



Our Origin is Dust, and Dust is our End.” – Kol Nidre, 5768

When I was in high school, it seemed like you couldn't turn on the radio without hearing the song "Dust in the Wind," recorded by the band Kansas. Some of you may remember its haunting acoustic guitar and the refrain: "Dust in the wind; all we are is dust in the wind."

Of course, I didn't know it at the time, but the song echoes words that we read in the High Holy Day liturgy, the words of the *Unetaneh Tokef*:

*Our origin is dust,
and dust is our end.
Each of us is a shattered urn,
grass that must wither,
a flower that will fade,
a shadow moving on,
a cloud passing by,
a particle of dust floating on the wind,
a dream soon forgotten.*

This year, when I read the words "*our origin is dust, and dust is our end,*" I think about my friend Michael.

I met Michael in a place with lots of dust. In the high desert of eastern Washington State, the wind always blows the dust around. Most of the time you'd hardly notice it. But sometimes the wind gains force, makes an eerie noise, and the air suddenly fills with dust and sand.

These dust storms are called "termination winds." They got that name back in the 1940's, when the federal government built the nuclear reservation there. When these winds blew, construction workers had to terminate their work and seek shelter immediately. If you happened to be caught outside when the termination winds blow, you cannot see more than a foot in front of you. The wind forces dust in the cracks of your eyelids and down your nose.

This happened to me once. The termination winds began suddenly as I was walking home from school. The dust erased all the landmarks so familiar to me. Everything turned brown, and I was suddenly all alone in the world.

When I finally reached the shelter of my house, I could still hear the wind blowing fiercely, forcing dust through the tiniest cracks in the windows frames, covering the furniture in a fine powder. As I looked at my reflection in the bathroom mirror,

I didn't recognize myself. The termination winds had coated my hair and my face in dust.

You wouldn't want to live in this place with the termination winds unless you had no choice in the matter. My family lived there because my father worked at the Hanford nuclear reservation. In my hometown, everyone's employment depended on Hanford, whether you traveled out to "the Area" every morning, or worked the dry cleaning counter at the local Atomic Cleaners.

I don't know who thought to call my hometown Richland, but whoever named it must have had a sick sense of humor. The land is stark and unforgiving, like the residents who lived there. People looked and thought alike. They didn't ask questions or challenge authority, their silent acquiescence a quality left over from the war years when asking questions meant trouble. Just as the termination winds choked everything in dust, erasing all shape and texture and color, so did the people of Richland suffer from a stultifying sameness.

It was a terrible place to be a teenager, especially if you were different. The town just seemed to drain the life out of you.

I met Michael in high school. He was already a shattered urn, though I didn't know it at the time. You couldn't tell how different he was just by looking. And he was very good at dulling his emotions with alcohol and hiding behind a biting sense of humor.

I liked Michael because he was a splash of vivid color in my dusty and drab hometown. He had red, curly hair and maniacal energy. Our friendship bloomed almost immediately. We were bound together by our deep scorn for the culture and conventions of our community. Michael and I wanted to stir things up, just to show that we were not of that place. We manufactured various adventures that Michael turned into cartoons – colorfully-illustrated graphic novellas that chronicled our teenage daring. Michael could always find a way to make me laugh and feel alive.

Every once in a while, Michael and I would escape the dusty streets of Richland and drive to where it was a little greener, where grass grew naturally, not just in neatly confined patches of watered and fertilized lawn. We could breathe easier outside of our town. We couldn't wait to graduate high school and make our permanent escape. We had had enough of those termination winds.

After graduation, Michael settled in Seattle, where the rain keeps the air clear and sweet smelling. As soon as he left the confines of our hometown, Michael seemed to burst into another life – his days became a blur of parties and promiscuity and hard core drugs. I couldn't understand why he lived the way he did. It was as if he was hurtling himself towards the day when he would return to the dust that was his origin.

That all changed the day he learned he was HIV-positive. He had suspected as such. He knew that his body was struggling, though he didn't want to believe that a deadly virus had already invaded and entrenched itself inside him.

In the moment that the health care clinician struggled to find the words to tell this young man that he would soon die, the termination winds began to blow. Michael was suddenly all alone in the world.

But also, in that very moment, his life began to matter to him.

He stopped the crazy parties and began attending Narcotics Anonymous meetings. He shopped for healthful foods and learned how to cook for himself. He read about vitamins and figured out the best ones to take. "It's ironic," he told me. "I know that I'm really sick. But in a way, I'm healthier than I've ever been."

Michael also began volunteering for a local organization that helped people living with HIV. He spoke to others who had heard the terrible diagnosis, and felt the choking isolation of the termination winds. And Michael drew cartoons for the organization's newsletter: funny, poignant chronicles of his life with AIDS. He could still make people laugh and feel alive.

But the disease continued on its destructive course, and Michael's world grew smaller. Eventually he couldn't leave his apartment. An aide had to help him dress, go to the bathroom, take a shower. He said: "I'm just twenty-six, and I'm living in an old man's body." As the color faded from his cheeks, he spent much of each day napping. His cat took advantage of his stillness, sleeping for hours a day on his lap.

Michael also began to notice, in his diminished world, things he'd never noticed before. He hadn't realized how artistically patterned and very soft his cat's fur was. He hadn't understood how warm and comforting the touch of a friend could be. He hadn't noticed how dust motes floating lazily in a sunbeam could be so extraordinarily beautiful. But he finally noticed all of these things. He finally recognized the treasure that was his life.

He would depart – too soon -- for a peaceful place well beyond the reach of the termination winds. And so one day his body returned to the dust that is our origin.

Our origin is dust, and dust is our end. But how precious – how inspiring – this dust can be, during that brief span in eternity when it is suspended in the light: tiny, sparkling suns, stunning in their exquisite beauty.

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