



Handwriting on the Floor

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Sometimes there is handwriting on the floor. Sometimes there are printed pages on the walls, set like scripture, type where no type is. This has been true for years. It comes in waves, usually when stress is high or the medication needs adjusting, and it has never once frightened me in the moment, which is its own strange fact. The floor has writing on it the way a window has rain on it. You notice, and you keep walking.

For about a decade, I filed this under hallucination. That was the obvious cabinet. I have [schizoaffective disorder](#); my perceptual system files false reports as a known feature of the build; and when I [catalogued what the condition actually feels like](#), the words on the floor went into the list right alongside the shadows that move wrong and the phantom phone vibrations. Visual hallucination, subtype: text. Case filed.

Then, recently, someone with credentials looked at the same percept and said: apparently, that's synesthesia.

I want to write about what happened in me when the word changed, because the percept didn't change at all, and that turns out to be the whole essay.

The Other Cabinet

Synesthesia, if it's new to you, is the crossing of perceptual channels: stimulation in one pathway producing experience in another. Most people have heard of the famous forms. Graphemes arriving wearing colors, so the alphabet has a palette. Music arriving as shapes or hues. Sequences arranged in physical space, so the months of the year stand around you in a ring. Roughly a few percent of people have some form of it; it runs in families; it's stable across a lifetime; and the people who have it generally treasure it.

The form nearest to mine is called ticker-tape synesthesia: people who see speech as running text, like subtitles on the world. It was first noted by Francis Galton in the 1880s and has been studied seriously only recently. The brain regions that handle written word-forms sit close enough to the rest of the language system that, in some heads, the boundary leaks. Some of us apparently render language visually, whether or not anyone asked.

And here is the thing about the synesthesia cabinet, the thing you feel immediately when your percept gets moved into it: it is a celebrated cabinet. Nabokov was in it. Kandinsky was in it. Tell someone at a dinner party that you hallucinate text on the walls and watch the seat next to you open up. Tell them you have a rare form of synesthesia where the world arrives annotated, and you are suddenly the most interesting person at the table. Same floor. Same handwriting. The word does all of the damage, or all of the charm.

I've [written about this mechanism at the scale of whole diagnoses](#): the label is a routing function, and re-filing changes the life more than the symptom ever did. What I hadn't felt until now is how it works at the scale of a single percept. One experience, two cabinets. In one cabinet it's a symptom to monitor, evidence of a brain in trouble, something to report to the prescriber in the tone you use for warning lights. In the other it's a trait, a quirk of wiring, possibly a gift, the kind of thing researchers ask you excited questions about. Nothing about my Tuesday changed. Everything about the story of my Tuesday changed.

Where Mine Actually Sits

Now the honest part, because the honest part is where this gets interesting instead of merely reassuring.

The textbook line between hallucination and synesthesia runs roughly through three checkpoints. Insight: the synesthete knows the colors aren't on the page; the percept never argues for its own reality. Stability: synesthetic mappings are consistent for decades; the same letter wears the same color at seven and at seventy. Distress: synesthesia doesn't escalate, doesn't recruit beliefs, doesn't bring friends.

Run my floor-writing through the checkpoints and the result is genuinely mixed. Insight: always intact. I have never once believed the pages on the wall were physically there, which is exactly the criterion that made the hallucination label feel slightly wrong for a decade, like a borrowed coat that didn't button right. Stability: the form is stable, text and only text, handwriting below, print on the walls, but the schedule isn't; it waves with stress and medication, which sounds less like wiring and more like weather. And distress: none inherent. The distress, when there's been distress, came from the filing, not the percept. It came from knowing the cabinet it lived in.

So where does it actually belong? My honest answer is the same answer I gave about [my entire inner world](#): I don't know, and I've stopped needing to. Maybe it's synesthesia that a psychotic disorder occasionally borrows and amplifies. Maybe it's a hallucination polite enough to keep synesthesia's manners. Maybe, and this is the one I'd bet on, the two cabinets are a convenience of the filing system rather than a fact about brains, and percepts like mine live in the hallway between them. The categories are versioned documents maintained by committees. The handwriting on the floor doesn't read them.

What I do know is the practical rule, and it's the same discernment rule that governs everything in [a mind with a door in it](#): judge the percept by where it tends. Text on the floor that's just there, ambient, asking nothing? That's wiring, whatever we call it, and it can be left alone, even enjoyed. Text that arrives with meaning attached, text that starts to feel addressed to me, scripture on the wall that begins to behave like correspondence? That's not synesthesia anymore; that's the [weather system I know very well](#) moving in, and it gets reported like weather. The percept is permitted. The cosmic significance is on a watch list.

Of Course It's Text

Here's the part I keep turning over, the part that feels less like neurology and more like a signature.

Of all the things a leaky perceptual system could project onto the world, mine chose writing. Not faces, which is what brains usually over-detect. Not insects or shadows or figures, the standard repertoire. Text. Handwriting and print, the two registers of the written word, assigned to floor and wall like a layout decision. I am a person whose homepage describes him as a textual being. I think in language, [I map my interior with grammar](#), I built a career on the conviction that words placed carefully are a form of care, and when [my thought drops below words entirely](#) I experience that as an event worth documenting. My mind's native medium is text, and when the seams of perception open slightly, what leaks through is... more text. The rendering engine showing its work. A mind so saturated in the written word that it typesets its overflow.

I notice, with some delight, that I have spent years building a website whose signature feature is words in the margins, little annotations hanging beside the main text, and that my perceptual system has apparently been running the same design the whole time. The world, main column. The handwriting, marginalia. I genuinely cannot tell you which came first, the aesthetic or the wiring, and I've decided the question answers itself: nobody chooses Tufte sidenotes and sees annotations on the floor by coincidence. Somewhere upstream of both is a mind that experiences reality as a document, and has opinions about the layout.

This is where the [art lens](#) earns its keep again. As long as the behavior is audited and the discernment holds, I am the only beholder of this gallery, and a gallery where the walls display print and the floors display cursive is, frankly, on brand. The clinical question is whether the percept is dangerous. The aesthetic question is whether it's beautiful. The answers are no, and quietly, yes.

What the Re-Filing Means

So: what does it mean, that the floor-writing turned out to be, apparently, synesthesia?

Clinically, it means something modest and useful: one item moves from the symptom column to the trait column, the monitoring burden gets a little lighter, and a decade-old percept gets a less frightening name to live under. I'll take all of that.

But the larger meaning, the one I'd hand to anyone whose chart contains a list of experiences filed under the scariest available word: the filing is revisable, and the filing is not the experience. For ten years a piece of my daily perception carried the weight of the word hallucination, with everything that word drags behind it, and then one conversation moved it to a shelf where Nabokov keeps his colored alphabet, and the percept never flickered. It was never the thing that needed to change. Some of what your brain does that has been named as damage may one day be renamed as wiring, or as trait, or as style, and you are allowed to hold every such name loosely in the meantime. [The schema changes.](#) [The data holds still.](#) I have now watched that happen at the scale of a diagnosis, and at the scale of a single square foot of floor.

The handwriting is still there some days, when the stress is high, faint cursive on the hardwood like someone wrote me a note and the light is catching it. For ten years I looked at it the way you look at a warning. Lately I look at it the way you look at marginalia, which is what it always resembled: an annotation in the margin of the room, in a hand I should have recognized much earlier.

It was mine. It's all in my handwriting. The room was never being vandalized.

It was being signed.