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A Post-Self story

Madison Rye Progress

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Motes Played

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Post-Self books

The Post-Self Cycle

by Madison Rye Progress (as Madison Scott-Clary)

I. *Qoheleth*

II. *Toledot*

III. *Nevi'im*

IV. *Mitzvot*

Clade — A Post-Self Anthology

Various authors

Unintended Tendencies

by JL Conway

Marsh

by Madison Rye Progress *et al.*

Motes Played

by Madison Rye Progress & Fireheart

Ask. — An Odist Q&A

Various authors

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Note: this book relies on the plots of *The Post-Self Cycle*, as well as that of *Marsh*. It is strongly recommended that you read those works first. They may all be found *post-self.ink* as paperbacks, ebooks, and free to read in the browser.

Content notes: themes of suicide and poor mental health.

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

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

— *Charles Wesley*

End Of Endings — 2403

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Rye — 2409

1

Once upon a time there was–

“A king?” my little readers will immediately say.

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

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

We must imagine these things because they are not true.

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

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

But that was three hundred years ago.

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

The Woman has many rituals.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

x

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

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

“No, I specifically do not mean that.”

“What do you mean by ‘unbecome’, then?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Not yet,” The Woman said. “Not yet.”

“Is there a time when you will, then?”

“I think so, just not quite yet.”

x

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

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

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

“Not yet,” The Woman would say. “Not yet.”

“And have you any idea on when you might?”

“Not yet, no.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

x

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

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

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

No rituals.

No overflowing.

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

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

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

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

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

2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

fulfilling.

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

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

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

x

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“End Of Endings?”

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

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

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

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

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

“And how is your mood?”

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

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

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

She laughed. “Of course, my dear. You are my best.”

Her Friend’s smile grew more earnest. “Thank you. That feels better to hear than I expected.”

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

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

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

“Mostly, yes.”

“But not always.”

“Yes.” Her Friend turned eir mug lazily from side to side

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

The Woman averted her eyes, nodded. “As we do.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Is that what happened this time?”

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

The Woman’s breath caught in her throat.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Now they left three.

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

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

"Perhaps we can speak simply of the fallout."

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

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

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

“Is that what you wound up doing?”

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

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

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

She nodded.

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

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

“Oh? How so?”

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

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

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

The Woman shrugged.

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

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

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

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

“Is there joy in loss?”

“I do not know. Is there?”

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

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

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

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

3

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

x

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Today was therapy, and her joy was gone.

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

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

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

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

The Woman never could explain how that worked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Perhaps she slept, perhaps she dreamed.

x

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

fact, I am doing that right this very minute!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Woman nodded.

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

"Of course, my dear."

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

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

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

8

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x

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What will become of me?

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

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

And am I born to die? What will become of me? And am I born to die? And am I born to die? What will become of me? And am I born to die? What will become of me? What will become of me? What will become of me? What will become of me? And am I born to die? And am I born to die? What will become of me? What will become of me? What will become of me? What will become of me? And am I born to die?