

ally

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Madison Scott-Clary

Also by Madison Scott-Clary

Arcana — A Tarot Anthology, ed.

Rum and Coke — Three Short Stories from a Furry Convention

Restless Town

Eigengrau — Poems 2015–2020

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This book uses the fonts Gentium Book Basic and *Merriweather Sans* and was typeset with X_gL^AT_EX.

ISBN: XXX-X-XXXXXX-XX-X

ally

First Edition, 2017.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

I'm not ready to share this yet.

But you want to save it?

I want to save it.

But you save it like this. You save it in a book. You obscure the meaning, but it's there. It's in the ink. It's on the page. It's in the realm of the physical.

That's not the same as sharing.

It's exactly the same as sharing.

And who asked you?

Who invoked me?

Well played.

Do you remember when you met me?

When I met you? I don't remember it so much as a meeting as you were just already there.

I was, yes.

After high school, then. That's when you showed up. That's when life began. That's when I started thinking of myself as a person. That's when I started thinking of others as people, with their own motivations, their own desires, their own incentives and failings.

And you made it through.

After a fashion.

You're here, now. You made it through.

*She never wanted to be
What she became;
The irony of which
Is not lost on her.*

Touching.

Hey now, don't be rude. Aren't you supposed to be my ally?

*I **am** your ally. I'm just not your friend.*

Fair enough.

So you showed up after high school. You showed up after life slid sideways through puberty. I went digging, you know. To find this out.

Oh?

Yeah. June 2004. There you are. I say,

The navy blue I've been seeing at waist level in front of me and to my left is contentment. I'm not entirely sure that it being omnipresent is a good thing, however, considering the colors it's mixed with. Am I really content with longing and hopelessness? It's not out of the question, I suppose that it could just be another aspect of my personality. But that just brings up the question of whether or not it's something I ingrained into myself through habit, something where I just kinda accepted that feeling such things is normal, okay, and what I want; or is it something I was born with, or that we're all born with? Is it a side effect of love, expecting impossible desires and the blind hopelessness that follows the end of a four year undertaking?

And you replied...?

You're rambling.

So pleased you remember.

You're rambling.

I suppose I am. But there you were. You said *You're rambling* to which I replied "Guilty, conspirator." And that was that. That was us. We never greeted each other. Why would we?

I kept digging, too. You stuck around for a year. I saw you off and on until June 2005. In October, 2004, I said that empathy is cooler in

person. *Why?* you asked. *So you can verify? Don't you trust your feelings?*
I said I didn't know, and then I begged you not to go.

Everyone always leaves, don't they?

Perhaps. It's good to hear from you again. Even after fourteen years, I've missed you.

And what was the last thing I said to you?

I was going to call you emo, or suicidal, but no, not goth. It was when Ash and Shannon and I found a house to move into.

I believe I also called you a prick.

Was I?

Yes.

Am I still?

Yes, but a different kind.

You're as chipper now as you were then.

Yes, but a different kind.

Why am I here?

Aren't you always?

With you, sure. Why am I bound to words, though? It's been fourteen years.

Surely that's not all on me. You must play some role in it. I was talking with my partner about doing something autobiographical for my next project, after all.

I'm the observer and the mirror. All I can do is reflect your choices back at you. Choice itself is not my department.

After getting *Restless Town* finished, I needed something to do. Some other project that would make me feel like I was being productive.

Feel, or seem?

Both. If I sat still, I'd burn up. If I was seen sitting still, clearly I'd be worth less in the eyes of those around me, right?

Not my department.

Right.

So I started digging through stuff I'd already done, seeing if any of it could be cleaned up and turned into a new project. I stumbled across *Rum and Coke* and found it mostly clean as it was, so I decided to publish it as a book. Paperback and ebook, I mean, not just the stories online.

Were you proud of them?

To an extent. A different me wrote them. A lesser me, in some ways. I was younger, I hadn't quite found my voice and tone. No *Arcana*, no *Disappearance*, no *Getting Lost* or *Post-Self*. All I had was a few scattered tidbits and my mom's words ringing in my ears: "You wrote your own wedding vows, right? I could tell."

A me with a different identity, too. A me that was working on gender through small steps. I hadn't yet picked up the word 'trans' for myself. I was non-binary, presenting male, writing to justify myself. Or maybe to hype myself up. I was writing works about gender and poly problems being worked through to convince myself it was possible.

They read like parables.

They were, to me. Each one came with an internal discussion after the last line, *now, what can we take from this?* Something in a circle. Socratic. A talking stick.

I know, I was there.

Of course.

Why didn't I show up then?

I was too...something. Too busy, too preoccupied. I was focused too much on identity, too much on The Work, as it were, to reflect. Maybe I was moving too quickly to notice my choices being shown to me.

You'd mostly stopped [adjective][species] by then, too.

Life got weird. I was transitioning–

A choice.

–I was solidifying my relationship with Judith–

A choice.

–I was starting to burn out at work–

Was that a choice?

The result of choices, maybe. The result of the choice to start drinking. It is called *Rum and Coke*, after all. The result of the choice to get into computers. The result of the choice to work from home, which itself was the result of a choice to take the previous job so far from home.

You burned out in part because you burned so hard at the start.

Was I not supposed to? I had to prove myself.

To whom?

You?

Not my department.

One of your neighbors, perhaps. A cubicle over, a floor above, something like that.

Do you anthropomorphize me that much?

No, I suppose, I don't. You're not my therapist, sitting in a chair across from me and talking me through my problems. You're not person shaped. You're the shape of my hands displaced half an inch behind my own, navy blue and trimmed with sea-foam green.

You haven't used colors in fourteen years, either.

What I'm trying to say is that maybe you're back because of nostalgia. *Restless Town* was done and couldn't be published yet, and a prideful part of me didn't want it to be my first book, so I pulled *Rum and Coke* into shape.

It rubbed my nose in the past. I published it a few weeks ago, and I wasn't done with the past, so I started archiving more data. I dug up my old hard drives. I grabbed stuff from Dreamhost, both files and database backups. I finally unlocked my LJ account and archived that.

And you work at an archive.

I go through phases, looking back at the past. I'll spend a few days trying to backdate some log files, or dig through my old scores and publish them — I did that too, alongside *Rum and Coke*, publish a bunch of my old music — or resurrect my notes on *Nanon*, or the like.

You are quite mercurial.

A failing. That may play a role in my burnout. I'm only good at something for seven years before it becomes so intolerable that I have to leave. Happened with school.

So here I am, your ally, twice seven years later.

I hadn't thought of it that way.

Portentous. The only way it would've been more so is if it were thrice seven years.

I ran away thrice seven years ago. In seventh grade, in 1997, no less.

Ill omens. What will happen to me in seven years?

Will you leave me for good?

Can an ally disinherit a mind so easily?

I'm not comfortable with that question. I'm not comfortable with its implications. Either way, the past is important to me because maybe it can help me figure out the present. Those who don't know history are doomed to blah blah blah.

And have you figured out your present?

For me to pull out that trite quote about my own personal history speaks pretty well to my fears of doing things accidentally. I've certainly figured out my present better than twice-seven-years-ago me had figured out his.

When 2007 rolled around, I turned 21. *What if, I thought to myself. What if I decided to see what it feels like to be addicted to something?*

By that point, alcohol was this nebulous thing. I'd roped a few people into getting me alcohol now and then, and it was fine. I'd started brewing and it was whatever. I had beer and it was alright. I went through a mead phase—

You went through several.

—I went through a wine phase, and an absinthe phase—

Don't sell yourself short. You wrote an essay on absinthe.

—and a gin phase. That's the one that got me. I had a bottle of Beefeater's, what was to become my gin of choice, and I had an inch of it poured over ice and I was standing in the kitchen. Such a wide open space. The kitchen at that apartment was larger than my bedroom now, and it opened onto a living room the size of what we have now. I was standing tall in that vast plain of a room, staring down into my glass and watching the way the ice melting into the gin created swirls of two different kinds of transparent. I was thinking how it was probably due to the different ways the two liquids refracted light, and then I was laughing, because I was staring down into my drink like something out of a bar.

What if I decided to see what it feels like to be addicted to something? I thought. I drank every night that week.

Why ruin your life on accident when you can do it on purpose?

I don't think I was thinking in those terms at that point.

Are you now?

Perhaps.

Maybe you're just afraid of doing anything by accident.

Perhaps.

You're sounding like me more by the day.

Learn from the best.

And so you set about with a will.

Like magic. I set forth my will with a stated goal and made it happen. My spell was spoken and washed down with liquor. I drank nearly every day from then on out. I spent thousands of dollars on alcohol over the next ten years. I went through more mead phases and more beer phases. I went through a distillation phase. Magic is empowerment through attention to detail.

The MEAD principle. Cute.

I drank hard with the choir, and then I left school and drank hard with the programmers. If there's one thing that most programmers do better than computers, it's drinking, after all.

I did some work at a bar, even. Just making their menu and website for them in exchange for free drinks.

You mastered \LaTeX that way. A very you thing to do.

I did well at it. I still have one of the menus and some of the paper laying around somewhere. I did that until the bartender left and, when I asked for my next payment from the owner, he flipped out at me and threatened to sue me for impersonating him. I don't think I realized Raffi, the bar manager who hired me, was already on his way out.

I drank my way out of one job and through a good chunk of another. I drank until I got better at it than I was at software. I drank myself into burnout. I drank until I collapsed.

You used up your spell slots. You ran out of will. You had to quit by accident.

I worked to quit, I'll have you know. It wasn't easy. It took meds and some rough nights.

*You were less of a person then than you were when you started drinking. The you who started drinking by focusing on **starting drinking** was more real than the you who collapsed in the kitchen from a PNES and stopped drinking because she was completely empty of intention.*

Should I start the daily drinking again, then?

You're more of a person now than you were when you started drinking.

That, coming from you, is a glowing endorsement.

You may have been more of a person when you started than when you stopped, but you weren't much of one, even then.

When I was young, back before I knew what mental health entailed, what anxiety and abuse and depression really meant, I was convinced I was having semi-regular mental breakdowns. That was the phrase I used then, because I was unsure of what it meant to have a panic attack.

This was before LiveJournal, of course. This was before I was writing on the internet, or even really on the internet at all. This was before you.

No, it wasn't.

Right.

When I ran away, my dad found my paper journal. I had kept it infrequently, as something about daily journaling to a seventh-grader felt dishonest, stupid. What could I possibly write about?

In the journal, I mentioned on a few occasions that I'd had a mental breakdown. My dad called me several times over the next few days after my mom found me, and in one of those calls, he yelled at me about that. "Do you really think you're crazy?" he said. "Do you need to be taken to an asylum?"

I told him no. I whispered it. I murmured it. I wasn't crazy. I didn't need to go to an asylum. I just felt like time stopped for me and the world around me sped up. I just felt like I was holding on by the barest amount of friction on my fingertips. The whorls of my fingerprints providing my only grasp on reality.

That was me saying hi.

Blunt-force greeting?

I was quiet as a mouse.

I have the words now. I have the vocabulary. I can say derealization, depersonalization, dissociation. I can say panic attack and anxiety and depression and hypomania. I can say *ah, **this** is what is happening now.*

You have emotions now, is what you have. Those were your mental breakdowns.

Dad didn't believe in those. Not for boys. *Mood's a thing for cattle and loveplay, right? Emotions are for women.*

He was half-right.

I suppose he was.

I think of myself as a trans woman, not a woman. I think of past me as male, not female. To an extent, I think of past me as cisgender. I was a guy. I was that gay guy who tumbled out the other side of puberty and was left to figure out what the fuck. I am not who I was.

You have ship-of-Theseus'd yourself into what you are.

I was not Madison. I am not Matthew. I can't deny his existence, though. He was him, and to erase that, to toe the party line and say I've always known that I was Madison, would do a disservice to him.

He got in all those relationships. He loved so hard it hurt. He dreamed of being held. He struggled with the words.

He fought. He enacted his cruelty in countless subtle ways. He promised himself he'd be better than his dad and failed more often than not.

He rode the same crests of hypomania and crashed just as hard after. Once, he tried to schedule his hobbies into his day so thoroughly that he forgot to schedule meals, then, having failed two weeks later, considered shooting himself in the head. Anxiety rode him just as thoroughly. Once, dead convinced that he had meningitis, he wrote a note apologizing to loved ones and left it on the bedstand.

He was just as mercurial, too. The brewing phase—

Phases. Plural.

—the gun phase, the photography phase and all its subphases: digital, film, cross-processing, rangefinders.

Yeah, he was a prick.

You said I still am, but a different kind.

In all fondness.

How kind.

All this to say, I have not always known I was trans. To pretend such would be to erase a real, actual person who tried his best more often than not.

Have you answered Theseus' question?

I don't know.

July 2nd, 2004, shortly after midnight.

My emotions are gaining distinct colors, like a kind of twisted synaesthesia. There's definitely a sense of physical location associated with each emotion, and it's not always internal. There may also be a tactile part to this, but I have yet to experience it in any different places or with any different touches, so it may just be one continuous headache that goes latent occasionally.

An example: when pondering ****, a luminescent fuschia color that seems to be flowing in the right hemisphere of my brain; when thinking of ***** and snuggling, a warm, earthy brown with a little bit of green in a pine-needle-ish pattern about a foot and a half in front of me and slightly to the left; tiredness is off-white everywhere and blind hopelessness is bright blue wrapped around my mind. The headache moves around, but it's mostly at the lower, back, right side of my head. Ibuprofin works well.

This isn't what I meant when I was talking about beautiful pain.

Current mood: Bright blue with a tinge of purple, but mostly off white and hazy.



July 3rd, 2004, shortly after midnight.

Greens covering my chest and shoulders warmly are happiness.



And that's when I showed up, yes?

Yeah, later that day.

The navy blue I've been seeing at waist level in front of me and to my left is contentment. I'm not entirely sure that it being omnipresent is a good thing, however, considering the colors it's mixed with. Am I really content with longing and hopelessness? It's not out of the question, I suppose that it could just be another aspect of my personality. But that just brings up the question of whether or not it's something I ingrained into myself through habit, something where I just kinda accepted that feeling such things is normal, okay, and what I want; or is it something I was born with, or that we're all born with? Is it a side effect of love, expecting impossible desires and the blind hopelessness that follows the end of a four year undertaking?

Whatever, you're rambling.

Guilty, conspirator.

And these pictures?

All from years later. The color thing comes and goes, like you.

April 8, 2004

The undersides
off gray
of clouds
drift
while I

on the path
stand
above
where the crow flies
me.
Off
with purple
gray, I
wandering
ponder, should
in a perfect
were there such a thing
world
be a
though the word is plain
color with it's own
to name
as they say
creates
word.
It soothes.

Sometimes I'm overcome by the numinous. Sometimes it's colors, sometimes it's you, sometimes it's a silence swelling within my chest, stealing breath.

He would be riding on the subway or writing formulas on the blackboard or having a meal or (as now) sitting and talking to someone across a table, and it would envelop him like a soundless tsunami.

That's a post-rock song title.

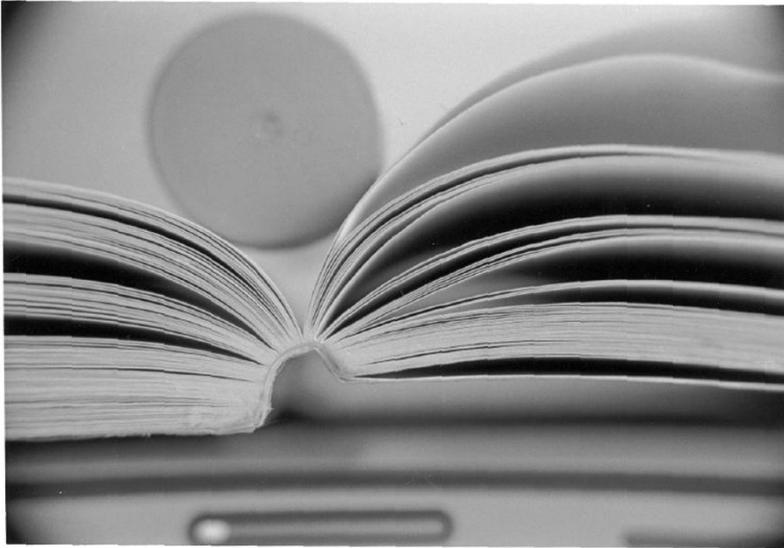
Is it wrong?



I'll take a picture, lasso a color, and desaturate everything else. Sometimes, it's fun. I do it to Falcon's eyes a lot because they're so pretty.

And sometimes it's something more.

Yeah. Sometimes it's a compulsion. Sometimes a picture will latch onto me and never let me go. Sometimes I'll remove all color.



Sometimes I'll blow out the background because the foreground is so completely overwhelming.



Sometimes I'll skew colors all in one direction.



It's not an artistic decision. Not *just*, at least. It's always something more.

Inter ĝuo kaj timo
Estas loko de tro da signifo.
Apud kompreno, ekster saĝo,
Tamen ĝi tutampleksas.
Mi kompareble malgrandas
Kaj ĝi tro granda estas.
Nekomprenebla
Nekontestebla,
Senmova kaj ĉiam ŝanĝiĝema.

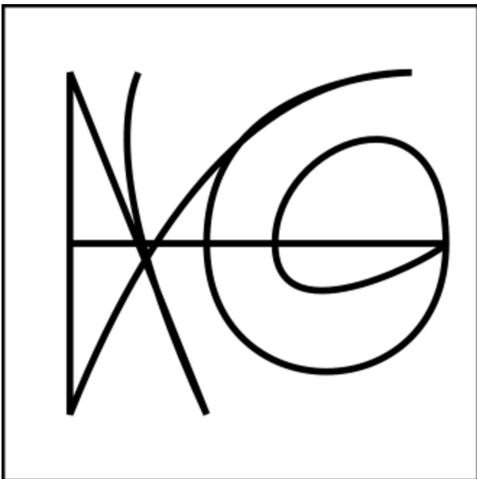
Between joy and fear
Is a place of too much meaning.
Next to understanding, outside wisdom,
It nonetheless expands.
I'm so small beside it
and it is too big.
Incomprehensible,
Incontestible,
Unmoving and always changing.

A sigil need not just be lines and curves.

Or maybe it's just mania.

It may be.

Tell me about mania.



*Lines and curves, lines and curves.
Beginning now.*

No.

Wait, what? Why are you asking? Weren't you there?

I was. I...am?

I don't think I'm hypomanic now. On my way, perhaps. I can't sleep.

I may be, then. Tell me about mania.

No, tell me why you're asking.

I'm more of a liminal creature, myself. It's hard to keep an ally around when depression slowly shuts down avenue after avenue of reaching one. You, as a reflection of me, become distorted while manic. Fun-house mirrors and blind-spots. I want to hear about it.

No.

Later.

I took a sleep aid. I'm not getting into this now. I was all prepped to write about poly stuff, but you started banging on the door.

[Read what I've already written](/birds).

I was there when you wrote those.

So? Does that not clarify it?

Will anything?

Likely not.

I will say, though, that I missed some stuff in my investigation earlier. You did come back for three brief days in November, 2013. It was at a liminal time, but you didn't stick around.

I'll remind you that you ignored me for one of those posts.

Point.

Let's get into mania later. We owe each other that. For now, bed. And tomorrow, something a little less harrowing.

Ah yes. Polyamory. Known for being easy peasy, lemon squeezy.

The first time I remember thinking about polyamory-

And here I was hoping you'd cave and talk more about mania.

Why are you so hung up on that? I told you I wouldn't, and you seemed to accept that.

'Seemed to'? 'Accept'? Are those things something like me can do?

Well, if *I* can...

Conceded. No mania, then?

It's not a comfortable topic.

Granted. Tell me why, at least.

It's not a good feeling. Not from the inside, not from the outside. From the inside I've only caught glimpses of it, even. Glimpses caught through the haze of medication or withdrawal or the mass of ineffable ecstasy comes crashing down upon me. I get all wrapped up in hypomania. Something less. Something just beneath. That thin meniscus between this world and...something else.

But in others I've watched — in some cases, been caught up in — the frenzy as their world slowly slides out of alignment with consensus reality. They turn from...

What?

You got me talking about it.

I'm pleased you think so highly of me.

I **will** talk about it. It's not off the table. I just need something not that for a bit.

To poly?

To poly.

Here is the difference betwixt the poet and the mystic, that the last nails a symbol to one sense, which was a true sense for a moment, but soon becomes old and false. For all symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead. Mysticism consists in the mistake of an accidental and individual symbol for an universal one.

Pretty.

I didn't write it.

I know.

I scramble through great heaps of words and sounds to try and at least pin some of them to fleeting symbols. Maybe then I'll be able to learn to see more of the accidental and individual symbols.

Too many words, too many sounds.

Yes.

You wrote four pieces about the winds coming down over the foothills near Boulder (for, of all things, wind quartet), just to try and capture one ecstatic experience.

I like those. I like the result.

You like the first two, most of all. They remind you of how hollow you felt, how you could feel the wind blow through you, vibrating your soul like the pipe of an organ, exciting you to ever higher harmonics.

Yes.

But then you kept writing.

Yeah. I make a terrible poet.

You make a terrible mystic. Your poetry's just okay.

How can I capture that essence of stillness? How can I become nothing?

Not reaching. Not trying.

How can I read the ecstasy of signs? How can I feel those black birds bursting free of my hunched shoulders?

Step beside yourself. Take your own hand.

How can I feel the cord that ties me to the center of the earth? How can I see where it leads? How can I walk the spiral?

Reach down, bury your fingers in rich earth, take root.

The cant of ritual.

The scent of incense.

The rhythm of chant.

The ripple of water.

Call and response.

The flicker of a candle.

Voices echoing voices echoing voices echoing...

Clay between fingertips.

And then?

March 10, 2004

We wandered around for a bit before ending up sprawled in a fire-escape at FHS with Shannon in my lap, me in Ash's lap, and Andrew in Kiran's lap. Andrew ditched to go shooting with Ash and Kiran, while I went to bomb a history test. That's when things started getting really weird. I had a percocet relapse (whether that's what it was or not, it felt oddly similar to the real thing: an incurable itch buried beneath my skin, to the point where I can't actually scratch it) near the end of the period, and then in choir I imploded from empathy - so many emotions from others that I had no room for my own. Then, horns grew from my chest and head, and wings from my back; a giant fox escaped, left, and exploded into a thousand birds over Viele. Mind you, none of this really happened, but I sure felt strange. During latin, I exploded from empathy in a patchwork swirl of colors while Starin et al. stared on as I banged my head against the desk. Ms. Gibert didn't notice. I yelled for help inaudibly and searched out white points of light in the black silhouette of Boulder. I yelled for Ash and searched for Moondog.

Afterwards, I figured out how to regain control (mostly) and just in time for the bell to ring. I got a small mocha at Cafe Sole, got eaten by small greenish crystals on a table while supposed psychics did fairy readings from a kids book, and here I am, about to take a shower and get ready for Great Works rehearsal, and then group, whereupon I shall request to Reiki Moondog (again) during the speakers board on gay marriage. Hopefully I don't ex-/implode again M

April 12, 2004

You have come, finally, to a safe place. You have arrived at the point where it counts most, the point at which Life itself seems to fall away, leaving behind nothing of its former shell: that blackened husk of body and mind that housed a bright bright star. Years and years, it took, places and places and each day offering good and bad, but you, lucky you, saw past that, saw beyond the grid of your perception to see inside others, touching and caressing the bright points of light that were essentially them, cherishing each for not only their good points, but for their faults as well. The energy flowed around and through you in the concentric spirals of the labyrinth and the Bat Qol kept you clean and pure with the voice of God and the Buddha in me to the Buddha in you weaved everything under the sun into Life itself. This is Rapture.

I'd like to chant, perhaps Emmeleia.

June 7, 2004

Or.. you could come up with something on your own. You know, do something productive with Nanon.

There's a thought. I still need to do those spells for Androo.

Exactly. Productive

I've noticed that, while my emotional colors are fading, you're becoming more prominent.

Who are you?

I'm a meme; I'm the idea of Lady Sage and Master Yage,

or maybe Eris and God. Are they the same?

I'm me.

I'm you. Are they the same?

I'm the fifth line of five.

You're an elusive bugger, that's what you are.

Damn straight.

You're depressing, too.

...hello?

October 5, 2004

Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani.

Upon reading certain things, upon hearing certain songs, upon seeing certain people, upon smelling certain scents, upon tasting certain foods, upon feeling certain feelings and upon losing myself, it flows, the light, in through the head, out through the heart, washes over all, and, being lost in it, have found myself without.

How poetic.

These are the white things. Cold, bright, burning, white.

Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani.

But the light isn't as it used to be. It was a thing to light up a day, a thing to light up me, filling completely. Now a simple thread flows from head to heart, and the light doesn't stray from the path of least resistance.

Love follows not the law of Ohm.

Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani.

Light can be many things, but here, now, it means love - all four loves - and it's a strange feeling to have been so full of it for so long, then to suddenly be nearly without.

Full of what? Full of shit? How pathetic, how trite.

Having deified love for several years, it's a shock to my faith to have it disappear, even if it only turns out to be temporary.

Faith? You're faithful? How have you EVER been faithful to love?

Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani!

What is your point?

You know.

Yes, but it is important that you make it.

It's the immediacy, the seamless immediacy...

It's about meaning and self. It's about defining where your boundaries are; your physical boundaries, your mental boundaries, your spiritual and emotional boundaries. It's about that ground-state training that you undergo so that you might step just a bit to the side. An inch. A mile. An age.

It's about breathing in for the count of four, holding for the count of two, breathing out for the count of four, holding for the count of two. It's about feeling where your feet touch the ground. It's about drawing a straight line from your center of gravity to the center of the world. It's about becoming totally present.

So that you can disappear entirely.

Why this? Why now?

Why talk about ecstasy?

Yes.

Dissociation.

Well, that was quick. I was expecting more roundabout. We would banter. You would get flustered. I would get smug.

Derealization, depersonalization, dissociation. Pure and simple.

Well huh.

Would I lie to you?

Oh, totally.

Fair.

You're not very focused.

I know.

It's just

that I'm

overflowing

with

words

I was born at the edge of the numinous.

That is why I can tread along the border.

That is why I'm able to whisper the name of God.

That is why I'm allowed to know the number and how to factor it.

That is why I have seven fingers spread wide and three curled toward my heart.

That is why my limbs trace the curves and lines of power when I dance.

That is why I sit with my back to the sun in summer.

That is why my body is a canvas.

You were born in sunlight.

Speak secrets into my hair.

Take my words from me.

Spend the intercalary days telling me lies.

Break my dystonia with a breath.

Wash my face with salt water.

Tell me the name you call yourself.

Close my eyes.

We will sleep in the shade.

Let me bless you with smoke.

Let me bathe your feet.

Let me light the candles.

Let me place a stone beneath my tongue.

Let me taste copper.

Let me draw in ash.

Let me rise up until my head is in the branches and my hair becomes the leaves.

At the beginning of time,
 when chaos birthed to order and disorder,
we were blessed with two souls.

One has seven eyes and can see all of the monsters in the dark,
 but is blinded by the sun.

The other has no eyes,
 but can feel no pain.

When order and disorder were close as children,
 our souls experienced the world hand in hand,
 but as they drifted apart and began to fight,
 some of us left one of our souls behind,
 and that is why we search.

Babel was a collaborative effort.

Once,

we all spoke the same language,

but on seeing god grow increasingly anxious with the rate of our progress,

we agreed to let our tongues be confused,

so that he could take things at a more comfortable pace,

and we could be assured he would not understand us unless we prayed in silence,

for only then do we speak the language of angels.

When I speak, the words drip from my tongue as ink,
and form writing on the ground,
and I leave a trail behind me,
and the ink stains your feet,
and when you walk, words and phrases and sentences are pressed into the soil,
and the ink breathes life into the plants,
and even the grass will flower,
and the bees will flourish,
and they will both sting you and provide you with sweet honey.

The ink stains my chin and my clothes.

Sometimes, I speak into my hands and stain my cheeks as well.

I speak against my fingers and press them into my flesh until I am covered in rosettes.

I stretch my hands to the sky and marvel at how black they are.

And as with the grass, where the ink stains, growth
quicken, and I am covered in soft fur.

I fall to all fours and hunt amid the rocks and the
buildings, between cars and along trails.

And when I am full, I curl up to sleep, and awake
human once again.

My skin is clean and my mind is clear,

and I cannot speak.

The only time I know my true name is when I pray.
The only time I pray is at the utmost need.
To pray is to ask yourself what you dare not ask god.
To answer your own question, you must step outside yourself.
To step outside yourself, you must forget your true name.
The only time I know my true name is when I pray.

Ask.

How does one approach what one can't describe?

Swing the flashlight rapidly across the room. Piece together what you can from the sweep of the beam across the walls, the furniture.

How does one hunt down what leaves no tracks?

Unwind the maze by keeping your right hand on the wall. Pray that the walls do not move.

How does one call down the gods to commune?

Speak thrice, and enter.

There was a sort of succulent quality to the air, as though, were I to bite down on it, it would all come bursting forth at once. Dribble down my chin. Stain my shirt. It would be sweet, almost saccharine. It would beg for a pinch of salt to quell all that sweetness.

I didn't know whether or not I'd be able to stomach it, honestly. I was dizzy. I was apart from myself. Above, and beside. I was looking down at myself. Were I to do so, to bite into time itself, I would surely overflow.

Was overflowing, I realized. Was bending forward at the waist where I was sitting. Those black choir chairs were comfortable, but made you sit up straight, so I couldn't slouch. I was bending forward, resting my elbows on my knees, and then bowing my head, bowing further.

I was overflowing, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. We weren't singing, the basses, we were watching the altos rehearse a part, so it wasn't too far out of the ordinary for me to be hunched over, breathing shallow, watching myself from above.

I was overflowing, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. Hunched over, breathing shallow, and watching from a few feet up, a few feet to the right, so that I could see my shirt tear even as I felt it against my back. I was so thin, then. So thin.

I was overflowing, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I watched my shirt tear, and my skin follow. I watched it split along my spine and peel back. It was bloodless, but not painless. The feeling of those wings, newborn and weak, slipping from the wound was raw.

I was overflowing, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I watched the wings stretch and extend from the wound on my back. “Aha,” I thought. “This is it. This is finally it. It’s finally happening. I am becoming something greater, and here I am, so unprepared!”

I was overflowing, though, not transforming, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. The growth did not stop at wings. An eye. A beak. The graceful curve of a head. Plumage.

“No, this isn’t it.” I panicked, and could think of nothing else but to apologize. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

The bird cocked its head as it climbed free of my back and perched on my shoulder. It cared not for apologies. Why would it?

Another pair of wings followed.

Another.

Another.

My hands were buried in my hair, I could see - barely - through the forest of pencil-thin legs crowding my shoulders, my neck, my head. Their weight had forced my shoulders down until my head was nearly between my knees.

We were singing now, and I was silent. How could I sing, when all I could do was beg silently for forgiveness? How could I sing with the weight of a dozen crows slowly crushing me into my seat? How could I sing when I was overflowing? There was nothing I could do to stop it

Chaos. The director stopped the choir, and as one, the flock lifted off. The weight was lifted off my back. The cacophony filled the air. I was borne up through the air by the birds. The birds were splitting, multiplying, avian mitosis. I was borne up, up. Up.

I was told afterward that my body stumbled, unthinking along the row and toward the double doors, that the director had sneered, ”It

sure would be nice if we had all our singers here today.” I was told that folks defended me, saying I was sick, I was pale, I was feverish.

I don’t know, I wasn’t there. I was above the Flatirons. I was beyond terror. I was beyond joy. I was beyond sensation, beyond any emotion except for that bottomless, black guilt. Sticky. Tar-like. Bitter. The flock numbered in the thousands, and still we flew up.

The blue of the sky became white, blinded, became black, and I was sitting in the hallway. I was with my body again. I was sobbing. A teacher stared. Students gave me a wide berth.

I cleaned myself up. I went back to choir. What else could I do?

A bird had plucked something from me. Something precious. Something unknowable. Something important and integral. Something hard. Something emerald and glassy. Before the white of the sky overtook me, I saw it in its beak.

The caw it gave as my vision left me and my ears filled with static was...triumphant? No, not quite. Triumph implies that the birds could do anything but succeed. In that sound was inevitability.

After school, - - - and I tramped through the ‘mini-forest’ and, impelled by something of the avian within, I collected five sticks.

They had to be as straight as possible. They had to be balanced as close to the middle as possible. They had to be the same length without me breaking them. They had to have been from different trees. They had to have fallen more than a year prior.

When I got home, I lay them in a row, asked my questions, and, one by one, broke them in half.

What had I lost?

What had I gained?

Where had I gone?

Where did I come from?

Why does memory stain me with that black, tarry guilt?

I had forgotten about the birds until recently, but every time I feel that ecstasy — that ekstasis — I am pitch. I am tar. I am sticky with apology. I am the living embodiment of “I’m sorry”.

I'm tired. I'm so tired. I'm tired and I'm upset and I'm lost.

I know.

I want to shout and to whisper. I want to talk about how the light flows in through the head and out through the heart. I want to put words to the feeling of falling to the ground and taking root.

I want to say how it feels when I step outside myself.

You tried.

I guess that's all I can do.

It's not, but it's important that you have tried.



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