

My Magdalene: Divinity and Desire

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No needlepoint homilies or gilded icons adorned a single surface in my childhood home: no anguished Jesuses, haloed Madonnas, or Holy Doves. Likewise, the absence of brass Buddhas, many-armed Taras, or doe-eyed Shiva with his glorious blue face. In our house, religious accoutrements consisted of a pair of bronze candlesticks (Grandma's), an unpretentious menorah, and Sunday bagels and lox. How, then, did I, raised in a secular Jewish home, fall under the spell of Mary Magdalene, Christianity's favorite sinner after Eve?

It's the early sixties, and I'm a teen innocent of erotic love but brimming with romantic affectations. I lose myself in movies, *Splendor in the Grass*, a favorite: insanity induced by sex; an amour fou. Billie sings it right: *Good morning, heartache, thought we'd said goodbye last night*. Passion exacts its price, an invitation to despair. Female desire is a sure road to trouble, and even the strong dames of cinema—Crawford, Stanwyck, Davis—get crazy or suicidal when they lose their man. (I hadn't yet met the alternative

narratives of Lucille Clifton, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, or discovered Magdalene's epic tale.)

My sister's room, forbidden to a snooping younger sister, pulses with the allure. Within her domain await the keys to womanhood, secrets the uninitiated must somehow obtain. (What younger sister isn't tempted to fiddle with the lock and break into the treasure house: lacy bra, nylons, fake clip-on pearls?) The book is on her wicker night table, face down, the poetess's name (we said "poet-ess" then) embellished in red: *Edna St. Vincent Millay*. I skim the starred stanzas.

Time does not bring relief; you all have lied
Who told me time would ease me of my pain!

TaDA TaDA TaDA TaDA TaDA. Before I comprehend the words, my heart recognizes the thumping iambic pentameter of its own beat. Tiny flares of light wink at the corner of my eyes; I catch a flicker of my own dark shining pushing at the bars of her cage. The beautifully brutal voice, the love-struck lamentations, the eerie sensation I'm reading my own future diary—I'm way too young to know but somehow I understand that one day I will have to pay for the sin of *luxuria*, love's lavish madness and the body's thunderous demands.

I whisper Millay's lines in bed. Cadence and meter pacify the churning. The poetess herself is a dazzling creature—part vulnerable child, part rock-star glamorpuss, transgressive in love and art, the first of many women artists whose work I will devour, ravenousness being an attribute of Eros. (The *vita* of Magdalene, her role as Christ's concubine, is still waiting in the wings.)

Impulses tug at me; I'm awakened to longing. I go to Mass with my friend Pamela and stare at a mural of the crucifixion, my gaze fixed on the weeping beauty in the red cape cupping Jesus' feet. I don't know how to put any of this together: love and death, my

wish to be empty and full. The radiance of grief. In dreams I wander the labyrinth of Mr. Kalarsek's garden, dizzy with the smell of bursting peonies and dying lilacs. The elemental calls. My wild spirit opens her throat but dares not answer. Eros is said to be the principle of attraction. I begin carting home stray feathers, rocks, shells, shiny horse chestnuts, totems of immanence my mother calls trash and throws out. I steal back into my sister's room. Millay is suddenly gone.

I cast off childhood, get married. Have my own children. I'm drawn to the mystical, the soul's life. I study poetry, seriously. Millay is passé. Sexton and Plath speak to my native self, but their anger burns. I am searching for a myth by which to understand the paradoxes of self. Hildegard of Bingen and Simone Weil enlighten. I veer from the psychological toward the spiritual, caught in the slippage between yearning and knowledge. The changes within are subterranean. In secret I'm finding my way to howl with wolves.

I transgress. Inevitably, for ages that seems like eons, the world is fogged by grief. In the underworld I search for illumination, for an image or narrative to hang my loss on. In the famous myth, Psyche is visited nightly by her invisible lover bridegroom, the very god Eros whom she is forbidden to see. So, too, do we blind ourselves to love's dual aspects, beauty and the monstrous, which the ancient stories warn us never to ignore.

In the nineties, a renaissance of scholarship about Mary Magdalene. I am smitten anew, read the unearthed texts. Magdalene is the quintessential bad girl turned good. The whore transformed into the penitent who becomes an apostle herself. The *Beata Peccatrix*. ("But Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on the mouth. The rest of the disciples were offended and expressed disapproval.") In the new/old story about Magdalene, Jesus is her lover. We cry to the songs

in Jesus Christ Superstar. *I don't know how to love him . . . I've been changed, yes, really changed.* We get it. Love breaks us into a new self. If we survive. I have been broken. I want to survive.

Mary Magdalene is not Psyche. She exists in a Judeo-Christian world in which God is all lightness, the dark forces allotted to the devil. She's a standout in the New Testament, a favorite subject of artists. Magdalene has lost her beloved, Jesus, and thus she has lost her connection to the divine. Her Lord is dead. And isn't this how it is with us when we lose someone we love? Our world bereft of radiance and awe? I do not join a heretical cult; I am no convert. I adore no god, and yet the account of Magdalene's life reflects my search for love's radical divinity, love's incarnation of carnality, that partnership of ecstasy and death.

I begin to write poems in Magdalene's voice, persona poems that tremble with her anger.

Let them call me harlot!
I refuse
to think of myself, or you, sweet pudding,
as a boil on god's face. I refuse the Pharisee piety.
—"Letter to Martha," published in *LUNA*

Her sorrow and confusion brew in me.

That you were supposed to die—
No, I couldn't accept it.
I remember the poor child, Isaac, bound with rope
and dragged up the cliff, panic sizzling in his head:

I said, *Yeshua, it had only been a test! Our Lord
is a great dramatist.*
There will be no intervening angels this time, you said.
—"Magdalene, Rehearsed," published in *Nimrod*

What has been promised to her of this love; what does love promise?

Your mother laid her head in my lap.
Her grief has no pity for the living.
She wants to know if the Lord
has blessed us with your death.
I tell her: the Lord wounds us with love
so that we may contemplate the jewel of suffering.
—"Visitation Selpulchri: At the Tomb," published in *Green Mountains Review*

The poems pour out, answers to questions I don't know I'm asking. I begin to understand that Eros is more than the convergence of an absolute attraction; its wholeness includes wounding loss. In a late interview, Denise Levertov said imagination is a prerequisite of faith. But faith is an abstraction unless it is a lived experience. In love we feel the faith the Other holds for us and mirrors back. When the Other vanishes, we descend, like Magdalene, into our depths to search for the lost divine parts which we can only know through projection.

With Eros we inhabit the timeless realms. (Can you remember your first gasp of it, transfiguration of blood into fire?) To meet Eros is to meet mortality.

For us death is not distance . . .
That is the great secret: we are not separate bodies.
—"Vows," published in *Hayden's Ferry Review*

My understanding of Magdalene becomes a work-in-progress, dependent upon new scholarship and Vatican policies. I go to see her in Italy to view her various manifestations—the opulent Mary Magdalene of Artemisia Gentileschi, the fleshy, breasts-bared Magdalene of Titian, alongside representations of a stark

Magdalene in her later years, an anorexic hermitic Magdalene in her cave. Desire uses her the way it uses all of us. What we pursue pursues us. Sinner, seeker, devotee, lover, disciple, apostle. In our fantasies, Magdalene is each of these: infinitely unknowable, never fully contained within a single image.

Now she has gone inward, my Magdalene, into the briny meat of me. I've absorbed her and been altered. The fifth decade of my marriage approaches. These days, I rarely think of my wild girl, despite all those poems and scholarly research. She is no longer a symbol, but gnosis itself, wisdom that guides spirit and flesh.

Does the soul know when we long for an image to concretize its experience? Does the healing image appear to a hungry soul in a mystical gesture one might call love? Is it more than luck that Magdalene appeared when I faltered and needed her? I sought her. She yielded and I took everything she wished to give.