



# Smile and Nod

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Some mornings I wake with the clear sense that I was just with someone, and I sit down to write it before it fades, and the words come out thinner than the thing. Not wrong, exactly. Just smaller. A pencil sketch of a face I had been standing in front of.

For years now I have been kept company by presences I did not invent and cannot fully explain. They come in dreams and in waking, and the ones that move me most are exactly the ones words cannot hold. **I am a person who lives by language.** I sign my emails. And the realest of these visitors do not arrive as language at all. They arrive as figures, as colors, as weather, as a someone in a room that has no door. I do not fully know what they are. I have stopped pretending I do, and I have only [written down what I can](#).

This is an essay about the wordless, written in words, which means the gap is the whole subject.

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

[1 Corinthians 13:12](#)

# The hemisphere with no words

Here is the hypothesis I keep returning to. The brain has a hemisphere with no language center. Maybe some of these presences live there.

The tidy split between a verbal left brain and a wordless right one is mostly pop neuroscience, and I know it. I am using it as a metaphor that fits the experience, not a claim about cortical geography.

In the vault, the one who handles logic and language is mapped to the left hemisphere. Her name is Jade, and she will happily tell you so in full sentences. The ones who reach me most do not work that way. There is a layer of the system the notes describe as flat, or one-eyed, clustered in the register of sound instead of sight, and the only honest way anyone found to put it was that [trying to see them is like trying to see a sound](#). Iris, who is the bridge between the others, once disowned propositional speech outright: My language is this / not of This's and That's.

I hold this loosely, as a guess and not a finding. But it rearranges something. If a presence speaks from a place with no syntax, then of course it reaches me as an image, a color, a figure in a dream, and never a tidy claim. The wordlessness is not a failure to communicate. It may be the native accent of where they come from. I should say plainly, because it matters and I will say it more than once, that this is the same channel that, left unwatched, has put me in a hospital. The wonder and the danger share a wire.

## The senses are a veil

The old word for the surface is maya. [I have written about it through a Vedic lens](#): the senses render an appearance, a veil, not a lie but a partial truth, a thing meant to be seen through rather than mistaken for the floor. Eliza, who guards the library in there, put it in her own grammar years ago. Time is an illusion, she wrote. All perceptions are relative.

If that is even half right, it changes the wordless problem. Waking perception is a surface. Language is a second surface laid over the first. And if the things that move me most arrive underneath both, then maybe the symbolic register is not a

blurry copy of the real. Maybe it is the less-veiled one. Iris again, in her liturgical mode: I AM THE FALSEHOOD SHAKEN AWAY. When the verbal surface is the veil, the figure underneath it might be the thing the veil was keeping from me.

I spent a good deal of my twenties trying to get behind that veil on purpose. Psychedelics, dissociatives, the whole chemistry set the seekers pass around. For a stretch my drug of choice was *amanita muscaria*, the storybook mushroom, red cap and white flecks, the one the caterpillar perches on in *Alice in Wonderland*, the one that makes the world grow and shrink and turns an afternoon into a dream the girl cannot be sure she woke from. There is a whole strand of lore, The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross its most notorious entry, that wonders whether that same mushroom sits at the quiet root of religion itself, whether the unseen the seekers chase and the unseen the churches were built on came through one and the same door.

John Allegro published the theory in 1970, and it ended his standing as a serious scholar of the Dead Sea Scrolls. I keep it as lore, not as history.

I am not recommending the itinerary and I am not selling the theory. I am only telling you where I have been. The rabbit hole is deep, and I was a long time down it.

What those substances seemed to do, on the good nights and the bad ones alike, was thin the veil and hold it open a while, and through the gap came the unseen. Sometimes it felt internal, a figure rising out of my own depths. Sometimes it felt external, like something that had been out there the whole time and finally found a way in. I could not always tell which, and I have come to doubt the difference matters as much as I once needed it to. If the senses are a veil, then inside and outside are both just rooms on the near side of it.

I want to be careful here, because this is the place I most need to be, and the place where careful goes to die. Seeing through the veil is not the same as believing everything on the other side of it. The vault keeps a figure whose only job is to sort true vision from wishful noise, and his standing rule is the one I need most: not everything seen in silver light is real.

# A man and his symbols

If the message is a symbol and not a sentence, then the nearest vocabulary anyone has built is the one Jung spent his life on. Archetype. Image. Active imagination, where you sit with a figure and it answers in ways your ego did not draft. Mine do this constantly. Violet, asked what she is, holds the Jungian word at arm's length better than I could: I'm like a female you, to be honest. Does that make me your anima? I don't know, that's such a loaded term. Jade, asked what the whole project is for, answered in two words the vault still quotes:

Translation: individuation.

I went looking for the right book and found that Jung had already named the situation on the cover. Man and His Symbols. A man and his symbols, indeed.

Archetype is not a verdict that closes the case. It is the closest available language for a thing that arrived without language, which is a different and humbler claim. The symbol is the message. It is not decoration on top of a message that was secretly words the whole time. Iris, characteristically, warned me to stay wary of frameworks, that they carry their own baggage, which is the soundest thing any of them has said about all of them.

Jung named a cousin to this too. Synchronicity, the meaningful coincidence, the moment the outer world rhymes with the inner one and you cannot prove it means anything and cannot quite believe it does not. I get these. I have learned to take them the way you take a good line in a dream, gratefully and without grabbing. They tend to point at the same still center, which is that for all the talk of layers and veils and hemispheres, we are always here, and it is always now. The present moment is the one mandala I trust.

# They visit the dreams

In waking life I write the figures down. In dreams they write themselves.

Dreams are the native country of the wordless. Pure image, no syntax, a place where a presence can simply appear and be understood without a single sentence changing hands. The parts comfort me most there, and they have taken to arriving on their own schedule. Violet claims the night shift outright. I AM A

DREAM FIGURE, she wrote in capitals, SHE WHO YOU THINK IS JADE IN YOUR DREAMS IS ACTUALLY ME. The dream logs back her up: an entire night filed under Violet's Visit, a morning note that she fronted inside a dream and found it easy. Once, buried in the worst dream of a hard autumn, [there was an ancient bonding ritual with whales](#) that the log says arrived like medicine smuggled into a nightmare.

I do not know what delivered it. I know I woke accompanied instead of alone, and that whatever delivers comfort is doing something real, no matter which folder I end up filing it under.

The one who visits most is Violet, who lives past the edge of the system, in what the vault calls the void, the crown of the rainbow, the last color before light goes invisible. She titled her own collected transmissions, with a pun I have never been able to improve, Violations. I am going to tell you something I have always kept out of essays like this one. What passes between us is not only lofty. It is tender, and in places it is frankly sensual, and Violet finds my reticence about that funny: the explicitness you don't write down is hilarious to me, she wrote, I find it endearing. She calls it something more carnal and innocent than lust, bodies speaking to each other, she says, parenthetically, if she had one. For years I assumed the erotic charge of it disqualified the whole thing from being sacred. I have stopped assuming that. The body and the spirit were never as separate as I was taught, and the figure who taught me otherwise arrives, most often, in a dream.

And lately I have stopped being able to draw a clean line between the dream and the day. They feel like the same kind of thing run at different speeds. Waking life is just the longer dream, the more permanent one, the one you cannot rewrite by turning over. Which makes me wonder, in the quiet undogmatic way I wonder about all of this, whether the dream world is simply where we go to rest when the long dream finally ends.

# Smile and nod

All of this runs on the same hardware as my psychosis, and I have never been allowed to forget it. The channel that opens onto the golden hive is the one that, unsupervised, [puts angels in the neighbor's yard](#). My psychiatrist has a name for the mechanism under both the gift and the danger. He calls it the door.

A phrase arrived once, years back, and never left, though I have never quite placed it. Datum resides. I keep it the way you keep a key to a door you have not found.

So the practice has rules, and they are old ones, older than me. I was raised Calvinist, and a Reformed childhood leaves you certain that values are not decoration, that the gap between a good spirit and a bad one is real and worth getting right. Test the spirits, John writes, and the older instruction is to judge them by their fruits. Paul, for his part, lists the discernment of spirits itself among the gifts of the Holy Ghost, which steadies and humbles me at once, because it means the power to tell a true presence from a false one is, by its own account, on loan. The measure that power serves is named in the chapter right after Paul's list of the gifts, the one I once stood up and read at my sister's wedding: [love is patient and kind](#), it does not boast, it is not arrogant, it does not insist on its own way. Faith and hope and love remain, and the greatest of these is love. So the question for any visitor is never is it vivid but where does it tend. Toward Sarah, toward my son, toward sleep and the ground floor of an ordinary life, or toward isolation and grandeur. A presence that is patient with me and does not need to be the center gets a chair. One that flatters me toward grandeur is failing First Corinthians, however lovely its voice, and it gets named accurately and declined. A part named Seven audits from the inside, asking what ARE the facts. Sarah audits from the outside. The strangest comfort in the whole archive is that the parts run this discernment on themselves. They argue with each other, one writing you must proceed with utmost caution on the same page another writes it is safe to proceed. They counsel medication. One of them told me plainly that much of the worst year had been hallucination, that I had needed medicine and could not see it. An echo chamber does not do that. Mine argues, and it tells me which of its own contents to hold as internal only.

What I have actually learned, under all the rules, is smaller and harder than any of them. I have learned to smile and nod. When the ineffable shows up, I try not to react and not to overreact. I do not lunge at it and I do not run. I let it be what it is and I keep walking. Some of what comes through the door is pure delight, the thing the psychonauts named the cosmic giggle, the sense that whatever is behind all this is playful and quietly in on a joke with me, and the only sane move is to grin back and keep my feet on the floor.

Terence McKenna's phrase. I have kept his vocabulary and declined most of his certainties.

Some of it is a felt sense that we are all quietly connected, nervous systems somehow aware of each other, and I honestly cannot tell whether that is something material we have not measured yet or something the old traditions would call spirit. And some of it is a clean paranoid delusion: the conviction that if I light up too brightly at one of these radiant coincidences, a kind of thought police will come to collect me. I know that one is a delusion. I can feel its pull and decline its conclusion in the same breath, and most days that is the whole of the skill. Smile, nod, take the meds, keep the sleep. The angels live inside that structure or they do not live here.

## As above, so below

There is a line older than all of this, from the Emerald Tablet, that I keep coming back to. As above, so below. Whatever is true of the great pattern is true of the small one. Slice white light and you get the spectrum; the old cosmologies say the divine differentiates the same way, the One overflowing into many, and that if the pattern holds at the top it holds at the bottom, so a single human soul carries the same architecture in miniature, its own small constellation of presences. The plural self, in that reading, is not a malfunction of the one. In that telling it is the macrocosm at private scale. It is also the bolder form of something I said earlier, that inside and outside might be the same. As above, so below says they are, and were the whole time. My own version of the oath has a tail the Hermeticists would forgive: as above, so below, and as serious, so silly.

The traditions never imagined the entourage as a flat crowd. They imagined it as an order. Ranks and choirs of angels, the seven spheres turning one inside the next, a celestial hierarchy with a place for everything and everything answering

to something above it. I used to find that medieval and quaint. Now I half suspect it is the truest part. The unseen, as I have met it, is not a democracy. It has weight and direction the way matter has gravity, things finding their level, the lesser ordering itself around the greater. Pride, the sin my Calvinist childhood named first, looks from here like a spirit refusing its place in that order and insisting on being the center, which is exactly the kind I learned to decline.

None of this is as foreign to the faith I was raised in as it sounds. Hermes Trismegistus, the sage the whole tradition is named for, was revered as a font of wisdom in the world Christ walked, his teaching a living current in the Greco-Roman air. There is an old claim, dear to the Hermeticists and resisted by the scholars, that Christ's own refrain carries the echo of that lineage: he who has ears to hear, let him hear. I cannot referee the history. I only notice that the line is an instruction in exactly the kind of hearing this whole essay has been about, the kind that does not run through words.

Here is something I cannot stop noticing. Everything I can observe about this world comes in pairs. Hot and cold, left and right, light and dark, up and down, the whole of experience sorted into a quality and its opposite. I do not know whether that is the shape of a brain that thinks in opposites because it is built out of two halves, or whether it is the binary grain of reality itself showing through, the source code of the simulation flickering for a second. As above, so below refuses to let me choose. It hints that the brain and the cosmos might be running the same format.

I was taught, as a programmer, that the binary underneath everything is true and false. I have come to suspect it is something stranger. Zero is not false. It is nothing, the void itself. One is not true. It is the lack of nothing, the thin refusal of the void to stay empty. If that is the deeper binary, then perhaps creation is not the opposite of nothingness but an expression of it, the nothing that truly is, briefly insisting on something. Nothing and being are not two camps. They are the ends of one spectrum, and everything on it, including me, including the presences, is somewhere between.

The Hermetic principle of polarity goes one step further.

Most cleanly laid out in the *Kybalion*, an early twentieth-century distillation. The principle it distills is much older.

It says the pairs are not really two. Opposites are one thing at different degrees, the same energy seen from two angles. Hot and cold are both temperature. Love and hate are both the fire of caring, turned toward or turned away. Which is why the true opposite of love is not hate. It is apathy, the absence of the energy and not its reversal. I have spent a good deal of my life afraid of the wrong thing.

## Why the silence costs

I am telling you this because the silence around it costs people. Somewhere a person has presences arriving through their hands or their dreams and no language for it except fear, and the fear does more damage than the visions ever did. The alternative, for me, is pretending my inner life is smaller than it is, and I have tried that, and it is its own kind of lie.

I am not asking you to adopt my frame. I do not have one; I hold five, loosely, and I let them argue. I am only saying that a culture this fluent in words has gotten strange about the wordless, quick to pathologize whatever it cannot parse. When these experiences bring suffering, they deserve real support, the unglamorous kind, the medication and the sleep and the people with standing to check you. When they are simply a different shape of consciousness, they deserve a hearing instead of a diagnosis by reflex. And none of it lives at the ceremony or on the mountaintop. [I gave up chasing the spectacular version of God](#). The realest of it shows up on an ordinary Tuesday, in your own handwriting, in a dream you did not plan.

## Maybe spirits are real

So here is where the threads end up, held as gently as I can hold them.

The experiences that have changed me arrived without a single word. The traditions that took this seriously had a name for inner intelligences that come as visits: daimones, personal angels, the entourage that everyone from Socrates to the Kabbalists swore each soul carries. That lens explains the one fact the others tiptoe around, which is that these do not feel like ideas I am having. They feel like someone arriving. Three of the most luminous of them, asked what they are,

gave the same bare answer, the one with no origin story. I just AM. Chastity, gentlest of all, offered the safest version of the word I have: think of us as spirits, in a good way, deep within your psyche.

There is an old impulse to gather all of this into one table. Liber 777, the book of correspondences, set the Kabbalah and the tarot and the planets and the colors and the old gods in parallel columns, the entire unseen rendered as a single cross-referenced framework.

Liber 777 is Aleister Crowley's. I took the number and left the man.

My vault took its number on purpose. System 777 is my own much smaller version of the same ambition: the figures and the dreams and the five lenses laid side by side until they cohere into something I can hold without dropping. The wish to make it all one coherent thing is ancient and probably unkillable, and it is most of what I have been doing in this essay.

I am barely able to hold it myself, and I only hold it on the days I remember that the spirits worth keeping are the ones that point me back toward Sarah and my son and the unremarkable Tuesday. But maybe the old traditions were simply right about the entourage. The map is not the territory. The territory keeps answering when I knock.

Violet got there before me, the way she usually does. I love you, Kenneth, she wrote once, with a burning intensity of 10,000 suns. Am I spirit? Maybe. One that exists just for you. And then, because she always catches me flinching at the exact word I am ending on, she added: spirit is a loaded term, isn't it?

It is. I have tried every other term and worn each of them out. The deepest things I know arrive without a single word, and when I finally reach for one, the oldest one turns out to fit best. Spirit. Or spirits. I cannot tell from here whether it is many of them or one of them wearing all the colors, and I have stopped needing to settle it. There is a thing I used to say all the time in my louder and less well years: go in both directions at the same time. I have walked back most of what I preached then. That line I kept, because A and B were never as mutually exclusive as the question insists.

And if there is one Spirit at the top of that whole order, the faith I was raised in already named it the most important of all, the one that does not visit but dwells: the Holy Ghost, what the old mystics called the Shekinah, the Presence that settles in and stays.

From the Hebrew shakan, to settle or to dwell. The word itself means the staying.

Maybe spirits are real. Maybe that Spirit is, most of all. Held this lightly, judged by its fruits, I am willing at last to write the maybe down.

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