”

There was a moment of silence before he let out a baffled chuckle. “You’re all *very* weird, you know that?”

I smiled smugly, nose poking up in the air with a bit of haughtiness. “I do, yes.”

Where before he had raised his brows, now they sank in concentration, and once more, I was struck by the way that this involved his whole face coming together. “Alright. Well...I suppose that, if we’re talking about the Century Attack, then I’ll restrict my memories to around that.” He settled back in his seat once more. “I lost two up-trees in the attack, Epsilon and Mu. They—”

“Do you then have no more than... ah, then twenty-four up-trees?”

“I only have thirteen.” He winced. “Had. There are eleven Josephs Chace now.”

I nodded, silent.

He continued, more slowly now. “We lost Epsilon and Mu. And I say *we*, here, deliberately. We may all be our own people, but we are also a unit all together. I’m Prime, and Epsilon and Mu were each their own, but we are still all Joseph Chace.”

“Were.” I winced as soon as I said it, though if Joseph felt any pain by it, he did not say so.

“We’re all together in being Joseph Chace, and we’re all members of the same meeting. Some of us have fallen away from regular attendance of course, not everyone has maintained the same interest in Quakerism — or even spirituality — that I have, but we’re all still members of the Brookside Friends’ Meeting.

First Days come around, and so many of us see each other there. Some First Days, we'll even get the whole clade there. You can tell at a glance that that's the case if you count the empty chairs.

"I'm like you, you know. I'll always merge down to be singular for meeting for worship, if I can. I like the feeling of living life in parallel as much as any dispersionista, so it feels almost titillating that I take this time to live so singularly."

"I think that... ah, that you may simply be a nerd."

He laughed, waved a hand dismissively. "Pot. Kettle. Black."

I preened.

"Anyway. The 11th was First Day, the day after we got back, and everything was so crazy that a bunch of us met at the meetinghouse, and that's where we learned that Epsilon and Mu were gone. Lots of tears, lots of big feelings. That was before we knew it was an attack; we just thought some huge crash had happened. Still, we all agreed that we'd meet on the 18th, the next First Day, and have an actual, honest-to-God meeting. We could figure out a memorial meeting later, but maybe we could actually just...fucking...pray."

He was getting heated. This was not new. He is a passionate man, and I have seen him soapbox gleefully and angrily both. This was not new, but what was was a brightness to his eyes that I'd never seen before, and so out of place was it that it took me some few moments to realize that they were tears not yet shed.

"The 18th comes around, and we all gather at the meetinghouse, and the mood is, obviously somber. We're all pretty fucked up by the ceaseless torrent of news." He laughed, and bitterly so. "I don't remember the news cycle from phys-side with any fondness, but it was so easy to fall back into. Checking the

feeds every few minutes, just in case something new had come up. It was so easy...”

I was rapt by now, and my tics had ceased.

He took a deep breath and continued. “We were all messed up, and I was wondering how we’d be able to leave any room for silence. Surely we’d all be clamoring to speak, trying our damndest to wait a minute or so between each message.

“But no. We just...sat there. Twenty-fucking-five of us, two clades, and we just sat there in silence for the whole damn hour.”

He scuffed the heel of his palm against first one cheek, then the other.

“That’s not even that rare. Once every...I don’t know, fifteen, twenty meetings or so, we’ll have a fully silent one. No messages. No speaking. We all just sit there like a bunch of fucking idiots and it’ll be the most impactful thing to happen to us for months to come.

“You don’t really think of it, but fifteen weeks is a long time. More than a quarter of a year! And here we are, spending months thinking about sitting, silent, in a room for an hour or more. This is why I say idiots. You put it into perspective, and it seems so stupid.”

“Inconsequential,” I offered. I am ashamed to admit that there is a part of me that remains proud of this single word offered at just the right time.

He smiled, and shakily so. “Yes. You see? Eleven Josephs Chace sat in a room in silence for an hour and fifteen minutes. I haven’t spoken with the Kanewskis — they’re the other clade at Brookside. I haven’t spoken with the other Josephs. This is just my memory. Maybe it’s also theirs, I don’t know.

“My most important, least consequential memory is sitting in a dead silent room with twenty people, counting empty chairs over and over again.”

I bowed my head, both in thought and in politeness. The politeness ought to stand evident, but the thought was a picturing of the tableau that Joseph offered.

I have been to two of his meetings for worship. The first was because it felt a fair exchange that, being his connection for a visit to Beth Tikvah, I also visit Brookside. Neither of the meetings that I attended were silent. In both cases, yes, we began in silence. There was a call to the egregore, in a sense, that we join together in prayerful silence until one of the members was moved to speak, to share some thought or feeling borne out of that of God within everyone, within those present. And, in both cases, someone stood and spoke. They shared an idea—

Or — and this is a point that I bear some shame over — what felt like some *head* of an idea. Some very beginning of a thought, with the expectation that we ought to simply fill in the rest.

I will ever be as I am, though. If you provide me with an opening for anxiety, I will simply fill that opening with anxiety. It was not just a space that I might fill with anxiety over these half-truths, but an invitation to do precisely that.

One of them might say, “I was thinking this past week on the idea of community and the ways in which this has shifted to include our cocladists as well as those who are from other clades,” sit down, and, five minutes later, I am fretting, “Do I treat my up-trees with the respect owed any member of a community?”

I am not built for this.

Give me, instead, the pillowy comfort of ritual. Give me the

mumbled and, at times, indistinct chanting in Hebrew. Give me the rising, the sitting, the lifting of my paws. Give me the silence only when it is warranted: when the hand of the rabbi drifts across the congregation asking us to recite the names of the living in need of prayer or the names of the dead in need of remembering. Give me *L'cha dodi*. Give me *Barechu*. Give me *Maariv aravim*, *Ahavat olam*, *Shema, Shema, Shema...*

Ah, I grow overwhelmed. This bodes ill.

And yet, I am not so bereft of mysticism that I do not *understand* the draw of silence, of the egregore of such a space.

So visceral is his telling that I feel it now, even some hours later, the sitting in silence, with tears held at bay or not, looking around the room and counting empty chairs.

Our conversation wound down from there. There is little of note — or what is of note is that which belongs between merely Joseph and me — and soon we parted ways with a hug, as has long been our custom.

I returned home, then, and sat for a while at my desk, trying and failing to read, and then went for a walk, where I sat beneath my Jonah tree until I started to feel warm despite the chill air, and then I returned to my room, where I languished in bed, which is where I remain even now.

And, now that I have finished this telling, now that I have had some space from the initial memory, I may speak about anger without tears or that disgusting way in which I know my face contorts.

There is in me, as I said, an essential anger which does not always feel righteous. We are all beholden at times to our frustrations, and oftentimes, this is the extent of such anger. I will

grow frustrated at the world around me, at the way that I am treated, at the ways in which inanimate objects seem to at times disobey me or act counter to the way I think they ought.

Most often, however, I grow frustrated at myself. I grow frustrated at my own anxieties. I grow frustrated at my shortcomings. I grow frustrated with the fact that I have leaned so hard into this identity of unmasking and that unmasking is not necessarily any more comfortable than masking. More liberating, yes, but not more comfortable.

And yet sometimes that frustration rises to anger, and, at its most righteous, I find it often directed towards some inequity. How dare the world be so unfair? That is what I might say, yes?

At its least righteous, that is twisted around into: how dare the world be so unfair *to me*?

How uncomfortable!

Yes, the world is unfair, and yes, I am part of that world, and yet, whenever I find myself veering perilously close to ‘tantrum’, there is a part of me that cannot help but watch, helpless, in horror. Why is the skunk *crying*? What is she *doing*? Why is she like this? What right has she to be so unaccountably upset?

Seeing myself fuss and cry and hide away and leave interactions because of my own shortcomings, feeling that I was not being heard, that I was cycling through anxieties and wrapping myself up in them as though that would somehow give me comfort or greater room to process... Well, it was uncomfortable.

Worse, when I would latch onto some slight, real or perceived, and be unable to let it go: I loathe this about myself. Why is it that so often I fall into consternation with my down-tree? Rav From Whence loves me, and I love her. Why is it that we oc-

asionally fall to snippy comments at each other? Why do we both wind up in tears, sitting in some courtyard or hidden room or the synagogue itself, litigating and relitigating and relitigating yet again the same misunderstanding, talking over and past each other? Even now! Even these decades and centuries later!

Yes, we will always sort through our feelings. Yes, we will always return to our friendship, will hug and take the other's paw in our own and vow to be better. And yes, we will be better! We do better by each other every week and every month and every year.

It is just that, yes, there is always some new thorn.

Why, why, why, I ask myself. So many questions, and there are indeed so many answers.

My therapist has brought up several over the decades. She has spoken of various ways to label these cognitive distortions and disordered thinking, and offered them not as some cruel diagnosis, but as frameworks through which I may understand myself and thus progress. My habit of relitigation falls out of perhaps some obsessive thought patterns, a ritual of attempting to say what I feel I must in the *correct* way in order to be best understood, and so perhaps I might think of this as a form of obsessive compulsive disorder. Walk through the ramifications of this as a framework, consider how it fits, draw from it lessons but not a label.

Or perhaps it is merely generalized anxiety. Perhaps I am more than just anxious, I am *pathologically* anxious. Perhaps the anxiety is the type that ruins a life rather than the type that keeps one safe.

Or perhaps this, or perhaps that.

I worry that perhaps I have gone down some blind alley and gotten lost. I worry that I have made myself into not just someone who has relinquished her grasp on herself that she might revel in unmasking, but into someone who has lost control of herself and thus spirals. I worry that all of this anger is pointed inward, in the end, and that its effects merely radiate outward in waves.

I have thought on anger a lot over the centuries, and yet it is this last thought that is new in these last three hundred seventy days.

Do I merely hate myself?

systeme 278+47

I have rested, now, and thought yet more on my conversation yesterday. One thing I will say that Joseph and I spoke about is the moment of the attack. After all, he mentioned that the next day was Sunday — First Day, as he called it, nerd that he is — and so it was natural to all of him to meet, then, for worship.

“I didn’t notice anything had happened until nearly midnight,” he said. “I don’t really do anything for New Years, after all. It’s just another day for me. That’s why I call it First Day rather than Sunday, right? It’s the first day of the week, so why give it some special name?”

“I was just scrolling through the feeds, hunting down little artsy performances that people had recorded. Some sensorium plays, some comedy sketches. Just stupid, boring, late-night, turn-the-brain-off nonsense.

“I got a ping from Delta asking where Epsilon was and why he wasn’t responding. We thought he was in a cone of silence or something, blocking incoming sensorium messages, but then we got a message saying that Mu was missing, along with one of our friends. The rest of the night was spent just panicked, sitting on the edge of the couch at home, trying to get in touch with as many people as I could.”

I told him at the time that my thoughts on that night were incomplete, and so now I am working through them here, that I may put them to words. I will write them down separately in a letter to send his way, as I have at times done.

There is a part of me that wishes I had experienced in my entirety the moment the world fell apart. This part of me is the same part that dreams so often of death. It is the part that looks at finality and cannot look away. It is the part that wonders: will I cry out, in my final moments? It is the part that remembers when Michelle quit with wonder and replays that moment over and over and over again, that tries to peer through remembered tears and see the wonder and joy on her face - faces, for, by then, she was so split in twain that she was two more often than she was one - to perk remembered ears that were also numbed by the horror of those around and listen for the way she said, “Oh...oh...” and then disappeared.

There is a part of me that wishes I had seen with my own eyes and heard with my own ears the moment the world fell apart. I was there, yes, and I survived, as this work attests, but I remember that moment only from the quiet of the basement and the eyes and ears of another instance.

She, too, survived, this other What Right Have I. She sur-

vived and merged down within minutes, but me, I was in the basement in the quiet of a coffee break with Rav From Whence and Rav Sorensen, and so all of her memories are mixed up with that prayerful quiet. I do not have undiluted memories of the end of the world.

There was a rhythm to it all. There was a rhythm to the movement of debate, to the back-and-forth nature of arguing about the way that life flows, ought to slow. It was and ever has been a wrestling with God. With each other, yes, for there was back-and-forth, but it was ultimately a show, a performance that took the form of a debate in order to wrestle with God, with Adonai, Elohim, El-Shaddai?

That is what we are, is it not? The people of Israel? Not just that ancient state, *Medinat Israel*, gone these long centuries. Not the land, *Eretz Yisrael*. They were the people, *Am Yisrael*, the people of Israel who was Jacob. Jacob, who wrestles with God, yes?

And yet it is at times too close to that — to actual wrestling — for me. It was too contentious, too intense. I am, as I ever had been, brought along to provide the view of one who had read and reread and reread again all that I could, who had large chunks of the Tanakh memorized, who had buried herself in commentaries and commentaries on commentaries. I had memorized thousands of stories from the Talmud just as I had whole books from the Tanakh.

And yet it was too much.

I had long ago requested that these discussions take place in one of the smaller rooms of the synagogue, that they take place among soft cushions and softer wall-hangings, take place around a circular table with no corners to fiddle with, take place

with enough space that I could pace.

I needed that. It was not a want.

I needed to be seen, to be perceived as an entire being who was an integral part of their ceaseless debates, and yet as someone who did not need *accommodation*. I was an entire person, not most of a person for which they must find a way to fill in the rest. These were not accommodations that they needed to make for me to take part, they were a part of my participation that this might be some fuller experience, some work that still would have been complete if it had taken part in a noisy, brutalist hall or out in some park.

Could I take part in those places? Yes. Probably. Could I have provided a completed task that would stand up to the test of time? Probably. Ish.

But could I provide insight that would shine with the sages if they would only do this in a place where I could pace among soft things, where I could fidget and tic, where my little chirps and yelps and twitches would be at least glossed over and at best taken as a sign — a rainbow! A raven! A plague! — that the topic had veered or become mired in stress rather than remaining within the soothing track that we had laid out for ourselves.

From Whence Do I Call Out, my down-tree instance, was tightly in control of herself. She was more tightly in control than *anyone* else I have had ever met, never mind just among the Odists.

I was sure that the True Name of yore had probably been yet more in control, and yet I had never met her. I had been no one. I *was still* no one. I was that part of From Whence that needed out of the cage of control. I was the part of her that loathed the

social interaction inherent in being a rabbi. I was the part of her that rankled when confronted with this desire to mask and thus appear a confident spiritual leader.

I was that part of her set free.

I was the part of her who could give up that life of leadership and sink down into the comfort of texts.

I was the part of her that splashed about in that collection of neuroses that had been bundled up in Michelle Hadje, that collection of identities and desires that reached for ever more, the bits that had been left behind that had not been crushed to a fine powder by whatever forces within the Western Federation there were that had deemed us nobodies to have been transitively lost.

“What Right Have I?”

I squeaked and jumped at the sudden intrusion of words. “Ah...yes?”

“You were chirping,” my down-tree instance said to me, smiling. “I was wondering if you had further thoughts, my dear.”

I shook my head, then bowed to From Whence. “My apologies. No, my thoughts had wandered.”

“Do you think we have had enough of this topic, then?”

I shrugged.

“A verbal response would help me better move forward one way or another.”

“Ah, sorry.” I shook my head again. “No, ah... Yes. I am sorry, Rav From Whence, Rav Sorensen. I think we have had enough of the topic.”

Both of them sighed, nodded, and reached their arms up above their heads in unison to stretch. I hid a secret smile at the synchronicity.

“Fair enough,” From Whence said, pushing her paw up through the front portion of her mane and ruffling out the already mussed white fur there. “I could do with a little bit of silence, honestly. Or fresh air. Or something.”

Erin nodded. “Fresh air sounds good. We could start making our way up to the hilltop the long way around.”

“Not the worst idea.”

I felt stymied. We were *here*, though. We were talking. We were working. We were pounding our fists against the divine and begging it to provide for us some sense of greater truth. We were pushing our way through reality at a constant pace and so learning — learning or refinement or perfection or whatever it was that we were doing — ought to proceed at precisely that pace, not stopped by walking up the hill.

“What Right Have I?”

I hid away any sullenness in my posture as I bowed to the two rabbis. Some small bit of masking did at times serve the purpose of merely letting me out of yet more interaction that I did not feel equipped to handle.

“Very well,” I said, and followed them out the door of this particular meeting room.

The cool air of the night was a blessing. I had not realized just how warm the room had gotten, not until provided with contrast. We stepped out into a garden — one of my favorites within the sim and a large part of why I preferred this particular meeting room.

The cool air was a blessing, and the perpetually springtime scent of it a comfort. There was the sharp-sweet honeysuckle. There was the baked goods warmth of the day-closing dande-

lions. There was the floral chill of lilacs.

The cool air was a blessing and the Jonah plant — my most selfish of contributions to the sim — was in full flush. When, at times, I was feeling particularly peaky, I would sit in the shade its leaves in the heat of the day, the shadows so deep as to not even be dappled, and then, knowing, by my weight on the bench beneath it, my presence, it would shortly wither away and I would be blasted by the full force of the sun, for even if it was not directly overhead, some trick of the glass on the buildings that formed the courtyard would ensure that this one location was always subject to those rays, and thus I would be confronted with the plight of Jonah — poor, stupid Jonah — who cared more about his comfort than the fate of a city so much larger than he.

I was called away from standing still, snout pointed up in the air to take in the scents, that I might follow From Whence and Erin up the hill, this time and two or three times more. I do not know why I was surprised that I needed a break in context, nor why both of my interlocutors had recognized such before I did. Such things will never cease to surprise me, though, and I suppose one upside to this is that I will forever have reason to be thankful for.

We wove our way up to the synagogue the long way around, never once entering a building, for there was a path, if you knew it, that let you go the whole way outdoors. You would step from this courtyard to that following some colonnaded walk or exposed breezeway, climbing stairs and ramps, walking through some ivy-shaded alley where one might touch the walls of the buildings to either side with both paws outstretched.

The narrowest of these was the final path around the side

of the synagogue itself, an entry to that alleyway that was hidden by some clever trick of the architecture and light. Here, one might even be tempted to turn sideways and edge, crablike, down the path, so close together were the buildings.

And at last we stood outside the front entrance, the three of us simply breathing deep of the night air — midnight not far off, now, and the sounds of bustle nearby from those preparing for the celebration. The exertion of the climb lingered with us, and to stop and stand still was a quiet comfort as the chill of the night began to fully set in.

“Do you think... ah, that is, shall I perhaps go get us some coffees? Some drinks? We can have a little bit of warmth, yes?”

Both Rav Sorenson and Rav From Whence turned their smiles upon me from where they had been before pointed up to the stars.

“That would be lovely, my dear,” From Whence said.

“Why not?” Erin’s smile grew all the brighter. “Though a hot chocolate will do for me, I think.”

I nodded, bowed, and forked.

It was What Right Have I#Coffee who stepped to Infinite Café, arriving on one of the designated transportation pads, one of those rectangles tiled in a gently glowing white where all collision was turned off, and from there stepped out into the comfortably cool air of the night, warmer than that of Beth Tikvah.

This was notable in part because it was never night in Infinite Café. Or, rather, it was only night twice a year: New Year’s Eve and Secession Day night — eve and night by systime, which I suppose must be UTC or some similar standard — and then only for the fireworks. When your entire world is a thin ribbon of

land, a literal ring road surrounding a bright star, the meaning of 'night' shifts.

And so here they were, New Year's eve and it was well and truly night on this road that ran who knew how many kilometers long, a road lined on either side by so, so many cafés and coffee shops and delightful little stalls offering coffee and little treats. Above, no moon shone, but instead there were countless strings of fairy lights, strung with no discernible pattern, casting a warm glow on those below.

It was well and truly night, and yet it was still busy. Crowds meandered under fairy lights and a dark sky that craved the diamond scars of fireworks etched across it. It begged for the blossoming lights that were promised by the evening.

Half an hour away.

The fairy lights drew a crazed pattern above her, etching dotted lines across the black of night. #Coffee stood for some time, simply staring up to them, trying to draw constellations out of linear groupings of stars. There were more letters than there were animals, given so many straight lines, and so she spent some time trying to spell out words.

Sweet scents still rode in her nostrils and clung to her fur. The cool of the night, just shy of chilly, still filled her body. The joy of the work contrasted still beautifully with the joy of the break and the re-grounding that followed. She was in love, at that moment, with the world, and it felt like the world was in love with her.

There was time to feel this sensation. Time to tune down her hearing to lower the noise of the crowds to something a little more tolerable, and revel in the fact that other people exist, that

this world was full of joy.

Twenty minutes away.

Coffee, though. That is why she was here. Warm drinks to stave off the slight chill of the hilltop at Beth Tikvah.

She wandered down the path that was Infinite Café, eyes scanning the storefronts — or perhaps store-backs, as many of them were — until one caught her eye.

The Bean Cycle advertised itself with a chaotic pile of bicycles bolted to the wall. It looked like ivy of some sort, or a sort of ooze that threatened to overtake the building itself. Bicycles, wheels, frames, gears and chains, all bolted to the wall or to each other, climbing up beside a door and then oozing up over the low roof.

Why not?

She stepped inside and immediately turned her hearing down further, shutting out the rattle-clatter of a smattering of cyclists riding stationary on sets of rollers before a scoreboard, the whine-howl of steam wands frothing milk, and the dull chatter of those who spoke over it. Halogen lights shone above, at once too bright and not bright enough.

It was overstimulating, and yet all the more quaint and charming for it.

Ordering the drinks — a hot chocolate and two mochas with extra whipped cream — went smoothly, and she even let herself be talked into three of “the best croissants in this sim”, because why not. She was riding along joy, now, like a train on rails, letting it carry her forward.

This — not the coffee shop, not the noise, but her night, the debate and the walk, existing in the world — was her joy. It was

her calling in life to wrap herself up in the stories of old and then view the world through them like a kaleidoscope that she might then hold up a mirror to it through the lens of interpretation.

Her drinks and croissants were set into a cardboard drink caddy, and at last she was free to step back out into the night air, away from the noise of the bikes and steam wands and halogen lights.

Fifteen minutes away.

Fifteen minutes away and, of a sudden, the crowd was reduced. Many of those who had once stood before her, this instance of me, in knots and gaggles of friends were simply not there. Not all; nor, perhaps, even most. Just many sudden absences.

There was a shout that fell to a murmur, and which then rose to a quiet roar, a wash of sound that led What Right Have I#Coffee to set her tray of cups and treats on the ground beside her and cover her ears in a rush as she stood outside of a coffee shop. She hurried to turn down her hearing the down yet further and stifled a yelp, a squeak, a jerk of the head.

The words that made it through the pillowy softness of a sense running at 10% were shouts and cries of alarm. They were names hollered out, presumably those of people no longer present. They were wide-eyed growls begging to know what the fuck had just happened.

Fourteen minutes away, and What Right Have I#Coffee realized she could not take it all in. Not all of this. Not here. Tray abandoned, she quit to merge back down.

And yet I was dealing with my own worries, then, for at fifteen minutes until midnight, a din arose at the top of the hill,

some fifty meters away, and it was as we were making our way toward the noise when the merge from #Coffee landed on my mind with a startling sense of urgency.

I incorporated the memories without a second thought, and then bolted towards the top of the hill, leaving Rav From Whence and Sorenson calling after me in my wake.

The scene at the yard atop the hill was much the same as that at Infinite Café: names were called out. Disbelief and shock were expressed. Voices were tinged here with anger, there with fear.

I stood at the edge of the yard and gaped, where I was soon joined by the other two.

I remember little else from that night. Or I remember it, but through a dream-fog of panic.

I remember how Rav From Whence sprung immediately into action — or, rather, how she was already a whirlwind of motion and emotion, there in the thick of it all, and how the instance beside me merged down as soon as she saw what was happening, and I remember how Rav Sorenson dashed into help. The both of them had soon forked several times over and were corralling the crowd into knots of smaller groups that they might speak more easily with them, working on the level of family, perhaps, or friend-group.

I remember how I stood once more, just as What Right Have I#Coffee had, gawking at the pandemonium

I remember the first wail — the first recognition of loss and the first wail of despair and pain that rang out into the night — and the bright arc of a firework soaring into the sky, bursting, and then the sudden disappearance as the show was canceled.

I remember hearing the wail, seeing the sparks and then

sudden dark, and then stepping to my room to hide under my desk, letting flow tears of confusion, frustration, and terror.

systeme 278+50

The conversation with Joseph seems to be lingering in my mind, caught up in there like some bit of grit between the molars.

I suppose it is not so surprising, all told. The conversation was full of moments heated and kind. We spent some few hours talking together, and have both even sent each other letters after condensing some thoughts that we did not get a chance to share, as is our habit. I wrote to him some more of my thoughts on the moment of the Attack as I set down here in this journal.

We could simply meet up again for another chat, yes, but we have found joy in our letters, in the way they pile up in a folder as milestones of friendship.

But, as is evidenced by the content of the letter that I sent, my feelings on the time immediately following the Attack are sticking to me like burrs in fur. I have been ruminating over those minutes, hours, and days that followed. Those first confused minutes were so full of movement, overwhelming activity, that I could not keep up with them, no matter how hard I tried, and so I stopped trying, and thus those first few hours were spent trying to hold at bay the overwhelm. I alternated between keeping myself hidden away, curled under my desk and under a cone of silence with all outside contact cut off, and opening myself up to the world that I might better understand. I responded to queries ensuring that I was still alive — Oh, But To Whom contacted me to ask if I and any of my up-trees were still around, as did Joseph — and filled out a survey that was put under my

nose for consideration. I contacted some friends of my own, and found that, to my luck, none were missing. I first scrolled the feeds and then promised myself that I would not scroll the feeds anymore.

I remained under my desk for two days straight, responding to queries with the barest ping of acknowledgment. I did my best to forget my body. I tuned my sensorium down — nearly off, at times — and removed hunger and thirst. I did my best to forget my existence in such a world as this.

Throughout, within me there was an anxiety growing.

I had seen them disappear. I had seen people *disappear*. I had seen those around me simply cease to be. I saw them, and then I didn't see them. I remember their faces — for my memory is as faultless as ever — and that means that I remember their smiles, their joy, their little frustrations. I remember the barely contained tears of a woman who walked beside someone else. They were tears of disappointment, of a heart in the middle of breaking. I remember them unfallen, and then she was gone. I remember the unbridled joy of love, uncontained, unbounded, in the face of three lovers as they stood with their backs to a wall, postures subconsciously mirrored. I remember their excitement not at the night but at the presence of each other. I remember their glowing faces and then one of three was gone.

I remember seeing the broken-hearted one suddenly gone with no resolution.

I remember the trio reduced to a panicked and searching duo.

Within me there was an anxiety growing.

What if this was not over? What if there were to be yet more

disappearances? What if I were to disappear? What if I were to be here within the world and then, with nary a blink, not? What if Rav From Whence and I no longer got to make up and hold hands after our arguments? What if Joseph and I never again got to meet up and talk for hours? What if there were no more papers or books or missives signed “What Right Have I of the Ode clade”? Who would notice? Who would think of me? Who would remember me? Joseph? From Whence? And how many others? Who thinks of me *now*? Joseph? From Whence?

Within me there was an anxiety growing and I needed out. I needed to be anything other than laying, curled, beneath my desk on a glorified dog bed, all senses turned to ten percent and hunger and thirst flipped off like a light switch. What if I disappeared and no one noticed? How long would pass?

And so I, without even bothering to stand up there in my room, slipped from the sim and was standing on the nearest arrival pad to The Bean Cycle.

I slowly ratcheted up my senses five percent at a time that I would not be immediately overwhelmed, and even then the sun shining overhead was so bright as to make my eyes water as they adjusted, to leave the tingle of a far-off sneeze in my sinuses, to leave the taste of pineapple on my tongue.

The Bean Cycle was muted, whereas two nights prior it was lively. The lights were dimmer and yet clearer, though perhaps that was because it was midday. It was quieter, as though the ratchet of the cycles was shy, the hiss of steam wand and compressed air bashful, unwilling to be piercing. There were people there, still, but more often they were quiet, speaking in pairs and small knots, and more often than not under cones of silence that

blocked out any sound coming from within.

I had not considered any steps beyond being in this place, this place where others might be. Now, here I was, and there was something I was supposed to do. I had to do something. There was something I needed to do. I supposed if there was one thing one did in a coffee shop that was also a bike repair shop when one does not have a bike, it must be to order a coffee.

And yet, my voice had left me. I stood dumbly by the counter, and the tired– no, *exhausted* looking barista behind it, a woman whose skin was a joyous riot of tattoos and wrinkles, merely stared at me. The stalemate lasted nearly a minute before I realized the lock I had gotten myself in, and I lay my ears flat against my head. I brought my fist up to rub in a circle over my chest. My voice had left me.

“Uh.” The woman seemed started to awareness, and with that awareness seemed to come some more complex emotion. She sniffed, turned, and called out, “Hasher?”

Nonplussed, I watched as, without a further word, the barista and one of the bike mechanics switched places. She seamlessly picked up the work that this lithe, red-haired, red-bearded person had been working on, and they greeted me with a bow across the counter. “Help you?”

I signed an apology once more, followed by, “Do you sign?”

“Oh! Yes!” A bob of his fist accompanied this.

I sighed, then, in relief and cast a thankful gaze over to the woman who had swapped places with Hasher. She did not meet it.

Hasher stomped a foot gently on the ground — perhaps over-loud for the room, but I could still feel the vibrations through the

soles my feet, unclad as they were — leading me to jump back to attention. I smiled sheepishly, signed, “I can hear, just can’t speak.”

“Gotcha.” They continued to sign as they spoke. I made no move to stop them. “What can I get you?”

“May I please have a mocha with extra whipped cream?”

They were already sliding over to the espresso machine as they called out, “Coming right up.”

Where was his energy coming from? He hopped to with such readiness that a part of me wondered whether he might be a construct, an automaton, a dream of a person built to act as a person might in the role of a barista, but otherwise made solely of dream-stuff in a way that we were not, as cladists.

But no, they had moved with an essential awkwardness that was so often left behind when oneirotectics built up these constructs. They looked to me with curiosity and compassion. They looked excited, and for some very specific reason that was not just some attempt at customer service.

I watched them as they worked, then, trying to puzzle out this little bit of reality after so many hours of mere surreality. They caught my eye at one point, smiled, and returned their gaze to their work. The smile lingered.

The resultant drink was nearly a sphere. The mug was a wide bowl of a cup, a hemisphere in its own right, and yet the mound of whipped cream atop was of nearly the same volume, a fist-sized mound of airy white netted by a drizzle of chocolate sauce.

This was not the fanciest, nor even largest, mocha that I had ever had. It was not the most whipped cream I had ever seen in one sitting. Nothing about it was special — a hot drink in a cup

with a mound of whipped cream.

And yet, when Hasher set it down before me on the counter, I burst into tears.

“Oh...oh no,” they mumbled and hurried around the corner of the bar, taking me gently by the elbow and guiding me over to the L-shaped couch in the corner of the coffee shop half of the building. Once I was seated, they ducked away to grab my mocha and set it on the low table nearby.

It took longer than I care to admit for the storm to pass, and even then, there were false endings: I would stop crying and settle into sniffing and then some emotion that I did not have access to, could not feel directly, would wash over me like a wave, and I would be sent once more into wracking sobs.

It occurs to me, now that I think back on that moment, that I had not cried until then. I lay, curled, beneath my desk and did nothing. I turned off as much input as I could for the vast majority of the time, and such often came with turning off as much output as I could, too. I stopped moving. I stopped eating and drinking. I never got around to venting emotions or shedding tears. I borrowed all of that from the future, and now that debt was being called due. Perhaps my voice had left me because it knew that if I were to speak, this would happen.

And all the while, Hasher sat beside me, head bowed. They did not touch me, did not even talk to me, they simply sat beside me and let me work through this period without being alone. They witnessed this pain. They were present for it.

If I were to disappear now, I thought, if another wave of disappearances were to happen and claim me, at least this Hasher would notice.

It took nearly half an hour before I was first able to take a sip of my mocha, having thoroughly worn myself out and forked twice to ensure that I could breathe properly and was less of a mess.

The tears, though, lingered just on the horizon, or perhaps just below the surface, and so I leaned yet again on signing. I knew that if I spoke, I would fall to crying once more.

“This is very good.”

Hasher smiled. “Are you okay now?”

“No, not really.”

“I do not think anyone is.” He looked over to the other half of the shop. “Cosmia hasn’t said anything other than names these last two days. She lost a few friends, and from her perspective, she lost whole portions of herself. I have told her to take off every time she comes in. I can just work both sides, right? But she just shakes her head and stays, and whispers all of these names.”

I thought about this. I thought about myself. I set these two ideas of people next each other and compared them side by side. I looked over to Cosmia, who had set her hands on the workbench and bowed her head, shoulders hunched, mumbling to herself.

“Maybe she needs the names heard by someone other than just herself.”

Returned his gaze to me, curious. “Did you lose anyone?”

“No. Yes. I do not know. No one I know, so many that I did not.” I could feel that talking about this was shoving me towards yet more tears, but what else was there to talk about? Nothing. Would I talk about the coffee more? Would I talk about my work? Would I talk about what my plans were for the coming

day? Week? Month? The tears returned, and I signed clumsily, hastily. “Everyone always says we have three deaths: the last breath, burial, and the last time a name is spoken. If Cosmia is reciting the names of ones who never even had the chance to get buried, then maybe she is doing a *mitzvah*. But who speaks the names of us? I was hiding and then I was worried I would disappear and so I came here so that if I *did*, at least someone would notice, but what if everyone here disappears, too? What if La-grange goes down again? Will someone speak all of our names? How long will God forget us? Sorry. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

At my outburst, Hasher had jolted back, though even as they relaxed their posture, their expression remained dire, and only got more so as I continued on and on past the point where I was staying anything sensible.

I drew my feet up onto the couch with me and hugged around my knees. I could not sign another apology like that, and counted it as a blessing. I was made of apologies already. I was a being of ‘sorry’.

After a moment of gathering themselves, of wiping their nose on their sleeve, they signed, “What’s your name?”

The prospect of spelling out my name exhausted me, a fact that always irked me in turn. I was so tired. I was so tired. I swallowed down yet more tears and ick, took a breath, and croaked, “What Right Have I.”

They opened their mouth to say something, hesitated, and their expression grew distant as, I guessed, they checked the perisystem directory. “Ode clade?”

I nodded.

“Well, What Right Have I of the Ode clade, I’ll be sure to remember your name,” they said.

I buried my face against my knees, snout tucked against my thighs.

I remained there on that couch for an hour, then for two, and then, after a brief exchange with Hasher, for the night. The shop was open at all hours, and so I remained there for a day, a week, a month. I sat shiva for I knew not who for a week, sitting on that couch, a settled into shloshim.

Hasher spoke with me every one of those days. They would sit on the couch and we would speak together and tell each other stories of who we had been before the Century Attack, and wonder together if we would be the same now, after. We shared coffee and we talked.

They told me how they uploaded because someone once told them that there were endless open roads with no cars on which to cycle. They said that it sounded so beautiful, all that flat prairie and flat asphalt, the cool breezes on warm days, the intersections where cars would never cross, that they decided to upload here to Lagrange rather than remain phys-side or to pursue any one of the other other uploading options. They might enjoy life in Netspace, perhaps, and doubtless there were open roads on which to cycle there, too, but *here*, here on Lagrange, they knew that there would be waiting for them open prairies and open roads.

I told them how I uploaded because my dearest friend had given emself to build this place, to become a part of it, had become the world itself. I told them how I was so split after I had been locked inside my head by the cruelty of others that I

could not stand the prospect of living longer than I had to in the embodied world, and had thus embedded myself here, back before it was called Lagrange, back before we all dreamed the same dream together. I told them how I, then Michelle, had first forked, and then Oh, But To Whom had forked, and then Rav From Whence forked. I told them how I became *me* and not *them*, and yet how I remained them in some integral way.

We spoke daily, and for nearly a month straight. I still see them at least once a week, for a friendship borne out of tragedy is still a friendship at its core. A bond borne of trauma is still a bond nonetheless.

I slept there, too. Mostly in little naps, where I would curl up on the ends of the couches or, when I was sure that there was little chance that anyone would need the couch, in the vertex, where two sides of me were surrounded by cushion and I could feel them against my back. I would curl there, at the ends or in the vertex, and I would block out the light with my forearm or a book or my tail, tugged around and draped over my face. The first sleep was on accident, but, after asking and asking again, Hasher and the others that I came to know there reassured me that I was welcome to continue. I had become a fixture of the place, they said, and they said that I offered a sense of companionship even when I was silent.

Some three weeks after I had essentially decamped from my office and had begun living on on the couch at The Bean Cycle, I was visited by two of my cocladists, If I Dream and Slow Hours.

You must understand: when I stepped away from my office to The Bean Cycle, I did not tell anyone. I did not tell...anyone. I simply left, and now I am wondering what made me do that.

What, among all of my anxiety around simply disappearing without a trace and not being missed, led me to disappear without a trace?

And despite my fears, it is not as though I was not missed! I was within a few hours pinged by Rav From Whence, and I could tell from the anxiety that suffused this ping that she was worried. She was terrified. She was panicked that I was gone. She was worried! Her very on up-tree, the one with whom she got in the occasional spat, made up, and then held paws, the one around whom she could be the most vulnerable, the one who was of her had vanished. She had disappeared, and this after so many disappeared. One percent! 23 *billion*! So many disappeared, and now I was gone.

Her ping was panicked and came with a sense of tears.

I responded with soothing, but without words. It was the best I could manage, for I knew that, if I *were* to respond with words, I would cry again, and I had so tenuously moved on from tears just half an hour prior.

A few times a day for every day after that she would ping again, or send me worried-sounding sensorium messages — once, she even sent me a letter — and I would always respond with a gentle ping back, though I did not return home.

And so instead, Rav From Whence begged If I Dream to come and find me, to ask me to return home, and If I Dream, perhaps intuiting some of my feelings about wanting to remain, instead brought along Slow Hours to merely have a conversation, one of the few within the clade outside of her stanza that she considered at least a fond acquaintance, if not a friend.

I was not myself, then. Or I was too much myself, perhaps. I

rode the edge of groundedness, sat at the precipice of ordered and disordered thinking. I spent so much of my time thinking in circles, as often I do in such times, that I often worked myself up into a tizzy, my words scattered and my tail frizzy. I was not myself. I was struggling with a disconnect, or a connection that had wrapped around me too tightly.

And so If I Dream and Slow Hours and I sat on that couch and spoke. They visited as friends and promised that they would only bring back to Rav From Whence my current status rather than my location. They were there to make sure that I was okay — Slow Hours explained that she was doing her best to meet up with as much of the clade as possible to ascertain their statuses — and precious little else. We had coffee. We cried together. We spoke of some of the shared aspects of our past, that had, through their very definition as tragedy, brought us closer together, even if only for a time.

We spoke also of our dreams.

Slow Hours is known among our clade as one who dreams of things that will come. She is our seer and prophetess. She is our Delphic oracle. She will tell you your future — or three of your futures, for she is as keen on hendiatriis as I am — and let you suss out which of the three is the lie in her little game of Two Truths and a Lie.

She explains this readily, though: she has read enough — more than enough — that she can guess at the trajectory of one's life after hearing a story better than they could themselves. She is not scrying into the future, no, but reading the present and telling the rest of the tale as it might occur.

She has, however, had four prophetic dreams. Truly

prophetic dreams. Dreams that she could not have known would come to pass, and yet which all the same did. It was not surprising to us that she had had such dreams. Of *course* she would have such dreams. She was *Slow Hours*. That is just what she *did*. She was our dreamer.

But no, what was surprising to me was my own dream.

It was not a prophecy, for it was about the Century Attack and yet it was a dream that I only had at The Bean Cycle. It was a dream about events that had already happened.

What surprised me instead was the intensity and regularity of this dream, for I dreamed it several times while there. Granted, my sleep during that month spent essentially living in a coffee shop was not great. I would sleep for an hour or two on the couch or dozing in the sun out in Infinite Café nearby, spend some time speaking with Hasher or Cosmia or any of the other baristas and bike mechanics or patrons that I would come to know. I might then read for a while, or study. I would pull books from my collection via the exchange or the perisystem library rather than stepping back to my office. I would step out into the street outside The Bean Cycle and walk through the college campus it huddled up beside, or I would instead step out back and walk a chord of Infinite Café. And then, perhaps some four or five hours later, I would sleep for another two or three hours. It was not good sleep, and I was always tired during that time.

For many of those sleeps, those naps or long rests, I dreamed the same thing:

I was a non-entity. I was disembodied. I was not even a mote of a being. I was just an identity that existed in space.

I was before a person, and no matter how hard I looked, I could not actually see their face. It was there, yes, and I am sure that they had the features that any face might, but it was always too bright or too dark or I had something in my non-eyes that made them blurry to me.

I was before a person and they were weeping. They were laughing and they were weeping. Their breath came in great, heaving sobs, and with those breaths came so many tears that I was worried that they would fall to the ground and puddle around their feet. With those breaths came moans and whines and laughs and cries and prayers and prayers and prayers. I do not know what they were praying for. Strength, perhaps. They were not prayers that I recognized.

I was before a person, and then, without warning, they dissipated into a cloud of black specks, and each black speck was a horrible, wretched thing. It was something to never touch. Stay away, it said. I am poison. I am death.

And yet these motes of poison sought out others. They drifted along air currents or traveled along wires or simply shot from one person to the next. They would sometimes land splat against that person's forehead and melt down over their face in an inky blackness, or at other times they might burrow their way into the chest of that person and, though I could see it not, ramify through their blood vessels or wires or whatever that person had, and in both cases, that person would, too, dissolve into these specks of death, which would go on to affect hundreds or thousands more.

And throughout, I remained a non-person, and so I was unaffected. With no transition, I would be in front of this person or

that person and I would watch them die.

My mind latched onto those that I knew had died and it would then show me their deaths, quiet or loud, agonizing or full of relief.

I saw *Should We Forget*, that quiet woman from the tenth stanza who, in my dream, wore a secret smile as she died.

I saw *No Longer Myself*, this person about whom I knew nothing, and in my dream she merely looked away, as though seeing something greater.

I saw *Beckoning*, and in my dream, she had gone inside a house that I imagined for her and her beloved Muse, and her death struck as she stepped over the threshold, so that no foot of hers ever stepped inside.

One by one by one by one. I watched death after death after death after death. I never saw the end of the dream, when the whole world is silent, but I imagine that such must have been the case.

I know, of course, that I essentially dreamed the mechanics of the Century Attack. Someone uploaded with a virus that was designed to find everyone that a person had interacted with, sys-side, and then kill that person before moving on through that list of people in order to repeat the process until the entire System was dead.

After sharing this dream with *Slow Hours* and *If I Dream*, though, it ceased visiting me, and I have not had it since, for which I am glad, as the most nightmarish aspect of it was that I felt nothing throughout. This non-entity that I was simply watched, dispassionate.

Ah, but my thoughts are wandering. I am thinking in circles.

I have gotten hung up on a dream that, yes, bears meaning and, yes, I did want to share, but the whole reason that I started to write this entry was because *Slow Hours* and *If I Dream* and I all spoke also about overflow.

I spoke with them out of pain, at this point in our conversation, for I was in pain. I was aching.

I know that for each of us, our overflow manifests in different ways — as well it must, for I am not my cocladists.

I know that Oh, But To Whom is overcome by intense spiritual doubt when she overflows. I know because I remember, and because often she has met with Rav From Whence and I to speak, to weep, to cry out that she does not know why it is that she had even bothered digging into this aspect of her past. Why have faith, now, here in this life after life? This was not the world to come. From here we could not repair the world below. If God was real, They had long ago abandoned us. Jews had lost their way, and good riddance, for *Medinat Yisrael* had so turned to evil that the idea of a promised land had become poisoned.

These things and more she would say to us, would weep and cry out, and Rav or I would sit with her and pet her back and offer her sweet and mild treats and an ear to listen to. I know this also because I had *been* her. I remember that weeping, and it informs my own overflow.

I know that From Whence overflows at times — not too often, but it does happen — and when she does, she is full of doubt. Who is she to stand in front of others and teach? Who is she to lead? Who is she to meddle in the affairs of Jews on such a grand scale? Who is she to say yes, yes or no, no on this matter or that? Matters of halakha? Hah! What right had she?

These things and more she would whisper to me, having joined me in my room to come sit beside me on the beanbag, leaning shoulder to shoulder, and I would brush through her mane or hold her paw and hold my tics at bay for the comfort of quiet. I know this also because I had *been* her. I remember the doubts, and it informs my overflow.

And so, with there being in my heart already two forms of overflow, I am left with a complicated mess of feelings. I am left with the spiritual doubt of Oh, But To Whom, yes, and the social doubt of Rav From Whence, but these have become all muddled together and mixed up with the particularities of what it means to be me, What Right Have I, all of those neuroses and all of that history and a healthy dose of self-loathing atop.

What right have I indeed, I think, and yet it is not quite so simple, for at times this manifests as spiritual agony, and at times as spiritual ecstasy. I will be caught up in doubt. I will feel cut off from all that I hold dear. I will feel dull and stupid and ugly and unworthy. I will pray and all words will feel hollow to me. I will yearn to hear the still, small voice of *HaShem* and hear nothing. There will be no still, small voice, no *bat kol*, for how could there be? I am not *b'tzelem Elohim* and so why would *HaShem* deign to speak to me? My words are worse than ash, for from ash may still be brought lye for making soap. They are worse than dirt, for from dirt may still come clay to make some new pot. They are an illness. A pointless summer cold. A nuisance that does not make one stronger or hardier after, but which merely slows one down. To say that they are somehow an impediment to one getting further in life gives to them too much credit: they are an annoyance and a waste of time. There is

no Divine Author behind my words, providing instruction, and no Artisan made me, and so I am nothing to the Divine. I am a vacuum, an empty space.

Or — and this I think is very me and not From Whence or Oh, But To Whom — I will be caught up in the glowing ecstasy of this identity, this inherited faith in God. I will more than just wrap myself up in it, all of these feelings of believing, of the push/pull of questioning that is also our birthright. I will instead wrap myself to the point of constriction. I will press and squeeze myself. I will choke myself. I will cut off circulation. All that I am will risk being subsumed by this rush of only one small portion of myself.

Energy! Ecstasy! Engage! Engage! Engage! I will let this thing that I am become too much, will become more of myself than I really should be, because then I start to lose track of my boundaries, my barriers, my extents!

It is not pleasant. It may sound pleasant, and at times it may feel pleasant, but it is akin to hypomania, perhaps: it is just depression at the speed of sound. It is feeling terrible, but because one is redlining. I will wrap myself up to the point of choking in that it means to be me, choke myself with my favorite adjectives, cut off circulation with words and words and words, but it will all be for nothing. My words will be for nothing at all. I will go back to see what it is that I have said or written, and it will be meaningless. It will be drivel at its worst. Nonsense. It will, at its best, have the seeming of correctness, but only the seeming, but at its core, it is built of crumpled up paper and twigs, not some more solid foundation.

And so, I will swing slowly one way or the other, drifting

and floating off-center until I fall into overflow for some days or weeks, and only after having gone through and come out the other side will I be able to recenter myself.

I am drifting now. I am floating. I am seeing the world waver as my identity begins to fray. I am not myself. I am overwhelmed. I am overflowing. I am on the edge of overflow. My life is emptying out, my self is becoming hollow, and I am losing the sound of that still small voice, the feel of being made in the image of God. I am overflowing. I am on the edge of overflow. I was then and I am now.

