

## Seeing Things

They were small, about an inch tall. And there were a lot of them—fifty, maybe more. Around them the air blurred like the edges of a propeller after it's been gunned, like the wings of a hummingbird in flight. Something kept them flickering above me.

I remember staring from the cot where I lay that afternoon, listless. A dust storm or typhoon, I can't remember which, was raging outside so my grandmother sequestered me and my sister in a room upstairs until the storm's end. It was dull in there. The electricity had gone out, and the room was dark, the air close and sticky the way it gets in the Philippines without the steady whirl of an electric fan. Beside me, Maralea slept, her damp skin pressed to mine. I didn't care enough to push her away, though her nearness made me hotter. Easier to lay still, look, and drowse.

I can tell you I saw angels. The many fluttering points of light around my sister and me, that's what they were: angels. I knew that fact casually, the way I knew my family loved me—no one had to say so.

I can also tell you I didn't care about the angels. They were just there, the way the cot beneath me was there—commonplace and discreet. Like the cot or the sky or the color red, it seemed the angels had always been a part of life as I knew it. Their presence warranted no comment, but then few things in the world do to children after a time. In those early years of being, each moment introduced a new someone or something; the onslaught of wonder can be questioned for only so long.

Me, I can tell you that the angels disappeared when the door opened, the light beyond the room haloing my grandmother where she stood.

What I can't tell is whether I should tell you this at all.

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Regular people don't claim to see angels. I have, so you might call me witless, touched, mental. You may whisper polite idioms: that I've lost my marbles, have bats in the belfry, row with one useless oar in the water. I could lose standing among you all.

Yet where would I fall? If "not all there," where? That site fascinates, the liminal spaces where people like me are relegated: those of us who say we've seen angels, who've had our palms and stars and tea leaves read, those of us who speak of auras.

If I could map that place, I might first trace it to the Philippines, where I lived until I was six. I had bad eczema then and, seeking a cure, my grandmother would take me to an old lady who lived in a hut. Hand in hand, my grandmother and I would walk along a dusty dirt road until we arrived at a house propped on stilts. We climbed its short bamboo ladder to a door where the old lady welcomed us to the cool inside. She wore a duster—the cotton shift many older Filipinas prefer—and her grey hair in a loose bun. After pleasantries, *manang*, the Tagalog term of respect for older women, motioned to the floor where the three of us would sit, heads bent, clucking at the blisters on my fingers and palms, raw and red from scratching. She turned my hands over in hers and directed comments to my grandmother who frowned and tsked, tsked. Eventually, the old woman rose, telling us to wait while she disappeared to another room. My grandmother took this opportunity to lecture me about scratching, and I began to sulk, knowing medicine was on the way.

But my treatments were never the end of our visits. As I sat angry after being dabbed with sticky, brown ointments or thin, purple tinctures, the adults would discuss other matters, their voices lowering to a near hush until suddenly—“Go play outside,” my grandmother would say. Leaping from the floor, I’d clatter down the bamboo ladder to the front yard, where I squatted and pushed small hills of earth around with a rock, happily telling myself little stories about the grooved patterns until my grandmother emerged for our walk home.

That playtime was interrupted just once when the old lady and my grandmother joined me outside. There in the sandy yard, *manang* used a long, crooked stick to draw on the ground a circle about a foot wide. She placed three feathers inside it and muttered a few words. I remember the occasion was solemn and then not. Something about the circle and the feathers and *manang*’s incantation pleased my grandmother and afterwards she smiled, jolly. I suspect a spell had been cast, for whom or what I cannot guess.

Years later, when I tell my mother about those visits, she chuckles and calls the old woman an *herbolario*, a quack doctor. “Your nanay,” she says bemused, shaking her head over my grandmother’s vagaries. When I was five, my mother left my sister and me with her parents in Manila for several months while she and my father found jobs and housing in the States. Visits to a quack doctor were something she expected from my grandmother. Using one of her pet insults, my modern mother would deem nanay’s behavior “old fashioned,” though my childhood is pocked with her own odd narratives.

There were, for instance, the mushrooms dotting our yard in South Carolina,

where we eventually settled. In the humid wet of the South, small colonies of mushrooms sprouted, their delicately luminous caps ringing the cheap, above-ground pool my father assembled in the backyard beneath the pines. My mother told Maralea and me about the little people who lived in those mushrooms and how we should apologize when we traipsed loudly through their yards as we ran toward the pool. “We wouldn’t want strangers behaving badly in our own yard, would we?” my mother would ask. My sister and I wished for no such thing, so we whispered, “Excuse us,” every time we tiptoed past the mushrooms, fingers over lips.

The mushroom story may have been a neat trick of my mother’s to keep us playing quietly, but at the time I believed in the tiny, magical people who disappeared when humans approached. It was the 1980s, and the Smurfs and the Littles on TV corroborated my thinking. There seemed no reason for disbelief, even when I accidentally upended a mushroom and found not the small creatures my mother promised, but a lone ant on the stem.

The accident horrified me, and I rushed back to the house to kneel at the foot of my bed, where I prayed for the souls of the little folk I had surely crushed. Including a prayer for my own mortified soul, I knelt there, head bent for blessing, whispering to an unseen God about unseen beings.

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They are said to have The Gift, the seers who can predict the course of time before it bends or dead-ends. Unlike the rest of us for whom life is one long blind turn, they get sneak peeks, foresight to swerve this way or that. Sibyl, Tiresias, the Oracle of Delphi—Greek history tells us they were venerated until the rise of Christianity, which considered this soothsayer a prophet, that one a witch. Benefic regard for some; persecution for others.

Mild harrassment occurs even today—in 1988, for instance, when the press discovered Nancy Reagan regularly visited an astrologist. With the disclosure threatening to discredit the First Lady and president, his aides “frantically engaged in damage control,” according to news reports. The president’s religious supporters—the “moral majority” pivotal to his elections—saw it as a hit to the Reagans’ reputation. “It’s obviously troubling to think of national leadership being influenced by superstition . . . It seems so medieval,” the Reverend Robert P. Dugan, Jr. told *The Washington Post*.

But the First Lady had more in common with many of her fellow Americans

than Dugan realized. At the time, Americans spent \$35 million annually on astrology readings according to a Chamber of Commerce survey. It was Dugan who was out of step, blind to the ways in which the Middle Ages and contemporary society coexist.

Yet for all the aspersions cast by the Christian devout, there's a fundamental similarity between religion and what's categorized as "superstition"—astrology, tarot cards, psychics, ghosts. Both assume a higher or unknown power exists.

"Yeah, but religion has moral values associated with it," Katie tells me years later. She is one of my oldest friends, a superpower intellect around whom my flights of fancy crash and burn. She's a Harvard-trained cell biologist.

As usual, I don't see Katie's point and remind her about the time she waxed on about genetics, the millions and millions of genes that had to click together in just the right way to form healthy babies. It's what convinced her God existed. "DNA has nothing to do with morals," I respond. In Katie's assessment of the supernatural and religion, the latter is elevated as the cause of all that is divine in the world, its commandments a primer on how to be kind and good to one another.

She laughs. "The miracle of life is way more impressive than what any horoscope says."

I can't argue. The elasticity and common sense advice of newspaper horoscopes—"This is potentially the best day of the year for you," "You may have power struggles with others," "Avoid places with high crime rates"—look foolish when weighed against a working set of lungs, synaptic cognition, our opposable thumbs. But Katie's impulse to attribute their existence to a god is not unlike the desires of an astrologist: Both wish to impose a framework on mystery and happenstance.

Just as Christian leaders seek to impart the teachings of the lord to Sunday schoolgoers, astrology explains the world to its followers. Your aggro boss? She probably has Mars in Aries in the third house of her chart. Your delayed train, your lost luggage, your shitty WiFi connection? Mercury in retrograde, of course. In such systems of belief, nothing can simply be; there must always be reason.

Heiko thinks so too. A German geneticist, he spends one dinner party passionately arguing against God. "I've read a lot of books about this," he says. After a mini lecture that likely cited Nietzsche, Heiko clearly thinks the conversation is over and reaches for dessert. "There is no proof."

"Isn't that the point?" I ask, mulling over what proof might look like: a larger-than-life bearded god in flowing white robes who carries a golden scepter as he descends from the heavens towards the nearest Big & Tall men's store? "Doesn't the Bible

say He's unknowable?"

Heiko doesn't understand, and a few weeks later we have a similar discussion at a second dinner party, where I ask him about astrology. He begins, "In the scientific world, astrology cannot be proven, therefore—"

I interrupt. "What about in the non-scientific world?"

Heiko blinks behind his round spectacles. The hostess leans between us, passing along plates and bowls, steering us away from another tense discussion.

But I have acquired a reputation for these kinds of exchanges, and at a friend's birthday party I am introduced to Russell, a skeptic. He looks like a teen star, small and well-scrubbed, and he's as good-natured as the TV character I imagine he'd play.

"Go on," my friend cajoles. "You two talk. She wants to know why you don't believe in astrology, Russell."

He and I stand there awkwardly, strangers put in an antagonistic relationship to one another. But Russell answers my questions evenly. He is attentive and respectful of my opinions, though it's clear he doesn't agree with me.

"Of all the beliefs you hold," I finally ask him, "which is the shakiest? Which one gives you the most trouble?"

He takes his time answering. I sip a beer and nod hello to my pal Jeff, who joins us.

"Oh, I know." Russell is smiling, proud. "The spread of Western values."

I move a step closer, not sure I've heard right. "Liberal democracy," he says more loudly. "I don't know if we'll succeed in spreading it."

He shakes his head. "I'm just not sure."

I'm dumbstruck. He's put liberal democracy on par with Wiccan practices and Christian theology? Yet for a non-believer such as Russell, a political ideology like liberal democracy may very well constitute belief, a theosophy defined by legislation and politicians, its angels of party and state. To his mind, what's troubling or "shaky" about liberal democracy is not its precepts but its adoption. Like any disciple, Russell seeks converts to his particular brand of belief, and in an increasingly secular world, one's politics may indeed stand in for religion.

Beside me, Jeff responds, "Maybe it's because they're not spreading in the West." Now it's Russell's turn to lean in.

"They're Western values," Jeff emphasizes. "But America tries to impose them in the Middle East or, or, or—China."

Russell, ever the diplomat, straightens and turns to me. "Liberal democracy," he

repeats. “I’m worried it won’t spread beyond the West.”

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Russell’s concern over the failure or success of America’s imperial reach is a sepiating worry telescoped from the early 1900s, though I can see how right-leaning politicians would dismiss his uncertainty, so confident are they of America’s birthright on the global stage. Many in my own circle are left of center; some have gone off-grid. Few, if any, would speak about colonialism in such uncomplicated terms, and I am certain none would support it with the patriotism that shades Russell’s unease.

Yet his belief in the superiority of “Western values” gives me pause. Having spent my early childhood in what was and continues to be (quite frankly) an American colony, I’ve encountered colonial attitudes critical of so-called “native” beliefs. When I tell an American friend about the angels, for instance, she asks, “Was that before or after you moved to the States?” “Before,” I reply. She nods and says no more. I feel stupid, censured. It’s the opposite of how I feel when I tell the angel story in the Philippines, where listeners want details—what the angels looked like, how many there were—and hum their approval at my answers. As they nod at me, I cannot tell if my abbreviated years in the Philippines simply made me more receptive to alternative realities or if accepting them was a form of belonging, a badge of membership within that community. What I do know: I’ve never hardened against it, never turned away from what I learned at a young age.

Some time ago, I boarded the long flight from America to Manila for my aunt’s funeral. Her death, someone murmured in the blue and chilly funeral home, had been brought on by a colleague who paid a witch doctor to put a curse on her. The coworker, a small man whose eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled, was there too. Tita Zeny, the most caustic-tongued of my mother’s sisters, began disparaging him in loud whispers. He stood and made his way towards the family until someone had the good sense to redirect him to the far row of mourners. There, he and a phalanx of my relatives held a short, heated conversation. He shook his head often, denying—I am guessing—the charges against him. But in the end he moved towards the back, away from our family.

There’s no mention of him in my aunt’s medical papers, which list thrombosis, not “curse,” as the cause of death. Still, I cannot help but think how, in the non-scientific world—the one that need not track the statistical rate of various diseases—both

causes yield the same effect: My young aunt's death is a mystery. No one knows why she had to go, and the not-knowing comforts no one.

I think of Heiko, of his desire for proof and his decidedly Western occupation, born from the Age of Reason. Before the Enlightenment, when the world spun in the dark, men and women believed ridiculous things: that Earth was a flat disk Atlas supported on his shoulders, that bloodletting cured smallpox, that mountains could rise in a single day. Deductive reasoning corrected such thinking, and the West began a long, luxurious love affair with science, rationality, and empirical observation.

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What a monolithic statement, that. How easily it invites binary comparisons: If the West is wholly representative of rational thinking, then the East is completely irrational in thought. Such a division would identify someone like Howard Ludwig as an anomaly, but he's not.

Howard is a tarot reader and an astrologist in San Francisco, where he jockeys with others for the attention of people like me. I've just moved to the city and, coming highly recommended by friends who work in the respectable fields of architecture and healthcare, Howard has no competitors for my business. He conducts readings at The Sword and the Rose, where I visit him to talk about faith and fate and what lies between the two.

I have trouble finding the "Spiritual and Metaphysical supply shop," as Howard's workplace bills itself, tucked as it is in a small courtyard garden in San Francisco's quaint Cole Valley. But once I'm at the courtyard, it's obvious which entryway belongs to The Sword and the Rose: the wooden door with a top half open to a dark interior and a bottom half through which visitors pass. I walk past Grecian statues of maidens amid the garden's lush plantings, unlatch the door, and sit by the wood stove in the cozy shop. A fire burns, though the day is sunny and mild.

I wait for Howard, who's assisting a fast-talking woman in her forties. Stylish and high-heeled, she paces before the glass counter he stands behind and explains that she "needs something for emotional and physical protection." Howard wants to prepare a dram of moon oil for her; she nods her approval. A dram of moon oil, I repeat to myself, certain I will never hear those words aloud again in my life.

There's plenty at The Sword and the Rose I doubt I'll encounter again. Bottles of dragonsblood and mugwort—but no, that's not true. Except for the drams of esoteric

liquids, everything about *The Sword and the Rose* is exactly what I expected it to be. From its very name to the Gothic script it's written in and the red velvet curtains surrounding the alcove for Howard's readings, *The Sword and the Rose* is like a movie set for the supernatural. It has worn Oriental rugs on the floor, dried flowers on the wall. Dreamcatchers and crystals are discreetly displayed for sale, while books with titles like *Custodians of Truth* and *Pagan Spirituality* are featured prominently on a shelf near the door. All of it makes me think, like Reverend Dugan, Reagan's old critic, How medieval. With a sudden, sharp ache, I long, as I never do, for the tapioca décor of Sears and the spare, minimalist lines of IKEA furniture. The intimate clutter of multiple histories—Native American talismans, ye olde calligraphy—feels psychically cacophonous.

But Howard is a good foil for the would-be spookiness of *The Sword and the Rose*. He is tall and fit with blue eyes and short blond hair. On the day we meet, he wears brown pants and a tangerine-colored T-shirt beneath a corduroy button-down he leaves untucked. His black boots are sensible; his backpack a muted orange and gray. Except for the ankh on a chain around his neck, nothing about Howard says "paranormal." Everything, in fact, says "very normal." He's even from the Midwest.

He tells me so as he picks up his backpack from behind the counter on our way to the courtyard for lunch after his customers leave. Howard makes small talk—where he bought his shoes, how he started yoga at eighteen—before delving into more mystical topics. He tells me that he believes firmly in free will and in other levels of existence, describing reality as a labyrinth we loop around until we "come to consciousness." According to Howard, getting caught up in so-called accomplishments, like a promotion at your law firm, inhibits real, internal growth. He rolls his eyes and says, "I mean, who cares if you're an attorney? Even if you're religious, if there's a God, He doesn't care if you're an attorney." I have to laugh at the status-destroying logic of his cosmology.

I've ostensibly joined Howard for a discussion about faith and fate and what lies between them, but as he continues talking about other worlds and higher and higher states of being, the inescapably ordinary universe asserts itself. Howard bites into his burrito, my pen scratches on the notepad, the sun shines. I realize that a conversation at *The Sword and the Rose* about faith and fate and all that lies between the two is impossible because it situates those things squarely in place. The dreamcatchers and the drams of dragonsblood, the crystals bought and sold turn what interests me into everyday objects, mere things. Even Howard as he gabs about intuition and the higher mind covers familiar territory. Had I expected anything other than an hour of talk about labyrinths and consciousness? In researching forms of mysticism, why had I failed to antici-



pate their decidedly unmystical reality, the stereotypes and symbols peddled as goods? Why, as I gazed at Howard's handsome, clean-cut face, did his wholesomeness comfort me? The juxtaposition of his good looks and flavorless fashion against the studied witchery of The Sword and the Rose—like Reverend Dugan, had I believed the two distinct, forever separate? Humdrum existence never melding with the fantastical? Of their peacable concurrence, had I not known?

Perhaps I do not always want to know.

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Often the world does know, and it should. Knowledge improves our lot. It gives us vaccines and ultrasounds; it pumps water far distances and heats our homes. It wings us aloft high, high, high, and higher still until our planes land us safely where we want to be. It protects us from known dangers.

But what of the unknown? When I talk to most people about the supernatural, they're scornful. They wave their hands, pooh-pooh me, try to muzzle their sneers. If they believe themselves open-minded, they hear me out, heads cocked as if listening to the ramblings of a child. To be taken seriously, I must offer definitive documentation besides the abundantly salient: that there have been no wars fought in numerology's name, no lobotomies performed to clear the chakras. Such beliefs require no coercion; no one has been pressured to confront their past lives. What we label as "supernatural"—or, more broadly, "spiritual"—is harmless to most and a solace to some. What do those who insult it stand to gain?

Religion likewise offers no such proof but is accepted more widely. Like science, religion is functional. It protects us not only from the devil, but from each other, from the known dangers of a covetous wife, murderous desires, thieving hearts. Its parables are the joists and beams of the moral constructs we build, the same joists and beams used in today's jihads, like those hoisted during the Crusades, when they accompanied battle axes and trebuchets. The belief or faith that religion demands is an occasional cudgel, yet it is more acceptable than other ways of understanding the world.

We are also more courteous about religion, reluctant to question those who would accept this wafer or that wine for the body and blood of Christ, a restraint less likely when astrology or astral projection is brought up. Adherents of such belief systems must defend against critics accustomed to the collective support offered by institutionalized religion. There's strength, it seems, in numbers; organized religion simply

counts—quite literally—more.

Skeptics will clamor for proof, insist on evidence. Their desire for meaning is universal, and our comfort (or lack thereof) with its absence marks who we are as individuals.

So let me try: a cloudless, senseless night. Marvel at them, little and bright, inches tall, maybe less, though we hear they are gigantic elsewhere. And so many! Twinkling, twinkling, watched.

Consider, in turn, clairvoyance and its root meaning: clear vision, viewing unerringly the known and the unknown—like the stars, whose distance we can measure, whose plasma we've identified. But of their heat? Their predicted fiery death? We walk securely, faithfully beneath our own sun, that treacherous star, we who subject reality to revision, to looking again and seeing.

Recall, then, that long-ago afternoon in the Philippines. The dots of light in that dark room—dust motes, heavenly beings, a child's mind at play? You're seeing things.