

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

A DELUGE IN DISGUISE:
THE STORY BEHIND NICOLE KRAUSS' *THE HISTORY OF LOVE*

BRADY PRESS
SPRING 2018

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for a baccalaureate degree
in English
with honors in English

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ABSTRACT

How should we read Nicole Krauss' *The History of Love*? This brilliant work about a Holocaust survivor is too intricate to simply read as a realist novel. Readers who take her words as common exaggerations miss the crucial and impactful themes that Krauss colors. What began as an examination of the novel's use of water developed into my elaborate argument that Krauss is writing an updated version of the story of *Genesis* in The Bible in order to face the harsh reality of religious skepticism amongst the Jewish community after the Holocaust. By using *Genesis* as a template, she references the story of Creation, the Flood, the Tower of Babel, and smaller biblical elements while weaving together a genuine, fictional masterpiece. Her seemingly wacky characters are actually modern-day angels, exhibiting the presence of God's messengers in everyday life, and her lonely protagonist, Leo Gursky, fulfills his time on earth in the novel's final scene. This thesis tackles the intricacies of the novel which, by opening your mind and reading *The History of Love* in a mythical context, take a more interesting and complex form.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to sincerely thank Lisa Sternlieb for her patience and support during this process. As a passionate professor, she introduced me to both this wonderful novel and to a new style of writing that has permitted my original ideas to flourish and allowed me to feel accomplished not only as an English student, but an English scholar. She has taught me that writing should be anything but boring and given me confidence in my ability to think critically, to tackle great literature, and to teach others. On behalf of us both, we encourage everyone to read *The History of Love* by Nicole Krauss, for it is a darn good book. In addition, I would like to thank Christopher Reed for his dedication to my work, and for challenging me to be a better writer.

Introduction

How to Read *The History of Love*

The central characters in Nicole Krauss' *The History of Love* each battle individual identity crises and struggle to acclimate to the modern world around them. Among these misfits is Leopold Gursky—the lonely protagonist and Holocaust survivor—who rejects his “invisibility” by causing minor public scenes, which only further isolate him from society. Recounting a memory of attending his son's book signing, the son who does not know he exists, Leo exclaims:

It was winter. Fat white flakes drifted down under the street lamps. I waited for my son to come out but he never came. Maybe there was a back door, I don't know. I took the bus home. I walked down my snow-covered street. Out of habit I turned and checked for my footsteps. When I arrived at my building I looked for my name on the buzzers. And because I know that sometimes I see things that aren't there, after dinner I called information to ask if I was listed. That night before I went to sleep I opened the book, which I'd put on my bedside table. TO LEON GURSKY, it said. I was still holding the book when the man whose door I'd unlocked came up behind me. *You know it?* He asked. I dropped it and it landed with a thud at my feet, my son's face staring up. I didn't know what I was doing. I tried to explain. *I'm his father*, I said. Or maybe I said: *He's my son*. Whatever it was, I got the point across because the man looked shocked and then he looked surprised and then he looked like he didn't believe me. (Krauss, 25)

This passage exemplifies Krauss' elegant writing and compelling imagery, and also mirrors crucial elements of Leo's character that present themselves repeatedly throughout the novel. He is notably humble, and rarely able to accurately express himself. Those who knew him in Slonim think he is dead, and are now gone themselves, while those who meet him misunderstand him. The one identity he cares most about—the father of Isaac Moritz—is secret to the rest of the world and even to Isaac himself. As the author of “The History of Love,” his narration is central

to the novel, but is Leo a reliable narrator? Leo's doubt of his own identity catalyzes questions among readers about how we should read his character, and thus the rest of the book. Is Leo real, and if so, is he sane? Is he as an angel, a ghost, or a righteous man?

In Krauss' novel, Leo constantly searches for answers regarding his existence. He feels invisible and ignored by the world around him. He is obsessed with his own death, and constantly anticipates his final moments. He expects to be helped by a pure angelic figure, causing him to miss the imperfect human angels who aid him along the way. Leo's death at the end of the novel, where he meets his final angel, symbolizes the rebirth that occurs after the Flood in *Genesis*, allowing for Krauss' novel to take a hopeful turn. This thesis will detail the novel's themes, focusing on its adaptation of *Genesis* and its legitimacy as a sacred text. By doing so, I provide new arguments and perspectives that enhance the analyses of *The History of Love* and offer new meaning to Krauss' post-Holocaust novel.

In order to recognize the novel's biblical elements, it is crucial to transcend a realist reading and use a mythical lens to approach this work. Rather than reading Krauss' statements as hyperbole, I assert the necessity of reading her words literally. By doing so, the characterization of Leo and the other characters transforms—they are not plain “misfits,” but religious figures communicating in a fantastical way.

The necessity of using a mythical lens to read *The History of Love* appears in Alma Singer's introduction into the novel, which includes a section of her chapter titled “WHAT I AM NOT” (Krauss, 36). The passage appears random and insignificant, however, it prompts the pivotal question of whether or not Krauss wants her audience to read the book literally. Within this paragraph, she explains a game that she and her little brother used to play in which they used their imaginations to explore a tangible thing beyond its appearance:

“I’d point to a chair. ‘THIS IS NOT A CHAIR,’ I’d say. Bird would point to a table. ‘THIS IS NOT A TABLE.’ ‘THIS IS NOT A WALL,’ I’d say. ‘THAT IS NOT A CEILING.’ We’d go on like that. ‘IT IS NOT RAINING OUT.’ ‘MY SHOE IS NOT UNTIED!’ Bird would yell... We denied whole rooms, years, weathers. Once, at the peak of our shouting, Bird took a deep breath. At the top of his lungs, he shrieked: ‘I! HAVE NOT! BEEN! UNHAPPY! MY WHOLE! LIFE!’ ‘But you’re only seven,’ I said” (Krauss, 36).

A literal reading allows our minds to wander: if a chair is not a chair, then what is it? If read in a realist way, this paragraph is a mere explanation of the playfulness and innocence of the two siblings. But Krauss does not include this scene to show childhood curiosity or the light-hearted relationship between brother and sister. If anything, she emphasizes the strangeness of Bird here, whose mind wanders beyond that of most seven-year-olds. Instead of Bird acting like a jovial child, he claims to have been unhappy his *entire life*. Alma deems this phrase melodramatic considering Bird’s youth. Krauss shows here that two of the main characters, Alma and Bird, are denying reality. Overwhelmed by grief, their mother also denies reality by lying in bed all day and separating herself from the outside world. By showing a distinction between realism and imagination, Krauss illustrates that the characters may “live” in an alternate world.

Leo, the protagonist, also looks beyond reality by creating imaginary characters that often have supernatural elements, such as men growing wings and trees with roots that touch the sky (Krauss, 8). Likewise, “real” characters such as Leo, Charlotte, Zvi, and others embody animals at points throughout the novel, such as Bird, who gains his nickname from trying to fly, and Zvi, whose wife calls him her “dark crow” (Krauss, 67). By assigning animalistic features to human characters, Krauss blurs the line between their lives as humans on earth and a different life in which they are animals. Therefore, we are able to question the identity of these characters in the same way we question Leo’s. The wavering identities of the book’s characters culminate in the grander

idea that they are what the Oxford English Dictionary defines as “ministering spirits or divine messengers” of the deity, known as angels.

Krauss subtly draws the connection between angels and the book’s characters through Isaac, Leo’s son, who writes a story in his book *Glass Houses* that mirrors the life of his father. Out of all Isaac’s works, the story of the angel is Leo’s favorite; however, Leo does not recognize the similarities between himself and the angel. Since Isaac does not know Leo, his intuition in creating a character like his father shows a higher power at work. The story features an angel who lives on Ludlow Street in New York City, not far from where Leo currently lives, who begins to lose faith in God:

He's lived there so long he can't remember why God put him on earth. Every night the angel talks aloud to God, and every day he waits for some word from Him. To pass the time, he walks through the city. In the beginning he's in the habit of marveling at everything. He starts a collection of pebbles. Teaches himself difficult math. And yet. With each day that passes he's blinded a little less by the beauty of the world. At night the angel lies awake listening to the footsteps of the widow who lives above him, and every morning on the stairs he passes the old man, Mr. Grossmark, who spends his days dragging himself... [around]muttering *Who's there?...Who am I?* which so startled the angel who never speaks and is never spoken to that he said nothing, not even: You're Grossmark, the human being...The more sadness he sees the more his heart begins to turn against God...Eventually he stops talking to God altogether. One night he meets a man under a bridge. They share the vodka the man has in a brown bag. And because the angel is drunk and lonely and angry with God, and because, without even knowing it, he feels the urge, familiar among humans, to confide in someone, he tells the man the truth: that he's an angel.” (Krauss, 24)

The angel in *Glass Houses* resembles Leo in many ways. The angel does not know why he is on earth, coinciding with Leo’s tendency to think he is going to die at any moment because he does not understand his purpose or why he is still alive. The angel marvels at everything, and Leo does not throw anything away, evidenced by his “apartment full of shit” (Krauss, 1). Leo feels out of place, unnoticed. Although he craves attention from random people, is his true desire, like the angel’s, recognition from God? The angel “lies awake listening to the footsteps of the widow who

lives above him,” which is exactly what Leo does with the widowed Bruno (Krauss, 24). Leo even shares characteristics with Mr. Grossmark, who has a heart that hurts from each instance of sadness he sees. Leo’s heart is “weak and unreliable,” and has suffered so much that he now directs his pain elsewhere, such as to his liver, pancreas, or kidney (Krauss, 10). While the angel tells the man under the pier that he is an angel, Leo wants to confide in the readers and tell them that Bruno is a fictitious character, but he cannot until the very end of the novel when he finally reveals the truth. The *Glass Houses* story draws clear connections between Leo and the angel, supporting the conclusion that Leo is an angel, but one who is unaware of his righteous status because he is a *lamed vovnik*, or “hidden saint” (Hoffman).

The story of the angel reveals a lack of faith in God that is present in Leo as well as many Holocaust survivors and other Jewish people. After the Holocaust, some Jewish survivors and their families lost faith in God, which Krauss alludes to in *Glass Houses*. Additionally, she demonstrates this lack of faith through her novel’s characters, as Bird and Mr. Goldstein are the only ones who are outwardly devout. There is no evidence that the other characters in *The History of Love* believe in God, and they are not practicing strong faith; however, they are angels. The angel in the story wonders why God is not responding to him in the way that God directly communicates with people in the Bible such as Adam and Noah. God’s lack of communication leads to a lack of faith; however, the characters in Krauss’ novel are imperfect angels amongst us, revealing that God’s messengers are everywhere.

Krauss repeatedly mentions God throughout the novel, but also juxtaposes religion with references to Darwinism and scientific discovery, suggesting another method of approaching religious skepticism. She discusses science mainly through the discovery of new species through fossils, a topic sparked by Alma’s desire to become a paleontologist. A realist reading explains

paleontology as a minor detail of the novel in which a child dreams of her future career, but the introduction of paleontology is crucial, as it leads Alma Singer to read about mass extinction, which is when she discovers that “scientists believe that we are in the midst of the sixth mass extinction in the history of life on earth” (Krauss, 139).

As scientists claim a current mass extinction, Krauss foreshadows a religious phenomenon that is the crux of her book—she is writing her own story of mass extinction in *The History of Love*. Distinct from Leo’s past experience in Slonim, *The History of Love* takes place during a mass extinction because it depicts the biblical story of *Genesis*, including the story of the Flood in which God asks Noah to build an ark so that he, his family, and the animals aboard can remain safe from the Flood that God unleashes to destroy all living beings on earth. The Flood is the original story of mass extinction in *Genesis* and is directly referenced when Bird starts building an ark for an elusive storm approaching. But Bird mistakenly believes that he is the *lamed vovnik*, and thinks that God calls upon him to build an ark like Noah does in *Genesis*. Since Bird is not the chosen one, he fails to build an ark that withstands the rainfall. Instead, Leo Gursky is the *lamed vovnik* that God spares during the invasion in Slonim. God saves Leo in the way he chooses to have mercy on Noah and his family before the Flood.

In accordance with the story of the Flood, *Genesis*’ characters appear at various points throughout *The History of Love*, creating an updated version of *Genesis* that fits into modern day. Within the novel, Krauss treats Leo’s “The History of Love,” as a sacred text like The Bible, evidenced by Zvi’s need to bury the book the way Mr. Goldstein buries the Hebrew School’s sacred broken siddurs rather than throwing them away. Like the siddurs, “The History of Love” is a sacred text as well.

In addition to plot elements, references to *Genesis* arise through characterization, where Leo is modeled on Adam and Noah, and “Alma” is Eve reincarnated. While *Genesis* is the story of the creation of humankind, each new beginning and promise of life is followed by death and destruction. Similarly, *The History of Love* includes hopeful events ending in death, such as Leo and Alma’s life in Slonim, Isaac’s flourishing career, and the passionate marriage between Charlotte and David Singer.

Krauss uses *Genesis* as a template to create a raw, empathetic, and multi-layered story that attempts to describe the modern Jewish experience. This thesis will detail an analysis of *The History of Love* through a number of biblical themes. I will start by discussing the beginning of *Genesis*, in which God creates animals, and I will draw parallels to the prevalence of birds in *The History of Love*. To follow, I will show the depiction of Adam and Eve through Alma Mereminski and Leo as well as Charlotte and David Singer. I will also illustrate the use of water in *The History of Love* that models the story of the Flood, and connect *The History of Love*’s plotline to the Tower of Babel. Finally, I will analyze the novel’s final scene in which Leo and Alma Singer meet at Central Park, and Leo allegedly reaches the end of his life. This final scene mirrors the story of the Flood because Leo’s destruction leads to a new beginning for the Singer family.

CHAPTER 1

Birds

The provocativeness of the youngest character, Bird Singer, diverts readers' attention away from the more pivotal, yet discrete, themes of *The History of Love*. Bird is just a goofy kid who claims he is the Messiah. While all the characters are strange, Bird is the weirdest. He holds a firm faith in a seemingly secular family, but his infatuation with religion stems from his father's death and a lack of attention from his grieving mother. His own sister degrades him and does not take him seriously, therefore the readers do not either. Whether or not we believe Bird, his devoutness to God seems out of place; however, it shields readers from dwelling on the other characters' lack of faith, such as Charlotte's, who remains deeply haunted by her husband's death.

Bird thinks that he is a *lamed vovnik*, and builds a faulty ark, which hinders readers from noticing that Leo is actually the *lamed vovnik* and that a real apocalyptic flood approaches. Above all distinctions, unlike with the other characters, Krauss introduces Bird's embodiment of an animal immediately through his nickname, which he receives after attempting to fly off of a roof. More subtly, though, Leo mentions turning into "a dog [or] a bird," Zvi is Rosa's "dark crow," the man at Isaac's funeral is a "dog," etc. (Krauss, 80, 67, 86). Krauss' intention for writing characters who at times epitomize animals is ambiguous—is she reliving the dehumanization of Jews during the Holocaust? Or does she imply something else? While the

answer is unknown, Krauss references birds more than any other animal, emphasizing that they hold a distinct significance in the novel, as they do in *Genesis*.

Before humans were created in *Genesis*, God created living creatures of the sea and fowl to fly across the heavens (Genesis, 1:21). Like in *The History of Love*, where birds are mentioned more than any other animal, birds frequently populate the pages of *Genesis*. When God announces the Flood, he distinguishes birds from other animals: “I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air” (Genesis, 6.7). This separation between animal and birds aligns with Krauss’ tactic to distinguish the two by naming a character “Bird.” Abraham, who is particularly important to Krauss’ novel, proves the sanctity of birds. As the father of Isaac, God asks Abraham to sacrifice his only son, which he begins to do before one of God’s messengers interrupts him. Leo, like Abraham, is the father of Isaac Moritz and Leo sacrifices his son by keeping Alma’s wish that he leaves and not act as a father to Isaac. Leo walks away from them and lives as a stranger to his son, which to him is the ultimate sacrifice. Before the biblical Isaac was born, God commands Abraham: “Bring me “a heifer three years old, a goat... a turtledove, and a young pigeon” (Genesis, 16.8). Although Abraham cut in two all of the animals he brings, “he did not cut the birds in two,” proving their worth in the eyes of God (Genesis, 16.8). Additionally, in order to determine whether the Flood has ended, Noah sends a dove from the Ark to test the grounds for water. Krauss’ allusions to birds is unmistakable and reflects their prevalence in the *Story of Genesis*.

In the novel’s first chapter, Leo has many encounters with birds. He reminisces about his earlier writing, done as a teenager in Slonim, which consists of fantastical elements such as “men who grow wings” (Krauss, 8). While further remembering his childhood in Slonim, Leo runs his

aged and swollen hands under hot water and hears “a rustle of pigeons” outside (Krauss, 10). After walking through the New York City streets, Leo realizes that he is becoming “the sort of schmuck who poisons pigeons” due to his sour demeanor, which arises because he feels like a pariah in modern day (Krauss, 18). For instance, when a solicitor tells him he would be pre-approved for a credit card if he sent in a check, Leo responds: “Right, sure, and if I step under a pigeon I’m preapproved for a load of shit” (Krauss, 20). Writing brings him solace, though, and he reaches the title of his second book, *Words for Everything*, after seeing “a pigeon coo on the windowsill and puff up its body” (Krauss, 32). Back in Slonim, when Leo first falls in love with Isaac’s mother, Alma Mereminski, he makes her “a necklace of tiny birds” (Krauss, 63). He would also “give [Alma] wings and [pull] birds from her ears and [put] feathers in her pockets” (Krauss, 230). Leo’s attempt to meet Isaac at a book signing is disrupted when he is unable to speak his mind. Instead, like a bird, he “flaps [his] hands... like a fool [he] flaps” as his son stares (Krauss, 25). When Isaac dies, Leo purchases a suit and bathes himself in the tub, “not a bird bath with a sponge, but the real thing” (Krauss, 83). Leo typically gives himself sponge baths, but here he refers to his routine as a birdbath. The day of Isaac’s funeral, Leo wakes up “to the sound of a pigeon ruffling its feathers on the windowsill” (Krauss, 84).

Alma Singer reads about the bird necklace Leo makes for Alma Mereminski in “The Age of Glass” chapter of her mother’s translated version of “The History of Love;” however, she does not read “The Age of Silence,” which is the chapter that caught the eye of the bookstore owner, and thus the reason that her father, David Singer, finds the book. “The Age of Glass” uncovers gestures as the first language of humans. The Argentinian doctor that finds the only records of the language of gestures while hiking in the mountains moves “his hands like birds” as he reaches death (Krauss, 73). This engaging chapter causes the store owner in Chile to display the

book, but of the original copies some are shredded and forgotten. Picturing this, Zvi, who claims he wrote “The History of Love,” imagines the mangled copies as “a flock of two-thousand homing pigeons that could flap their wings and return to him to report on how many tears [were] shed” by readers (Krauss, 71). Zvi, like Bird Singer, is a bird in the eyes of his wife Rosa, who calls him “her dark crow” after seeing him in a black coat (Krauss, 67).

Bird observes his “mentor”—the janitor of the Hebrew School—Mr. Goldstein, pushing a wheelbarrow filled with old siddurs and begins burying them as “two crows as big as dogs [watch] from the trees” (Krauss, 37). A maverick at school, Bird views Mr. Goldstein as his only friend. Similarly, Leo relies on Bruno for companionship. After Bruno, who calls Leo a “phoenix,” leaves a gift under Leo’s pillow, Leo appreciates the little things in his current life such as, “that [he] can watch pigeons fly. That at the end of [his] life Bruno has not forgotten [him]” (Krauss, 92 and 124). Bruno tells Leo that “if [he] bought a pigeon halfway down the street it would become a dove, on the bus home a parrot, and in my apartment, the moment before [he] takes it out of the cage, a phoenix” (Krauss, 124). Krauss lists four different types of birds here, representing the “winged fowl of each kind” that God creates (Genesis, 1:22).

CHAPTER 2

Creation

Following the creation of birds and living creatures is the story of Adam and Eve in which God creates the first humans. Krauss depicts the story of Adam and Eve through two generations: Leo and Alma Mereminski, and David and Charlotte Singer. While reading “The History of Love” to her daughter, Charlotte Singer recites Leo’s words: “the first woman may have been Eve, but the first girl will always be Alma,” (Krauss, 57). This phrase directly references the Creation story and its reflection in “The History of Love” by acknowledging a connection between Alma Mereminski and Eve, because both are associated with being the first *female* human on Earth. Leo and Alma are teenagers when he writes this work, therefore he calls Alma “Eve” in her young state, which is also when he falls in love with her.

Their love climaxes as teens, but the relationship between Alma and Leo begins during childhood in Slonim, Poland, “in a village that no longer exists, in a house that no longer exists, on the edge of a field that no longer exists, where everything was discovered and everything was possible” (Krauss, 11). The paradisiacal Garden of Eden, which translates from Hebrew into “Garden in Eden,” is an “extraterrestrial place” that, like Slonim after the invasion, does not exist (Laie). The Garden in Eden is mythical and mysterious like Slonim is to Alma Mereminski’s kids, who do not know much about their mother’s life there and have only seen a few photographs. In Slonim, Leo claims that “everything was discovered,” which correlates to the story of Adam and Eve in which they discover “everything” in the Garden in Eden after eating

fruit from the forbidden tree. They realize their nudity, and gain the knowledge of good and evil, thrusting themselves out of the blissful ignorance that God tries to keep them in. When Leo recalls his childhood, he speaks as though it was paradise, reliving memories of his blissful imagination and playing in the field between his and Alma's houses. In the field, "she is Queen and he is King," and "they collect the world in small handfuls," just as Adam and Eve were technically "King and Queen" of The Garden in Eden because they were the only humans there (Krauss, 11). And "collecting the world in small handfuls" could refer to the gathering of any food they ate from trees, as the flora of the garden was their only source of nutrients. It could also refer to the knowledge of the world that Adam and Eve slowly gained after eating fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Leo's knowledge-gaining moment occurs when he falls in love with Alma Mereminski, for he "becomes aware of her special powers...as if his eyes have been given magnifying powers [in which] she reveals every inch of herself to him." Leo's first encounter with sexuality occurs when his childhood tailor, Grodzenski, teaches him how to sew and shows him photographs of fashion models in elaborate dresses (Krauss 83). Reflecting on this memory, Leo exclaims, "If someone had told me then that Eve had eaten the apple just so that the Grodzenskis of the world could exist, I would have believed it" (Krauss, 83). Leo implies here that Eve's actions of eating the apple allowed for others after her, like Grodzenski, to commit sin. When Zvi commits sin by rewriting Leo's book in his own longhand, he "throws away a bruised apple," illustrating his need to distance himself from religion so that he is not judged by God. Although never mentioned in the biblical story, an apple is the fruit widely referred to in accordance with Eve's sin and loss of purity.

At the point that Leo becomes aware of Alma's body, he also "becomes aware of his own" and at this moment "begins the end of childhood," and becomes impure (Krauss, 127). In other words, Leo's awareness of Alma's body causes him to lose his innocence in the way that Adam and Eve lose their innocence when they eat fruit from the tree of knowledge. Once blissfully ignorant of their nudity, after eating the fruit they suddenly realize they are naked and clothe themselves. Surprised and angered by their newfound intellect, God asks, "Who told you that you were naked?" and condemns them for disobeying him and abandoning their innocent states (Genesis, 3.17) Later in life, Leo faces the realization of nudity once more when he becomes a nude model for a drawing class.

Still attempting to be publicly noticed, Leo agrees to pose nude for sketch artists at a drawing class he attends in response to an advertisement in the newspaper. Upon arrival, he is slow to undress and, panicked, wonders: "what, exactly, does "nude" mean?" (Krauss, 16). Literally, Leo stresses over whether or not he should keep his underwear on; however, the question of nudity's interpretation suggests a deeper meaning. He pictures himself dying at the scene—naked in an abandoned warehouse—before eventually exposing himself. Despite his apprehension, Leo voluntarily takes off his clothes, as opposed to Adam and Eve who, upon realizing that they are naked, clothe themselves in shame (Genesis, 3.17). The question of what nude means makes Leo appear innocent, like Adam and Eve do before Eve's encounter with the serpent when she is manipulated into disobeying God. But Leo quickly loses his innocence by shaking off the question and exposing himself to the artists. Similarly, "Eve," or a variation of it, is the name of the first woman in every translation of the Bible, even across different religions.

Leo's "creator," his father, is only mentioned briefly in the novel and, according to Leo, "spent his life in the clouds." If interpreted literally, the image of Leo's father living in the sky

infers that his father could be God. This detail helps validate that Leo, who is constantly trying to prove his humanity, is the first human—Adam. God brings Adam all living creatures for him to name, and Adam names the first woman Eve (Genesis 2:20, 3:20). Accordingly, Leo names the character “Alma” in “The History of Love,” who is based off of Alma Mereminski but becomes “every girl in [the] book” (Krauss, 243). The fact that the name “Alma” represents every girl shows the transcendence of the Creation story from generation to generation.

Leo’s life, which is burdened by the loss of his family and lover, coincides with God’s creation of Adam through Krauss’ allusions to dust. God created mankind when he formed Adam “from the dust on the ground” (Genesis, 1.25). Echoing this event, Leo remembers standing in the “dusty sunlight” when envisioning himself in the town square back in Slonim, which is also when he first realizes he can see things that others cannot (Krauss, 19). Dust appears again in regards to Mr. Goldstein, who is a janitor like Leo once was in Slonim. Despite his cleaning profession, Mr. Goldstein has hands that “leave behind more dust than they [clean] away,” rendering him visible (Krauss, 36). Leo does not leave dust behind but instead absorbs it. Overcome by loneliness one day, he walks home from the library feeling “abandoned, unnoticed, forgotten, [he] stands on the sidewalk, a nothing, a gatherer of dust” (Krauss, 129). When Adam disobeyed God, God punished him and said “for dust you are, and to dust shall you return” which diminishes Adam’s significance as a human (Genesis 3:17). Leo illustrates this condemnation by God in his own subconscious by equating himself with dust and nothingness.

Leo is far from nothingness, but he does not know until the end of the novel that his book has been published and has affected multiple people. His joyful times in Eden-like Slonim with Alma Mereminski result in him preserving their love by carving the initials “A+L” into a tree. As the Garden in Eden is filled with trees, the only tangible memory of Leo and Alma is a

photograph of them under the initialed tree, which Alma does not know he carved in. Isaac finds the photograph after his mother dies, but he does not know who the man accompanying her is. The novel's final chapter, in which Leo meets Alma Singer, is titled "A+L," this time referring to Alma Singer instead of Alma Mereminski. The recycling of these initials confirms that the story of Alma Mereminski and Leo's childhood love that inspired "The History of Love" and mirrored the story of Adam and Eve in The Garden in Eden transcends any one couple and recapitulates itself over Jewish survivors.

Charlotte and David Singer

Like Alma Mereminski and Leo Gursky, Charlotte and David Singer embody the biblical characters Adam and Eve, illustrating that the Creation story appears in multiple generations of Jewish people throughout Krauss' novel. Adam was put on earth as the first human in order to "till the soil," and specifically to tend to the Garden in Eden (Genesis, 2:6). David, an outdoorsman who was born in Israel, dedicates much of his adult life to gardening. After he and Charlotte fall in love, she drops out of college and moves to Tel Aviv to live with David, leading to "the happiest years of their lives" (Krauss, 40). During their blissful relationship, David "plants an olive tree and a lemon tree in the garden" of their "sunny house, [which is] covered with bougainvillea in Ramat Gan" (Krauss, 40). He also plants carrots in the garden—a memory that later saddens Charlotte and causes Alma to cease asking her mother questions about him. Instead, Alma keeps a journal called *How to Survive in the Wild* in an attempt to feel closer to her late father, who is praised throughout the book for his survival skills. During his travels in South America, he finds a copy of "The History of Love" that he gives to Charlotte. In this copy, he inscribes: "For Charlotte, my Alma. This is the book I would have written for you if I could

write. Love, David” (Krauss, 108). David is Adam, and by calling Charlotte “his Alma,” he equates his wife with “Alma,” and thus Eve.

CHAPTER 3

The Lamed Vovnik

Much of *The History of Love* circulates around the stories of the three sole survivors from Slonim, Poland: Alma Mereminski, Zvi Litvinoff, and Leopold Gursky. Leo is the only survivor of Slonim who is present *during* the Nazi invasion, making him the “chosen one” to survive—a phenomenon even he is never able to explain. His elevated status implies that he, not Bird, is the *lamed vovnik*, but also it establishes Leo as a “Noah-like” figure because he is spared by God during the Holocaust as Noah is saved by God leading up to the Flood—the first mass destruction of the earth.

The idea of the *lamed vovnik*—the Yiddish name for the thirty-six hidden saints, or “righteous men” of “divine presence” who are accountable for the fate of the world—originated from Babylonian Talmud and appears in 16th-17th century Kabbalistic folk legends as well as 18th century Hasidic folklore. A true *lamed vovnik* is unaware of his or her virtue, and “humble in nature and vocation” (Jewish). As explained by Alma Singer’s little brother, Bird, there are always thirty-six saints at one time, and one is the Messiah. Bird thinks that he is a *lamed vovnik* and claims to be righteous throughout the novel; however, he does not hold the necessary qualities of this mystic figure. In fact, only God knows who is a *lamed vovnik*. If one suspects that he is holy, then he is no longer a *lamed vovnik* (Stern, 8). If read as a realist novel, one may still recognize that Bird is not the *lamed vovnik* due to his claim that he is one as well as his lack of humility, but readers will likely miss the inference that Leo is the *lamed vovnik*.

Why is Leo the Lamed Vovnik? And What Does It Mean?

In the context of *Genesis*, Leo’s *lamed vovnik* status is Krauss’ vehicle for modeling him after Noah from the story of the Flood. When Leo and Alma Singer meet at the park at the

novel's closing, she repeatedly calls Leo "the oldest man in the world," which is a title appropriate for Noah since he was six hundred years-old when the Flood waters came to earth (Genesis, 6.1). Although he does not know why he is different than everyone else, he recognizes that he suffers and seems to feel everyone else's pain, as does a *lamed vovnik*. Aware of his weak heart, he processes his own "daily humiliations" in his gut, lungs, and liver. His pancreas, however, is reserved for absorbing "all that's been lost," which he feels as a quick, sharp pain (Krauss, 10). Much of the pain he feels is his own, such as remembering his childhood, and he feels "the pain of forgetting" as well as "the pain of remembering" in his spine (Krauss, 10). I believe this dichotomy of pain associated with both remembering and forgetting represents the suffering of all Holocaust survivors, or Jewish people in general, who feel the pain of their ancestors that were abused and put into concentration camps. More specifically, Leo feels pain in his knees when remembering his parents, or "that which made him," that no longer exist. When he sees a man kicking a dog he feels it behind his eyes, which he calls "a place before tears" (Krauss, 10). But loneliness seems to be the ultimate pain that his body cannot take.

Embodying another characteristic of a *lamed vovnik*, Leo sees things that are not actually there. On the novel's first page, he claims that "the roar of the invisible crowd rings in [his] ears" after he lets Bruno into his apartment (Krauss, 1). Bruno is his only friend and he spends his days with him, either "in person" or by tapping on the walls and listening for Bruno's response. When together, the two usually sit in silence, or speak in Yiddish, which is a language that no longer exists. And Bruno himself is not real. He is dead, and a character Leo created (Krauss, 249). Leo admits to "inventing imaginary people," which he started doing when he was a boy, filling notebooks with his stories (Krauss, 7). Although he is aware of his running imagination, Leo doesn't allow the readers to know that he imagines people until the end of the novel when he

admits it to us. Additionally, when he meets Alma Singer, he asks a stranger whether or not the girl sitting beside him is real: “Is someone sitting next to me?” (Krauss, 248).

In this same scene, while Leo sits on the park bench and waits for Alma Singer to arrive, he reflects on his life. He confesses:

I remember the first time I realized that I could make myself see something that wasn't there. I was ten years old, walking home from school. Some boys from my class ran by shouting and laughing. I wanted to be like them. And yet. I didn't know how. I'd always felt different from the others, and the different hurt. And then I turned the corner and saw it. A huge elephant, standing alone in the square. I knew I was imagining it. And yet. I wanted to believe. (Krauss, 228)

Earlier in the novel, after waking up from a dream, Leo remembers seeing the elephant in the town square; however, at the time, “no one could remember having seen it, and because it was impossible to understand how an elephant would have arrived in Slonim, no one believed [him]” (Krauss, 19). Leo's ability to see things that others can't, or that are not actually there, proves his sense of elevated power. He is living partly in an alternate universe and waits to die and retrieve his place in heaven.

In the first chapter of the novel, he exposes this notion to readers when he wonders who the last person will be to see him alive. He also thinks that he will die when his book *Words for Everything* is complete and envisions himself dying on the toilet. As he uses his typewriter, he waits for “something to happen;” in other words, he waits for death and is disappointed when there is “no wind [that] swept everything away. No heart attack. No angel at the door” (Krauss, 34). Literally, Leo is waiting for the angel of death to greet him, but no angel comes because it is not his time to die. Why is Leo so adamant about dying? Aside from being old, at this point in the novel his son is still alive and therefore Leo has something to live for, so why is he constantly waiting for death? Leo himself never explains this, and most likely does not know. But he *is* in

fact reaching the end of his life. His expectation of death shows that subconsciously, as a *lamed vovnik*, he feels what is to come, but his ignorance keeps him living longer than he suspects he will.

This phenomenon of Leo waiting for his death begins in childhood after his uncle dies unexpectedly, causing Leo to “sense his own death.” Leo associates death with water while sitting with his uncle’s body, claiming that the nearby sink’s faucet has a leak, and with each drip he “feels his life ebbing away” (Krauss, 125). Although he lives to be an old man, this initial image of a drip leading to death foreshadows Leo’s assumed death at the close of the novel, in which, at their first meeting in Central Park, he taps Alma Singer in order to communicate with her, evoking the image of a dripping water tap. The association of death with water lends itself directly to the Flood in *Genesis*, where God creates a disastrous Flood in order to destroy earth and its inhabitants, along with the evil they brought to earth. God spares Noah and his family, as well as many animals, and in a similar way continues to spare Leo throughout the novel, even though Leo feels his death should have come long ago.

Leo’s unexplained salvation allies with his righteousness, for “a *lamed vovnik* never passes on until God decides that it is time” (Stern, 15). His life is in the hands of God, who spares him until the right moment. Obsessed with death since childhood, Leo does not understand why he is the only one to have survived in Slonim during the invasion. His obsession with death begins with the untimely death of his uncle. After seeing his cold body, Leo “imagines his [own] death in a hundred different ways, but the funeral is always the same: from somewhere in [his] imagination rolls out a red carpet. Because every secret death [he] dies, [his] greatness is always discovered” (Krauss, 125). While explaining his tendency to be late to everything, Leo attempts to explain his prolonged life: “I like to think the world wasn’t ready for

me, but maybe the truth is that I wasn't ready for the world" (Krauss, 84). This line is thrown into a scene in which Leo speaks of his tendency to be late to everything in his life, but Leo is subconsciously talking about his role as a *lamed vovnik*. One of the *lamed vovnik*'s is the Messiah, for whom the world is waiting to reveal himself, but Leo acknowledges that he is not ready. This could mean that Leo is not the Messiah, or simply that he needs more time to perform his duty as a savior.

Again, Krauss foreshadows Leo's death here in which his greatness is discovered because Alma Singer finds out that he is the true author of the monumental story "The History of Love." Additionally, Leo indicates that his deaths are secret, aligning with the hidden identity of a *lamed vovnik*. This scene with his uncle occurs right before Leo details the moment that he began to love Alma Mereminski as a child in Slonim. The structure here is exemplary throughout the novel and mirrors the story of the Flood, which places death and destruction before birth and a new beginning. In this case, the story of Leo's uncle dying leads into his story of falling in love with the girl who becomes the light of his life.

Charlotte Singer

By reading between the lines, it becomes clear that Leo is not the only character who holds supernatural characteristics. Consistent with the discrete nature of a *lamed vovnik*, Charlotte Singer is not a central character, nor does she have much dialogue in the novel; however, her daughter, Alma, does spend a significant part of her narrative detailing Charlotte's idiosyncrasies. Charlotte reverses Leo's constant attempts to be seen by isolating herself from the rest of humanity. After her husband dies, she "turns life away" in order to keep his memory alive (Krauss, 45). She stays in bed for nearly a year and reads books. She rejects social interactions and strives for invisibility through her introverted lifestyle. But she is unable to disappear. When

she is younger, exiting a train in Oxford, Charlotte “leaves behind her a trail of sand” (Krauss, 39). Nowadays, according to Alma, “if you want to find her all you have to do is follow the pages of crossed-out words, and at the end of the trail she’ll be there” (Krauss, 44). Once you find her, she will likely be “looking out the window or into a glass of water as if there were a fish in it that only she could see” (Krauss, 44). Krauss hints here that, like Leo, Charlotte can see things that others cannot. Rather than Alma saying Charlotte looks for a fish that is not there, she acknowledges that Charlotte may be a supernatural being. Alma goes as far to say that her mother should have a species named after her, because she is “the only complex life form” able to “subsist for days on water and air” (Krauss, 45). Perhaps the species Charlotte is part of is angels. Whether or not Charlotte has a supernatural ability, we cannot be sure; however, the image of her longingly staring into a water glass shows that she is haunted by her husband’s death and not present with the world around her.

CHAPTER 4

Water, Water, Everywhere

In the final scene of *The History of Love*, when Alma Singer and Leo meet for the first time on a bench in Central Park, Leo reverts back to the language of gestures and communicates with her through taps on the shoulder rather than words. He repeatedly taps her, evoking the image of water rhythmically dripping from a water tap after the faucet has been turned off, coinciding with the novel's multitude of water references that culminate into an eleven-day flood that mirrors the story of The Flood in *Genesis*.

In the same scene Leo's eyes fill with tears when Alma Singer alludes to Leo's long-lost lover, Alma Mereminski. Just before Alma Singer's arrival, when Leo decides to wait on the bench, he ponders the idea of thirst and how the wet earth could feed him. Leo then reminisces about his time living in the forest in Poland when his overwhelming thirst forces him to "[drink] water from the puddles. Snow. Anything [he] can get hold of" (Krauss, 226). While at the park, he watches a young boy throwing pebbles into an empty fountain where the dry basin is filled with dead leaves rather than sparkling water. After seeing the dead leaves, Leo claims that he is "older than the rain. And yet...not older than the rain," which has been "falling for years and after [he goes] will keep falling" (Krauss, 220). This encounter with Alma follows a sequence of bad weather in which it rains for eleven days straight leading up to the end of the book. Why is the fountain's basin dry after such a large rainfall?

These taps appear elsewhere in the novel when Bruno and Leo communicate through the walls of their apartment by Bruno tapping on the radiator with a walking stick. Each night, Bruno

and Leo perform these taps: “three taps means ARE YOU ALIVE? Two means YES, one, NO” (Krauss, 19). Right before Leo introduces this image to the reader, he speaks of his dream, taking place in the woods in Slonim, “in which he was teaching his brother Josef to pee in an arc” (Krauss, 19). This scene marks the first mention of an arc in the novel, which later becomes a central topic as Alma’s brother, Bird, builds an ark to fulfill his supposed role as a *lamed vovnik*. Leo’s brother Josef, who bears a biblical name, pees in the snow as steam rises from it—two separate forms of water (Krauss, 19).

In his dream Leo recollects that Josef had beautiful gray eyes that were “like the ocean on a sunless day, or the elephant [he] saw in the town square when [he] was his age,” evoking the image of a dismal sky that occurs before a storm (Krauss, 19). When Leo wakes up and is detached from his dream, the rain, which begins just four pages earlier, is “pit-pattering” on the glass of his bedroom window, while he listens to water gurgling in the pipes, drinks a glass of water, and pours water into a pot to boil.

Aside from the consecutive eleven-day rainfall leading up to Leo and Alma’s greeting, it is raining throughout nearly every scene of the novel. In addition to the weather, the novel’s characters are always surrounded by water. To name a few instances, it is raining on Leo’s way to his first drawing class, which is evidently where he meets Alma Singer for the first time when the “girl wearing a sweater too big for her” directs him to the studio (Krauss, 15). Rain pours yet again when Leo rescues the man in need of a locksmith, resulting in his later coming home in wet shoes and listening to the rain tapping on his window while he falls asleep. Before Alma Singer’s quest to find Isaac Moritz’s house, “rain [splashes] against windows” as she awakens Bird before leaving for the Coopers’ house (Krauss, 197). She and Herman Cooper then drive to Connecticut and experience such hard rainfall that they are forced to pull over on the side of the

road, where they “reminisce about a water fight [they] had a hundred years ago” (Krauss, 200). Time reveals itself limitlessly here, as it does in *Genesis* where many figures live for hundreds of years. Herman and Alma are teenagers in the novel but remember the water fight as if they have lived for over one hundred years. Is this simply hyperbole, or are Herman and Alma immortal, supernatural, or perhaps biblical? Are they, like Charlotte and Leo, angels? When they finally arrive at Isaac’s house, Alma notices a lake and ponders what her parent’s interaction in the Dead Sea was like the summer before Charlotte, Alma’s mother, started her studies at Oxford. Once at Oxford, Charlotte did nothing but “watch the rain fall on the cows in the Christ Church Meadow” and heat up water for tea on her hot plate (Krauss, 39).

The manuscript of *The History of Love* is destroyed by nothing other than— *water*. The destruction of the original Yiddish manuscript occurs when Zvi and Rosa’s house floods, leaving only one page remaining that “Rosa [rescues] from where it was floating on the surface of the water” (Krauss, 66). When Rosa reads Leo’s letter to Zvi and discovers that her husband is not the true author of the book, she flushes Leo’s letter down the toilet. Later, in order to keep her family’s secret, Rosa “[turns] on the tap of the sink and [plugs] the drain,” purposely drowning the manuscript (Krauss, 70). Zvi attempts to destroy the translated manuscript with fire, water’s complement, when he burns the dead matter that the publisher returns to him (Krauss, 70). Just before the package containing the dead matter arrives at Zvi’s house, his hand hovers a piece of blank paper, while his eyes are “watery with revelation” that he is on the verge of understanding something (Krauss, 70). His epiphany, however, is interrupted by the mailman’s delivery, which fills Zvi with fear that he has been exposed, and thus shifts his mood like a “squall,” or sudden storm of wind or rain, “on the horizon” (Krauss, 70). Krauss emphasizes the fact that the book is absorbing water in order to connect it to rainfall.

Along with Alma and Herman, Leo approaches the idea of immortality as well, though he thinks about his own death constantly. During his first heart attack, he thinks: “I didn’t live forever” (Krauss, 5). Leo states this as fact, but the question arises of why did he ever think he would live forever? Identity is frequently called into question. Misha asks Alma Singer why she thinks that Alma in “The History of Love” is a real person and continually questions her romantic explanation that the author could not change the name of the woman he truly loves (Krauss, 117). What she does not say is that the name “Alma,” like “Eve,” is sacred.

Water continues falling when Zvi dies and rain pounds on the roof, as well as in Uncle Julian’s letter to Alma, where he discloses that it rained on him and Aunt Frances during their first night camping. Alma reads this letter while hiding its contents from her mother, who she had only been seeing “through all the water glasses that collected around her bed” for almost a year (Krauss, 43). Charlotte’s self-proclaimed bed rest is a result of grieving her husband’s death, which also makes her occasionally “subsist for days on water and air” (Krauss, 45). Charlotte’s grief forces Alma to meddle in her mother’s future relationships with the hopes of making Charlotte happy again—a goal that leads her to Dr. Eldridge, a paleontologist and author of the book *Life as We Don’t Know It* that Charlotte gives Alma for her birthday. In the book, Eldridge and a few other scientists confute the belief that the ocean floor is a “wasteland with little or no life” (Krauss, 51). Rather, Eldridge discovers an entire ecosystem at the bottom of the ocean that, like Charlotte with water and air, “subsists on the hydrogen sulfide spewed from the vents” between earth’s tectonic plates (Krauss, 51). After reading this book Alma vows not to fall in love and subsist on water like her mother; however, she begins to fall in love with Misha Shlovsky anyway when the two swim together at Coney Island. Watching sweat travel down Misha’s forehead and seeing his body dive into the waves gives Alma a foreign feeling in her

stomach one might call “butterflies.” Lastly, the story of Noah and the Flood ends in a six-line

stanza:

“As long as the earth endures,
seedtime and harvest,
cold and heat,
summer and winter,
day and night
will never cease.”

And the last lines of the novel mimics the style of the biblical stanza:

Alma, I said.
She said, *yes*.
Alma, I said again.
She said, *yes*.
Alma, I said.
She tapped me twice.

CHAPTER 5

Babble, Babel

The History of Love opens with Leo repetitively rambling about tedious details of his everyday life. Rather than telling the readers that his apartment is messy, he takes us on a journey from the bed to the toilet, toilet to kitchen table, kitchen table to front door (Krauss, 1). His random stream of consciousness continues as he wonders who the last person will be to see him alive, probably the Chinese take-out boy, and by the second paragraph we know how many nights he eats out, his typical order, and his daily routine. We know it is hard for him to get up and down, that he purposely spills coins from his pockets, and drinks juice even when he isn't thirsty. We are even taken through his peculiar interactions with an Athlete's Foot employee who he bothers while desperately seeking attention. Leo goes on and on. His babbling is quickly countered when he reveals that, although it appears constant, his talking is actually rare.

Leo spends most of his time alone or with Bruno, who he either sits in silence with or exchanges few words. His first language, Yiddish, is obsolete, and even he and Bruno "never speak in Yiddish" because "life demanded a new language" (Krauss, 6). It becomes apparent that this "new language" is not one Leo is able to speak well, evidenced by his lack of social cohesion and isolated lifestyle. Throughout the novel, the best conversations Leo has are with Bruno, who is imaginary. To others, he is an outcast and often reverts to bizarre behavior to compensate for his unease, such as executing a queen's wave or shoving a plant into someone's face. In addition, his first interactions with both Bruno and Alma Singer consist of gestures

rather than spoken words. Leo is more aware of the difficulties of language than he thinks, for a chapter in his book “The History of Love” illustrates “The Age of Silence” in which humans used gestures to communicate. “The Age of Silence” replicates the story of “The Tower of Babel” in *Genesis*. Leo’s babbling in the opening scene foreshadows the Tower of Babel, which was named after the verb.

The Tower of Babel

Like the story of Adam and Eve, The Tower of Babel is a well-known passage in *Genesis* that recounts the Creation of the earth. In the story, “the earth was one language, one set of words” and the people, in order to make a name for themselves, build a brick tower in a valley in the land of Shinar, where they migrated and settled (*Genesis*, 11:1). The people were united, bound together by one language and the tower they had built, until God decided to “confuse their language” and “scatter them abroad from there over the face of all the earth.” The city was then named Babel because the Lord “made the language of all the earth babble” (*Genesis*, 11.4-9). Krauss extends the story by exemplifying the results of God’s scrambling of people and language by increasing the language barriers by generation in each of the novel’s relationships.

Alma Mereminski and Leo speak the same language, Yiddish, which no longer exists. They try to learn English together for fun, such as naming Alma’s body parts, like “elbow” in English as Leo touches them (*Krauss*, 11). Rosa’s initial interest in Zvi results from hearing him speaking Yiddish, for her parents immigrated from Poland and their language intrigues her. A generation later, Charlotte and David speak different languages, but Charlotte embraces this fact by learning Hebrew so that she can understand him. She is so successful that she becomes a translator. Neither relationship is deeply burdened by the differences in language and location, but with each generation it becomes harder and harder. Misha and Alma, the youngest

generational relationship, struggle the most with their language barrier. Misha speaks Russian, prompting Alma to learn. She feels the difference between herself and Misha due to their heritage and exclaims: “If I had a Russian accent everything would be different” (Krauss, 98). Each couple represents the timeline of the Tower of Babel in the modern day, where one unifying language becomes many, and complicates the reality of being in love.

The Language of Gestures

The final scene of *The History of Love* depicts a dying Leopold Gursky sitting on a park bench with Alma Singer, whom he has just met for the first time. Overwhelmed with joy, Leo is unable to speak and instead answers Alma’s questions by delicately tapping her twice on the shoulder. He continues to communicate with Alma through these taps on the shoulder in place of saying her name. Although Alma talks, Leo responds solely through the taps, exhibiting his need to speak through gestures rather than words. The two begin displaying the “language of gestures,” which is “the first language of humans” referenced in the chapter “The Age of Silence” of Leo’s book, “The History of Love.” To do so, Alma stops speaking and “reaches for [Leo’s] hand.” He taps twice, and she “squeezes [his] fingers.” He taps again, and she “puts her head on [his] shoulder.” Another tap from Leo and Alma “puts one arm around [him].” After one last tap, Alma returns the ultimate gesture that causes Leo to stop tapping—a hug. The following lines appear:

Alma, I said.
 She said, *yes*.
Alma, I said again.
 She said, *yes*.
Alma, I said.
 She tapped me twice (Krauss, 252).

This passage can be read in two ways. Either Alma's hug breaks Leo's inability to speak and he is now able to communicate with her verbally, or he is still not talking to her but his gestures are not noted. Whichever way one reads it, Alma responds with taps. The taps likely mean the equivalent of "I understand," because Alma is able to share a moment with Leo despite his inability to speak.

Krauss uses the same style of communication when Leo sees his long-lost childhood friend, Bruno, on the New York City streets. After recognizing him from his peculiar walk, Leo "puts [his] arm out" although he doesn't know why he does this, and grabs Bruno's sleeve (Krauss, 5). Similar to the closing scene of the novel noted above, Leo and Bruno's interaction continues without speech:

Bruno, I said. He stopped and turned. At first, he seemed scared and then confused. *Bruno*. He looked at me, his eyes began to fill with tears. I grabbed his other hand, I had one sleeve and one hand. *Bruno*. He started to shake. He touched his hand to my cheek...His hair was thin and white. He dropped the fruit. *Bruno* (Krauss 6-7).

Like Alma Singer, Bruno responds to Leo's gestures; however, Bruno is the vulnerable one in their meeting. His physical communication with Leo results in his eyes welling up as well as his body shakes.

CHAPTER 6

Mass Extinction

Like the Bible, *The History of Love* is translated into many different versions: Yiddish, Spanish, and English, and is everlasting in society. Alma Singer is named after Alma Mereminski in *The History of Love*. Along with Leo's brother Josef, his son also has a biblical name both in his birth name, Isaac, and in the pseudonym, he uses when writing to Charlotte—Jacob. Bird Singer is also dually biblical, being that his nickname alludes to the repetition of birds within *Genesis*, but also for his biblical birth name, Emanuel. In addition, the novel is filled with animals, appropriately coinciding with the animals that join Noah on the Ark. Alma explains a day where a veterinarian, Dr. Tucci, comes to her classroom with animals, many of which are in pairs: “an iguana, two ferrets, a box turtle, tree frogs, a duck with a broken wing...[and] two llamas in his backyard” (Krauss, 48). After Zvi washes his socks, he hangs them on the line where they lay “draped like two exhausted animals” (Krauss, 67). Butterflies, an elephant, dogs, fish, and birds also appear in the novel, both as animals and as the nickname of a central character—Bird Singer.

Birds sister, Alma, remembers that Misha and his father used to try to catch migrating butterflies in the summertime, so she tries to make a birthday card for Misha with a butterfly on it. During her internet search for a picture of a Russian butterfly she comes across an article stating that “the butterfly extinction rate was 10,000 times higher than it should be” and that the species had declined significantly in the past two decades (Krauss, 139). After this discovery, Alma researches mass extinctions. She realizes that “one out of eight species of birds will soon be extinct,” again focusing specifically on birds. Additionally, she reads that “the current mass

extinction isn't caused by natural events, but the ignorance of human beings," referencing the debilitation of our planet and its animals due to climate change resulting from global warming (Krauss, 139). Krauss introduces the idea of destruction and mass extinction further through chapter titles. The first chapter of the novel is "Last words on Earth" (Krauss, 1). In chapter two, Alma speaks of her late father, and titles number fourteen on her list: "At the End of the World," referring to her Dad's death (Krauss, 42). Another chapter is titled "Flood," referring to the story of the Flood in that is the first mass extinction on earth (Krauss, 115).

The constant rainfall and allusions to water throughout the novel mirror the forty-day flood that God creates in the story of the Flood, which results in the destruction of all living creatures besides those on Noah's Ark. In the biblical story, water represents destruction, and it is not until the earth is completely dry again that Noah, his family, and the animals exit the Ark and begin a new life. While Leo is walking to the bench, he passes an animal in the form of a statue of "a bear, a hippo, something with cloven hooves [he] took to be a goat" and then the fountain with the dry basin (Krauss, 220). The rain concludes right before Alma and Leo's meeting at the park, representing the end of the flood, and the fountain's dry basin illustrates that the earth has dried up, allowing for the rebirth of a new humanity to occur. In the basin are dead leaves, like the olive leaf from the Bible, which are "everywhere now, falling and falling, turning the world back into earth" (Krauss, 220).

CONCLUSION

On Leo's way to the park bench where he meets Alma Singer, he passes a fountain with a dry basin. It has rained for eleven days straight, yet the fountain is dry. There are no pennies at the bottom of the fountain. Instead, it is filled with dead leaves. He sees a small boy throwing pebbles into the empty fountain, and Leo claims that he can tell the boy "has too much wisdom for his age [and] probably believes he is not made for this world" (Krauss, 222). Leo does not describe the fountain, but Central Park's best-known fountain is the Bethesda Fountain, which features an angel on the top (see Figure below.) The boy is throwing pebbles, which he likely



acquires from the angel's collection of pebbles in *Glass Houses*. Or maybe he *is* the angel. According to Leo, the boy, like him, Charlotte, Alma, Bird, and Zvi, is not made for this world. By passing the fountain, Leo finally gets his "angel at the door"

greeting him with death. The final scene ends with Leo's obituary, which, after having had it written for years, is finally applicable. Up until this point, the characters in the novel have been his angels. He mentions a time where he was living in a potato cellar in Slonim when the SS arrived to capture him, but the soldier is preoccupied because he thinks his wife is having an affair. Displaying the prevalence of angels everywhere, Leo explains that "because of that wife who got tired of waiting for her soldier, I lived...how by accident she saved me with that thoughtless act of grace, and she never knew, and how that, too, is part of the history of love" (Krauss, 241). This woman was not flawless, or righteous, but she positively impacted Leo's life in an irreplaceable way. Like the wife's "act of grace" toward Leo, Zvi carries Leo's obituary in

his pocket in order to keep his friend alive, and, although criminal, he publishes “The History of Love” that goes on to change lives. Isaac writes the *Glass Houses* story about him.

The “chosen one” reaches his end, and destruction is brought upon the earth, like at the end of the Flood. When Alma arrives, Leo travels back to his early life with Alma Mereminski and communicates through the language of gestures, because Yiddish no longer exists. He has waited for this moment for years, and God is finally ready for him. His interaction with Alma climaxes at the end of the flood in which it stops raining and, like with every biblical apocalypse, a new beginning is brought upon the earth. During their “conversation,” when Leo reveals to Alma that he is the father of Isaac Moritz, “a pigeon [flaps] up into the sky,” similar to when Noah releases a dove from the ark window to ensure that the earth is completely dry (Krauss, 250).

Alma Singer, his ultimate angel, allows Leo to share his story. He wrote “The History of Love,” he loved Alma Mereminski, and she loved him too, and together they conceived a son, who did not know he existed, in a town that no longer existed. But he exists. Alma is able to share Leo’s identity with Charlotte to lift her out of her grief, and with Bird to stop his wondering, bringing hope to the Singer family. And Alma is there to witness that the end of Leo’s obituary holds true to the end of his time on earth: “He was a great writer. He fell in love. It was his life” (Krauss, 253).

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