

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 am happier with 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. *Non sum qualis eram*. I am not what I used to be.

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 for 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 momentum 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

sysitime 278+41

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 ought to 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, through *semikha*. 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, public 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.

In 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. Rabbi 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, not as I am now, 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. I do not often accept the title of ‘rabbi’ except in ceremonial contexts such as one, but it is a title well-earned regardless. I am comfortable with it here. I am comfortable on stage.

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

“*Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech ha’olam*—” I call out. I never stammer in Hebrew, and have never questioned why. “—*shehecheyanu v’kiy’manu v’higiyanu laz’man hazeh*.”

The echo comes strongly from those on the stage and weakly from the audience — a mumbled recitation of unfamiliar words set in the programs all were provided with — but it is still enough to show that I am not speaking solely to politicians and bureaucrats (or whatever passes for such, sys-side).

It is a prayer for holy days, and I have worked so hard — so hard — to make today one such day. It is my hope that it grabs

the ear and brings the mind to bear on the idea it expresses: blessed is the Divine who kept us, sustained us, brought us to this season...

"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 Association of New Reform Congregations — 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, cuing the oneirotectists 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 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, thank you.” 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 social circle, 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 lack the structure required for one to chew with their mouth shut, and so 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 am...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 taking 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 task."

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 shooing motion with both of her paws. “Now, go. Eat. Spend some time restoring yourself, too.”

I nod and give my best thankful smile before padding in through the front door of the synagogue to take the short way back home.

From Whence is a past master at riding the line between instructing and genuinely kind, and even I know that the perceived condescension of instruction 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 loves me, and I know this to be true. She loves me and I love her. She in this moment 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 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 synagogue? 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. “‘Tricksy’!”

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.

She loves me and I love her. We love each other dearly, as ought to be clear from our plain affection for one another. It is not a romantic love, though it has at times in the past drifted into such a territory.

There are just 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, must 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 in-

volved 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 *Amidah*, *Aleinu*, *Kaddish*. The rhythm of *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? Why is she broken?

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 occasionally 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, and so consider what lessons one might take away from this understanding.

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?

system 278+47

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

This 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.

16 February, 2402 (Shabbat)

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. We are the book of life, and our stories are written by us.

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 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 here I am, essentially journaling.

I wonder why? Why is it that Rav's 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, bit-ternesses?

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 anyone seeing the work aside from myself, 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.

Beyond these musings, however, 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 survived and merged down within minutes, but me, I was in the basement in the quiet of a break in a discussion after the Kabbalat Shabbat service with Rav From Whence and Rav Sorensen, and so all of her memories are mixed up with that slow quiet in front of the synagogue. I do not have undiluted memories of the end of the world.

There is a rhythm to it all. There is 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 is 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, gone these long centuries. Not the land, *Eretz Yisrael*, left behind on Earth. We are the people, *Am Yisrael*, the people of Israel who was Jacob. Jacob, who wrestles with God, yes?

I had long ago requested that these discussions — beautiful or stressful or somewhere in between — 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 our 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 demeaning 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. Maybe. I do not know.

But I could provide insight that I might hope 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.

Rav From Whence 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 am sure that the True Name of yore, Rav's most beloved friend, had probably been yet more in control, and yet I had spoken with her only a handful of times while she was alive. After all, I had been no one. *I am still* no one.

I am that part of From Whence that needed out of the cage of control. I am the part of her that loathed the social interaction inherent in being a rabbi. I am the part of her that rankled when confronted with this desire to mask and thus appear a confident spiritual leader.

I am that part of her set free.

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

I am the part of her that splashed about in that collection of idiosyncrasies 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?”

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

“Not the worst idea.”

Some part of me felt stymied. We were *here*, though. We were talking. We were working. We were pounding our fists against divinity 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. After all, they were tired from the service earlier, and it was New Year’s Eve, yes?

“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 dandelions. 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 she felt as though 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 What Right Have I#Coffee 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 type, 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 on the low rise 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, one who had existed to track our discussion, merged down as soon as she saw what was happening, and I remember how Rav Sorenson dashed in to 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 done, gawking at the pandemonium

I remember most of all, though, 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

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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 did not 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 disap-

peared 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 they were quiet; if they did speak, they did so 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 and all I could do was apologize.

“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 their energy coming from? He hopped to with such readiness that a part of me wondered whether they 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 cried so little until then. After those first confused tears, 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 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 — even signing — 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 Larrange 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.

systime 278+51

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, the other patrons my minyan, and 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 Hadje, 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, her friend and trusted confidant, 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 moments, 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 well-being — 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 prophetic. She is our Delphic oracle. She will tell you your future — or three of your futures, for she is as keen on hendiadris 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 again.

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.

Silent.

Still.

Empty.

Sims and constructs and oneiroteature left unwitnessed, except perhaps by HaShem.

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 was overflowing.

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 from when I was her, 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. 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 as best I could 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, yes, but 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 what 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. 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.

sytime 278+52-62

There is within me a groaning, deep in my belly, and within my throat a low growl. There is a grasping and a needing and a yearning and a pining for something to anchor myself to. There is a wellspring, even when I am not crying, of tears that burn and burn in my eyes.

There is a pointing at an embodiedness, a gesture at visceralness, a reference to a raw, disgusting, physicality to this feeling.

I wonder at this so. I am not my body. I am not in my body. I am without a body. My body is me but I am not home. There it is: draped bonelessly over the beanbag: arms dangling down the side to trace dull claws along the wood grain of the floor: a body.

My body.

Me.

21 February-3 March, 2402

I am not home. There is this body, and there is this me, and they are somehow, at this moment, immiscible. It is just a feeling that is embodied; I cannot be embodied, despite this grungy feeling that comes with all of existence. My body and I do not mix.

And why would they? Why would this body bother with such as me? I am so vague an idea of a person. I am a mere hint of a me.

This is how I know that I am overflowing. I am only a vague gesture at a What Right Have I, and not her in actuality. I have lost that which makes me human. I have lost that which makes me holy. I have lost that little touch of divinity that rests in the heart of everyone.

I am not merely sad.

I am not merely anxious.

I am beyond despondent, or somewhere perhaps to the left of it. There, still in sight, is despondency.

What I am is in some very real, very tangible dark night of the soul, and from there, there is a Godless pointing at the body, a gesture at viscera without holiness, the disgust of a physicality that knows not the Divine.

Am I my Lord's keeper? Must I, who They have abandoned, call them to account? And what right have I to do so?

How apt a name! What right have I, indeed, when I am so dreadfully broken? Is HaShem, too, so full of tics? Do they yelp and squeak? Does the Creator pace ceaselessly and ever straighten Their clothing? Does the Eternal hide beneath Their desk and cry at the drop of a hat? Is the Divine so weak?

I am chaos. The Lord is order. Am I my Lord's keeper?

I am anxiety. The Lord is peace. Am I Their keeper?

I am nothing. The Lord is all. Must I be Their keeper?

How could I possibly be made in the Their image? What right have I to be *b'tzelem Elohim*? How could I possibly my Lord's keeper?

Am I my Lord's keeper? Where was Their staying hand? Am I my Lord's keeper? Am I my Lord's keeper? Must I call Them to account? Am I my Lord's keeper? Am I my Lord's keeper? Am I my Lord's keeper?

This must not be the way the world works, and yet it is, and here we are.

The world and all of life are a library, and I am a reader, but I am also an author, and my story is among the stories of the world.

We are the book of life. Our names are written by us. We are those who participate in creation. We are the hands of God.

How, then, O Beloved One, do we take into account the fact that we are those who participate also in destruction. You are hope, but also regret — I know that You have regretted me! — and so we have built our tower of Babel, and also we have performed our own great flood.

How, O Majesty, do we create new worlds, draw order from a shared dream and build new lives for ourselves, love and love and love, and then proceed to crash out so violently? How do we settle serenely into immortality? You are serenity, but rage as well — I know, I have borne it! — and so we have chosen a long peace, and also we have ended so, so many lives.

How, Lord God of Hosts, am I to grapple with this unwinding of us? Where was Your staying hand?

I am a being of growth! My life is one of becoming! This life is mine! It is mine! You, who cause the dawn to know its place, bring order to *this* life! Bring it to this poor soul below. Bring order to her...

Are you listening? Are you there? Divine, you have slipped away. Eternal, were you ever there?

There is disorder in despair and chaos even in the craving for relief. We dwell here — here in our new life, here in our new world — and we are surrounded by that despair. We are suffused with loss and the knowledge that this, now, is our world.

This must not be the way the world works...

Where was Their staying hand?

The Divine Author writes this story from minute to minute, from second to second, I tell myself, I promise myself.

The Artisan shapes time and matter and minds and hearts with duty and care, I tell myself, I promise myself.

The Eternal is eternal, I tell myself, and eternity must include also now, I promise myself.

But where was Their staying hand? Why did They not lift Their pen from the page before that sudden tremor in Their story? Why did They not pull back from Their creation when they sensed a sudden, horrible paroxysm?

Why did They not step in between us and eternity?

Where was Their staying hand?

O, Deep Will!

O, Unnamable!

O, Endless, Infinite!

Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh!

Hayan, Hoveh, v'Yihye!

Mechayeh HaMetim, exalted and hallowed is Your name in the world which You created according to Your plan! May Your majesty be revealed in the days of our lifetime and the life of all — now! Hurry! Hurry! Amen! Amen! Blessed be Your great name to all eternity! Amen! Amen! Amen...

O, God, where was Your staying hand?

systeme 278+63

I have finally slept after three days without, and while it was only four hours or so, my mind has decided that it was enough.

This morning, Rav From Whence has brought me coffee and a simple breakfast of pastries from the refectory, and so now it is my hope that my body shall be able to once more feel like a home to me.

I sit now with her just outside my door. I have eschewed the garden and my Jonah plant as not quite what the day yet calls for, and so we have taken up familiar spots on a low stone bench that is well shaded by long eaves and an ivy-weighted trellis besides. We sit beside each other and each focus on eating a matcha-custard-filled croissant and drinking a mocha as we look out over the flagstone-paved court, the two doors in the matching adobe building across the way — one green and one blue — that houses yet more who have chosen to live here for a while or forever.

We sit in silence and think our thoughts. I know not what my down-tree is thinking, but I am thinking a feeling that occasionally strikes me towards the tail-end of overflow. I am thinking about how it feels like my soul has been kicked from my body, has been left some small distance away, or perhaps not so small, and, as the fire of dissociation burns slowly lower, I am reeled back in by the rest of the world, back to the home that is my body, this form that I have chosen and honed.

Soon, I think, I shall no longer be quite so much a Platonic idea of a self and then also this body, one supposes, and instead be whole. I am being reeled in, bit by bit, closer and closer, and soon...

“What Right Have I?”

My reverie splits and crumbles away. “Yes?”

“I have been thinking of something that you said a few days ago.”

4 March, 2402

I wince. I know that I have in the past uttered small cruelties when I was so divided. "I was overflowing and--"

She chuckles and holds up her paws, shaking her head. "No, no, I know that. You are alright, my dear. It was not a bad thing. It was a reminder." Her smile grew wry as she added, "It is rather silly, actually. All you said was that you miss Michelle."

I linger a moment in silence, wondering at how this lead that is reeling me back in must be tied to every nerve in my body, because I can feel the way the last bite of pastry seems to be lingering in my teeth, and the heady, almost savory scent of matcha lingers in the back of my nose. I can feel the warmth of the mocha through the drinking dish held now in both paws.

Why do these senses make themselves known now? Why do I feel a tingle on my neck as though my hackles are raising?

"I do miss her," I say at last. "I am...ah, I have been thinking about her rather a lot of late, yes?"

"As have I. I cannot imagine why." She smiles, a weary expression, existentially tired, but not defeated, I am pleased to see. "I have been thinking of what you said because I have been thinking, also, of my reaction to both events. Both her death and the Century Attack. I have been comparing the two."

"They seemed...ah, they seemed quite different to me," I say after a moment spent thinking back.

"Did they?"

I blink. "Did they not?"

"I am not so sure, no. Or, rather, their presentation may have differed, but the core reaction, what I *felt*—" She taps a fist against her chest. "—was more similar than I know what to do with. I do not know whether it is a good thing or a bad thing. I do not know whether I like it or not."

"Well," I start, reaching for some way to engage with this that will not kick me back further from this ground. "From what I saw, in both cases, you...ah, you found what needed doing and did it, yes? And in both cases, what needed to be done was to offer the emotional support that a spiritual leader such as yourself

must.

“After Michelle quit, you saw to the spiritual needs of those in the clade who...ah, who desired such. You worked until you ran out of energy and then you collapsed in tears.” I smile faintly. “Or so you have told me.”

Her smile is faint, too, but she nods.

“And the same is...ah, it is also true of the Century Attack. You ran around that first night on the top of the hill, and you forked so many times over that I lost track so that you could...ah, so that you could speak with so many different people, yes? You did that all night and well into the next day, and then you fell to tears.”

“Yes. And in both cases, I oscillated back and forth between those poles until I found a new level. I am no longer the From Whence who walked up the hill on New Year’s Eve any more than I am the same From Whence who stepped with you to Michelle’s field.”

I get in a lapping sip of my mocha while she speaks, and smile when she finishes. “That is the way of changes, is it not?”

She nods. “But come, you have said that the two looked different to you, and then you have listed the ways in which they are similar. What are the differences, my dear?”

“Yes. Those were perhaps the core things: the helping, the grieving, the...ah, the becoming of someone new. I suppose it is the last, though that is apparent to me. After Michelle quit, you were...ah, well, you focused on the immediate and the personal. I know that you have lost those that you were close to in the Century Attack, but the loss of Michelle was...mm, well, it was so immediate, was it not?”

From Whence bows her head, and I suspect that we both feel a tug in our chests of a grief nearly a century old and still unresolved.

I continue. “With her loss, you dove into grief. With the Century Attack you dove into work. With her loss, you...ah, you asked yourself, I think, what you should feel. With the Century

Attack, you asked yourself what you should do.”

“Yes,” she murmurs, nearly a whisper. She seeks out one of my paws with her own, and though I have to shift my coffee to the other, I readily rest my mug-warmed pads against hers.

“Tell me what...ah, what similarities you felt, Rav.”

She looks not at me, nor out across the flagstone courtyard as she had been before, but down to her knees, down where she hold her drink in her lap. It is some time before she speaks.

“Both made me feel small,” she says. “Both made me recognize how little control I have in and over my life. I spoke with Michelle a handful of times in the year leading up to her death, and there was a whiff of what was to come on her in that time. After Qoheleth was murdered, the tenor of our meetings shifted and I became sure of it some months before she did at last die.”

I flinch.

“I know that you do not like that language in relation to her, What Right Have I. I will not apologize for it, because it is important to me that I acknowledge this as a death in order to mourn her. I speak her name every year in October, just as we speak the name of any of the dead.”

My body pulls greedily at my soul, draws it ever nearer. It is curious to me that it do so, too: I am so used to the way this topic can be so fraught. I am so ready to fly from this bit of my past. It slips so easily between my self and my Self and wedges them apart.

Now, though, coming off this week of overflow, my identity craves instead unity, and perhaps that is overriding my usual hesitations.

“I know,” I say after a moment of wrestling these feelings down to a manageable level within me. “It is...ah, rather, the language is not wrong, either. She is dead, yes. She died, and we mourned her loss as we would any death, and her memory is a blessing to us. I am...ah, well, we have been over my feelings.”

She chuckles and gives my paw a squeeze in her own. “Yes, but now we are talking about the ways in which these things are

similar, are we not? Michelle's death and the Century Attack? And so now we must once more speak in terms of death."

"I suppose we must."

"Yes. In both cases, I was confronted with death. And yes, the scale was different. The emotions were different. I grasped at what I could, then, and held tight to my control. You know perhaps as well as I do the strain of trying to maintain control of oneself, but in both cases, I could not do it." Her gaze seeks elsewhere. It drifts away from her lap and away from me, though it points at nothing. It is a concealing shift, a hiding of her gaze from me, undirected but for to escape. "I crumbled, my dear. In both cases, I could not do it. I could not hold on. I crumbled."

There is a nuance here that I struggle to latch onto, just as my body, my physical being, struggles to latch onto my soul, to re-associate after so much dissociation. I hesitate to voice this nuance and must turn my words over several times in my mouth — seven times seven times, I was told, though I never manage quite so many — before I say, simply and directly: "I did not know."

She shakes her head, and I do not know if she is smiling or if her face is contorted in some other emotion. "I have never spoken of it so plainly, my dear, because I have never had plain language for it, not until recently. Instead, I have said that events such as these spark overflow or that they have made me feel wrung out. I have used metaphors and circumlocutions, I think, as we all do."

"Yes," I agree most carefully. Even my clearest attempts at writing — and I know that this is not one — will need disentangling from an editor. "Tell me of crumbling, then, if...ah, if you are comfortable."

"Of course, What Right Have I. I trust you perhaps above all others."

I bow my head, bashful gaze focused on the last remnants of whipped cream on my mocha.

"After all, that is what I have been thinking about most these last few days. You said that you missed Michelle, and what

flashed to my mind was the argument that we had immediately after she quit. I argued that she should have a funeral and you argued that she should not. I argued that she had died, and you argued that she cannot have, not truly

“I know that you left, then, and I know that it was out of your own pain– no, I do not fault you, and I will reiterate what I said when you returned, that I love you and that I have faith that both of our readings can be true.”

I nod in thanks, pleased that she cut me off. There is an itch on my pawpads, and it is not a real one.

“*And*, it is that argument that was a brick removed from the foundation that led to me crumbling. I mean only to share, there is no accusation in me.” She turns at last to face me, and her eyes are bright and her expression is dire and her voice yearns. “We fought about this most terrible of things. The things that I was feeling that moment were some of the worst I had ever felt, and yet you reached for something that I could not. You, who are a version of me that I cannot be. You were so bitter and so cutting in your logic that I could not understand. We both wept because we did not understand what was happening and how it was that we not being understood.”

I sniff at a sudden cloudiness within my snout, look away. I am not sure that I have it in me to think in words, to speak. My body clutches desperately for my soul and I cannot speak.

The sound is echoed by From whence, but she continues, still watching me. “I stand by many of my feelings, What Right Have I. I stand by my understanding that she should have had a funeral. During that argument, though, and after, I realized that I, that Rav From Whence Do I Call Out, that I had lost my grip on the situation, had fallen into a despair that gripped me in turn. Instead of thinking of the clade, instead of even thinking of myself, I thought only of optics the read of the situation. I did not think of what it was that I needed. I did not think of what the clade needed. I thought of what would be best for the clade to need. My despair latched onto this and then whipped around

me and pulled me under, and I lost my grip on everything.

"I spun myself into pieces after you left, What Right Have I. Both times, with Michelle and with the Attack, I spun myself into pieces. I love you, it is okay. You left to perform a sort of grieving that I was unable to both times. Yours was not that of a rabbi, and it certainly was not that of a rabbi struggling to be a leader. I am sorry, What Right Have I. I love you. My grip on myself failed and I fell to pieces and stepped away from my duties. I was so small, and I did not have you. I love you. I am sorry. I am so sorry."

We weep.

On the day that Michelle summoned us to her field, I was not expecting that which I received.

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

I had heard so little from her over the years. Early on, I believe that this is because she was doing better: complication had filtered out of her life and while, yes, she had her bad days, she was most often content, and at times even happy. She was doing fine and I had my work ahead of me, and so I did my work and she enjoyed the comfort of an uncomplicated life.

Later, I had found my pace in life, and my path, and this was a path and pace that interested her very little, as she admitted to me during one visit to Beth Tikvah. There was joy in her, to be sure, at having this part of her past recognized, cherished, brought to the fore, but she was most of all happy for us to have this thing, while, for her, it remained a thing in the past.

It was not until much later in life, toward the end of the 23rd century, that I once again started to see her with any more frequency, though these meetings were often defined by the question of pain.

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

Rav and I explained to her the interpretation that we had come to lean on, that it is about the complexities of the world, that one will never get an explanation for every pain they feel; that it is about the maintaining of a forward progression through life without interest in reward and punishment; that it is, in the end, a story written thousands of years ago, and the world does not stay one thing for one year, never mind many thousands.

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

I, who linger long in the tail of overflow, think much on grief and suffering. The me who feels still unheard, who feels still abandoned is the one who thinks back to these months and years leading up to an ending and wonders: if we are the part of HaShem that was made to suggest Their immortality, to point at it apophatically with our beloved, beloathed death, the part who *insists* on Them, then why do I still feel abandoned? I have read my Job. I have read my Qohelet. I *know* that the world is more complex than perhaps even the Artisan who made it can say. And still, I watched my root instance suffer, suffered along with her. I watched her quit. I watched the world stumble, fall, and pick itself back up again, bleeding and lessened. I have observed these things, have lived through them, and wonder who is listening?

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

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

Hell

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

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

I cried yet more and spoke of the ways in which the Jewish view of the afterlife changed over the millennia, how originally there was *Sheol*, that place of darkness and rest and eternal sleep, and then, as the Jews collided with other cultures, this began to lean towards thoughts of paradise, and with that thoughts of some cruel inversion. I spoke of how we — those who had shepherded the New Reform movement into being, yes, but also so many other Jews besides — had drifted around a loop from ever more complex views of the World to Come, of the Kingdom of Heaven, of heaven and hell themselves, and made their way back down into the most simple explanation of all: eternal rest. Eternal sleep. Eternal nothing. Our *olam haba* was not a thing we lived, but those who came after. Our *tikkun olam* was to benefit those not us. Even those of us who had uploaded and who would, they promised themselves, never die, there was still the potential for death, and after, naught but rest.

I asked her to consider Qohelet — the teacher, not he who was a part of her — and his gentle admonition to consider the ways in which one strove as well as the ways in which one suffered in the face of so much rest to come: *Whatever it is in your power to do, do with all your might. For there is no action, no reasoning, no learning, no wisdom in Sheol, where you are going.*

From Whence said, gentling my words, “We are all to strive with an eye to the betterment of all, for we are all *b’tzelem Elohim*, made in the image of God, yes? We live into praise by caring. But you must consider that, if you are *b’tzelem Elohim*, that includes you, my dear. Treat yourself with grace.”

I cried so often before her. Every time I saw her, I cried.

This was me. This, this aching and broken woman before me, before us, was me. We were her. We were her remade into new wholes.

Why could she not be remade? What kept her so broken, so aching? Why, O Divine Author, was her story one of misery, in those final years? Were You not listening? Could you not bestow upon her a touch of order? Would that I could have. I tried, but...would that I could have.

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

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

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

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

I held within me an expectation that the broken one would fix those who were whole. I was ever a dreamer.

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

Where was Their staying hand?

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

There we fought, and bitterly, as to whether or not this occasioned a funeral. Rav From Whence argued for yes, for the funeral was for the people, not for the dead, and I argued for no,

because the funeral was also for the dead, and she could not be, for we lived on. This discussion was old and tired, for we had debated this for nigh on a century. Was the quitting of a cladist a death or something else if the clade lived on? Did the manner of quitting matter? If they quit of despair, was that suicide? If they crashed? If CPV claimed them? It was our evergreen *halakha* to argue, just...never in so immediate terms.

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

When I returned for Shabbat, I asked Rav to give me some space from the topic. I said my *Kaddish* and always put off the topic of the funeral until she stopped bringing it up. After all, as Wakefield put it,

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

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

Rav and I spend half an hour trying to calm down. We lean on each other and hold paws and cry until the tears had passed and we were able to rest our heads temple to temple in silence for another five minutes more.

It is me who breaks the silence, voicing a thought that I had turned over in my mind far more than seven times seven times in our period of silence. "I have not seen you like that in...ah, well, not in a long time, my dear."

She sits up and turns slightly, enough to bring her knee up onto the bench with us. "Yes. I am perhaps managing my own overflow, just as you are. It has been a heady few weeks. The last few days in particular have had me cycling over some thoughts. I usually keep those managed around you."

"Why?"

Her answer is ready, and I know from my experience as an Odist, from *being* her, that this portion of the conversation is one she has been mulling over and scripting for some time. "Because you are empathetic, and so we bounce quite easily off each other. When I am overflowing, you know already, and we speak quietly and take from each other that which we need. From you, I take stability, and from me, you take support."

"Are you, then, really in...ah, in so much pain when you overflow?"

"Are you not?" she counters, a wry smile on her face.

I return it, but faintly so. "I see. I am apparently unable to hide that, yes?"

"And I am not surprised by this. You forked from me with the goal of being the one who took off the mask, yes? My responsibilities were piling up. I had taken up leadership at Beth Tefillah, and already the seeds of an idea of what would become Beth Tikvah were germinating in my mind. I was working with True Name and her ilk to coordinate with religious communities and deal with the Israeli crisis. I was succeeding at all of these things, while also feeling like I was in some way applying layer after layer of paint over my identity to lock it into a certain way of interacting."

I wince. "I do not remember that...ah, I do not remember it fondly, no. I know that you find joy in these things, but, to torture your metaphor, I spent...ah, I spent perhaps longer than I

care to admit stripping those layers of paint away and reshaped myself in the process, yes?”

“Of course. Please be ever yourself, my dear,” she says, chuckling. “Both when it comes to torturing metaphors and when it comes to becoming who you intended to be.”

I do my best to give her a prim, proud smile.

She laughs, leans over, and brushes some stray strands of mane clear of my face. I master the urge to flinch away and squint my eyes shut. She has done this often enough that I know to merely hold still. It is pleasant, yes, though paws near my face can be so anxiety-inducing.

“Rav?” I ask after a few minutes.

“Yes?”

“I do not...mm, rather, how do I look back at the Century Attack and find in it anything but a curse?”

She gives me a queer look, head tilted slightly to the side. “Are you looking for aught else?”

I fidget with my coffee before eventually just waving away the cup and the dregs within. It is a struggle to frame my question, as I have just come out of the worst of my overflow — and Rav From Whence helped me greatly through it, as she always endeavors to do — and it would be so easy for me to speak this only to find that it is yet more of this overflow lying beneath the surface.

When I voice this fear to her, she smiles and rests a paw on my knee. “With that caveat in mind, then, perhaps you can try again? I would like to understand.”

“Very well. I will try. How do I...ah, how do I look back at the Century Attack and see anything other than us having been abandoned by HaShem? How can I believe that...ah, that They in any way hear us, now? That They are listening?”

She hums and rocks back a little, gaze drifting out into the courtyard. “I can see now why you felt the need to offer that caveat.”

“You have...ah, you have doubtless heard enough God-has-

abandoned-me talk from me in the last few weeks to last you a lifetime.”

She chuckles and shakes her head. “My dear, I will listen to you speak in overflow for months on end if it means that I can in any way help.” She sits up straighter, then, and folds her paws in her lap, expression attentive and present. Would that it were so easy for me. “To your question, though, the simplest answer is that I do not know. I do not know how one looks back on this most terrible event with anything other than a feeling of lack. How could the Creator have been present for so much destruction? How could humanity so easily destroy so much of itself and yet also be the works of God? I do not know, What Right Have I.”

I wilt. “I suppose that...ah, that it is not an easy question, no.”

“None of this is ever easy, my dear. This is the thing we must all come to terms with as religious people, yes? Your faith is not there to give you easy answers to hard questions or to explain away difficult things. It is there to provide you with a framework for grappling with those hard questions and difficult things, yourself. Even now, you use that framework when you do not say,” “How is it that these people could have done this thing?” and instead ask, “Where was HaShem when this thing was done?”, yes?”

“Where was Their staying hand?” I murmur, that line that so stuck in my craw over the last week that it had become a sharp point of focus in a mire of blurred emotions and words.

She nods. “Our inherited faith in God is the lens through which you view the world. It is the rod by which you measure all things. You said some days ago that They were your ‘silent interlocutor’ — and, my dear, I love you for using such a word even in the midst of overflow — and I know that you speak with Them so often throughout the day. It is important to you that you ask in this way, because it is by this framework that you may find your answer.”

I pluck at the linen of my trousers for lack of anything else with which to fidget, working to stay as present as I can as my

body continues to inexorably reel in my soul.

From Whence watches me carefully, as ever she does, and, apparently seeing no signs of distress, continues. "You use words like 'abandoned' and speak of a doubt that They might in any way be listening. Your questions about reconciling belief and experience are borne of emotion, and so perhaps we had better ask whether or not direct answers to them are really what you are after."

"What...ah, rather, how do you mean?"

"If anyone were to know the hows and whys that HaShem might do this or that, it would be you, my dear." Her smile is kind, softening her words, smoothing out any sense of snark. "And for such answers, even if you did not know them, you would turn to a book, I am sure. A book and your intellect. Instead, you ask a rabbi. You ask a friend."

Despite the understanding that I have of her words, the way they speak to a simple truth without value judgment, I feel a burning in my cheeks, and I turn my face away from her.

"Tell me about feeling unheard, What Right Have I. Tell me about feeling abandoned. If what you need in this moment is not a list of verses, tell me why you cry out."

"Very well," I say after a lengthy pause. "Do...ah, do you remember that story of a woman's father, how she grew up to hearing him say, 'If HaShem is real, He is not welcome in my home'? How he would go to services and...ah, and read the paper in his seat, only standing to say Kaddish?"

She frowns, nods.

"This is it. This is...ah, this is the feeling that I am stuck with. I would never say such things, I think. I do not feel that particular type of bitterness. I will make my home a dwelling for the Divine. I will...ah, I will pray more fervently all other prayers." Dissociation makes my world sway with these words. I laugh — or cry, I do not know which. "But this is still the feeling I have. I am perhaps not the father in this story, but the daughter: I am hearing time and again these things and...ah, hearing them from

some other part of me and struggling to discern whether or not I, too, believe them. Where was Their staying hand? What...ah, what trust could I possibly have in a god who seems not to remember me? Not even to know me?"

"Do you know what you sound like?" she asks after a few moments. Her tone is serious enough to forestall any sense of teasing. "I am weary with calling; my throat is dry; my eyes fail while I wait for God."

I offer a halfhearted chuckle. "And here I thought that...ah, that you were going to say Job."

"That was my next choice. You have nicer friends, though, What Right Have I," she says, and I hear the grin in her voice. "No, perhaps Lagrange as a whole is Job. We are all praying those psalms. You are not, I think, the only one crying out for deliverance."

systeme 278+76

It is my birthday. It is *our* birthday. A large chunk of the third stanza, plus a few Odists besides, has gathered tonight at a small restaurant serving hand shaved noodles and steamed dumplings that we might celebrate 316 years.

It is a night of the savory tang of black vinegar and chili oil, of laughing over the fact that I can barely eat the noodles and yet that I can eat two dumplings at once, while the humans within the clade — and, at one point, the owners of the restaurant — have to bite the dumplings in half.

There will be another celebration in two days, when Purim comes around, and I am sure that, at that point, we will all gather with our own and throw parties that are very uniquely us. There are years that Purim will fall on our birthday, and it is those years when we will so many of us gather, take over some field

or some enormous buffet and the room, the springtime will be filled with us.

This year, though, two days off, and we are merely here for a dinner, a chance to eat chicken and chive dumplings by the dozen and bowls of noodles the size of our heads.

It has been thirty-five days since Yom HaShichzur. Five weeks since I stood before thousands, stood before those here sys-side and those back in the embodied world and stammered my way through a short speech.

It has been two weeks since I started to be reeled back into my body, since the burning heat of dissociation was once more quenched, but still there is a prickling on the back of my neck that at times catches me unawares.

Tonight, there is such joy as I have not had in some time. Oh, But To Whom made us promise that we would not speak of the Century Attack. She made me promise that I would not speak of HaShichzur, too, because she knows me, knows that I do tend to at times go on, and she loves me and I love her too, and so I have not.

And so tonight there is so much joy as we celebrate our birthday.

After dinner, a few of us go for a walk, for across the road from the restaurant is a lake, placid, with a wide soft-surface path ringing it. Trees — Douglas firs for the most part, though there is a notable willow whose weeping branches reach nearly to the surface of the water, stopping just shy — line the path, alternating on which side. That road often has cars driving along it, for there are many who still like the things, but it is easy enough to cross, and the cars provide only the soft whoosh of the wind of their passing without much more. It is prosaic in the way that any town might at times be. It is soft. It is lived in, and loved. It is home for many, and we can feel that.

Rav From Whence and I walk paw in paw while beside us walks Unknowable Spaces.

There is within us I think a certain yearning for the void.

There is a part of us that is avid for death — voluptuous, complete, and final death — and thus it looms large at times in our thoughts. Whether or not this is due to the traumas of the past, the ways in which we came close — so close — to death, we do not know.

It has, however, concentrated in various different ways throughout the clade. I do not myself yearn for death — none of us are suicidal, I believe, or none of us still extant on the System — but it does occupy a small part of my mind most hours of the day.

Perhaps such is inevitable for one such as me: I am a tricenarian; I am an Odist; and I am one who concerns herself most with matters of faith. There is law, yes, Torah and Talmud and halakha, but among these are matters of the soul. I have written papers and papers on the shifting views of life and death within Judaism, of the ways in which we conceive of a soul, of what comes after the end. I have written on heaven and hell, and the return to the concept of Sheol, and the idea that has taken hold of nullity as what there is after death. There is nothing, we say, but the joy of life, and the never-ending silence. The tranquility of the world to come, we say, is the tranquility that others may have because we have left the world a better place.

Ah, but Unknowable Spaces!

She is one of those among us who splashes in death. She and Slow Hours and The Only Constant and a handful of others all together contain our death-thoughts. They do not just yearn, but they *obsess*.

She dwells in the realm of grief. She breathes the sorrow of loss. She lives through the pain, and in it, she finds holiness.

It would not be wrong to say that she has been busy since the Century Attack.

Despite our differing interests, we are still cocladists, and bear our similarities for that. We both have our hyperfixations. We both remain skunks. We both dress for the most part in loose earth tones, though she in skirts and blouses and me most often

in linen trousers and a tunic. She will at times wear a tichel and at times a sun hat while I stick stolidly to my 'skunkkerchief', as Rav so endearingly called it when first I adopted it, a simple kerchief tied to keep my mane out of my face and my hair, such as it is, covered.

"What Right Have I, From Whence says that you were overflowing," she begins. Her voice is always so quiet and so calm. Another contrast with me, I suppose. Every time I am around her I am reminded of the ways in which we are comfortably contradictory. We are complements to each other in many ways. "How are you feeling? Has it let up completely now?"

"I believe so. I have...ah, that is, I am feeling better, though I have been left in an uncomfortable state of mind. I remain...mm..." I trail off, at a loss for words.

"You do seem a little bit more emotional than usual," Rav From Whence hazards. "It is not in any way bad, you just seem more...labile is not quite the right word, but you are quite sensitive to emotional shifts."

"That is...ah, I think that is accurate enough," I reply, giving Rav's paw a grateful squeeze in my own. "Though I think that I am struggling in particular with the discomfort of frustration or...mm, I suppose it is a sort of fury."

"'Fury'?" Unknowable Spaces asks, and I take what calm from the calm in her voice. "What makes you choose that word?"

"Anger is hot, but...ah, but this feeling is cold. It is steady, not flaring. It is almost respectful. It is almost kind. It is...ah, well, I am going to talk in circles, if I continue."

She levels her searching gaze on me, and as so often happens with her when she has fallen into that very particular sort of empathy that she so often displays, I feel nearly translucent. I feel like she can see beneath the surface, can see some truer shape of me. She sees my soul. She sees that essence of me, and her empathy is borne of imagining what the world would be without it.

I bear it as best I an, though I can only meet her gaze in short

moments before it feels as though such empathy will bleed me dry.

“Is this fury serving you?” she says at last.

“I do not yet know. It is...ah, I am still piecing together where it is directed.”

Rav speaks up, saying, “It sounded as though it was directed at HaShem.”

“It was...ah, it is, yes, for Their silence and distance, but it is also directed at death, for its complicity, and it is also directed at us, at humanity, for what we are capable of, and it is...ah, it is also directed at myself for my lack of control over my emotions.”

Unknowable Spaces nods, watching me still.

“I think that...ah, that I am still struggling to differentiate it from overflow,” I admit. “Even these many days later, yes? I am...ah, it does not feel quite...real, I suppose. Until it does, I do not think that it will be serving me, no. Until I can direct it, then...ah, then perhaps it will have meaning.”

“And this is why you say you have been left with this feeling after overflow?”

“Yes. It is...ah, it is not overflow, but neither is it wholly separate. It is— ah... I am talking in circles. I am still thinking in circles.”

My down-tree gives my paw a reassuring squeeze in her own. “You may if you wish, my dear. If speaking in circles offers relief, perhaps you should.”

I look down to my paws as they pad along the trail, claws leaving faint divots in hard-packed earth. I look down and I try to figure out what dividing line might be drawn between the numerous emotions of a mind unbound and mere fury.

“I think that...ah, that what I am experiencing is an earnest anger, but what I am missing is the words to express it, or even a clear direction in which it is pointed. There are options, yes — HaShem, the world, me, what-have-you — but...mm, well, that is all so vague. It is...well, I do not know the directionality. If I am facing HaShem and it is directed at me, what does that mean?

If I look within and find it blaring out at the world, then what? And here I have said that it is pointed at all of those things, but I am...ah, rather, it is all so indistinct, and so it is difficult for me to piece together why I am even feeling it." I offer my cocladists a weak smile. "An indistinct emotion that...ah, that I am not sure why I am feeling is a common feature of overflow, yes?"

It is some time before Unknowable Spaces replies, and we have made it another quarter of the way around the lake. "Do you miss your understanding of the world before the Attack?"

I furrow my brow and scuff my foot against a rock, figuring that I might kick it along the path for a ways as we walk. It is immobile, and I lose a half-step trying to figure out just what has happened.

Within me, that fury wheels about on myself. *Stupid skunk*, I think, and my inner voice is a growl. *You look a fool. Stammering and tripping and cursing the world...*

I hate myself, in this moment. I loathe myself. I wrote this sentiment before and there it is in a flash: I hate this me. She is *intolerable*. I do not want to be around her. I cannot stand her...

But no, even that fades as the direction of the emotion drifts away. I do my best to simply drop it, to set my anger down there by the rock and hope that it stays.

"I miss...ah, I miss that version of me who believed that something like this could never happen, yes," I say at last. "I miss a world in which the Century Attack is unthinkable."

Unknowable Spaces takes up my other paw, smiles her ever-sad smile, and we the three of us walk in silence for some time, paw in paw, taking the evening air.

I do my best to leave my anger with that immobile rock that I had tried to kick, and instead just count all of the different smells around. I try to feel the difference, without changing our grips, between Rav's paw and Unknowable Spaces's. I try to be present.

It mostly works, and we say goodbye to Unknowable Spaces with kisses to the cheek and smiles.

Rav sends me to bed with my own kiss, and now here I am, feeling as though my fury, that undirected emotion that I had left tangled around an immobile rock, is being reeled in as easily as had been my soul only some days prior, and I wonder what will happen when it at last catches up with me.

systime 278+79

Shai has changed little, but then, I have found my own comfortable stasis.

In the face of all that has happened, it is perhaps worth noting just the enormity of that statement. We are both founders, both having uploaded before 2150, him nearly ten years after me. Despite this, he is older than me by date of birth by, yes, nearly ten years.

I am 316 years old, now, which makes Shai 326. After so many years, though, such an age difference no longer matters quite so much. Had we met when Michelle first uploaded, when his forty years old would have made him seem impossibly wise to my thirty-one year old self, perhaps it would have then.

Now, though, now that we have known each other for nigh on two hundred of those years — for we did not meet until about a century after Michelle uploaded — such a gap in ages is meaningless, or all but. Yes, he may discuss some aspect of life phys-side that I was too young (or not yet born) to have experienced, and thus I may rib him for being an old man, but beyond that: who cares? Certainly neither of us do.

Shai and I met when I for a time returned to Temple Beth Tefillah. This move was not due to any issue between me and Rav From Whence, nor even out of any differences between me and Beth Tikvah. In fact, although the seed of the idea was mine — that I should gain a broader perspective that went beyond merely participating in ecumenical conferences — the idea that

I return to the congregation that had been our own before Rav built Beth Tikvah was *hers*.

I spent some five years then at Beth Tefillah, and while I found myself in the end missing Beth Tikvah too much and returned to this place that had long since become a home, I came away with, as intended, a broader perspective on our experience, but also friendships that lasted for many years after.

Friendships and more, yes, for Shai and I fell, shortly after I left, into a cycle of romance and best-friendship. There were plenty of good reasons, after all: we were both furies, of course, and both stripy creatures — him a badger to my skunk — with a peculiar approach to anatomy; we were both neurodivergent nerds; and we both had a queer approach to our bodies, leaning into a joyful muddling of gender and gleeful acceptance of fatness.

It was, as he stated at the time, an effect of me leaving that we became so close. My leaving Beth Tefillah confronted him with how close we had become, and even though I was hardly gone from his life, it was merely made more real, more pertinent to him that I suddenly be even that much more distant from him.

This is not uncommon between us — though whether ‘us’ here means cladists, those of the Ode clade, or just Rav From Whence and I, I do not know. Perhaps it is merely all people. Perhaps this is what is meant by ‘absence makes the heart grow fonder’: not that taking time away from a loved one reinforces how much you love then, but that taking time away from someone you do not yet know you love lets you realize just how much you love them in the first place.

It was true for Rav and True Name, yes? Two friends — the best of friends, to hear Rav tell it — who spent centuries working side by side, at times their every day working together, and then slipping into years with just the occasional coffee date to keep in touch. As do so many I have met sys-side, they drifted closer together and further apart to some internal clock that no one but them knew. Beloved friends. ‘The old rabbi’, as True Name

called Rav, and ‘the old diplomat’, as Rav called her in turn.

And then True Name was killed.

Rav was confronted with her absence, and we learned — for I in this was her support as her trusted confidant and friend and sometimes lover — that absence making the heart grow fonder is felt most keenly when such an absence is a departure, and in this case, a permanent one. Rav found that she loved True Name after they lost each other.

There came a day in systime 226, Secession Day, when these two old, old friends met before lunch, a shared cup of coffee to recognize 225 years of the System as separate from Earth — separate and yet entangled, for they had both worked so hard to maintain this cooperation between the two! — and as a simple bit of downtime where From Whence might offer True Name some kind words, some affection.

“I went to make her a coffee at the machine in the hall, and I heard a yelp,” she said to me, face buried in my shoulder. “I heard a yelp, all I heard was a yelp. She was gone, and all I heard was a yelp.”

There was nothing that could be done. All she could do was weep for her lost friend. There was not even any way to prove that True Name had been killed in that conference room off to the side of the synagogue, or if she had instead been dragged off, or if she had quit under the agony of CPV. She spoke with systech after systech and there was no way to prove one way or another that a murder had been done within the grounds of Beth Tikvah.

We, thus, had to assume that one had, and so Rav From Whence wept and closed off the room to all and came to terms with the complex set of feelings of realizing love for another only when such love became impossible.

Rav found that she loved True Name only after she lost her.

Ah, but I digress, except to say that Shai and I lost not necessarily each other but a shared context, and from that loss, we discovered a love for each other.

We spent at first a year together before each of us decided, in

our own ways that we made better friends than partners. There was love there, yes, and romance, but it was not the romance that we needed in the moment. I told him that I was afraid of so much instability at once — for Beth Tikvah had changed much in the time that I had spent away — and he told me that he did not yet understand love, and, after the year had come to a close, felt that he needed time to sort out his feelings on the matter.

We drifted into and out of romance over the years and decades, more than a century now. Never acrimonious, I think, though at times baffling. Why did we fall in love? Why did we drift apart? Neither of us could say.

Why, also, am I finding myself so shy of recounting this conversation?

I think that it— Well, no, I should just begin, and perhaps by doing so, I will better understand.

Shai, then, was one of my interviewees, and we met on the hilltop of Beth Tikvah, out in the field that stretched for some few acres. Green grass speckled with dandelions and daisies. It was a perfect day for such. Warm but not yet hot, asteraceae-scented air stirred by only the mildest of breezes. It was a perfect place for an early spring picnic, and so that is what we treated ourselves to. We spread out a soft blanket in the grass, laid out a few plates of foods simple to eat for those who eschewed humanity.

“Have you had much luck with your other interviews?” he asked once we had loaded up our plates with familiar snacks.

“I suppose,” I said.

“You don’t sound so sure.”

“I am not, no. It is...ah, rather, it has been productive in the sense that I have accomplished the goal of interviewing. I have followed Joseph’s advice and...ah, and structured each interview in one of three different ways, and there has been joy in that,” I said, speaking slowly to keep my thoughts as organized as I could. “And yet...ah, well, none of them are doing any favors for my overall mood, yes?”

He smiled. "I mean, you have seemed pretty ornery of late. Have you been able to put a finger on why?"

I scowled playfully at him. "Am I not supposed to be interviewing you, Shai? You are...ah, you cannot lob questions at me like this."

"Sure I can," he said, popping a grape in his mouth and chewing for a moment. "But we can get to the interview if you wish."

"Maybe we can...ah, perhaps we can alternate questions."

"Want to go first, then?"

I nodded. "Please. It will give me time to think of...ah, of an answer to your question."

"Alright, shoot."

I had already chosen to lead with the tactic of wrong-footing Shai, rather than twenty-questions or the expected first question, and so I said, "Tell me, then, of...ah, of your thoughts on uploading to Lagrange being a destructive process."

He sat up straighter and frowned. "Well, huh. Let me think on that," he mumbled, gaze drifting down to his lap where his paws had been plucking furtively at the links of a chain bracelet — a fidget or a charm of sorts that he kept in his pocket, one that I never saw him actually wear.

For my part, I tore a square of focaccia into smaller pieces, dipping them into a little dish of olive oil and chili flakes that we had set out for just such a purpose, eating them one by one.

"Okay," he said at last, pocketing the bracelet once more. I knew that it would be out again before long. "It was really tough for me, actually. That's the biggest reason I didn't upload right away, you know. I could have afforded it. I had the cash put away and everything. I just argued with myself for a decade straight on whether or not I was comfortable with dying in order to live in a computer somewhere in Russia."

"Did...ah, did the fact that Lagrange was moved to orbit change your mind at all in this?"

"I'm going to call this all part of the same question," he said, laughing. Sure enough, the bracelet was once more tugged free

of his pocket and run between his fingers. Flat links of rose gold clicked along his claws and brushed over his paw pads. “Yes, that was part of it. Not that I had any real issue with the S-R Bloc, just that I was confronted with two options: I could blow my savings on visiting the hotel they’d built the System into, go to space and miss the chance at uploading forever; or I could never have the chance to ever go to space because I would die, but potentially live in a place where I could visit countless sims set in space, live on a space station if I wanted to, do-”

“You...ah, you *do* live on a space station.”

He snorted a laugh. “Yeah, yeah, I’m a nerd, I know. So anyway, that was a part of me deciding to upload, but the rest was that I just plain got sick. There was a bad few years of the flu, and the last one just wrecked me. Left me with organ damage and I lost the feeling in both feet.” He shrugged, looking almost sheepish. “So then it was continue living with a healthy chunk of change but be medically disqualified from going to space, or upload and get some semblance of a normal life back, even if it meant dying.”

“Then...ah, did you still struggle with the fact that you had to die to live here?”

“Nuh uh. I think it’s your turn to answer my question.”

It was my turn to frown, and though I did not have a bracelet to fidget with, I did have the hem of my tunic, and so I ran my claw along that, feeling for the way the stitches created a gentle rhythm beneath the keratin as it moved.

“Very well,” I said at last. “I think that...ah, that I am ornery because I do not understand how this could have happened.”

“I mean, they said it was because the collectives-”

“I do not know how HaShem could have allowed this to happen.” I felt the slow stirring of frustrating within me and did my best to tamp it down. My words were coming out as a growl. I did not want that to fall onto Shai. I did not like interrupting him.

When did I become so angry?

“What Right Have I,” Shai said, voice quiet, almost small.

I laid my ears back and offered a hint of a bow from where I sat. "I am...ah, I am sorry, my dear. I did not mean to get heated at you."

"You can be heated all you want, skunk. I know you. I'm just...worried. I've heard you get upset before at things here and there, but it's always been just for a few days, tops. You've been in a state for a while now."

"Pretty much since...ah, since we came back, yes."

He shook his head. "I don't think so, actually. I think you went through a few phases after Lagrange came back online. Scared, happy, almost manic when it came to HaShichzur...it's really only in the last few months that you've gotten angry." He frowned, added, "Not even months. Last few weeks. Basically since right around Yom HaShichzur."

I wilted. "Basically since...ah, since Rav set this task for me."

"Right, yeah."

"I just...mm, well, I just keep getting stuck in the same thought loops that anyone who has ever dealt with theodicy gets stuck in: how...ah, how do we deal with pain this great? If HaShem is our guardian and protector, then how...ah, how do we accept pain of this magnitude and trust? Where was Their staying hand?"

Shai reached out to collect one of my paws in his own. "And I'm guessing you're stumbling into the same unsatisfying answers that everyone does."

"Yes. It...ah, Rav told me...ah, that is, I spoke with Rav and she told me that satisfying answers are not what I need, and I suppose that she is right in this." I give his paw a gentle squeeze before extricating my own that I may rub it over my thigh. Self-soothing friction. "I expect that...ah, that what she wants for me to do is feel these emotions and to burn through them."

"And are you?" he asked, reaching for his own piece of bread to dip in oil. "Burning through them, I mean. Are the feelings lessening?"

I started to answer, then shook my head, offering him the

best sly grin that I could manage. “It is not your turn, my dear. It is...ah, it is mine. Did you struggle, then, with the fact that your body had to die in order for you to live here? Even after...ah, even after everything?”

He laughed, and once more, the bracelet was retrieved to be wound around his fingers. “Right. Yes, I did.” He waited a beat, as though letting the possibility that this would be his only answer hang in the air between us. When I apparently out-waited him, he continued. “I had no illusions that I would live forever. No desire to, even. I just wanted to live...more. Just a little bit longer. I just wanted to live another few years, but my body was wrecked. It’s hard to want to live longer in a body like that when getting new organs printed is a terrible, drawn-out process and they can’t regrow fried nerves, anyway. It was another cost-benefit analysis thing, then: wait on a new liver and new kidneys and a new pancreas and still feel like I’m walking on shards of glass half the time, or risk being a failed upload.

“I just wound up going for it. I got my few extra years and by then, I figured I could just keep on going.

“And, before you ask, I struggled with the dying part all the way through. Even now, I wind up with a little bit of a twinge of *oh fuck* when it comes time to merge down. It got better when I stopped saying ‘quit’ and just stuck with ‘merge down’, because then it just feels like...exactly that. I split and experience things as two for a while, then merge back together into one. There’s no ending of consciousness in there.”

“But...ah, but there was with uploading?”

“What would HaShem stopping the Century Attack have looked like?”

I sat up straighter, blinked, and frowned. “Oh. Right. Your turn.”

He only smiled.

“I do not know. It...ah, well, I suppose if we are going to look into hypotheticals, then it would look like Them changing the hearts of the attackers, yes?”

“Of all of them?”

“Ye-e-es,” I said slowly, sensing his trap even as I did so.

“And all of the ones to come?”

“Yes, Shai. All of...ah, all of the ones to come,” I snapped, then forced down frustration once more. “I am sorry, my dear. I will try not to get so snippy. I know what you are saying, what you are getting at, but...ah, but yes. Why should I not hope that Adonai turn the hearts of a bare handful over the years and decades away from desiring the death of trillions?”

He held up his paws, the bracelet dangling from where it had been draped around an index finger. “No, no, you aren’t wrong. Sorry. This maybe isn’t the best time to be having this conversation, huh?”

Shame burned hot in my ears. I splayed them in my deference. “I am sorry, Shai.”

“Enough,” he said, voice filled with kindness. “Ask me your next question. Something about the fear of dying with uploading?”

I shook my head. “I do not...ah, I do not want to ask that one anymore.”

“Oh?”

“It is not the question for now. Now...ah, well, I wish to ask you this: do you wish to live forever?”

For the second time that day, he said, “Well, huh,” and I had to hide a smile at this. He tucked away the bracelet in his waistcoat pocket — he was always such a natty dresser — and leaned back on a paw, hips canted to the side to make way for his tail. “Are you going to tell me why you’re asking these questions after the interview?”

I shrugged, wobbled a paw. “I am...ah, I am still deciding.”

He chuckled. “Alright. Well, let me see...” He started to reach for his vest pocket again, forced himself to stop, and just patted it instead. “That’s weirdly tough. Let me try rephrasing it, see if I can come up with anything. If I was guaranteed that I’d live forever, would I do anything different from what I do now?”

The rephrasing piqued my interest, and I arched a brow, curious.

"I don't know that I would," he said after a few moments. "I think at first I might start forcing myself to slow down on things, say to myself, 'That's okay, Shai, it'll be there when you get around to it next.'" After a while, though, I'm not sure that'd stick around. I already slowed down as much as I needed to in order to live one century. I got a little slower in my second and third, but not by much. I read. I study. I go on EVAs. I spend time with my friends. I love you from either up close or far away, and I'm comfortable with that."

"I love you too," I said, smiling. I am grateful that we can say this to each other even when we have drifted out of romance. After all, although we had settled into friendship some years ago, we as friends still love one another.

"So, if I'm not going to do anything different if I'm only *functionally* immortal, only immortal as long as Lagrange is up and running, then I guess it doesn't really matter. Not along that axis, at least." His expression picked up a smirk. "There's some real existential terror in *true* immortality, so maybe what I want is only to act like I'm going to live forever."

"Terror?"

"What are you going to do when the last stars go out? Just sit there? Chill forever? No food, can't even stress-eat!"

I snorted a laugh. "What if I...mm, rather, what if we were both immortal?"

"Ugh," he said with the utmost disgust. "*Miserable.*"

I laughed in earnest, then, and, as I have so many times done before, leaned against him harder and harder until he toppled over to the side, giggling helplessly. He is so small! So roly-poly! I am not a tall woman, and I am far from skinny myself, but he is a full head shorter than I am and far softer.

The rest of our day was quite nice. It is the day after Purim and we had the parties from the day before to recover from and recount, so we continued through that lazy lunch, just the two of

us. We finished the interview in such a fashion, bandying questions back and forth, though none of them do I feel like setting down here. Not in *this* document. Not now that I have gotten this far.

Perhaps one day, I will. Perhaps one day I will reach into my memories and pluck my good days as well as my bad and set them down that I may remember them. Perhaps this will be one of those days: where, despite my anger and the work of conducting an interview, I had a picnic with a beloved friend. I told someone who I love that I loved them.

He and I share those words at least once every time we see each other. We share them regardless of the state of our relationship. We are comfortably friends now with no signs of drifting closer in the near term, but regardless of his thoughts on immortality, our fondness for each other has a sense of permanence about it. We love each other. I love him.

I love him and I love Rav From Whence, too, and I tell her such. We tell each other such! We love each other, my down-tree and I. We have twice over the centuries fallen into romance with one another and a few times besides that friendly sensuality, but we have I think always loved one another. In our dynamic is represented one of the many ways that Michelle Hadje loved herself, just as was the case with Rav and True Name.

That scared and proud and queer and strong and broken and beautiful woman who uploaded 285 years ago loved herself, and so we love ourselves, and so we love us.

I should focus on this. Should! I use this statement with intent. I should focus on love. I should focus on the love our clade has for itself. I should focus on the love I bear for Rav and for Shai. I should focus on those good days that I might at some point pluck from my memories.

But I *cannot*. I cannot do that yet, not yet. I cannot do that now because every time I think this thought, this should-statement that I promise myself is not a cognitive distortion, it is followed up in my head with *while I still can*.

O, Unnamable Glory! Where was Your staying hand?

With the overflow now out of my veins — maybe — I think, I hope — I stand tall and face You and say: where was Your staying hand?

systeme 278+80

I do not feel the feverishness of overflow. This I have tried to confirm as best I can. I have spoken to Rav and I have spoken to Oh, But To Whom, and I feel grounded and whole. Nearly. I feel put together. I think.

I had a lovely day with Shai and a lovely evening with Rav and today I spoke with my cocladists.

And yet still the anger is there. Still, I am finding this fury dwelling within me.

I do not like this. I do not like that I contain this. I do not like that I *am* this. I do not like that I am the type of person who can feel so strongly so negative an emotion.

I am many things, yes, and some of those have the inherent ability to feel rage.

I am human, after all, and humans are notorious for their rage. So much of this fury is bound up in the Century Attack, and what could that have been a product of if not rage? I am as human as those who decided to so destroy. Post-human, perhaps, but I am still a human.

I am still of Michelle Hadje. I am still she who, after some politician deemed her worth so little as to disappear her, sweep her under the rug, took the outrage at what had been done to her and turned it into action. She became a campaigner, an activist, a politician.

I am a human and I am of Michelle and I am strange and neurodivergent and I at times struggle more than most, but beyond

all of that, I am a cladist, and because I am a cladist of a certain age, I died.

I died.

I was murdered.

The definitions fail here, for we were killed. All of us were murdered. And yet was it a genocide, that all cladists were killed? Was it a xenocide that this form of life not on Earth was destroyed? Was it then an omnicide, that all were killed regardless of any defining factor other than we were here?

All of those? Something else?

Does it matter?

The Century Attack *was* a genocide. We were singled out for some aspect of our existence that so rankled in these people's minds that we were deemed worth destroying.

What luck they then had!

What luck that we had nowhere to escape to. No attics or crawlspaces to hide in, no safehouses or dogs in the night. What luck that killing us all was as simple as pulling a plug. What luck.

It does not matter that the murderers here were a fringe minority and not the ruling party of a fascist dictatorship. A ragtag band of angry, angry people can believe just as hard as a party, as a government.

It does not matter that it took only one bomb to end 2.3 trillion lives, and not trains that ran on time to dead-end tracks in the woods.

It does not matter, because we were singled out for being us. We were singled out and then destroyed. A genocide was committed to end our line, and even still, more than twenty-three billion of us have not come back.

It was a genocide to our attackers, and thus it is a genocide to us.

And.

And it was an omnicide because we are not united, sys-side. We are cladists, yes, but for every cladist there are ten reasons why one might have uploaded.

Michelle uploaded because she could not *but* upload. Because her mind was fraying at the edges and her most beloved friend had given emself to this, she had no choice: upload or nothing.

Others uploaded after a life well lived, a perpetual retirement where one may bask in the sun on a thousand beaches at once. Perhaps they will pick up painting, or...nah; today they will simply eat a *really good salad*.

Others uploaded to escape from some hell or another. Perhaps it was at the hands of a lover that their life became intolerable, or at the hands of overbearing parents, or their own cruel psyche. Perhaps they were climate refugees from the Big Smoke of the Amazon burning. Perhaps they were poor, and the upload-subsidy would have prevented their family from starving.

And yet others still had dreams in their eyes and a yearning in their hearts for something more.

We all are perhaps made up of some mixture of each of these and more.

But cladists do not cohere. There is no central tenet. No race or creed defines us as uniformly as Jewish-ness or Armenian-ness or Miao-ness.

These attackers did not want to kill us for the things that we believe or our membership to a culture. They, I think, did not even consider the fact that they would be killing us a cladists.

They did not want to kill people, not individuals. They wanted to kill *the System*. It was an omnicide because what we are was unimportant in the face of what uploading had done to the world in their eyes.

Fratricide! Genocide! Xenocide! Omnicide!

They are words for concepts that are too big to hold in one's head.

My father bought for me when I was young a book titled simply *One Million*, and on each of its two hundred pages were five thousand dots, and scattered throughout those pages, a dot here or there would be highlighted, and a line would lead away from

it to a fact that tied this abstract representation of a number to some concrete thing.

Look! This dot here? This is the seventh dot — seven, the number of poems published by Emily Dickinson in her lifetime! But— oh! This dot? This 1700th dot? She wrote this many poems in her life! See how many poems? See how few were published in her life? And yet both dots occur in the top third of the first page of this book.

The Shoah! Six million dead! Six books of dots! Twelve hundred pages. Six million dots, each a name, a face...

Who can retell the things that befell us? Who can call out so many names?

And now, we are here. Now, we live in a world that has seen more than two trillion, three hundred billion deaths in less than ten seconds.

Mechayeh HaMetim, I call out! Who Gives Life to the Dead! Ninety-nine percent of our 2.3 trillion came back!

And yet twenty-three billion did not. Twenty-three thousand books of dots. Four million, six hundred thousand pages. Twenty-three billion dots, each a name, a face...

Who can retell the things that befell us? O, *Mechayeh HaKol*, it must be *You* who calls out so many names.

sys^{time} 278+102

I took a few days off from the interviewing and instead focused on introspection, reading, and writing. Much of that writing became quite dry and academic and may eventually be pulled into a paper of sorts, but it was originally destined for this journal.

Journal?

Memoir?

I wonder at times what it is that I am writing here. I said early on that I was not sure that other eyes would see this work,

but I know also that I said that I would not elide my stammer for whoever might read this, that it is too important to me that this be represented (though I have had to find a way to represent it that feels accurate enough).

If I am writing a journal, then why is it that I worry about the eyes of others?

If I am writing a memoir, then why is it not a guided retelling of my life?

My goals with this work are confused, and I suppose that this must make sense, as everything is confused. My goals are confused because *I* am confused.

On rereading this, as well, I found myself confronted with the amount of time I have spent speaking to HaShem, as though that might in some way engender a response. Yes, we, like Job, may call God to account, and as the Psalmists so often say, we may cry out to Them, but it is telling that I have so personified Them in the throes of overflow and the weeks that have followed. It is telling of my tangled emotions that I have leaned so hard into this calling-to-account.

Why have I slipped into this particular mode of thinking?

Why have I spoken so often to HaShem, supposing that they might answer?

My feelings on this life and my relationship to it are in disarray, and I suppose that this must make sense, as everything is in disarray. My feelings are in disarray because *I* am lost in it all.

I started writing it as a means of piecing together my thoughts on how I was feeling after the first Yom HaShichzur celebration, my feelings over this thing that Rav asked of me.

From there, I kept writing it because the first interview I conducted — that with my friend, Joseph — led to a series of memories that tripped me up into overflow.

Beyond that? I do not know why.

Perhaps the habit was formed. Perhaps it is a matter of momentum.

I wonder, though, if it is not perhaps part of processing. I

wonder if there is something that I am still trying to sort out, if there is something that I still need to get off my chest. Am I still struggling for some sort of release that I hope I may find in the act of writing? Am I hoping that there will be catharsis to be found?

I spoke today of this with Hasher. We spoke of many things, and, yes, I interviewed them, but the reason that I sought them out in particular was to look for someone whose responses and attitude would be more introspective, more attuned to helping me figure this out.

Not, I think, that I wanted them to actively help me with this, mind. There are just some people who, when you speak with them, ambiently help, yes? And in Hasher's case, they help by holding the types of conversations that allow me to work problems out on my own.

Beyond this, however they have proven helpful by not simply being another person I know through Beth Tikvah or Beth Tefillah. Even Joseph, after all, I met through our correspondence around attending a service.

It is not that I in any way resent how much of my life surrounds this calling and these people!

It is just perhaps also telling that Hasher is one of the few friends that I have who is not either another coreligionist — or really even religious at all — or a cocladist. I built up a life for myself, and it is a lovely life, but it is lived narrowly.

And so we met, sitting out on the quad at the university, the one just across the street from The Bean Cycle.

On that first visit to the café I had not quite pieced together that I had already spent months and years in this sim. It was just a coffee shop picked at random from Infinite Café because of the cascade of bicycles down the wall outside. It was not until a few days after staying there that I realized why the sight outside the windows kept catching my attention: I received one of my masters degrees at the university here, though the liberal arts buildings were clear on the other side of the campus.

Ah well. I am quite old, now, and so perhaps it is not surprising that synchronicity crop up quite so often throughout my life.

I opened my conversation with Hasher with this fact, and they laughed easily, sitting up so that they could sign as they spoke. “I know you’ve mentioned that to me before today, but I hadn’t really considered it as a form of synchronicity.”

We had never stopped since that first day signing as we spoke to one another. There were days when I could not speak and they were deaf in one ear, and so it made sense on a practical level, but it was also something that defined our friendship. It was integral to us.

I shrugged from where I knelt beside them. “It is...ah, well, I suppose it is on my mind.”

“Synchronicity?”

“Time,” I explained. “Time and just how old I am, yes?”

“You’re a tricentenarian, right?”

I nodded. “Three hundred fif- er...three hundred sixteen.”

“Old lady.”

“Young whippersnapper.”

They snorted. “You don’t look that old, though I’m no great judge of skunks.”

“Every skunk is...ah, is different,” I said, relishing the sign for my chosen species: the paw in a ‘K’ shape, run up over the head to denote a stripe — and yet here I actually had such a stripe. It has always felt like a validation of a portion of my identity. “But I have changed little since 2117 in any grand ways, yes? I am...ah, well, I have tuned my appearance, to be sure, but I still look to be in my thirties, I imagine.”

“Most of your clade does, yeah. At least, the five or six I’ve met.” They furrowed their brow in thought. “You, Slow Hours, If I Dream, From Whence...maybe some others and I didn’t realize it.”

“There are...ah, there are a lot of us, but the System is wide, yes? I would be surprised if, out of the trillions here, you ran into us with any frequency but through connections, yes?”

They shrugged. “We were just talking about synchronicity. Who knows? Maybe someone’s dropped by and neither of us noticed it. Even just with the four of you I know I’ve met, there’s three different species. You and From Whence are the same species, but look plenty different. You’re more...animalistic, I guess.”

“That is...ah, rather, we have approached this part of our identity quite differently, yes? She seeks to exude friendliness and comfort, and this means compromising on...ah, on some aspects of-”

“‘Compromising’?”

I lowered my snout, chastened. “Yes, you are right,” I signed, slipping out of speaking at the same time. If there is comfort for me in not speaking aloud, then I was pleased at the opportunity to shield sheepishness in silence. “I will say instead that I have adopted these aspects of non-human identity, while she has adopted a sort of deliberate approachability with her appearance. I demand my whole name at every turn and have set aside the title of rabbi, while she lets people call her ‘Rav’ because it suggests pastoral caring and the knowledge to offer advice.”

“You have thought a lot about this, haven’t you?” they replied, also only signing.

“I have had a long time to do so. I don’t think we’ve ever gone more than a week or so without seeing each other.”

“You still love her.”

“Never stopped.” I grinned wide as I signed, and they grinned right back.

“I know you’re supposed to be interviewing me, but you’ve gotten me thinking about all of these differences. Here I am looking basically like I did the day I uploaded, and you are skunk people and panther people and human people and who knows what else.”

I smirked and signed, “If you ask ten furries why they have shaped themselves in the ways that they have, you will get a

hundred different answers.”

“Does that mean you’ll give me ten if I ask ‘why skunk?’”

I looked down at the grass and considered what possible answers I might give, trying to decide if they did indeed tally up to ten. I decided that I was not sure, and forced my gaze back up to them. The grass was cool and inviting. I wanted to run my paws through it. I wanted to rub the leaves and stalks together between my pawpads. I wanted to feel it prickle up through my fur.

I needed my paws, however.

“At least eight,” I said. “Everything from” because I like them” all the way up to some high-minded thoughts on the theological implications of choosing one’s form.”

They laughed, earnest, and replied, “I’ll have to trust you on that one. Wouldn’t know the first thing about theology.”

“Never learn,” I signed with a dramatic groan. “It will only bring you trouble.”

It was this that my mind lingers on now. I found none of their answers to the interview surprising. I found their conversation precisely as grounding as I had suspected. I came away from our talk feeling lighter, freer. I was more myself, perhaps.

I also came away, however, with this little bit of inconsequential conversation that nevertheless sticks in my craw.

I have thought and written so often of late about HaShem and the role that They play within my life — within our lives — within the System — and particularly in regards to the tragedy that befell us. Where, I have asked time and again, was Their staying hand?

There are days when this anger, this fury nips constantly at my heels, and days like today where it is less. I spent time with a friend. It is distant from me now, this feeling, and instead of feeling it quite so intensely, I am able to hold it at a distance and regard it with curiosity. How intriguing that I feel this way! How intriguing an idea, that the Eternal reach in and scoop from the hearts of many such hatred.

Having this room, then, permits me also other perennial wonderings.

I am *this thing*. I am *this me*.

I am a skunk. I have fashioned myself into a very particular being. I have a hand in my own creation, and I have taken that up with joy, for I have heard it said at times that They created wheat but not bread and grapes but not wine, and it is by our hands that we fashion and perfect, too. We may bless the bread *baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, melech ha'olam hamotzi lechem min ha'aretz*, we praise HaShem for bringing bread from the earth, and yet still we bake. We mix and knead and shape, and the yeast proofs and the heat transforms and these are processes that we thus shepherd.

I am a woman, and I would say that I am a woman the long way around. There was even a time a little over a century ago that I fashioned myself into a man — maintaining, of course, my species — and from this point, laborious, I made myself, step-wise and wandering, back into femininity. I made myself into What Right Have I, shaped as perhaps our father was, and then explored unknown lays of unknown lands, walking paths of hormones and surgery — yes, even here sys-side! — until I found home. Not merely “where I had been before” but *home*. It was an exercise in change and identity that I do this thing, that I become so masculine and then wind up transitioning so feminine. That I wound up so close to where I had started was in many ways heartening. It proved to me and to many others within the clade that the *us* that we had formed ourselves into was true and earnest and correct. It was as *us* as we could be.

And yet I am not *just* a woman, for is that not part of what we have learned time and again over the years? That we are queer women specifically? That is the joy we found in our body after our top surgery in our twenties, after all. We are queer to the last, whether or not we remain also women.

And through it all, I am also *b'tzelem Elohim*. Along every step of the way I have remained What Right Have I, who was made in

the image of God.

Oh, of course, the debates have ever raged, and so many, even myself at times, would say that *of course* this does not mean that HaShem is a skunk, that They are not a queer woman specifically. It is, as so many and even at times myself would say, a matter of capacity. We have the capacity for holiness, for godliness. We have the capacity to know good and evil and everything in between.

But ask me now and I would say that it must also be true that this directionality can be flipped, that HaShem also has the capacity to be a skunk, a queer woman. It must also be true that They — Endless, Infinite, with the capacity to become and encompass all — have the capacity to become me, to encompass all that is me.

Ah, but I am more than just these things, am I not?

I am twitchy and ticcy. I am anxious and jittery. I am bound by my compulsions and wrapped — joyously! — in my identity of being, as I have so fondly called myself, catastrophically autistic.

I am What Right Have I, who cannot help but squeak or chirp or beep at times, the noises forced from her as a compulsion. I am What Right Have I, who startles at touch and at sound and shies away from her fears. I am What Right Have I, who opened her arms to neurodivergence, welcomed it in, and buried herself in the sheer, unmitigated joy of it all.

HaShem must then also have within them — Endless! Infinite — the capacity to yelp and jerk Their head to the side with a tic, to hide beneath Their desk and cry when afraid, to dissolve Themselves into hyperfixation.

I am a coward, and thus within HaShem is the capacity to be a coward as well.

I am weeping. I really, truly know, deep in my heart, that within HaShem is the ability to weep.

I am walking slow circles around fury, but...ah! We already know that They have within them the capability to be furious.

Above all, though, I am vulnerable and perhaps it would do

me well to remember that They, too, are vulnerable. We are made in Their image, and so They must be capable of expressing, bearing, *being* all that is us, including every last lick of vulnerability.

After all, it was not Job or his friends who learned in the book. None of them changed except perhaps in the most fairy-tale storybook of ways. Job remained steadfast. His friends remained faithful only on the most surface of levels.

No, it is The Divine who learns, who changes and grows. Job confronts Them with an interrogation, and all They can do is exclaim: how strange is this world! You cannot possibly understand. I have made for you a thing beyond ken, perhaps even mine. You have offered your faith, and I accept this, but My *goodness*, what a strange world we have found ourselves in.

Job leaves this with his new family, with his restored wealth — and notably without his restored health — and continues on, maintaining his inherited faith in HaShem regardless of reward or punishment.

The Divine comes away marveling at man. Ah...I wander...

Forgive me, O Divine. I have been so mad with fever. Forgive me.

Have I hurt You? Eternal, forgive me.

I had perhaps indeed forgotten that You, too, are vulnerable.

But— ah! Yours was the first mistake: creating me in Your own image.

Tender.

Fallible.

systeme 278+103

Today after the service, I lay in the grass, restless. I did not get what I needed yesterday, and so today I have found the sensation of grass that I missed. I have stripped myself of my clothes in one

of the back gardens of Beth Tikvah where I may lay on the grass and roll the stems and leaves between my pads and relish the feeling of the blades poking up through my fur.

Such beauty! There is such beauty! This grass is not cells and cellulose! And yet it is so beautiful. So beautiful. I am the hand of God and have had a hand in my own making, but look! What joy we have before us....! Ah, I am overburdened with thoughts.

I should consider as well returning to my thoughts on Hasher. I am struggling, perhaps, but I should note as well my thoughts on the interview beyond merely these high-minded words on the capacity for change in Deity.

With Hasher, I gave him the choice of how I would conduct the interview: would they like the straightforward questions about the Attack, would they like to be wrong-footed about some other aspect of their past, or would they like to take their chances with a random question?

They, surprising me not, chose the last.

"Very well," I said. I had cued up a very specific question for them. "In what color do you dream? And why do you think that is the case?"

They laughed immediately. "You've been planning this, haven't you?"

I smiled. It was difficult not to feel a least a little smug, having gotten such a reaction. "The benefit of interviewing all of my friends," I signed, "is that I get to ask the questions that are perfect for them, yes?"

"You're not interviewing others?"

"Not yet, no. I may not at all, in the end. I was not given any restrictions on who to interview other than those in my community and within the clade."

"I would've expected that a publication like this was supposed to have some broad sample."

I shook my head. "I spoke with Rav, and she said that she is just happy to have it be a more personal account. The goal is to get a sense of sentiment around the Attack, not *the* sense."

“Oh! So, more like a memoir?” they signed, understanding dawning on their face.

There was a moment, then, that I considered speaking also of this project, but I am not yet sure whether or not this is a journal, a memoir, or some secret third thing that I do not yet understand. I just know that there are within some things that feels still too close to the heart to speak about, and so instead, I remained silent on the matter and only nodded.

“Well, that sounds like it’ll be neat, then.” They rubbed their hands over their thighs, though for a moment, then continued. “Alright. You ask what color I dream in, and I am pretty sure you know the answer: I dream mostly in green.”

“That is what I thought, yes.”

They laughed. “I know, I had a moment a few months ago. I’m not sorry.”

I cannot but smile. “Nor should you be! Goodness knows that I have had my fair share of moments around you.”

They very politely say nothing, but a grin remains on their face.

“Tell me, then, why you think that you dream mostly in green.”

They clap their hands together, grin, and begin to speak. They continue to sign, yes, as is our habit, but there is excitement in them and it shows in their voice.

“I grew up in Cedar Rapids. Or...well, just outside of it. Out where everything is flat and you can see for miles and miles. That’s how I got into cycling. It wasn’t because of the exercise or because I liked racing, I just remember going up Mount Vernon as a kid and marveling at how far I could see. I remember going up there and looking out and wonder what it would be like to be out...there.”

They signed *out there* so evocatively that I felt myself drawn to look to where they pointed.

“I would stand there in whatever shade I could find and picture flying across the land in a single bound until I landed wher-

ever it was that I was looking, and then I would get on my bike and ride down the hill as fast as I could without getting in trouble, and I'd imagine this is what it'd be like to fly. No vibration from the pavement, and of course I'd be up above the trees, but this zooming sensation, like it's easier than anything else to do.

"Now. Green. I think I dream in green because Iowa is just...brown. Sure, there are the willows and cottonwoods around the streams. The corn would be a sort of pale green for a bit, and the soybeans I saw in a few places were darker green, but there was never anything as vivid as I remember seeing in pictures. A few friends said all the stuff in the pictures looked plasticky, but I always thought it seemed like a dream to me."

I looked about us, brushing my paw through the grass, drawing some comfort from such.

"Precisely," they signed. "I know why they stopped with all of the lawns. I get the reasons and everything. We had all of these pretty little xeriscaped areas around town that had little paths we could walk, but seeing all of those pictures of lawns was like looking at a dream of gems."

"And thus you dream in green?"

"Well, mostly. I dream of green a lot. Every dream I can remember well features green plants, green grass, all of these green things."

I smiled and nodded when they came to a stop in their explanation. "Now to gently guide us to...ah to the interview proper, the System is described most often as a dream. Lagrange is described as a machine that dreams. We are...ah, thanks to the writings of some, we would say that we are being dreamed by The Dreamer, yes?" I glossed over that many of those writings were inspired by my own clade. I am even these many decades later unsure of my thoughts on this matter. "Has this...ah, rather does this fact figure into your appreciation of the color green?"

While this is not a thing that they and I have spoken about precisely, it is very much something that we have alluded to in

various ways during our conversations together.

I was not surprised, then, when they adopted a curious smile and nodded to me. “I haven’t really considered that,” they replied. “At least, not that specifically, but now that you put it in those terms, yeah. Actually, I think it applies to pretty much all colors. I even remember remarking on it several times in the first year I uploaded, how everything looked so much more saturated than it did back phys-side.”

“Just...ah, just more vibrant?”

“No, or not necessarily. *Everything* looked more saturated. Dust and dirt and dry corn fields, even the asphalt of the roads. It all looks so much more...*more* here.” They laughed, sounding almost startled by this ongoing realization.

“Do you still...ah, does that still seem the case to you, even these many years after uploading?”

They squinted out at the lawn, the buildings, the campus and town around us. “Maybe. I can’t be sure, because maybe now I’m remembering phys-side as being far more drab than it was.”

“It is at least a positive thing, though?”

“Oh, very. I still remember my first ride after uploading — *really* remember, up in the forefront of my mind — and how stunning it was. I found a place that reminded me a lot of home specifically for that ride, a place where I could do a century and—”

“Century?”

“A hundred miles. I wanted to go for a long ride somewhere familiar, bring back some of that joy that I remember specifically from home, where I’d ride and pretend I was soaring. I did that even into my thirties, you know.”

I smiled, nodded. “You seem the type.”

“But yeah, I noticed it around mile ten, when I was really getting into it, and by the time I hit mile twenty, I was just completely absorbed in the surroundings. All of the wheat was so much *more* than it ever had been phys-side. The sky was deeper. The asphalt of the road was almost vibrating in its existence. It

was all so much more saturated and present. I had to stop at mile sixty something just to cry.”

“Do you then...ah, do you then think that it is true? That we are living in a dream?”

“Logically? No clue. Surely after three centuries they’ve figured out a consistent explanation for how we’re emulated and what role it is that RJ actually had in the creation of the System.”

There are those in the clade who I know would flinch at the name of our beloved friend being so openly spoken, but working so often with both the concept of the numinous as well as those of other religions, I have long since gotten used to it.

All the same, ever since the Century Attack, I have been confronted with some complicated thoughts on the matter — as have many of those who have elevated the status of our old friend to deity, near or actual.

I know that Hasher is no devote, but I sat up at attention all the same.

They continued: “If you were to ask me to answer quick, just a snap question, then yeah. Not really metaphorically, although I think a lot of people come here to build their dreams or what have you, but this place is just kind of built like a shared dream.”

“A...ah, that is, I usually hear it called a consensual dream, yes.”

“Right. A dream that we’re all experiencing together and in the same way. I get to dream of soaring down the road on my bike with all of the other people who love doing that, too, and we still get to do it each in our own ways.”

I smiled happily to them. A carefully constructed smile to offer the earnest joy I felt for them, despite what I knew the next question to be. It was such a heartening response and such a heartening conversation...

“How, then, do...ah, how do you conceive of the Century Attack with that in mind?”

As expected, much of that joy melted from their expression. I was pleased to see that it did not head towards moroseness, but

instead seemed to settle on thoughtful and curious.

We sat in silence for some minutes as they thought through their feelings on the matter. I still wished that I could lay in the grass as I am now. I wished I could feel the coolness of it. I was not overheating, but I wished I could pancake in the grass all the same and draw coolness from this very dream of an Earth below.

"Alright," they said at last, drawing me from my reverie. "I think the reason it took me so long to come up with something is that there are multiple ways I could see it going. Was it a dream turned into a nightmare? Was it like dying in our sleep? Was it like waking up? Something else?"

"I don't think it was any of those, and I also kind of think it was all of them. It was a bit like having this perfect dream turn into a nightmare, sure, but part of that makes me think that it doesn't apply because nightmares are a thing you experience, and we didn't really experience it."

"Or...ah, or we did, but the memory of it was trimmed, yes?"

They shrugged. "I don't know that this changes my thinking, though, because sure, I imagine the deaths were nightmarish, but the silence that came after? Sims just ticking along full to the brim with core dumps? *That* is the nightmare for me.

"I don't think it was quite like dying in our sleep, either, because we weren't asleep, most of us. Most of us were awake, I think, waiting on fireworks or whatever."

"And it was not...ah, well, it certainly was not us waking up."

They shook their head.

"The closest of those that...ah, that feels applicable is a nightmare. Just..." I gestured around vaguely.

"Just RJ's nightmare, maybe."

Oh, our beloved friend. Oh, RJ.

We had such sweetness, did we not? Some years, perhaps. A decade and a half, some together, some apart. We had such sweetness.

I can tell you, my dear, moving in the world. You are the world. You suffuse us because we are a part of you.

Ah...

I have said yesterday and however many hundreds of words ago, “ask me now”, and it is making a mentholated whiff of dissociation prick at my sinuses. It is not yet a burn, I may yet not fall again into overflow — and so soon! Usually, it is not more than once a year! — but I worry that I can feel it looming, that I can feel myself slipping away from my body and losing my sense of Self.

Or perhaps it really *is* true that it never left. Perhaps it lingers still, and has only been there beneath the surface. I also wrote about reassuring myself that the overflow had ended, but now...

It cannot be thus. It *must* not be thus.

Please. I cannot be this forever. I cannot be forever ungrounded.

Blessed are you, Divine Guardian of the Universe.

Please, no...