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PARTY LIKE IT'S 5785

There are books that belong to the dying, written in a language known only to those who have seen the final page, a mirror-script, reversing time's arrow.

For a few years, I made a practice of reading those books on the Day of Atonement: fast, self-afflict, take in the words of Clive James, Christopher Hitchens, Harold Brodkey, Oliver Sacks, Anatole Broyard, Gillian Rose, Cory Taylor, Paul Kalanithi, Jenny Diski, written in the months when they knew their end was near. (But always preceded by Bruce Jay Friedman's story, "When You're Excused, You're Excused," to remind myself that Jews laugh.)

What was I looking for? Did I hope to gain some wisdom, to find a map or compass to guide me?

This tradition proved short-lived. On Yom Kippur in 2024/5785, I went on a hike in the Catskills with my oldest friend. No fast, no affliction, unless you count the steep stretch of Spruceton Trail after mile 2 on the way to the peak of Hunter Mountain. It was the last in a series of five fire-tower hikes we'd planned for the year.

I once heard a rabbi say that we fast on that day to become more like angels, who neither eat nor drink, and hover between man and God. I celebrated that final hike by having a beer with my friend, my first drink in 12 years. It was almost sundown.