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So Damn Divine Oracle: A Wholly Irreverent Journey of Playful Contemplation and Compassionate Self-Reflection

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The So Damn Divine Oracle
A Wholly Irreverent Journey of Playful Contemplation and
Compassionate Self-Reflection

and

We Are Each Other's Oracle
An Essay Exploring the Creative, Divinatory, historical and ministerial dimensions
of the *So Damn Divine Oracle* deck



A Creative Thesis Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Divinity

Harvard Divinity School
Cambridge, Massachusetts

By Cody Hooks

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Submitted May 13, 2022

A note on the organization of this project:

The thesis is presented in two parts. The first is the creative work, the *So Damn Divine Oracle*. The second, *We Are Each Other's Oracle*, is a supplemental essay.

Abstract:

In the practice of modern tarot is a vibrant and meaningful confluence between forms of divination and the principles of spiritual care. This thesis, a creative project and supplemental essay, is the creator's personal exploration of the ministerial potential that emerges from this space. The *So Damn Divine Oracle* includes original artwork and writing; it is a playful reinterpretation of tarot, as well as a creative and scholarly study of contemplative technologies. The essay is grounded in the author's spiritual heritage, a history of both tarot and oracles, as well as "shared wisdom" and religious concepts that speak to the oracular potential of all people.

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All art, writing, and design
By Cody Hooks

The So Damn Divine Oracle

A Wholly Irreverent Journey of Playful Contemplation
and Compassionate Self-Reflection

Created by Cody Hooks



The So Damn Divine Oracle is dedicated to all the beings of my beloved chosen family

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Welcome

I'm trying to speak—to write—the truth. I'm trying to be clear. I'm not interested
in being fancy, or even original. Clarity and truth will be plenty,
if I can only achieve them.
— Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

Then I said, "What are these, my lord?" The angel who talked with me said to me,
"I will show you what they are."
— Zechariah 1:9

I speak in images. With nothing else can I express the words of the depths.
— Carl Jung, *The Red Book*

Here we are at the altar of the oracle, the oracle of our own divinity, of me myself and you yourself and, *blessedly*, we ourselves. You and I are together, right here and right now, for a moment. To share some small space with you—meeting for a blip in the vast span of eternal time and space—is a marvelous thing. Everything depends on this essential togetherness. This interbeing. This radical connectivity, where we are rooted to and in each other. I want to slow this miracle down, turn it over in my hands and notice its shape, its weight, what it could mean. I call it a "miracle" but, in truth, we could call it something else, call it so many things. A meeting of the minds. A shared journey. A divine encounter. An oracular pronouncement. Yes, all of it.

Thank you, my friend, for joining me. Let us begin. But before we go any further —

An Invitation

I am inviting you to *put down this book and just experience the cards*. Simply be with them as they are—*and as you are*. No need for fancy ritual preludes. Just pick them up. Hold them for a few minutes. Move them around, flip them over, flip through them one by one. You can even smell them, talk to them, touch them to your forehead or your heart if you desire. Just be with yourself and with the cards. Meeting your deck and welcoming it into your practice is an important step in this journey.

The Deck

This deck has a story that I need to share with you. Thank you, over time and space, for listening.

Tarot had been part of my spiritual practice for more than a decade, and for much of that time, I toyed with the idea of creating my own deck of oracle cards. The problem was, I emphatically did not consider myself an artist. So doing something like this seemed either ridiculous or hubristic. But at last, the moment was right; maybe I finally dropped my serious-face long enough to risk feeling silly. And so with a set of Crayola watercolor paints and a single black Sharpie marker, it started. I didn't have a plan for what the cards would be or how they would look. I was following intuition down an unlit path, only seeing where I was once I got there, never knowing where we would go—as it is with most of our most meaningful journeys.

But here we are. The deck consists of forty-eight cards, divided into six suites.

First Suite	Second Suite	Third Suite	Fourth Suite	Fifth Suite	Sixth Suite
Flight	Prophesy	Archangel	It's true	So	Cooking pot
Inward	Cielo	Dream	Touch	Here	Tidal
Other side	Down low	Delta	Fancy	Honey	Prayer
Shed this	Damage	Echo	Sweat	And	Death
Rest	Big Love	Medicine	Crying	Shine	Wasp Nest
Ember	Salt	Play	Revelation	Filth	Sol + Soul
Thunderclap	What is	Hallowed		Wreck	Chaff
Heal	Theft	Rot		Yes	Rose
					Perfect
					All of it

This is a motley crew you'll meet along the way. Some cards are on the serious side (like *Wreck*, *Damage*, and *Death*). Others are much more lighthearted (*Play* and *Dream*, for example). Some are straightforward images or concepts (*Thunderclap* or *Honey*), whereas others are, admittedly, sort of out there (*So*, *And*, and so on).

The cards and suites are arranged chronologically in the order I made them. And so, they can be read as a journey. But not a journey from Start to Finish. It's more like a pilgrimage, an eternal circumambulation, returning again and again to some sacred center that eludes and obscures as much as it directs and reveals. The cards speak to my own journey of healing. I offer this not as *the path* toward healing, but as another story in the trove of human experience.

The Meditations and Notes

Words can only go so far. I have found that words are often obstacles to understanding, not entryways. (Though an obstacle can become an entryway). Still, I have felt called to offer some words in the hope that when working with this deck, you never feel alone.

The deck emerged between October 2019 and January 2020. It was an artistic, creative, spiritual, mystical, meditative and mysterious process. I was in the flow. It was as if I had taken my most diffuse but urgent questions—*What am I doing here? Who am I? What is the meaning of all this*?—into the darkened caves of creativity and emerged with this oracular pronouncement. I was then tasked with trying to understand what it meant. As it would happen, I had lots of time to answer these questions. The global coronavirus pandemic upended most everyone's life. The solitude brought on by necessary distance became, for me, contemplative. I was a hermit, left with only my sacred texts and inner landscape to pour over and travel through.

The Meditations and their Notes are informed by my research, my conversations with friends and fellow seekers, and by asking, What can I say about this card that is most true, for me, right now?

A few of the Meditations are stories. Some of them are something like poetry. Others read more like a list of questions or affirmations. Some Meditations explore the origins of the words. And still others are anchored by meaningful quotes or a string of free associations. In any event, I have tried to collapse the space between us. Who is "me" and "you" is not always so clear.

In addition to the Meditations, there is a Notes section at the end (as well as a Bibliography). This is where I've gathered the sources of quotes and indirect references in the Meditations, reading suggestions, intertextual asides and etymological references that do not otherwise fit in the other parts of the deck's written material. The Notes, as much as the Meditations, reveal the webs of meaning that I have divined about the deck so far.

There are a few elements that are consistent across most Meditations. At the top of each page is the number of the card as well as the names of three cards, which are the cards that come directly before and after the one in hand. All of the Meditations have a visual description, a short invitation into what I'm seeing in the cards. Please do not let that override what *you* see in them.

The cards do not "mean" anything in particular and I should hope the cards are not limited by what I have written about them. Rather, you are catching the cards and the deck under a particular set of circumstances. Each time you or I use cards, their meaning is revealed yet again and in an entirely unique way.

Ways to Journey with the Cards

I cannot tell you how to work with this deck. The best I can do is offer some suggestions that have emerged from my own encounters with the cards, as well as readings I have facilitated for other people. Here are a few waymarkers for our trek.

We Are Each Other's Oracle

The oracle is so many things. The cards are an oracle, perhaps. But more importantly, so are we. We all have an oracular capacity, an ability to step from our mundane way of thinking into a sacred arena where we can get a better vantage point on what's happening within and around us. We are all divine and so we can all be diviners. I have done what I can by making this deck; when you meet me, you are calling on that oracle, that seer, in yourself. Our gazes meet and something emerges. The oracle is a result of our radical connectivity and our shared wisdom.

Compassion and Playfulness

Working with the cards (be it this deck or any other) can be very serious. We bring our deepest worries, anxieties and sandnesses. We bring our traumas. Our doubts. Our questions. Our most earnest longings. We bring stuff that we might never voice to another person—or that we are only beginning to voice for ourselves. This is all very meaningful. Know that, even across time and space, I care about what you carry with you into this space. I hope you can also bring along compassion for who you are and where you are emotionally, spiritually, physically or otherwise.

That being said, this deck has taught me how to shift between the serious and the silly. I created the deck with a spirit of playful curiosity. I believe the deck responds well to similar energy. Cherish your questions, but hold your answers loosely. See what happens when you do.

Foundations of Making Meaning

When I'm doing a reading with these cards for someone, I start with the **visuals**. *What do you see in the card? What pops out to you?* They'll describe what they see and I'll try to zero in on some element: a color or shape, a texture, a recurring motif. Then we move on to the **concept** for each card—*What does this word bring up?*—and play around with the word by free-associating. Only then do I layer in the **position** of the card in the overall spread. These three aspects form the foundation of meaning. When doing a reading for myself, I especially like to take stock of what the card is doing to me internally. *Is an emotion getting activated in some part of my body? Has my breathing changed? Am I more or less tense looking at this card than I was looking at the last one?* This sort of somatic data is incredibly potent.

Connections and Flow

In addition to the foundations of visuals, associations, and card position, it is also revealing to notice the connections and flow between the individual cards. Each card illuminates both the next card in a reading and the one preceding it. Within a reading, the cards are essentially a microcosm of the macrocosm of a situation, so each card speaks, in some way, to all the rest.

Directed Questions vs. Wandering About

The typical way of approaching an oracle, the tarot, or any form of divination, is to first formulate your question. This distillation makes the reading more potent and directed; there's more scaffolding for the meaning of the cards to hang on. So ask yourself: *What are my questions? Can I refine them even more? How much clarity can I take with me into this reading?* At the same time, there is something to be said for wandering about, for letting go of certitudes and tired stories and staying open to the mystery of your own emergence. As much as possible, see if you can strike a balance between these ways of approaching the oracle.

Experimentation

You'll find the best way to use this tool of divination and contemplation. You'll figure out exactly what you need to figure out. Pull one card each morning. Or put it on your altar. Or let a single word (the card name, or a word from the Meditation) rest on your heart as prayer. Pick several cards and write an epic story with them. Mix and match with other decks. Go wild. You will find your way.

Spiritual Heritage

Spend enough time with the Cards and the Meditations and you'll notice that the sources of this deck are coming from a lot of places: the natural world, landscapes I've called home, the Bible, apocryphal Christian texts, atheism, Jewish history, Buddhism, Occultism, New Age concepts, Afro-futurists, queer films, country music, Greek and Mesopotamian mythology, scholarly research, and so on. These represent the sources of my spiritual heritage—syncretic, funky, heretical and weird as it may be. I have tried, as best I can, to speak only of what I have known intimately in my own spiritual journey-work, to give credit where it is due, and to be in a wholesome and accountable relationship with the knowledge and insights I am passing on to you. If I have erred in that, the error is mine.

At times, the Meditations and Notes have an irreverence and a definite (if not also ambivalent) point of view on theological and philosophical matters, like the notion of God, the supernatural, enchantment, magic, and so on. If I should occasionally come across as more preachy than

pastoral, more raucous than refined, I can only hope something meaningful is spawned in the friction. I believe that it is our entwined wisdom—coming out of our infinitely unique perspectives and experiences—that constitutes the power of any oracle worth consulting. As much as I hold our fundamental interconnection in the greatest reverence, I also hold our differences in the highest respect.

Who we are

The deck is, in so many ways, autobiographical. All of the written materials are from my perspective, as are the cards. But you know so little about me. To remedy that, I have included a short biography at the end of this guidebook. Yet more than that, who I am is revealed across the whole deck, as a collective experience and in its pieces and parts. Vulnerability has led us here. Thank you for holding mine with me. And know that I am holding yours with you. We are, at the end of the day, just two people trying our best to be humans together. That's sacred.

Card Spreads

Here are several spreads, starting with the simplest and moving toward the more involved.

The Day's Oracle

This is a one-card spread. Simple, simple: just pick a card. You can do this whenever you need a point of focus or you can ritualize it and get into a rhythm of reading: pick a card every morning and journal while you sip some coffee, do one before bed, etc. This can be the totality of your reflection or you can take on an oracular mindset for the day or week, paying attention to any instances of the idea or image coming up in your life, conversations, memories and dreams.

Contemplation and Action

When I read for other people, two-card spreads are, very often, all we need. Worlds upon worlds can open up from the basic exercise of compare and contrast. Any two-card spread is illuminating: self and other, inner and outer, mirror and medicine, material and immaterial, then and now, head and heart, etc. Of course, be wary of binary thinking, for nothing is ever *only this* or *just that*. It's always both, and neither, and so much more.

"Contemplation and Action" is my favorite two-card spread, built from a tired religious argument about the so-called "contemplative" and "active" paths. Active people are thought to be the folks out in the world, going places and doing things for others. Contemplative people are the hermits and monastics, devoting their lives to prayer and realizing deep truths in deep silence (which, incidentally, is also done for the benefit of others). But even outside of formal religious circles, this debate rages on. In our own time, there's come to be a distaste for "thoughts and prayers," supposedly empty gestures when real actions are needed to face down injustice and relieve suffering. And yet, to give something your mental and spiritual attention, in the spirit of compassion and liberation, is a deeply transformative practice. This is the source of the insight that illuminates our paths forward. We need both—the reflective and the practical, the mirror and medicine, the contemplation and action.

Root, Trunk, Branches

This is a basic three-card spread. Hold your question in your mind and pull three cards to get insight into the *root* or origin of the situation, the *trunk* or solid core of the situation, and *branches* or directionality (potential end results) of a situation. I'm a tree-hugger, so I prefer this over the always classic *past-present-future* spread.

Sacred Journeys

This is another three-card spread, but reflected through the theme of sacred journeys or pilgrimages. Ask yourself: *Where was I? Where am I now? Where do I want to be?* These are essentially the same questions as the previous spread. However, whereas imagining a tree can help us feel more *grounded or stilled* in a particular situation, imagining a journey can help us get in touch with the sense of *movement or flow* inherent to all things.

Visio Divina

This spread draws on the monastic practice of *lectio divina*, where people will read the Bible or other sacred text in an structured way that takes them deeper and deeper into the meaning of a single verse, phrase or word. This is not just a way to read, but a way to pray—a way of prayer, in fact, to reach the very heights of mystical union with the divine. For that reason, this is more of an exploratory spread for when you don't have a particular question but just want to wander the back alleys and forgotten mountain paths of your mind and heart. I learned a version of this practice where the written text is replaced by the visual: a painting, the view from your window, something you saw on a walk, or in this case, the cards. There are two ways to go about it: Choose one card and use it to go through each stage of the practice (my preference), or choose a card for each stage of the practice (in which case, pay extra attention to the continuities between each card and your reflections on them, such that you find a through-line from beginning to end).

> *Visio* - Hush the mind and simply look. Notice everything you can. Take it in.
>
> *Meditatio* - Notice words and ideas as they bubble up. What does it make you think of? Songs you have sung? Books you've read? Stories from your past or from the show you watched last night? Free associate at your leisure. Let your imagination run wild.
>
> *Oratio* - The prayer stage. After taking such a cosmic look at things, come back in close. Among everything you've imagined, where do you feel the most ease, or resonance, or warmth. Allow some word, color or feeling to take center stage on the altar of your heart. Stay there for a while.
>
> *Contemplatio* - The last stage. The mind stops all its fuss and chatter. Absolutes don't mean anything and you feel as though you can go with the flow, rest in the glow. You can't actually force your way here. Sometimes you reach it and sometimes you don't. But it's always worth the time it takes to find out if you can.

The Year About Me

A spread for the whole year can be a way of gaining longterm perspective on life and getting more regular, focused insight into a particular month (be it a calendar month, lunar month, or some other personally meaningful unit of time, such as a natural or liturgical season). I appreciate this spread because I can revisit it regularly and see new meaningful connections emerge. One way to do this spread is to pull twelve cards, one for each month of the coming year. This is lovely to do around birthdays or new years in various calendars. An alternative way to do this spread is to draw thirteen cards: half of the cards represent the previous six months, one for the current month, and another six for the coming six months. This version is useful for when you have some recent experiences to reflect on and potentially resolve. Still another way to do this spread is to do it over the course of the year, drawing one card at the same time each month (the first or last day, the new or full moon, etc.).

Clarity from the Cloud

This spread is for when you are just trying to find your way through a cloud of confusion or diffuse, unspoken feelings. Try to come up with a few general categories (or perspectives) for what you're thinking about: changes, loss, grief, gains, trauma, history, future, perceptions, receptions, body, family, friends, etc. Then draw one card for each category. I would suggest no more than five cards for this type of reading; much more than that can easily overwhelm an already overwhelming situation. If these feelings are especially tender or rooted in trauma, be sure to seek support beyond the cards.

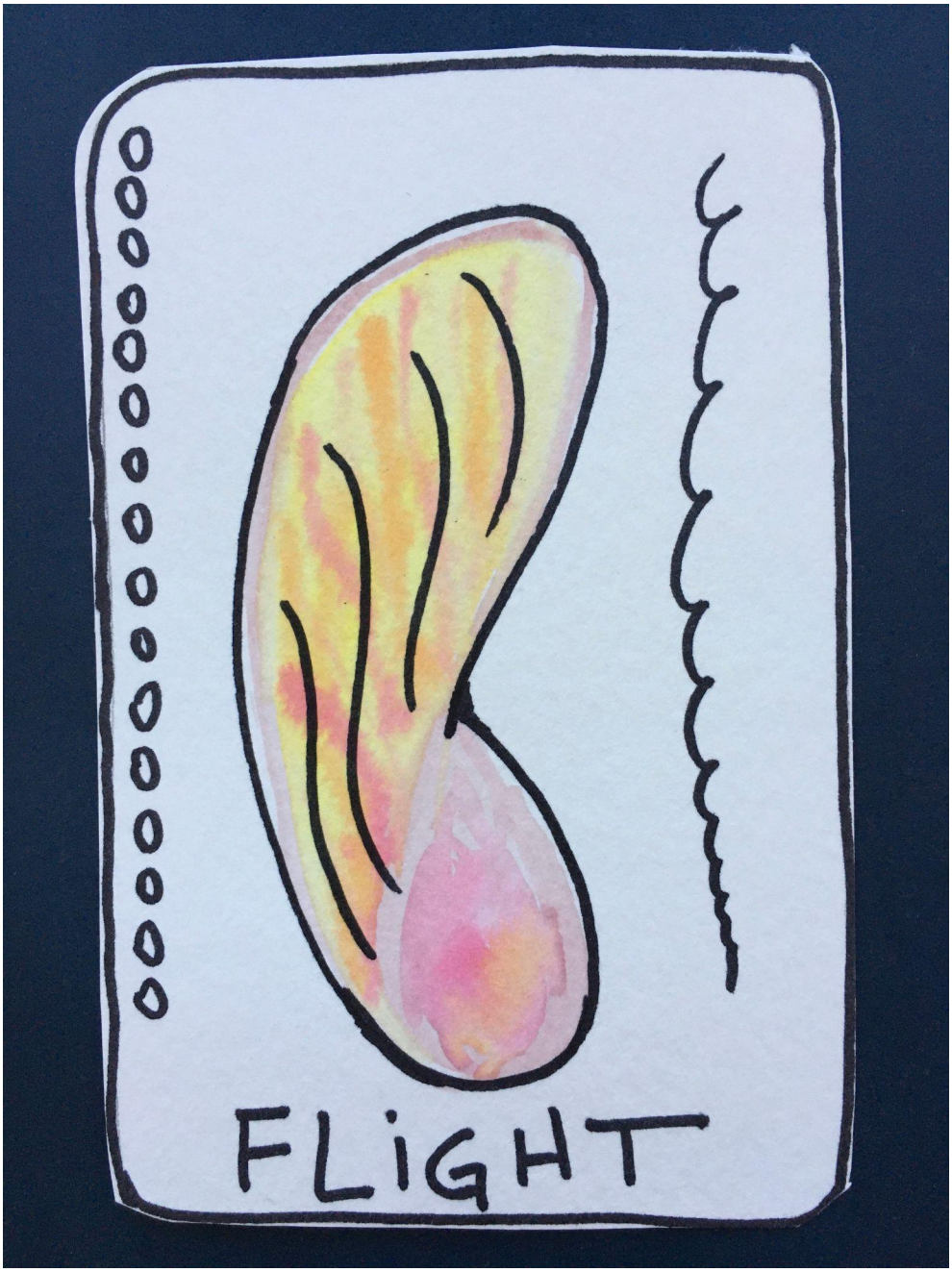
The Not-A-Spread

Shuffle the cards or toss them in the air. Lay them all out on the floor, reorder them by color or any other dimension. Just play with them, interact with them. Here, the cards are more ritual instruments than sacred text. See what happens. Anything can.

Deep Discernment

Choose a single, pressing question or situation: something you need to figure out and need sustained attention to do so. Ask your question, shuffle the deck and then, day by day and card by card, work your way through the stack. Do it with all 48 cards for questions that demand the deepest commitment to discerning the path forward. Or do it with a subset of cards: 28 for a moon cycle, 9 for a novena, 7 for a week, etc. When you get to the end, read the first card again.

Flight



Meditation on *Flight*

No. 1
Preceded, in a way, by *All of it*, followed by *Inward*

So. We begin.
I forgot the journey started here.

> *Without my meaning to, the fool's journey renewed itself through me —*

What do you notice?

> What do *you* notice?

Visually, I'm seeing a maple seed. It's autumn and the seed is stationary when I find it on the back porch, its motion implied, its true path unknown. In winter, squirrels eat the meat held within. By early spring, the ones that are left will seem to decay into strings of grass and mass, covered in frost on still cold mornings. And then, on a warmer day, they'll sprout. By the thousands and tens of thousands, they'll sprout. By the charcoal grill and between the granite graves, they'll sprout.

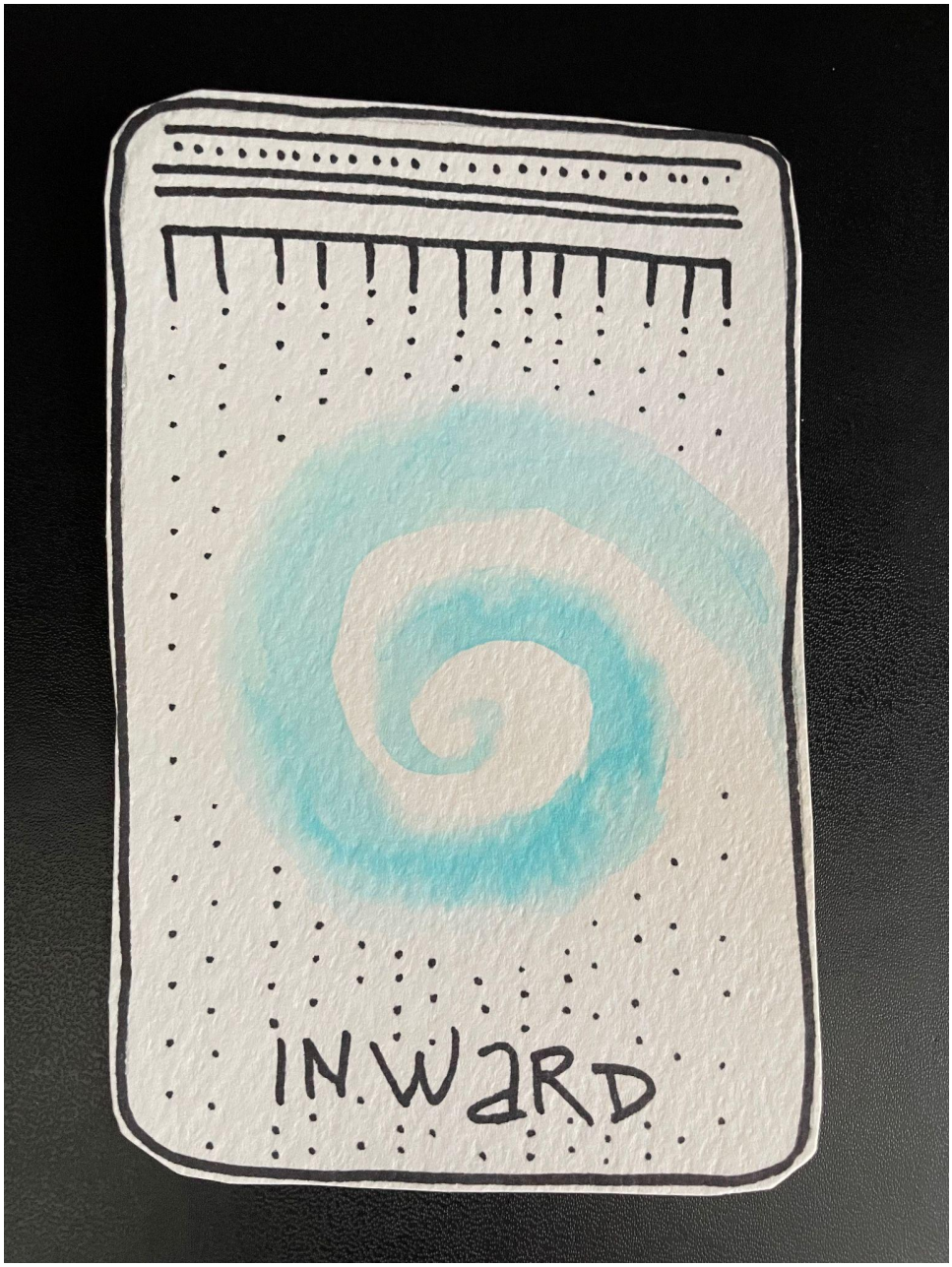
Flight comes from "flow"
Flight contains "light"
Flight has darkness, too

Flight from violence, or abuse, or a still-unnamed toxicity. (But trauma came along for the ride, didn't it? I know how it goes.) Flight from oppression in its particular forms.

> flight into mystery
> fly to the sun
> the pulse of dragons aloft

we are already in motion — and simultaneously still

Inward



Meditation on *Inward*

No. 2
Preceded by *Flight*, followed by *Other side*

inward, inward

moving inward is subtle movement — a journey to the heart, no less

"You can see beyond all that to where the other being is. You will do that when you've gone inside to see where you are — beyond the things in your which attract you and seduce you and excite you and repel you — the journey across the great ocean of existence is a journey inward. Ever in deeper and deeper, and the deeper you get in the more you reach truth."

ferocious

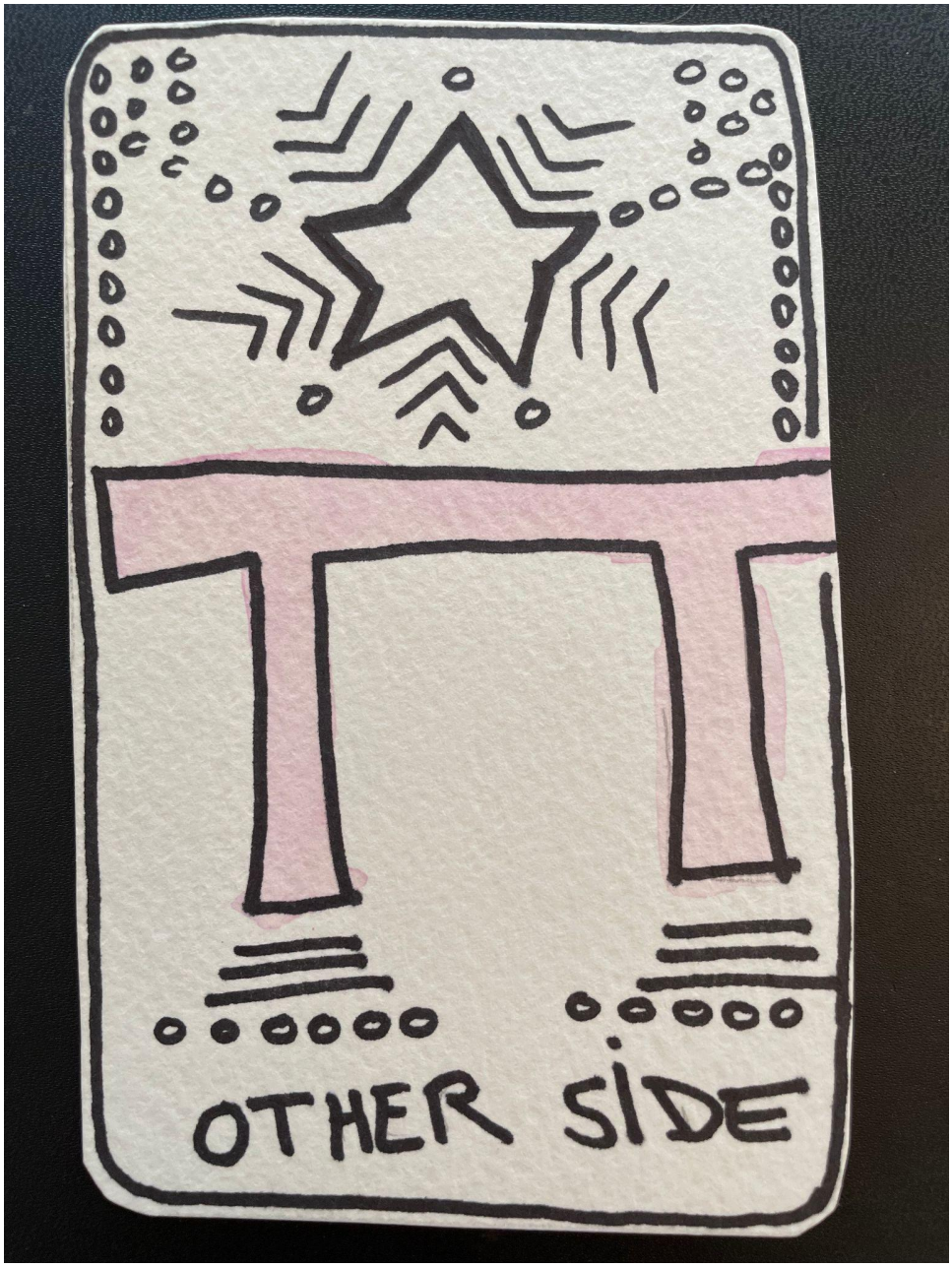
Visually, I'm seeing a blue spiral that's curling in on itself. The empty space of the card is curling inward, too. In the background, dropping from a comb-like line, are many black dots. The dots are vertically arranged, but still somewhat haphazard, irregular. The dots…the dots…the DMT dots taste like static in my mouth, the way a battery tasted as a kid (I wasn't supposed to do that), the way lighting — I'm told — tastes. Void opens.

Careful of "spiraling out of control," even if you're spiraling inward. At the same time, to lose control — to be *undone* — can be that ecstatic state they talk about.

We are strong enough for this journey.

Watch how portals emerge from within portals.

Other side



Meditation on *Other side*

No. 3
Inward - Other side - Shed this

"There is a place that is as far from here as breathing out is from breathing in."

...from here to there...how do I get from here to there…

how did you — and why?

from then to now
from now to when
from valley to crest
from life…

…to death

i meet my sorrow gazing at that gate
i can't yet go through
and i meet my stillness when i see love gazing back
through the bright emptiness of all that is

Visually, I'm seeing a type of gate, a ceremonial threshold, with two large beams and a larger crosspiece that extends past the right-hand border of the card. Above it, a giant star dances, it's connected by two arms of orbs. The gate is a soft pink — in truth, the color of sunset in New Mexico, where, in my backyard, there was a threshold of peeling juniper poles such as this, erected among the sagebrush, where I could stand and look south toward a sacred mountain whose name I will not say right now. .

I could cry thinking how short that sunset really is, and still —

"I can't imagine the bitter end of all the beauty that we're living in."

Of course, at this moment, this card may not be about such transitions of death. If not, tell me about the nature of that threshold you're looking toward

its shape and size
who built it, or how you found it
how long you've looked
and the things inside that have been changed by looking
and other little things like that

How far from that other side are you — are we — really? As close as the next breath?

A note on card order: the *Other side* seems to be out there, but really, we only got there by you going *Inward*. Go any further — and I trust you will go further — and you'll be asked to *Shed this.* What's this? That'll be determined by you and the ferryman when the time comes, and not a moment sooner.

Shed this



Meditation on *Shed this*

No. 4
From *Other side*, to *Shed this*, to *Rest*

Are you ready to drop what you've outgrown? What's become too heavy to bear? What is ready to fall from you and into the dirt underfoot?

am i?
am i what i am?

the earth is ready for
our yielding bow

whatever it is, it can't be brought along

nothing can
not a thing

✳

I love this card. One of my original eight, before I had any clue at all about what was happening to me, through me, in this creation. The image — it's quite pedestrian — comes from my home in the Southwest. The card shows an elk antler, fallen to the dry ground, watered in by rain, slowly resting further into the ever receptive depths. When I made the card, I was struggling with the move from desert to ocean. But as with so many things, as I was able to loosen my grip on what was, so much more was within reach.

The heaviest parts of this dream….those, those I've tried to let go of. Rains have come. The earth has accepted my offerings — of what was, of comfort, of a feeling of certitude — and asked I start intoning a new chant for these days ahead.

In tarot, the fourth card is usually some iteration of “The Emperor” and has something to do with stability, rules, the hardening off of milder and wilder ways, of pulling suit jackets over faerie wings and lacing oxfords over centaur hooves. Masculinity can turn so damn poisonous, and so we’re asked — cautioned, encouraged, demanded — to shed censures such as this.

There’s a reason the many wisdom traditions speak so fervently about our longings and attachments — not only to things, but also to ideas, emotions, that which we hold most dear. Thich Nhat Hanh asks us to remember each morning as we awake from our nighttime dreams:

> “All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them.”
>
> If this is too heavy to remember, then
> remember that it too can be
>
> yielded
>
> to the yawning earth

Rest



Meditation on *Rest*

No. 5
Shed this comes before *Rest*, afterward comes *Ember*

after the unburdening, a stillness
a great commandment to
hush holy proclamations

I could go on and on about rest and how we need it, how I've learned that we should rest *just because* and *not* so that we can do more work. I could go on about what we really need to rest, to renew: a bed, time, community, safety, perhaps exhaustion, and certainly release. I could go on, but going on and on is not rest, so

[breathe]

[and go on, breathe some more]

this is enough

just rest, sweet one, rest

✳

Additional notes on *Rest*

"Avoid massage, wrestling, and wrestling in dust. Soften them with plenty of sleep and, apart from natural exercise, let them rest."

Between days of double-leagues, Enkidu and Gilgamesh would rest and prepare a sacred space, and then dream prophetic dreams.

Rest also means to be at peace, to be free of anxiety and mental bother. May you have this. May you rest your weary bones, and rest that structure of yourself that lies even deeper than your bones.

Hold this holy word in your mouth — say it, without ceasing, as prayer.

Ember



Meditation on *Ember*

No. 6
Preceded by *Rest*, followed by *Thunderclap*

On other days, I might be inclined to talk about the liberating aesthetics of hellfire, or the Spanish mystics — especially dear Teresa and John — and how they spoke of both darkness and light, of water and fire, the enkindling that happens in the heart, that revs up into mystical union and. But today wildfires are on my mind. Teresa and John didn't see, perhaps couldn't even imagine, our mega-wildfires, so big and unwieldy and *wild* they create their own weather. These blazes call us, human people (the species that shunned fire and so created this destruction), into new relationship with ourselves and our world. Wildland firefighters try to create "firelines" to "contain" the fire, and yet, a few embers flying through the air, from crown to crown, can undo those efforts so astonishingly fast. Embers — small manifestations of the larger phenomenon — are also needed to keep a hearth fire going. Maybe it's all about scale. Maybe not.

Some questions we can think through together

> Will the seed of this passion grow?
> Are we in the midst of fire season?
> What enkindles to conflagration?

✳

> "We could not rest. There was still fire. Little fires that could grow into big ones, smoke, blinding and choking smoke...No rest. But we could slow down. We could emerge from the worst of the smoke and ash, and escape the lash of hot winds. We could pause by the side of the road for a moment, and gag in peace. There was a lot of gagging. Coughing and gagging and crying muddy tracks onto our faces. It was incredible. We were going to survive. We were still alive and together — scorched and miserable, and in great need of water, but alive. We were going to make it."

Thunderclap



Meditation on *Thunderclap*

No. 7
Preceded by *Ember*, followed by *Heal*

"Heavenly fire is spit forth by the planet as crackling charcoal flies from a burning log, bringing prophecies with it"

a ripping through the atmosphere
a singular Sound among the roll
so awoken

uranian epiphanies — ecstatic illumination — a soul-sure tether between earth and sky

I'm seeing a cracking open of the sky, a numinous splitting — and a union of sight and sound. There's a yellow-gold thunderbolt in the middle, with cross-hatched lines inside and bands of black lines that emerge from its juncture points. Small orbs and dots buzz and pitch around the whole scene. It's electric — the interior life of electricity.

We can follow the words like charge to charge. "Thunder" means to "re-sound," a groan of the electrum stretch, the emergence of living creatures. As for "clap," it means to throb or beat: an echoic verb.

It is said that Asclepius, a healing god, raised a man from the dead. That, apparently, was not okay. Zeus sent a thunderbolt and both healer and healed were struck down. Asclepius was raised into immortality, eventually, and went about his healing as a god.

Consider brontology, the prognostic study of thunder

> When did you last hear thunder? Had you seen the bolt of lightning blanket the world in light, and then count? When next there's a storm, can we be students of this — icy collision with fire, as air explodes outward, all around. Can we follow this journey, this path of the rumbling sound resulting from electricity's coming and going, ascending and descending?

The return stroke makes the loudest thunder

Heal



Meditation on *Heal*

No. 8
Thunderclap to *Heal*, *Heal* to *Prophesy*

> when i've most needed healing, it seemed the most impossible thing, to want or reach. i wanted to let go — entirely — my tether to this world
>
> (such was my despair)

Now I wonder so many things. Such as: why did it feel so impossible, and why did I feel so alone? (Though let me not pretend that a great part of my healing has been to savor my solitude as I would some soup when I have a cold).

> I would say that we are, first and foremost, here for you and your healing. But I know that we are bound — somehow — and that I can't help you with yours if I'm not helping me with mine.

heal: to be made whole:
whole: you already are:
you: wholly, holy, you:
heal: as you will be, as you are, as you already were

✳

Some questions we can think about

> What feels broken or shattered or unwell?
> Is it bodily? Mental? Emotional? Spiritual? Some Other Thing?
> What is your story of the healing that you have already gone after?
> What has still not been said?

Some thoughts about healing

> It's messy. It's round-about. It takes time, sometimes — often times — a long time. Healing needs space, space enough to let go of things as they were and the calcified desire that they should be so again. Not always, but more than you'd think, the body (yours, mine, the earth's) will heal all on its own. (Though, truthfully, it takes many people and forces for this to come about). One can still heal even when there is no cure.

Thunderclap is the divine speaking to you.
Heal is what happens when you listen.
Prophesy is what, transformed, you have the renewed power to do.

On a practical note, it's been recommended to sleep, take walks (perhaps at either sunset or sunrise), reach out to people who love you, even when it's hard, to get acupuncture, and, on a personal note, to enjoy some miso soup.

> May the Rivers of Pain and Anxiety, of Heartbreak and Hollowed Spirits, empty into the Great Ocean of Healing, where everything from Depths to Sky is utterly, blessedly, gorgeously, and intensely connected. So be it.

(So ends the first suite)

Prophesy



Meditation on *Prophesy*

No. 9
Heal. Prophesy. Cielo.

I'm seeing in this card mostly open space, but it doesn't feel "blank." The colors are a mix of bright, saturated blue and pale purples, bleeding together, layered together. The color is in three distinct areas. Two of these areas cover the bottom third of the card: one of these rises as a pillar (picture the Pillars of Creation in the Eagle Nebula — or an even more fabulous dreamtime stalagmite), while the other swishes as a scorpion tail. Black orbs rise here and there, as in the *Dream* card. There's a uniformity that, to my mind at least, recalls code or an old switchboard.

The word here is not prophecy (the noun) but *prophesy* (the verb). This action is vital. These are our transcendent utterances.

Prophets speak into the past and future as much as within the present
marshaling time, herding the hours

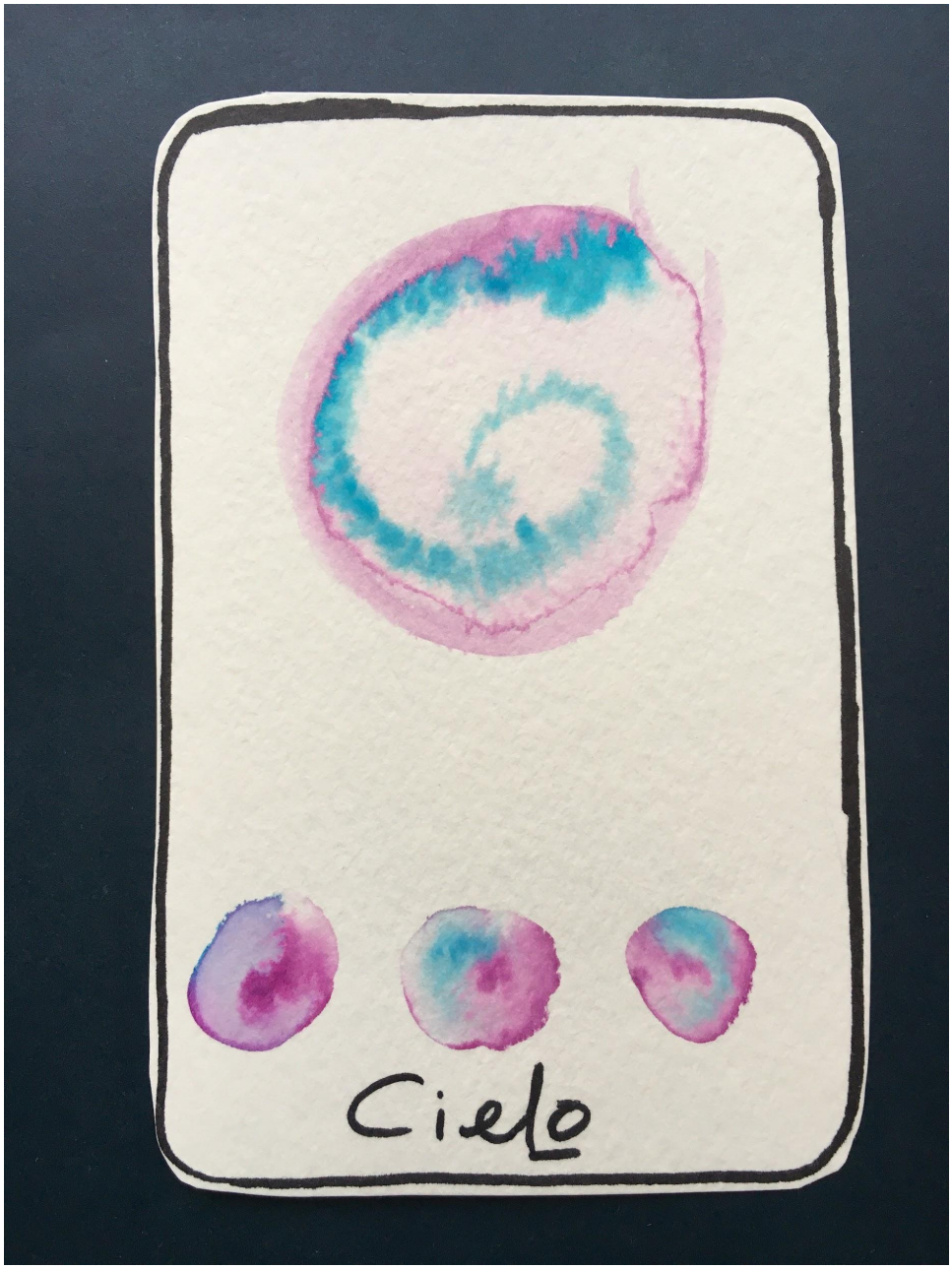
Something about…contestations, contending narratives, the turbidity of the truth

You tell me
Do prophets still walk the earth? Did they ever? What prophecy do you hold? How do we know? Did words come? Was it coursing through blood and over bones? Did you *just know*? (I won't judge; I *just know* a lot of things, and that's as good as faith). How do you decide when to speak? Others will no doubt trust the message. Do you?

I won't belabor the skepticism, though, sure, it's there —
Warnings of False Prophets
Warnings of Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

— prophecy is so often a warning

Cielo



Meditation on *Cielo*

No. 10
Prophesy. Cielo. Down low.

> "Gone. Gone. Gone beyond beyond. Hail the goer. Beyond even conceiving of a place beyond which you can go beyond…"

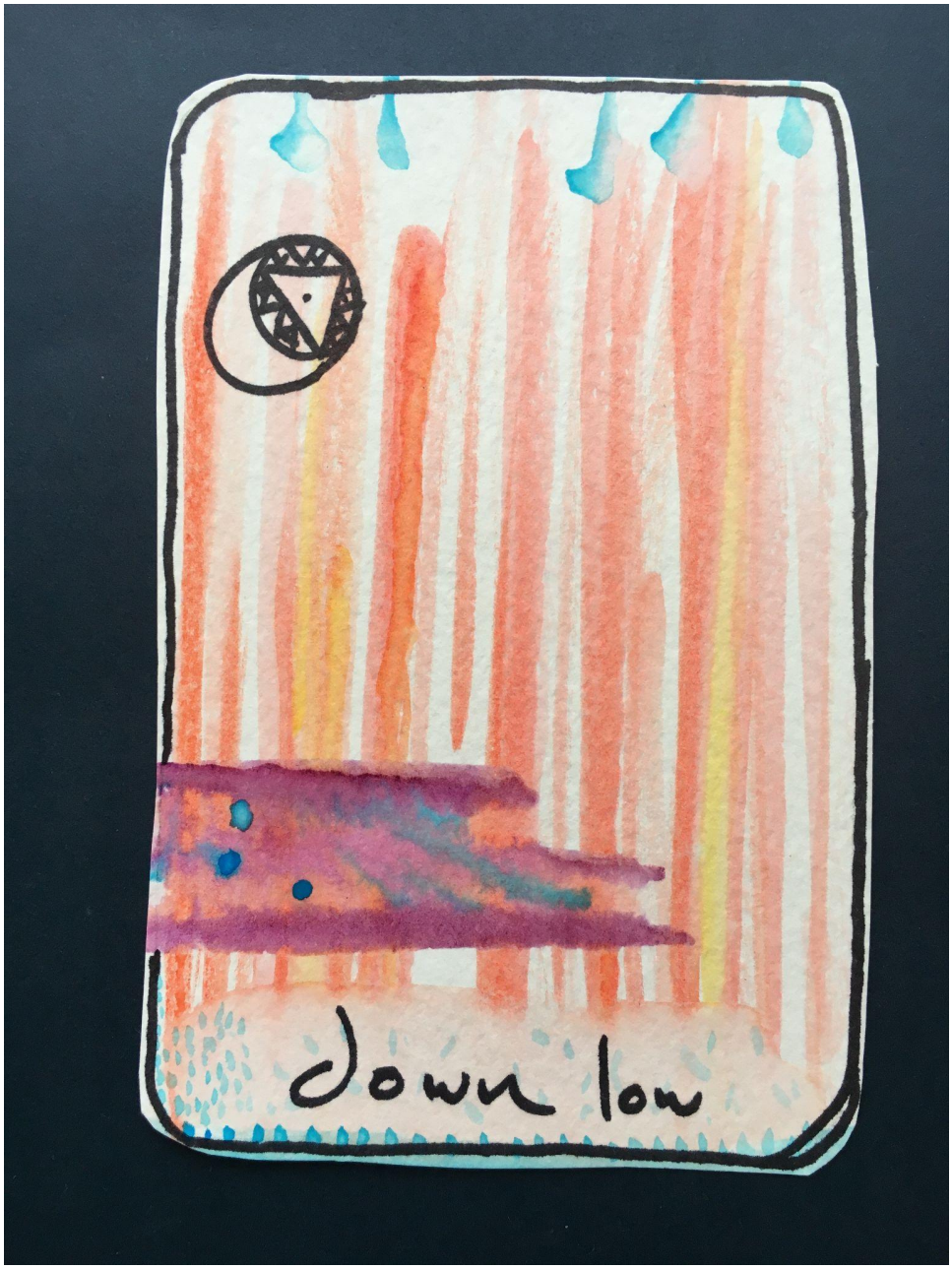
I cannot say what compelled the creation of this card. I do know that neither "sky" nor "heaven" would do. Perhaps the word "cielo" unites the material fact of the sky — its depth, without borders — with the expansiveness, or maybe intimacy, of heaven. There are two visual facts of this card: its empty space and the four orbs, swirls of blue and purple. They look almost like fish eggs. (*Incubation. Life forming. Seeding clouds with gusts of wind, grains of dust. Creation. Inward.*) The top orb is larger, centrally placed; the bottom three orbs are smaller and aligned in a horizontal band.

> *Something about three in one, or one in three. Tie-dye trinity. Tripping, as we do. Echoes of nautilus shells. A sense of unfurling. The dissolution of things in water.*

I'll go ahead and say it. I don't really believe in heaven (any more than hell), and only that heaven and hell that I've made for myself. But if I can stay with people's questions and certitudes about "heavenly" things, about death, angels and the universe, then we can get a lot closer to each other. And when that happens, more of the cosmos can come into view.

> *So let me ask. When it comes to such things, what are your questions and certitudes?*

Down low



Meditation on *Down low*

No. 11
Cielo. Down low. Damage.

keep it on the d.l.

The d.l. To say out loud the full meaning of the initials — down low — is to expose its power. You're asked to keep something on the d.l. so as to keep it safe, as a treasure, a hidden treasure locked in a cedarwood box, to keep it secret, to keep it held in the intimate hush of whatever relationship there is between the one and the other.

Are you being asked to keep something hush-hush?
Are you the one needing your secret kept?
What truth waits at the bottom, way down low?

Visually, I'm seeing vertical streaks of reddish-orange and a few columns of yellow. Oceanic thermal vents. Up top (up high) are five blue marks — tears? — made by flipping this card on its head and using force to sling the paint, not "down," but "up." (Direction isn't so clear.) Our moon is there, with a fractalized triangle held within it. Down low on the card is a purple, perpendicular flush, with blue streaks and three piercing blue orbs. In this moment, I can't make sense of it, visually, at least. Something's on the d.l., kept even from me, especially from me.

these are sometimes grave matters, how we negotiate identity

Damage



Meditation on *Damage*

No. 12
Down low. Damage. Big Love.

Damage - as verb - what led to a state of brokenness

but are you “broken”? am i?
i am that i am.
perhaps this is our natural state?

Perhaps someone did us harm. Perhaps we did the harm.
Damage can drop us deeper than mere hurt or pain.

Visually, I’m seeing that orange and yellow paint, and black marker, dominate the card. To the left are rectangles stacked on top of one another, almost like a wall of a fortress. (It’s even buttressed). The word ‘damage’ sits under it, suggesting the foundation isn’t so sure. To the right, a black circle of geometric pieces and vertical dots: a bear claw, or perhaps a sailing ship? I’ve always seen a man’s face — suggested by an orange horizontal line (extending from the wall) — with a nose and goatee. Colonizer, perhaps. The wall is drained of color.

The sequence. What of the sequence? From *Down low* to *Damage* to *Big Love*?

I resist stories that say suffering is redemptive. Suffering just is.
Damage, however, is a violation.

and yet

the sequence tells me that *Big Love* awaits what’s next

Big Love



Meditation on *Big Love*

No. 13
From *Damage* to *Big Love* to *Salt*

"I want to explode you"

These words occurred near sunup, not long afterwards. I was walking along the shoulder of a two-lane highway that curved down a steep, rocky hill. Behind me, about forty other people, some carrying relics, rosaries and prayer petitions (those scraps of paper with hopes and fears inscribed in ink). I was at the front of the line of pilgrims. And as we finally reached the place where the hill's pitch dropped off, and I stepped into the sunlight of the new day, I was visited by what I have come to call a vision.

It wasn't the heavens opening. No burning bush or trembling mountain. No trumpets, even. No one else knew it happened, and I just kept walking. But it thundered —

"I want to explode you"

I saw in my mind's eye Our Sun burning in Space. Saw the flames gigantic, the churn of solar essence glowing with a billion billion shades and shadows. Saw its hum, life wanting to live. (Of course, I was receiving the new day's light — only eight and a half minutes old — into my eyes and on my body. But I've seen a lot of sunrises and only experienced one like this). The Sun let me know that if there was one (Christian) devotion that was mine to befriend (as I was no longer a Christian, and I was really hung up on that at the time), it was the Sacred Heart of Universal Love. The Heart is eternal as eternal can be and no religion (or species, or planet, for that matter) can lay sole claim to it. The Sun didn't "tell me." I just knew it — *just knew*.

But, it did tell me this —

"I want to explode you"

At least, those are the words my brain could put to this interior happening. It was the word "explode" I had to sit with for a long time. Didn't it seem a little violent? Well, the Sun's processes are a little violent. Explode: it means to release the inner sound, the

eruption inside. Thunder is air exploding outward. When a crowd explodes in applause, it releases into the physical world all the emotion generated within, among. This card, *Big Love,* is that explosion. Or the whole deck is. Either way, that's the story —

> *"I want to explode you"*

✳

A few other notes on *Big Love*

This is my story and it's important to tell it here, but I'd also ask

> What does *Big Love* conjure for you? Do you feel it, from others or in yourself? When have you had direct contact with "the divine"? What in you needs to find expression outside yourself?

This card comes after *Damage*, so I'm getting that anything I might call "infinite love" is to be found even there, within the damage. This card is followed by *Salt*, the great cleanser, the portal opener, the keeper of our food, the keeper of our life.

✳

And lastly, from the poet-priest Ernesto Cardinal

"Gravitation produced thermal energy: light and heat.
That is to say love."

Salt



Meditation on *Salt*

No. 14
From *Big Love* comes *Salt*, from that comes *What is*

walk to the marsh by the seam of the sea

and watch

how cormorants and gulls
do those rites of

eating and being

how holy herons do
how mollusks and seaweed do
how salt erodes all edge

between

earth and tidal swell
headwaters and deep
you me and every kind of thing

✳

I'm seeing ocean depths. At the bottom is all orange and red, in diagonal bands, with what could be bubbles rising from the seabed — breath of the earth, its homeostasis, its gorgeous heat — before reaching stratified bands of blue, green, purple and aqua up top, where a few lines indicate movement between them. These are all kinds of currents.

Salt. Pour some out in a circle for protection.
Salt. Mix with water to purify what needs it.

Salt. Conductor.
Salt. Consecrator.
Salt. Salvation, even.
Salt. How we learned to eat our food.
Salt. Of the Earth, held deep, found by way of mines.
Salt. Of the Sea, held everywhere, found by leaning back.

Salt has close kin in this deck: *Delta* (No. 19), *Sweat* (No. 28), *Crying* (No. 29), and *Cooking Pot* (No. 39).

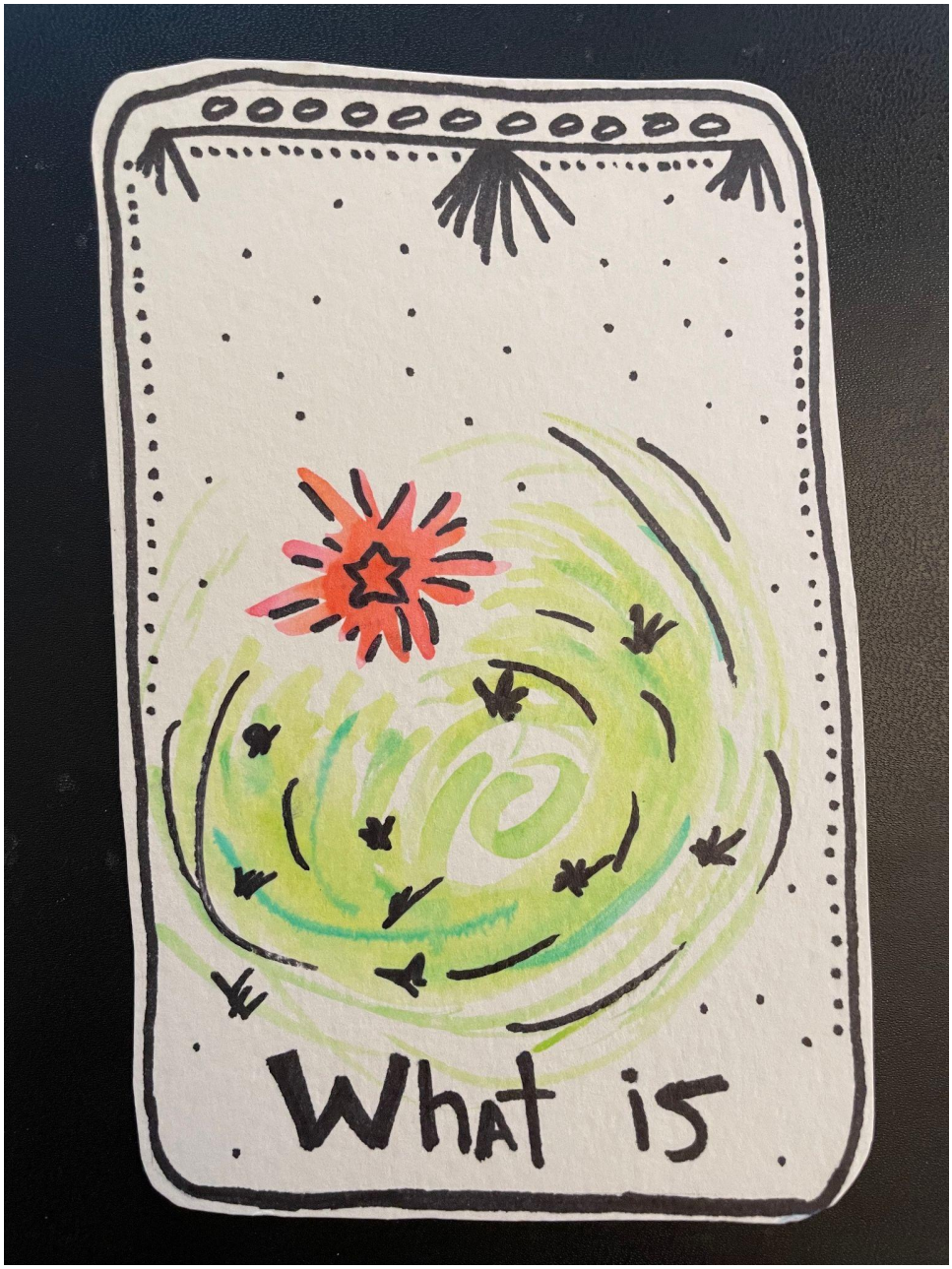
beyond the cards, i wonder, what is the spirit of salt?

what's eroding, by way of earth sea wind?
what portals open here?
from what do you need protection?
what are you purifying yourself of?

and a mundane but crucial question

have you already salted the pasta water, because we want it salty as the sea

What is



Meditation on *What is*

No. 15
Before this, *Salt*. After this, *Theft*.

I'm seeing around the card a border of dots —not entirely surrounding it, but largely. There's a green swirl toward the bottom, with little tufts around it, and one salmon pink burst with a star in the middle. It looks like a cactus or an event in space — death of a star, or, perhaps, its birth. It is what it is.

if a cactus, i say, this is What is
if a star, in birth or death, i say

(also)

this is
What is

Somebody asked me one day what God was — or if not "God" per se, then Divinity or The Ultimate. My off-the-cuff answer was something like, "everything in the material and energetic universe." But separating out matter from energy isn't quite right, so I've tended toward the language of this card: What is

what was in the beginning
what is, right here and right now
and whatever shall be

(nothing's not holy, you know)
(insofar as "holy" is a useful word)

Sure, but bring it home —

The situation at hand is now laid bare to only WHAT IS

what do you make of it?
how do you feel?

your finger throb from the thorn?
you stunned by the explosion?
has your sun, your center, ceased?

It could also be a question: What is?

rare and precious are the cactus blooms
that from earth and dryness blush
to the shades of a dying sunset
so damn sweet, it must be, for the
small wild bees to only drink and drink
and curl up in amongst the petals
to sleep, till past another dawn
when to rise into the world yet again

take it

What is

pray it into your bones
hum it with the spheres
free it down to hell

oh yes
oh yes

release
release

Theft



Meditation on *Theft*

No. 16
What is - Theft - Archangel

Like all that sand on all those beaches — innumerable, that is — so it is with the unremitting slights, arrows, harms. Those that fly from mind, mouth and hand. And those that pierce our sides like St. Sebastian. But I'm no saint. (*Says who?*). These thefts have left an unease, a space that can't be filled with more of the same, so now the question is:

> What are we going to do about it?
>
> (it's not the only question)

> When you look at the situation, where's the theft?
> What have you stolen?
> What has been taken from you?

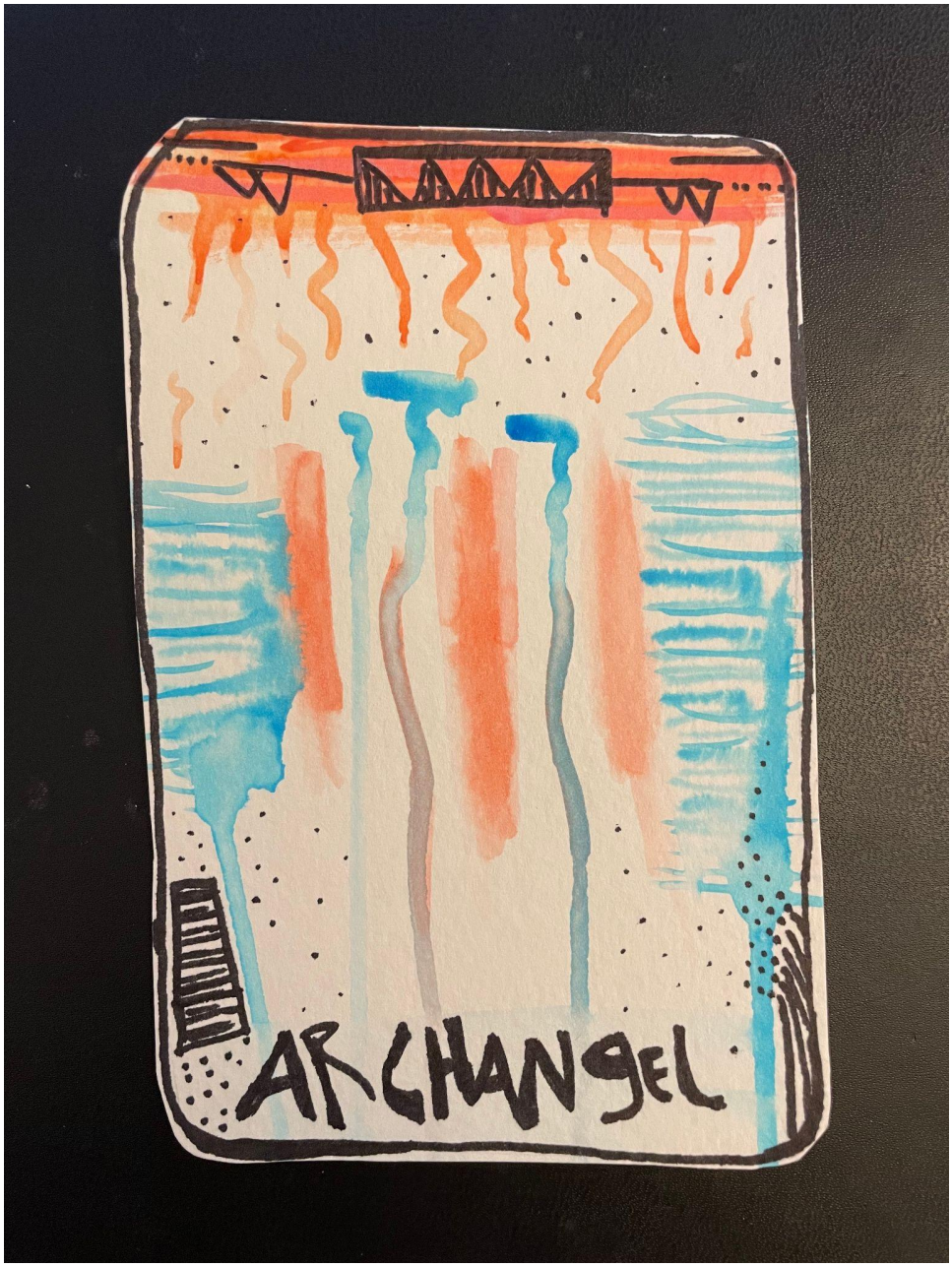
Theft of life? Of an individual? Family? Generation? A whole people? Theft of spiritual systems? Sacred Texts? Dances, or gods, or the freedom to move a dream into the world of flesh?

(so many questions, but never too many)

I'm seeing three colors in this card: a purple-blue from up top, flowing into a grey-brown-black (ash), and ending at the bottom in a wave of watery, pale orange. Surrounding it are blocks or rectangles in black marker. These blocks fill every space available to them — yet inside each block is a space — white space, empty space, the void of space — and I wonder why. Cinder block craters. The hollowing of theft.

(So ends the second suite)

Archangel



Meditation on *Archangel*

No. 17
From *Theft* to *Archangel,* from *Archangel* to *Dream*

licking flames of heaven's manifold chorus

manifest
here below

— my only caution with angels: go slow —

the collision
of fire and ice, or matter and void (if you will)

will refuse cheap glances

will demand your wrestling arm
demand you take yourself seriously

✳

We don't need to be on the same page about this, but I do feel I have to ask —

Where do you stand with angels?
Have you felt the presence of one before? Heard its voice, song, or scream, its echo or its hum? How did you know it was an angel? Or, not an angel? Why is their existence in such question? Is it to you? In your mind's eye, is their whole look laughable or terrible? (*To the extent possible, let go of your giggles about angels. Don't suppress it — offer its release to whatever you seek*). Could you entertain the possibility of being not afraid? And lastly, what of the hierarchy, the status, for we've now been visited by an archangel.

✳

Visually, I'm seeing three long lines of paint — angels? — They are blue and they are reaching from the orangey-red flames up top all the way down to the word "archangel" at the bottom. On either side of the figures are all these blue, messy horizontal lines on a singular stem (rectangular and still somehow vegetal, as fronds). At the bottom left, in black marker, is something almost like a ladder. Black dots float around most of the card.

Some other thoughts go like this —

Like *Big Love* (No. 13), *Archangel* refuses religious silo.

17 is a prime number — like an archangel, divisible only by The One and itself.

Know that archangels, according to some ancient writers, aren't the ultimate — they're rather lowly, having to mess around with humans as much as they do.

Naughty angels — The Fallen — taught us writing, reading, reading the stars, herbalism, make up and metallurgy. God bless those promethean rebels.

Consider that you, too, are an angel.

✳

"Well I'll just lick an angel just to purify again
Ooh, angels are fun — they're so fun —
So dress me up, I like it be better if we both pretend
Yeah, make love till we're numb"

— Janelle Monae

Dream



Meditation on *Dream*

No. 18
Archangel comes before this, *Delta* after

"Don't dream it, be it." — Dr. Frank-N-Furter, from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, crying, on a floaty, in a swimming pool, soon to die

visions of realness — happenings in the mind's eye and in subtler places, too

So it was with me and the pink triangle

On pilgrimage. In ritual. At night. Awake. It came. To me.

Someone had said something about how each of us are a unique facet of God and only by living our truths can we honor our divinity. I don't think it was "God" who showed me this — but maybe it was, or an angel, or my own playful imagination — who took that pink, downward-turned triangle and slowly, tenderly pushed it into me, radiated it into my chest, my breast, my heart. But I got the message

"Be gay. Be gay *as fuck*."

Pink triangles call me to here — Gay people persecuted, hunted down and murdered for being so. Then along came AIDS. Queers shifting energy, politics, community. Queers grappling with death. Queers calling on ancestors.

(*Be with me, please, my precious ancestors)*

The word "dream" calls me to the healing temples where you'd pray — purify and sacrifice and pray — for a healing dream

chronic suffering, chthonic surfacing
blurring realities
guides through various states of consciousness

Thermal vents on the ocean floor

Delta



Meditation on *Delta*

No. 19
From *Dream*, to *Delta*, to *Echo*

river's end

a steady always where

silt
and sound

do go on

saying, my beloved is mine

and i

i am his

✳

I am seeing so many things in this card. First, the colors. The top half is a light purple, the bottom half orangey-yellow. These fields of color aren't flat, but layered, as long and low banks of clouds or the lines of sand at water's lapping edge. In black marker, at the center is a stream of lines pulled to a narrow point to the right, bisecting the card: two messy swirls on either side of this divide: the bottom moving clockwise, the top counter-clockwise. (These are not contradictory, not at all.) Up top are random dots — like little gnats or flies — though down below, they become ordered into vertical streams.

infinite changeability
fertile, fecund, and full
generous creatrix

Delta: a region in the South, just east of where I grew up, where Black people were made to work Black soil, the wealth of aeons pillaged
Delta: where the river empties itself to something larger
Delta: a variant of the coronavirus
Delta: CHANGE ITSELF Δ

"The only lasting truth is Change."

✳

Where is this river going?
What is its force and flow?
Into where does it open?
What's happening above, and below, and how are they related? Or not?
What does it mean to trust the river?
To yield your body to the Black earth?
To offer these bones to big fish, mollusks, seaweed and ancestral whales?

ask your questions, yes

but no, don't hold so tightly to these

answers

Echo



Meditation on *Echo*

No. 20
Coming before, *Delta*, coming after, *Medicine*

in the beginning was not the word but something more Subtle and Fierce
everything else is only an Echo

what clap, exclamation or explosion set off the sounds against canyon walls?

cacophony or chaos
d.m.t. fever dreams
the phasing between forms — human, animal and otherwise
delicate pandemonium — pah, pah, the prayers, pleas, pageants, parades, pendulums, potent, portent, past, pestilence, proceed, procreation, pester, pewter, protein, power, prolong, preempt, pour, pour, pour out libations

roar, roar, roar your lion

horns, stars, scales, cocks, drizzle, bubble, clap and shake
move into this chamber — *s o m a* — unspooled

onomatopoeia fails us here, letters and words and phrases fail us, to understand the bodily concussion of sound to flesh in so powerful an echo as this...but i'm getting lost in these words… it's all an echo — stop — listen — to the source of what we're hearing

bats, whales, dolphins
talking across oceans through water
a delicacy disrupted by war

a parental warning: don't make me repeat myself

This card is related, in so many ways, to *Thunderclap* (No. 7)

Medicine



Meditation on *Medicine*

No. 21
Echo to *Medicine* to *Play*

Medicine might point to what we usually refer to when we say medicine, those things used to treat or manage physical conditions and symptoms. If it is, then this card could bring up a lot — *What's it supposed to be treating? What are the goals of this care? What if this is a chronic condition? How is your body? How are you feeling, in your body and in your heart (your soul, but also your heart-heart), right now, just in this moment?*

Of course, medicine isn't just a physical thing. Our wounds and pathways to healing aren't just physical, or observable. They're emotional. Psychological. Somatic. Symbolic.

Medicine is also spirit. Pilgrims in the ancient Mediterranean would try to meet the healing god Asclepius in their dreams. Sometimes he'd heal you right there. Sometimes he'd give you a regimen (of movement, of herbs, of bathing) to follow. What medicine might your dreams hold? Let them show you what they need to show you.

Visually, I'm seeing purple blobs in an expanse of blue, with dots everywhere in the top half of the image. Up and to the right corner is an irregular, inward turning spiral, bisected by a single band of reddish-orange, which then blends into the blues.

Are these jellyfish? What do jellyfish need to teach you?
(A collective of jellyfish is called a smack or a bloom)

My friend Kalypso died at the beginning of the pandemic, a one-in-a-million case of the flu, they said. She's a daughter of the waters, knows the ways of the Ocean's medicine.

And, at last, visual wisdom from dear friends who imagine:

> *magic mushrooms that today will help me love myself better and more thoroughly. bodiless tutus. self-medication, self-knowledge and self-reliance. retrospect and clarity. a world map.*

Play



Meditation on *Play*

No. 22
Medicine comes before, *Hallowed* after

Time to drop the pretense. Drop the seriousness. Drop the inhibitions. Drop the thick stone walls of my head and heart into the hungry earth so that, unfenced and unbridled, I — You — We — can play.

Want that juicy spiritual transformation they keep talking about? Play.

you know, sprawling story. loose rules. loose ends.
another iteration of the unknown.

The order of the cards is vital. The prescription is *Medicine*, which is fulfilled through *Play*, which can *Hallow* your life — the route to holiness is playing

play nice with others and
play nice with yourself
play, just play
with yourself

Visually, I'm seeing another pared down card, one that's relatively "simple" and "straightforward." But not. Up top, are those bubbles? Perhaps. They're certainly orbs of purple, pink, yellow, orange and blue. Down below. I don't know, can you tell me. Harps? Pan pipes? (Pan is certainly at his work). There are also pink "figures" — lanky yet thick lines, three of them, all at the same level.

The figures are beings, strangers but not so strange — aliens, ETs — and the orbs so many worlds and galaxies. We're on a starship, going where we're going to go

Hallowed



Meditation on *Hallowed*

No. 23
Preceded by *Play* and followed by *Rot*

here. now.

why rush so quickly over the palm of the universe?
why turn so quickly from your own answers?
from your questions?

take them, into your hands, and

yield

to the cavern dwellers
these pieces of
you

hallowed: how you make it holy:
holy: it already is: and deeper and deeper it can be:
HOLY, HOLY, HOLY: You

(and pardon my language)

holy fuck

down here live devils, demons, hellbenders, and such

(and so do angels)

I'm seeing three black and purple figures in a central part of the card. They are surrounded (encased? entombed? enshrined?) by orange, yellow, purple, and black marker. Layers both bleed into each other and are distinct. Layers of rock. Layers of earth. Flame strata.

Rot



Meditation on *Rot*

No. 24
Hallowed, then *Rot*, then *It's true*

decomposition is

and i will not be upset if you call it grotesque
no need to be clinical about it

let it rot
let it rot

(this hurts)

let it rot

let it go
let go
let go

let go, this too
these that entered the body as toxin

unbecoming becoming

✳

There's a *Tower* quality to this card — the falling of stones and mighty cedars, except instead of fire and lighting and terrible roar, it's the quiet leaving of breath. Something akin to the disintegration of cells, atoms, certain bonds. This card is the twenty-fourth, so we're halfway through the deck.

A note on card order: even the holy rots, it's true. This truth is not without its mercies.

(So ends the third suite)

It’s true



Meditation on *It's true*

No. 25
From *Rot* to *It's true, It's true* to *Touch*

It's true confronts me.
It's true. It's True? Bold declaration.

But how quickly we retreat from the truths we know inside, those wordless truths

Can we rest in what you know to be true?
Can we, like Jacob wrestling the angel (or was it God?), wrestle with these truths?

Perhaps it isn't true after all. Perhaps it is.
Move here.

Visually, I'm seeing roots of azure reaching into a coral base, the base that extends around the card in a diamondback pattern. (*Wreathed in a Snake — Ouroboros — Leviathan*) There is a portal, a squared-off archway, of mauve. Toward the bottom of these timbers are blue roots. Within the archway are three horizontal bands — two are blue and purple, one is orangey-red. There's a single orb — this morning's sun...each morning's sun. But if the sun is on *that* side, what's on *this* side? Which side are we on? (Does it matter? You tell me.)

Universals aren't needed here. They crumble, like dust into dust.
We're after something much more particular.

i cannot say what these cards "mean"
right now or any other time
least of all when i made them
but they're inching me closer to what i think they mean
slowly, slowly
closer, a little closer

Touch



Meditation on *Touch*

No. 26
It's true, then *Touch*, then *Fancy*

"Blind loving wrestling touch, sheath'd hooded sharp-tooth'd touch!
Did it make you ache so, leaving me?"

the touch of you, of me, together, to gather in

unity union fusion cruising doing as we're doing

bruising
the tenderest

✳

loss of this, of hand entwined, hand on my face, my
hip, encircling, enrapturing
the glory and majesty of this right here, everything
electricity passing between us

Something is both microscopic and cosmic in scope
Something about visible and invisible boundaries

What's going on with this *sensation* of touch? Who is touching you? What, or who, are you? What are you touching? Who? When are you touching into? How long have you gone without? Is this great? Awful? Awesome?

(trauma lives here, too — so unspeakable so)

Fancy



Meditation on *Fancy*

No. 27
Touch - Fancy - Sweat

Fancy is a matter of perspective
Fancy ought to be a delight of an indulgence
Fancy weaves itself into our fantasies

"To thine own self be true"

Something about — Glamor. Luster. Extravagance. Enchantment.
You put on the fancy outfit to go out, to see and be seen.

When does the fantasy stop being fun? When does it stop? Things take on a life of their own. Do I like living here? In this story I've so earnestly spun?

Spin, spin around. Spin our fancy, past the point of ecstasy. Beyond even conceiving of a place beyond which you can go beyond.

I'm seeing a quality of drip and glisten, of something *bedazzled*. Maybe one of those room dividers with the beads hanging down. You know what I'm talking about?

(I can hear it, the muted sounds of plastic or wooden beads. When they're wood, you can sort of see through the divider, but not entirely. Unfocus your eyes and you can see the beach or the mountain, the mirage printed on a thousand shards, strung together just so-so. Focus your eyes, though, and you can see into the next room.)

But if the string of holy beads are clear, they can catch the evening light and, whether diamonds or dollar-store knock-offs, it's beautiful. There's so much space between the strands. Between them is a black "void" surrounded by black dots. There's a white "cross" at center. This is mysterious, ominous even. (Beware crusaders and their dark fantasies). Still, the stars keep dancing. Craft the fantasy and let others fan the flames.

go forth - make believe

Sweat



Meditation on *Sweat*

No. 28
Fancy before *Sweat*, after that comes *Crying*

"gives me a hot and cold fever
leaves me in a cool, cool sweat"

I'm seeing so many things, but only three colors: black, white, and purple. (Purple, a royal color. But what else is purple to you?) Up top are locks and hair, dripping with sweat. Around the other borders are dots. And flecked across the card are blips in murmuration. Fruit flies? There's a juicy star. And of course the three purple, inverted triangles with their ends dripping down; these are beefier figures than the angels of *Archangel* (No. 17), *Hallowed* (No. 21), or *Play* (No. 23). This is only what I see.

sweat purifies, cleans out toxins — feels that way, at least —

(exuding processes of thy throes, thy perturbations, thy sweet release)

and, to my nose, *intoxicates* —

"the scent of these arm-pits / aroma finer than prayer"

sweat yourself into the river of me

And yet —
If you hear an indictment to work harder — *Time to sweat* — unhear it
Listen instead to the Ocean's wrestling waves

Sweat it out. I want your fever to break. I want this for you.
Though I cannot want it for you as much as you can.

Break a sweat. This is good and healing medicine.
Dig roots, haul brush, or run by the river's edge.

Go on. Go ahead. Go hard.
Wanna dance? Dance into a frenzy, an ecstasy, an ecstasy & oblivion —
Dance us both to there

then drop.
drop. droplets. drip. drone. drag. drug. drenched.

[and now, we breathe]

In the so-called "Good Book," the word "sweat" shows up twice, once in the beginning of a long arc, once at the end of another.

But I prefer other stories. They say the mythical River Dinur (the fiery river) is cradle and grave to angels. They emerge from the river and descend into it, always in step with the sun. The river flows from the sweat of the *hashmallim* — the *hayyot*, the living creatures we call angels — who carry the throne of all divinity.

sweat yourself into the river of me

from *Sweat* to *Crying* — sanctification by liquid salt

Crying



Meditation on *Crying*

No. 29
Before this comes *Sweat*. After this, *Revelation*.

I'm sorry they ever called you "crybaby," they ever said "that boy ain't right."
You know what, though?

Fuck them

Say it, say it if you want. Say it again, and again if you need to, to let your rage pour into the holy defiance pour into your voice cracking pour into the tears you've never thought to shed.

And of course, I'm talking mostly to myself

These tears will take down the walls of Jericho

Intriguing I should move so quickly into words of confrontation, swept up in a deluge of anger. Intriguing? No, all too expected. It's no surprise that under a lot of tears is anger, and underneath a lot of anger are so many more tears. Forces like "decorum" and "masculinity" and "keeping it together" sculpt; crying, like loss, like the ocean, erodes.

I do not need a god to practice this surrender,

to lay this heaviness down
to look to the moon and ask for only Sweet Dreams

"He is dangerous"

The order of the cards is meaningful. *Sweat* from all the work done not to cry; *Crying* is not a command but an observation, because tears are flowing, even if through an underground river; let yourself go, then comes the *Revelation*. That's a potent trinity.

Visually, the colors drip downward, these fading stains of bright blue, pale lavender, and deep purple. But three of the streaks are orange, unspooling molten tears on your face.

There's a triangular prism: nesting, inverted "mountains" release waterfalls from within. Three messy stars sit at center.

Some questions about crying —

What do you see in this card?
What might you see if there were tears in your eyes?
When was the last time you cried? And why?
Do you cry as much, or more, than you want to? Or far too less?
Does crying feel safe or "fine"? Or far too risky?
Can you know the heart of this crying? I mean — what do those tears *mean*?

Can you touch your face with Supreme Gentleness the next time crying finds you?

for

"a thousand teardrops can't be wrong"

so

"call me up anytime, c'mon baby, cry"

Revelation



Meditation on *Revelation*

No. 30.
Preceded by *Crying*. Followed by *So*.

BE NOT AFRAID of this revelation.

The sun breaks through a snowstorm on a mountain top. Wildfires release vast, swelling energy into the sky — a birthing.

Fire bird. Beating heart. Dragon flying through rain, storm, the thirteen winds.
Raw, exposed organs. Homeostasis.

Speak, Prophet.

Visually, I'm seeing a central flow of orange and yellow paint — like a heart and arteries. There's a core of the yellow, and it bleeds into the outstretched arms or wings. It's bounded by black lines above and below, upward and downward pointing triangles band it: solid lines to what is above, and dotted trails to what is below, dissipating like rain before reaching the word "Revelation."

Revelations rarely settle. They disrupt.

This is the thirtieth card. (What did you learn in your thirtieth year, or any division or multiple thereof?) This is the end of the Fourth Suite (out of six suites), so we're two-thirds through the deck. (The Book of Revelation — *"the" revelation, with so much conflation, extravagance, fever dreams* — is the end of one sacred text. This revelation isn't the end of anything.)

be not afraid
be not afraid
be not afraid

(*So ends the fourth suite*)

So



Meditation on *So*

No. 31
From *Revelation* to *So,* from *So* to *Here*

So, you portal.
So, you portal word, into deeper conversation.
So, and deeper still.
So, what an invitation into what comes next.

Visually, I'm seeing 83. (I get a sort of synesthesia with these colors and this number). There are seven purple lines in the bottom half of the card. Seems like they're measuring something. In the top half of the card are nine minty green "tails," connected at a base and radiating outward over 120 degrees or so. These "tails" are almost like yucca leaves (fibrous, flourishing), or the river's end. They're wispy — can't contain, can't hold on to. So it is with the word and idea and meaning of "so" — can't contain, can't hold on to, slips away like the immediacy of a dream.

So what? I offer you a spell of sorts, something to move in the flow of *So* —

I love you so much
So I was thinking
I don't think so
I told you so
It's just so
So-so
So…
So slow
So sweet
So meow
So many stars
So on and so forth
So there you are
I love you so

So be it. See to it.

Here



Meditation on *Here*

No. 32
So - Here - Honey

First, some questions.
Where are you? Where am I? Are our respective "heres" the same place? Are they in the physical plane? By what river, stream, wishing well, ocean or dried-up mud puddle is that? By what names are these here-places called? Or are our here-places elsewhere? In head, heart, or spirit? Here is always relative, no? What do you hear me talking about?

The trick, I'm told, is not to get caught in concepts

Up here and down here
Be Here Now and all that
The Here and Now
Here goes nothing
Here you go
Here we go
I'm here
Here's to you
And something about the Hereafter

I'm seeing a river system, a river that, over centuries, has taken an oddball path through the earth to the Seashore. There are these swirly orange shapes (slashes, curls) encased in a black, swooshy circle. Fish eggs tucked into reed, mudbank, estuary — this miracle could only happen right here.

What do you make of the progression from one to another, from *So* to *Here* to *Honey*? *So* and *Here* were a pair, twins of a sort, their colors shared, their river-nature equally expressed. After all the choices of *So*, we have — You have — I have — made it *Here*.

Have we? Made it? Here?

Honey



Meditation on *Honey*

No. 33.
Preceded by *Here*, followed by *And*

A spoonful of fresh honey at my great-grandma's house. Ancestral sweetness. Aint nothing like it. Of course, I wasn't there; she was too old and living elsewhere when I came along and was old enough to remember. But my mom, who adores her grandma, remembers. And when I have a spoonful of honey in my coffee, I remember the sweetness that lives through us, that poured from my great-grandma, to her daughter, to her daughter, and to me, the sissy. Aint nothing like it.

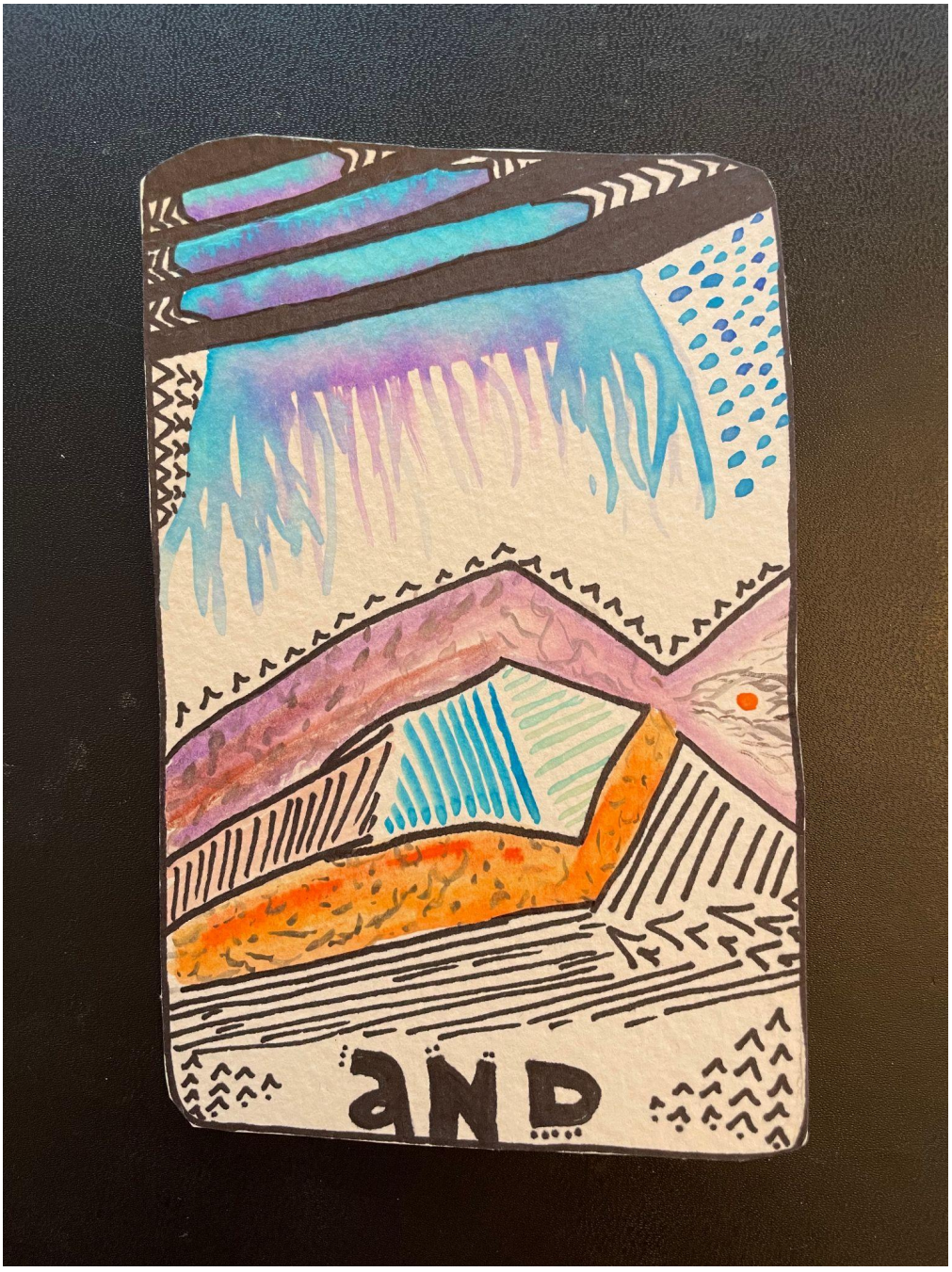
flaming orb — blaze and combust — the roil and radiance

It's highly niche, what honeybees do. Those Light Harvesters. Honey: the labor of many. Kindness toward the young. Created with journey, dance, and the flow of time, the flow of seasons, the flow of sunshine.

Visually, I'm seeing an orange and yellow orb, with an inward arrangement of dotted lines and thorny, inwardly pointing arrows. Stray strokes of red and orange are like flashes from the sun. All the black marker is dancing with joy. There's an unperturbed sweetness at the core.

We can walk through the land of milk and honey, right now, as we are. Recall and anticipate the honeyed sweetness of a new year. Make an offering to the gods, which is, of course, the god in you, dear one, the god in you.

And



Meditation on *And*

No. 34
From *Honey*, to *And*, to *Shine*

it all comes down to the “and”
it always does cuz there’s always
more

not a voracious “more” - unquenchable
but another tether

taut and ready

the “and” isn’t just “more” - it’s the muchness

the All Of It
the I Am That I Am
the You Are That You Are
the We Will Be That We Will Be
the So And So
the On And On

this card joins. unifies. merges. enfleshes. engorges. enjoys. envelopes. involves.

dissolves

small word, does much
we can’t calculate
only
find the other variables, gather
them under our attention
and
keep being as human as we can

(though, that’s another thing that’ll need to be let go of)

✳

Visually, we've seen one of two things in this card, and often both. The first is a landscape which extends beyond the frame. Up top in black and blue-purple bands is rain (and maybe thunder and such), while below are mountains, fields, washes — planted with different stuff, some fallow, some lush. The other image we've found is that of a person lying down — the tiny orange dot to the right something like a belly button, the purple and orange bands the person's legs (covered in hair). Our bodies, we know, are literally made of the same elements and substance and essences and energies as the earth. To yield your body to the earth is only a caress of your own neck or thigh.

Shine



Meditation on *Shine*

No. 35
Before this comes *And.* Afterwards, *Filth.*

Rise and shine
Rise. *And*. *Shine*.

This is not a command, to shine, but may it be so
for you, for me, for us, for it to be so
may it be so

"Hear me illustrious, thy lover me, for always I have loved thee."

Autumn dawn at the ocean edge. The long and slow emergence of our sun, a shine and heat chasing the horizon at my back. The long and slow opulence of brightening. The long and slow shadows settling back to the point they emerged from the earth, until — with quickening glow —

"Thou with thy fructifying heat"

Heat. The heat. The waves of warmth splashing, lapping, as that sibilant sea. Laughing. And from the foam steps out the one and only Aphrodite —

Venus, morning star —
The billowing starshine of billions of stars —
My eyes drink in the throb of photons
You, who shines from the depth of all creation,
You, more ancient than anything of Earth

"Shed, shed thyself on mine and me, with but a fleeting ray out of thy million millions,
Strike though these chants" —

And with that out of the way, I say, let us sing! let us chant! to life burning and rising and flaming toward what was, is, and will be

I’m seeing a card with only a couple graphic elements: a burning orange-yellow orb, sputtering photos (droplets of paint) out toward four triangles of brown, black and purple, recalling how dawn breaks up the chunky ice of night. But note, please, how even the triangles glow with buzz and throb — darkness has a shine to it, too — This is Essential, those dark rays of illumination — even in the black belly of night, remember, please, how you shine

Questions about your glow and luster —

What makes you shine?
Is it innate? Generative? Polished?
Is it light? Or dark?
Can I tune into your vivifying frequency?

Are you going to let it shine?

(this, within you, that needs)

Filth



Meditation on *Filth*

No. 36
Preceded by *Shine* and followed by *Wreck*

brown - purple - a spot of red

Circular motions. Circular Paths. Circumambulation. Pilgrimage. Grit. Fortitude. Judgment. Standards. Cultural conditioning. Heretical Pleasure. Linking together.

Animals. “Animal nature.” Animal magnetism.
Bull’s eye. Drop zone.

“Filth” is a noun, meaning foul, putrid matter, something especially loathsome, such as dirt or refuse (trash, thrash, gnash your teeth seeing this loathsome thing). Or, so-called moral corruption or defilement. Or, something that tends to cause this so-called corruption or defilement.

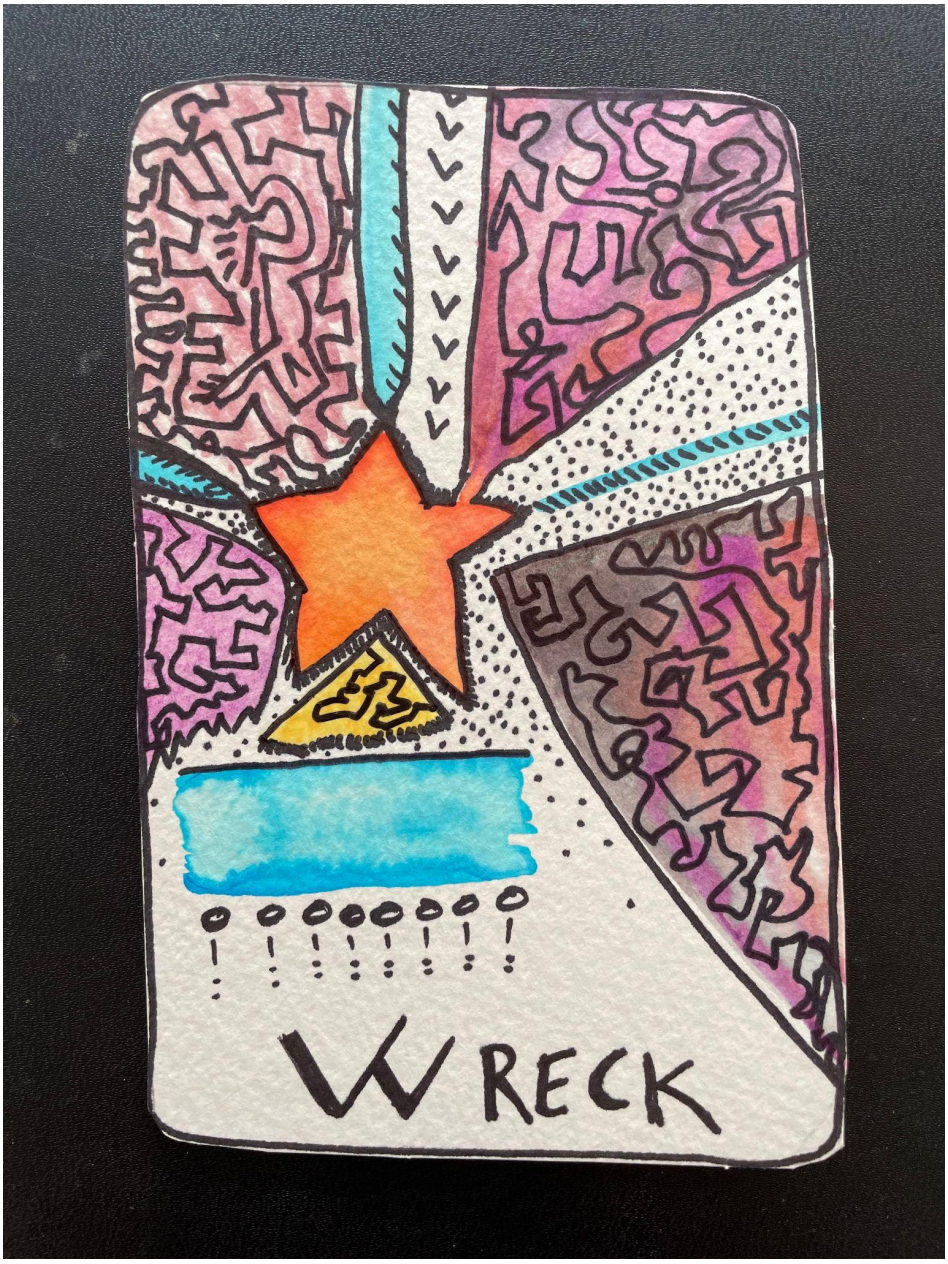
(Such harsh words. Who dared call us, the glory that we are, filth?)

unleashing atoms — cyclical time, cyclical space — subterranean cycles

Dirt on a clean floor, the ground you stand on. Boundaries between the so-called “inside” and “outside,” the “domestic” from the “wilds.”

things in their places. it’s all so-so
one thing leads to another
rusty water, pouring from the ceiling
and if not that
the glee of playing in mud with abandon

Wreck



Meditation on *Wreck*

No. 37
Preceded by *Filth* and followed by *Yes*

wow, baby. that was close. but here you are, with me, right now.

This card feels simpler, somehow. More cacophony, more chaos, more disruption, rupture, worry. But simpler — to the point

the point of impact

It's got you seeing stars
It's got you seeing past the bullshit
Went and opened Pandora's Box with this one, huh?

I'm seeing that a glowing orange star is at the center, and in the four quarters are fields of brownish-purple, with a chaos of squiggly lines inside of them, and random other patterns (dots, chevrons) filling the blank space. The star leaks its colors into the top right field. Underneath the star is a yellow triangle and blue horizontal bands.

Wreck comes from a root that means to push, shove, drive or track down
— something about *pursuit*, *intent* —
Shipwreck: not everything works out. Feeling so damned scattered. What do you find on the wrack line of the beach, that intertidal place?

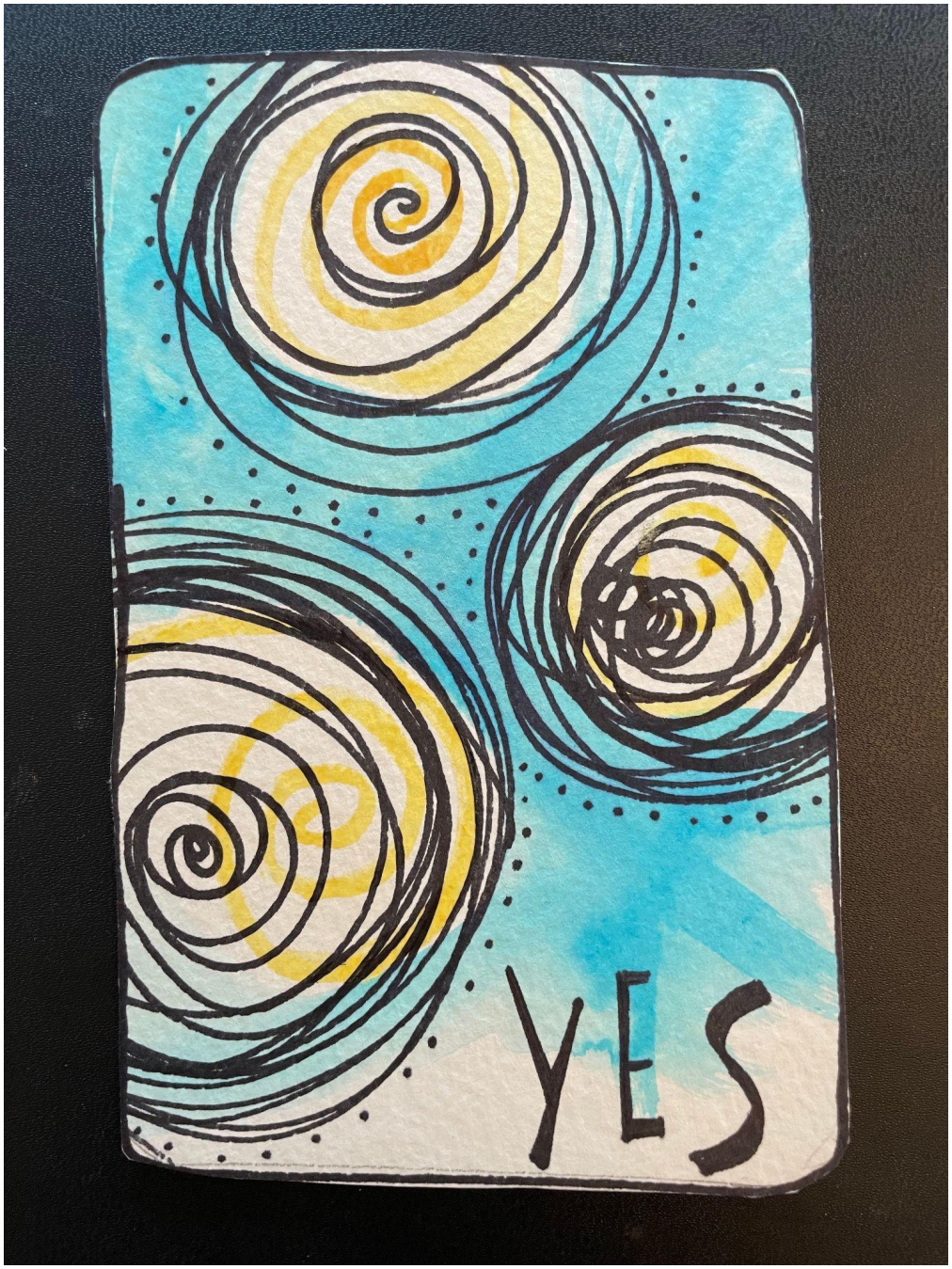
One can be a wreck ("I'm a wreck recently"), one can wreck ("I wrecked"), one can wreck something ("I wrecked the truck").

"A soul tearing itself to pieces...the soul's agonizing: a constriction, a suffocation, an affliction so keenly felt and with such a despairing and tormenting unhappiness that I don't know how to word it strongly enough."

This card evokes — show, don't tell

It initiates GREAT WORK

Yes



Meditation on *Yes*

No. 38
Before this, a *Wreck*. Afterwards, *Cooking Pot*.

What even is a card that says, only, *Yes*? Like, sure, I appreciate the affirmation, but what does it mean? I've come with my questions, looking for clarity, and maybe even an answer, a straightforward answer

Should I move?
Should I quit?
Can I really pull this off?
Will the battle be successful?
Won't it hurt?

And imagine the Voice Of God saying, clearly, in a word,

YES

But even such a clear pronouncement isn't so clear, isn't so steady.
Doubts can erode even a divine *Yes* —

and to be clear, that *Yes* you feel in
your bones, or gut, is nothing short of divine

So then again, maybe it is that simple

(there's no "No" in this deck)

What could you do — what could I do — if there was
trust in a clear and uncomplicated *Yes*?

How does it feel?

Looser? Fuller? Freer?

Is this *Yes* the path to some sort of liberation?

I’m seeing a mostly blue card with three swirls, or vortexes, of black marker, with other yellow spirals messily, but clearly, underneath that layer. Each spiral is surrounded by black dots. The spirals generally move clockwise, inward, though the one on the right is so messy I can’t tell — that one seems to lose track of its center —

This is not one of those “light and love” affirmations. (Not inherently, anyway).
Some Yeses can be terrible, crushing. You ask; they answer.

Really?

Yes

in any event, let us
take our Yes
and take it easy

(*So ends the fifth suite*)

Cooking Pot



Meditation on *Cooking Pot*

No. 39
Preceded by *Yes*, followed by *Tidal*

gather

alchemy — sustenance — our tending, raising

work it up to a simmer
recall the ceremony
prayers sung over the pot
curses she sang at “idiots,” “drunkards,” and “pigs”
which is to say, all that’s unfair in life

the journey-work of fire
the many into one and the one into all
the broken stove, sparse wood
doing what you gotta do

we wash the dishes to wash the dishes
good enough for me

deceptively domestic
political encampment, prayer camp, source of all action
ironclad, steely and dauntless
roil, grounded, the heat, the heat

so simmer down my pot of clay

ingather
ingather

the heat
the heat

Tidal



Meditation on *Tidal*

No. 40
Cooking Pot to *Tidal* to *Prayer*

When I first moved from the desert to the seashore, everything felt so off. So much transition, so fast. It seemed that the ground beneath me — the ground of my being, earth of my roots — was gone. It didn't go anywhere. I did. But I've found some mooring, down by the horizon — that stretch of forever — where I can watch the tides

i watch the tides
i let them be my timekeeper
Little Book of Tidal Hours
praying high tide, praying low tide
praying high tide, praying low tide

keep me, O Eternal Tides, keep me

and yet not eternal at all
ever breathing, always changing

Tidal rivers meet the Ocean. When and where, exactly, shifts and shifts, is swirling and sloshing, surfacing and slipping beneath, (and all scientific modeling aside) unanswerable. They flow in and out of each other

so let us, let us

Shhhhhh, says the Ocean

actually, i can't say too much about *Tidal*. all i can do is watch the tides, somehow holding the Ocean within, feeling the ebb and flow of that primordial depth reaching and retreating at the shallows and the shore. some things take a very long time to only sort of understand.

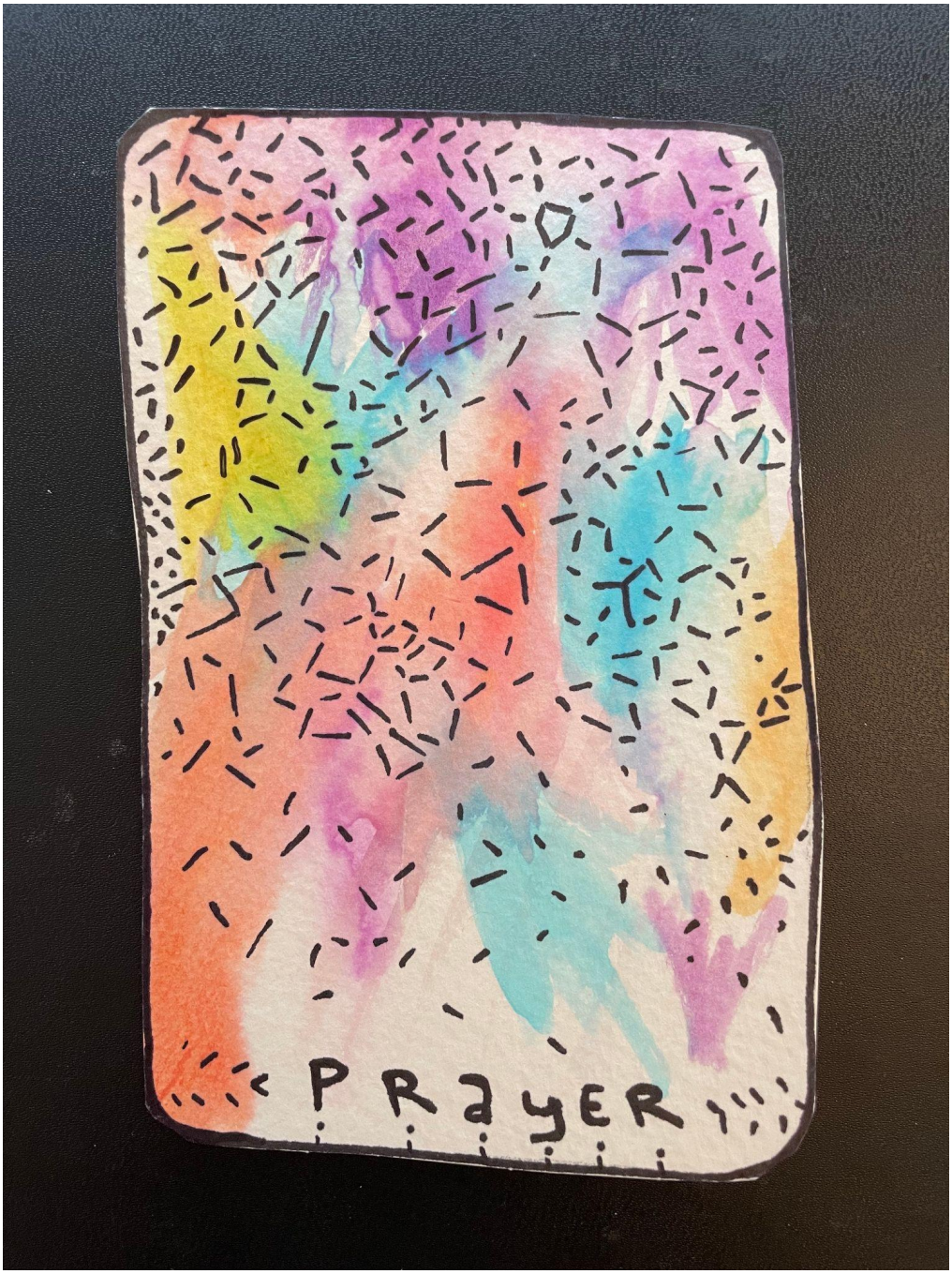
Visually, I'm seeing a blue and green card of watery, diffuse, vertical lines of paint. Up top is a line of downward pointing arrows and a black counterclockwise spiral emitting dots. On either side of the word "Tidal" is a simple, square grid of 25 dots.

We are underwater, waiting, just waiting.

"Tidal" is an adjective. What does it modify?

What's the rhythm of your ebb and flow?
Where, my love, does the river of you meet the Muchness?

Prayer



Meditation on *Prayer*

No. 41
From *Tidal* to *Prayer* to *Death*

I have no grand theory for what prayer is, how it works. It is something I do, though I find it hard to put into words, both during and afterwards when I try to describe

So I'll slow it down, tarry and ask

Do you pray?
What's it like, if you do? and
if not, please tell me about this space in your life

where "prayer" might usually go —

When I was little, before I started to learn the techniques of self-mortification, I'd pray with song. On and on and on, silly songs — while I played, would swing on the swingset, told my mom about my day

(Oh, to relearn those Chants)

I recently worked in a hospital, and prayed, quite simply, for people to live. Or, in some situations, to die something like an easy death

When I stand at the ocean and can't summon words — that's prayer

I pray with the Moon that I can just have a good night's sleep
I pray with the Sun that I too can haul myself out in front of everyone for another day
I pray crossing rivers, having learned *water is life*
I pray with my tears, my gaze, my hips and my hands
I pray with my attention and letting it go
I pray my dead brother is well, feasting on plates of gold and silver
I pray with my feet, especially in those wanderings where I don't know where to go

Sometimes my reading is prayerful, though it's often slow and frustrating (which can be the experience of prayer, too)

Do let me say two things, though. One, the card is “prayer,” not “pray.” There is no command here. I would imagine you likely live in so much prayer, are wrapped in it well — nothing else to do but unfold. And two, we definitely don’t need gods to pray to. Octavia Butler has a little line of dialogue where one character asks another something like, “What the hell do you believe…”

> I found it:
>
> “But what the hell do you stand for?” she demanded. “What do you pray to?”
> “Ourselves,” I said. “What else is there?”

Visually, I’m seeing a flow of colors — blue and coral and purple and even yellow, and all the little lines, so few of them connecting but they all move together, as water molecules swelling in the ocean, as wind and breath

A couple of notes on card order: *Prayer* is card No. 41, a prime number; it is an irreducible force. And the sequence of three has something to say: tides fluctuate and so does prayer, and so does the approach of death

Each of these cards is a prayer — to you, my friend, because truly, “*what else is there*”?

Death



Meditation on *Death*

No. 42
Prayer, then *Death*, then *Wasp Nest*

we slow our breathing
and slow
our hearts'
beating

because death's demand —
no airs, a subtlety that can't be forged
— is now due

things are slipping between
this and that

these rivers
flow
in their directions

by streams, seams,
and seeps, we flow
in our directions

pick up a
handful of leaves and gunk
from the channel
lend a hand to the
joinery of prayer

to the unstoppable
i hope
to say

hello beautiful — what a lover you are

✳

I'm seeing two rivers, of so many painted lines of blues and purples, at top and bottom. The diagonal line (top right to bottom left) is a wash — the paint was loaded with water, and so from each side it's connected by a flow. The "joinery of prayer" (almost-connected little black lines) are in four patches, but are disintegrating. Two orbs, one bigger and brighter, the other more distant and paler. It looks like a Z (which is not always the last letter of the alphabet, depending on the alphabet — consider the cultural norms that suggest where language begins and supposedly ends).

In Tarot, I sometimes read "Death" as transformation of any sort, but it's potent to read it simply as death

How's your relationship with death?
(how close at hand its loss, its exquisite pain? how far pushed to the edge?)

How do you honor your dead?
(did you help them into their unbecoming? what do they tell you in your dreams?)

It's bold to make a card of death, so universal an experience (and how ignorant I really am about it myself). Still —

✳

there have been versions of me

who

have needed

to die

so

that i might live

Wasp Nest



Meditation on *Wasp Nest*

No. 43
Before this is *Death* and afterwards is *Sol + Soul*

portals emerge within portals
journey to the Cosmic Deep

Where does a wasp nest? What of these galls, these figs, this parasitic entombing and resurrection from the bodies of another? What of these paper nests hanging from winter-bare branches?

Visually, I'm seeing twin orbs — binary stars. One is a blue orb in the center of a rusty-purple sky. Small black lines almost constellate into a structure that sprawls from one side of the card to another, yet all of those small black lines are all separated by some kind of space. These marks are like those of *Prayer* (No. 41, coming just before *Death*).

Death, it turns out, was not the end of this particular journey. And in order to pass from there to the next to the next place, we have to go through the *Wasp Nest*. To move through there, the nest — and this is just my take on it — it's probably wise to lead with breath, not words, and certainly do not shout. Hear the hum, this one more holy than frightening, harmonic, wild as anything in the universe

threshold between unknowns and further unknowns
wandering orbits
other such mysterious phenomena

Sol + Soul



Meditation on *Sol + Soul*

No. 44
Wasp Nest, *Sol + Soul*, *Chaff*

still of twilight, the airy disturbance of a new dawn

You brought your questions to this card. But say them again under this new light.
We can take our time, then rest in the shade.

Is the question of a "soul" — or psyche, or mind, or consciousness, or self — important to you? To this matter at hand?

I'm seeing sunrise, or perhaps sunset, or maybe even midday. An archipelago of pale-blue paint splatter crosses the card at its center. And an arch of the same color borders the card (as in *It's True*, No. 25). In horizontal bands are strips of orange and yellow, and just the creamy color of the card. On top of that are a billion black marks, little lines and dots, flowing into and out of some order. They form a "sun" toward the top left — dark dazzles

— lengthening shadows, stretching, crawling, grasping —

I try not to fear these dark rays. I try. I try.

I was never sure if this card should be called "Sol *plus* Soul" or "Sol *and* Soul" or simply, "Sol/Soul." I think its name is a mirage. And what of our order, this sequence? From *Death* to *Wasp Nest* to this ensouled place, and then to *Chaff* — all's revealed on the threshing room floor.

Chaff



Meditation on *Chaff*

No. 45
From *Sol* + *Soul* to *Chaff* to *Rose*

Visually, I'm seeing a background of pale orange, peach, and even a minty ice cream-green, all in long brushstrokes that arc beyond any edge of the card — a real sense of seeing close in, knowing it's a partial view. In black marker are shapes, mostly out of long, continuous lines: triangles, chevrons, a bird (perhaps), a skeleton (perhaps), and just lines that fit or flow together. I'm seeing playfulness, an easy movement, the natural swishing and sashaying of electrons and such small, fundamental aspects of existence. This card operates without singular dedication to focus and form. (In that way, it's like mysticism. In this way, it's like the whole damned deck.)

Chaff - the stuff that's cast off, but really it's so vital and important - a world in which nothing is "cast off" in which all is given its space.

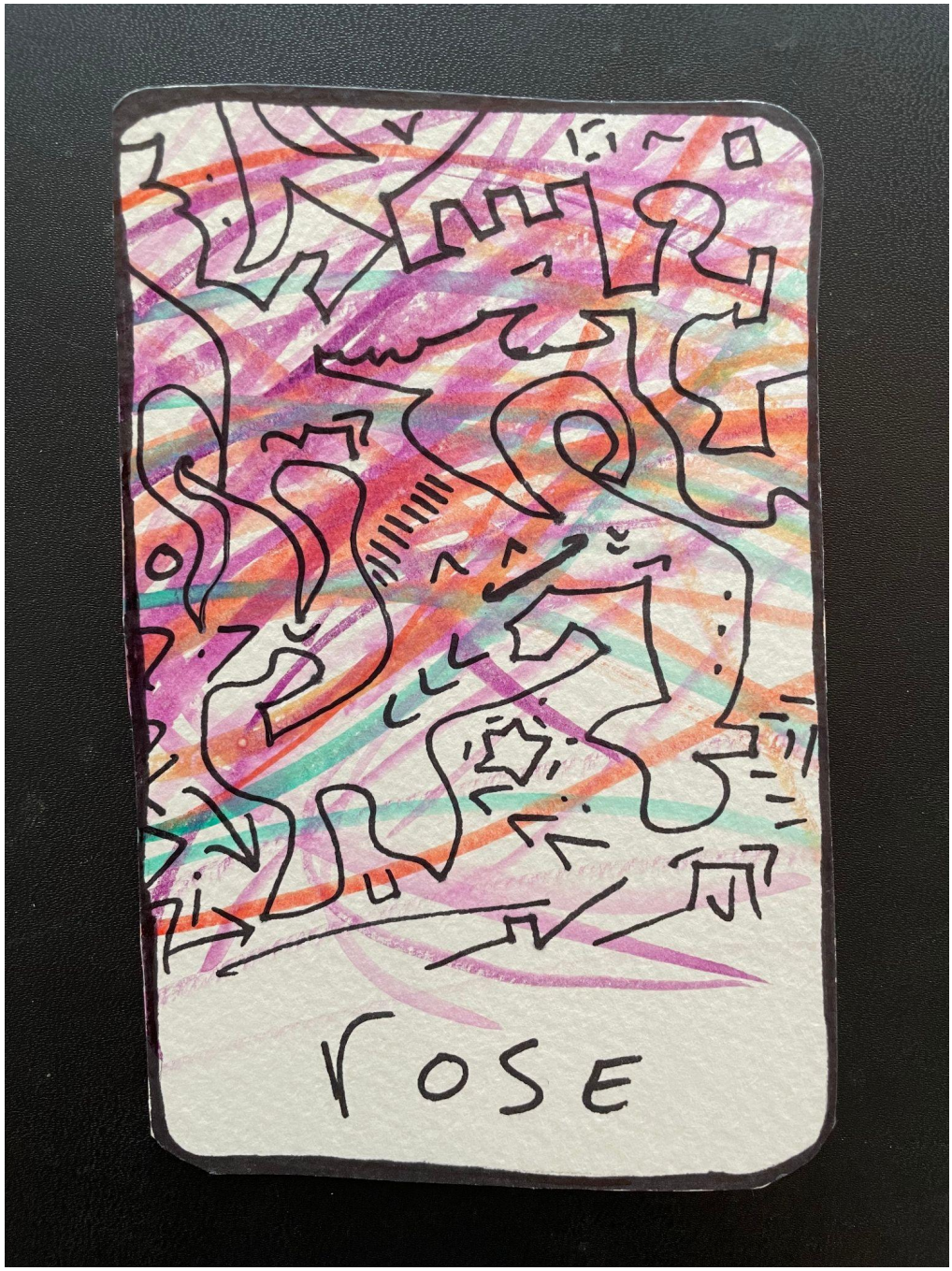
Chaff - "debris" or "something comparatively worthless." Yet there's a card for it. It's important enough, worthwhile enough, to be here. And its twin, with whom it shares so much genetic material, is *Rose*.

Chaff - from a supposed root word meaning "jaw" or "mouth."

What does a mouth have to do with the situation at hand?
Is it what you eat? What you say? The tension held there?
The winnowing that happens with words?

The people holding the Bible over their own heads told me many lies about chaff: sin this, wickedness that. So much violent language, so bent on separating one from the other. There is a fleetingness to life, though, that much is true. We are all like chaff before the desert wind, like the morning mist burned away by the sun. All of us are. All of it is.

Rose



Meditation on *Rose*

No. 46
Preceded by *Chaff*, followed by *Perfect*

"What I'm trying to do isn't quite normal"

loosening, not so many sharp edges now
wend, wend your way through the bush

rose, floral epitome
something thick with symbolism
symbol of symbols, power of powers

draws you in and invites you to linger - velvety to the touch, enchanting the nose

Visually, the card is ruled by purples and pinks (the purple is somewhat pinkish, actually), along with oranges and a couple types of teal. It's all long streaks of paint, overlapping, crisscrossing. It's all long arcs of color, and we know those arcs connect it to *Chaff*, its twin. These glyphs chiseled in black...I don't know so much of these. There are almost faces, legs, bodies. But not quite. Movement, though, movement, yes.

An affirmation only works if said simply and truthfully
An affirmation: We are unique. We are special. We are perfect.

(can we try to believe it?)

makes me think of a rose thicket in the woods, or by the ocean
rose petals along a path — always a path

a cacophony of colors and sacred rites but discernible forms
Altar of Adonis. Aphrodite. Mary. Graves. "I never promised you a rose garden."

ugly beauty unfolding — grace in procession

Perfect



Meditation on *Perfect*

No. 47
Rose to *Perfect* to *All of it*

A favorite. Makes me smile, even on a cloudy, rainy day. How hard it can be to trust in this — flawed, sure — but also *just so damn perfect*.

You are perfect in your messiness. In your muchness.

I am perfect in my messiness. In my muchness.

We are perfect in our messiness. Our muchness.

And you are perfect in mine and I in yours.

Perfect is also a verb. (It can be a dangerous one, trying to climb that which has no ladder. Cautions are in order).

I'm seeing a chaos. Stunned and elevated. An orange band of short brush strokes takes up the middle third of the card, with a fabulous little green, upward-pointing gem at center. Erratic lines on either side — microbial growth, growing. An irregular crown, a purple band within it. Some of the marker blows over this thick yellow painted core.

This is also perfect. This is all so perfect.

just so damn perfect

All of it



Meditation on *All of it*

No. 48
Preceded by *Perfect* and followed, in a way, by *Flight*

Be Not Afraid. All the way to the end of the line and here we are. There's order here, even if it's all criss-crossed — words disintegrate but I can feel it. *All of it*. All. All. All.

ah

(the breathing out in sublime exhaustion)

hu-huh. i get it. now i do.

The healing journey goes from *Flight* (from you, from me myself, from wholeness), to here, the *All of it* — the Allah, the Names that We Don't Say, the "God" stuff that gets so cloudy, that gets me so confused sometimes. But in this moment, don't you see the place of worship? Steeple of orange — and all these orbs! — at the center, on the altar. A sense of order emerges. These hearthstones found their orbit. A transit across the heart of *All of it*. We are the omphalos — let's those primordial eagles circle till they find us here —

What of the sequence, from *Perfect* to *All of it*? We don't travel through all of this to reach perfection. That's already our way. So realized, the view opens up to *All of it*, to the messy, dirty, swarming, weeping, wailing Muchness, to — "God," if you wish.

All saints. All souls. All bodies.
All devils. All death. All dark.
All light. All flight. All filth.
All nothing. All void.
All of Me All of You All of Us All of We All of It
All of It All of It All of It All of It All of It All of It All of It
All of It
All
All. All. All of it.

(*So ends the final suite*)

The So Damn Divine Oracle

Notes on the Cards and their Meditations

Included here are sources that are directly quoted or indirectly referenced in the meditations as well as intertextual or explanatory notes on the cards that do not otherwise fit into the structure of the guidebook. Etymological references for English words can be found in the Oxford English Dictionary, and those for Hebrew or Greek words in Strong's Concordance. Biblical quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version.

First Suite

Flight (No. 1)

"the fool's journey" is a name for the story of the twenty-two cards in the Major Arcana in more traditional iterations of the Tarot. You start with The Fool, wind your way past cards like The Lovers, The Tower, The Devil…and end up at what is usually the final card, The World. When I made this deck, I wasn't intending to tell a story, let alone echo this story and its archetypes. But as I've spent more time with the cards, certain stories have revealed themselves. I now understand the deck to be a journey. Not from Point A to Point B, but round and round, circumambulating something holy and hidden. A journey of healing, a journey of beginning to understand something, a journey of learning to take my questions more seriously and hold my answers more playfully. Here's to the journey.

Inward (No. 2)

"You can see beyond all that…" is from *Be Here Now* by Ram Dass, p. 58.

DMT is an entheogenic compound, a sacred psychedelic. I am grateful for this and other plant medicines — and their human caretakers — for their guidance in my healing.

Other side (No. 3)

"There is a place that is as far from here…" is from the book *Honey from the Rock* by Lawrence Kushner, p. 11.

"I can't imagine the bitter end…" is a line from the song "Oh Maker" by Janelle Monae, which appeared on her 2010 album *ArchAndroid*.

Shed this (No. 4)

"suit jackets over faerie wings" recalls the holy text, *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions*, written by Larry Mitchell and illustrated by Ned Asta.

"Masculinity can turn so poisonous." Anything I could say about this would be thanks to bell hooks, especially her book *Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love*. She's been

an invaluable teacher in thinking about the ways masculinity can be toxic — as corrupting to the human spirit as the body — and also models of masculinity that embrace love, healing, vulnerability, and the quest for greater connection.

"All that is dear to me…" is the fourth of the "Five Remembrances" as taught by Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. The other remembrances are that I am of a nature to grow old, to have ill health and to die, and that my actions are my only true belongings.

Rest (No. 5)

"...how I've learned that we should rest…" recalls several great teachers on the necessity and radical potential of rest, including Alexis Pauline Gumbs, adrienne maree brown, Tricia Hersey of The Nap Ministry, and several rabbis who've taught me about shabbat.

"Avoid massage, wrestling…" is from the chapter "Dreams" in *Hippocratic Writings*, p. 255. For further comments on wrestling, see notes for *It's True* (No. 25) and *Archangel* (No. 17).

"Say it, without ceasing, as prayer" recalls the meditative practice of Centering Prayer. Rather than clear your mind entirely, or focus only on the breath, you choose a single word. When the mind wanders, come back to the word, repeating it quietly or silently. There are, of course, innumerable spells, mantras and affirmations from many other religious and secular traditions. To "pray without ceasing" is a spiritual method found in *The Way of the Pilgrim*.

Ember (No. 6)

St. Teresa of Avila lived from 1515-1582. She is probably one of the most recognized mystics in and outside of the Christian tradition. Teresa has been a companion to me in my journey to make sense of a spiritual life that, at seemingly every turn, has eluded words. She writes: "the soul will not know how to explain, nor can it understand how it knows, but it does know with the greatest certitude" (*Interior Castle*, included in *The Collected Works, vol. 2,* p. 408). *Meditations on the Song of Songs,* her short treatise on the holiest of holies in Christian and Jewish scriptures, is a profoundly helpful guide in delighting in the mysteries of words, symbols, and meaningful texts. As she says: "One word of His will contain within itself a thousand mysteries" (*Meditations on the Song of Songs* in *The Collected Works, vol. 2,* p. 217).

St. John of the Cross lived from 1542-1591, and was a partner to Teresa in her religious reforms of the Carmelite order. He wrote extensively of the mystical dimensions of night and darkness. For example, he writes: "Just as this dark night of loving fire purges in darkness, it also in darkness does its work of enkindling" (*The Dark Night*, 12.1, p. 422). And this: "Through the inflaming of love we can understand some of the delightful effects this dark night of contemplation now gradually produced in the soul. Sometimes, as we said, it illumines in the midst of these darknesses (*The Dark Night*, 13.1, p. 424).

"We could not rest…" is from *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia E. Butler, p. 313-314.

There's a quality to this card reminiscent of the Wheel of Fortune (usually tucked between The Hermit and Strength) in the Tarot.

Thunderclap (No. 7)

"Uranian epiphanies" is a phrase I picked up from a piece of writing that I, truthfully, understand little of: *Figuring the Sacred* by Paul Ricoeur. The phrase shows up in this section: "The figure of the sky supports the symbolism of the Most High and generally of divine transcendence. And to this sky cycle are attached images of ascension, or mountains or ladders, those of flight and of levitation, as well as astral, solar and lunar symbolisms, along with uranian epiphanies such as thunder, lightning, storms and meteors…Nowhere else is the solidarity between the sacred and natural powers so well attested to" (p. 52). I most appreciate — and this has nothing to do with how Ricoure meant it — that "uranian" can refer to homosexuals and queer folks. Queerness has its own epiphanies, its own revelations of identity and divinity; see *Dream* (No. 18).

"electrum stretch, the emergence of living creatures…" recalls the fashionable entrance of some frightening Old Testament angels. "As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire, something like gleaming amber [electrum]. In the middle of it was something like four living creatures" (Ezekiel 1:4-5).

"Heavenly fire is spit forth by the planet…" is from Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, Book 2, Chapter 18.

"coming and going, descending and ascending…" recalls the story of Jacob's Ladder. "And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (Genesis 28:12).

Heal (No. 8)

For some reason, the visual description for the card did not want to live in the meditation. Too much of the essence of healing exceeds language. I'll just say that I'm seeing the card as a gentle wash of light blue and a pinkish-purple. The color seems to rise from the bottom, like a lovely billow of smoke from a small fire. In the center of the card is a saturated red-orange orb; it's small. Other than the border, the word "heal," and an upside-down triangle in the bottom right-hand corner, there is no marker in this image. The triangle also appears in *Dream* (No. 18).

"I wanted to let go — entirely…" is a reference to my relationship with suicide. I have relied on the support of many people (including dear friends, beloveds, therapists, and other medical professionals and healers) in my efforts to care for myself through the worst of those moments and their choppy wakes. Healing hasn't been about removing that notion from my mind. In reality, a great part of my path has been understanding more of the dimensions of my thoughts, feelings, and experiences of suicide.

Second Suite

Prophesy (No. 9)

Prophets and oracles were both diviners whose insight relied not on sacrificial livers or birds, but on words, on human language. Oracles always answered a question (often enigmatically). Prophets, on the other hand, spoke unprompted. The prophecy bubbles up within. There's no option not to share it.

A note on card order: this is the first card of the second suite, a continuation of the overall journey and a return to some type of beginning. Also, to *prophesy* is to speak into the space between *healing* (*Heal*, No. 8) and *heaven* (*Cielo*, No. 10).

Cielo (No. 10)

"Gone. Gone gone beyond…" is from *Be Here Now* by Ram Dass (p. 8), echoing the mantra at the conclusion of the Heart Sutra, *Gate, Gate, Paragate, Parasamgate, Bodhi Svaha.* The rest of that page in *Be Here Now* reads: "Who's adventurous enough to want to go on that journey? Do you realize when you go on that journey in order to get to the destination, YOU can never get to the destination? In the process YOU must die. MUST DIE. Pretty fierce journey, pretty fierce requirement. We want volunteers." See the note for *Death* (No. 42).

"...(any more than hell), and only that heaven or hell…" gestures to the famous speech of Satan in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. "The mind is its own place and in itself / can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n" (Book 1.254-5).

"...grains of dust." Regarding grains, see *Chaff* (No. 45). For more on dust, see *Sweat* (No. 28).

Down low (No. 11)

The phrase "down low" comes out of Black culture (mostly pre-millennium) to describe men who have sex with men but who do not identify as gay or queer. It's a phrase with deep history, wrapped up with the structural realities of AIDS and racism, as well as the politics of coming out and the many processes we can collapse into the eliding phrase *"negotiating identity."*

"...locked in a cedarwood box…" refers to some of the first lines in the Gilgamesh story, one of my most sacred texts. "Now look for the cedarwood box, undo its locks of bronze, open the door to its secrets, take up the tablets of lapis lazuli and read aloud: read all that Gilgamesh went through, read of all his suffering." See the *Gilgamesh* translation by Sophus Helle, p. 4.

A visual note: this card has a blue base or foundation, which reminds me of the card *It's True* (No. 25).

Damage (No. 12)

"Colonizer, perhaps" warrants a note on who I am, my positionality or social location. I am a white person from multiple lineages of settler colonialists. I grew up in a place I

knew as Arkansas, the homeland of the Quapaw. My blood ancestors were from Tennessee, North Carolina, Switzerland and, I think, Scotland and England. My understanding of colonization and decolonization is indebted to scholars Shawn Wilson and Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz; friends and acquaintances from Taos Pueblo; The Red Nation, based in Albuquerque, New Mexico; my friends and colleagues in "Decolonizing Buddhist Studies"; and many others. Some harms cannot be righted. Still, I offer these cards as a prayer into the damage and violence that exist because of settler colonialism.

Big Love (No. 13)

"Sacred Heart of Universal Love" is my take on the popular Catholic devotions to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary. My favorite saint (not yet an official saint), Blessed Bernardo Francisco de Hoyos y Seña (1711 - 1735), died young. Before that, however, he married Jesus in a mystical vision and worked to spread devotion to the Sacred Heart in Spain. This was a complicated though ardent desire, since the spread of religious devotion was bound up with colonization in the Americas. (See Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz for more on Spain's role in religious persecution in the Greater Southwest.) Wrapping my mind and heart around these layers of reality — let alone the mystical experience that seeded this card and deck — is ongoing.

"Gravitation produced thermal energy…" is from the poem "Stardust" by Ernesto Cardinal and translated by Johnathan Cohen.

A note on card order. This card initiates a special sequence in the deck, iterations of 13. Check it out: *Big Love* (No. 13), *Touch* (No. 26), *Cooking Pot* (No. 39).

Salt (No. 14)

This card invites ritual. One invitation is to work with the poem that begins the meditation. If you can, go to the ocean or a tidal area; you'll know what to do. And if that's not an option, another invitation is to hold a small pinch of salt in your hand. Speak to it of your hopes, dreams, fears or whatever you need to speak. Hold it until, at last, you feel it is time to let go. Then do that.

What is (No. 15)

"...in the beginning...right now...shall be" is freely taken from the Glory Be prayer in the Christian tradition ("Glory be to the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and forever shall be, world without end, Amen"), of which there are innumerable interpretations. The truest and most gorgeous version of this prayer I've ever heard (from a Benedictine monk at a monastery in New York state) goes, "Glory be to the Lover, the Beloved, and Love Overflowing."

Theft (No. 16)

Some of the card images, I've realized, have visual elements that I surely picked up from indigenous styles and petroglyphs in the Southwest: for example, the way the spiral of Medicine (No. 21) is drawn, and the tassels in cards like *What is* (No. 15). This was unintentional and, nevertheless, bears acknowledging. I have only altered one card in this deck after the fact, and that was to obscure a particular element that seemed, after

reflection, not mine to share. I cannot deny that this deck is spiritually syncretic, as Tarot has been for the entirety of its history as a divinatory tool. I have tried to give credit where it is due, to not reenact settler colonial patterns of cultural or epistemological theft. Where I have erred, the error is mine and I am sorry.

Third Suite

Archangel (No. 17)

Angel is from the ancient Greek *angelos*, which comes from the Hebrew word, *malak*, meaning "messenger."

"What of the hierarchy…" refers to *On the Celestial Hierarchy* by Pseudo Dionysius, from around the fifth century CE. Angels are grouped into three trios. From top (closest to God) to bottom (closest to humans), they are: Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones; Dominions, Virtues, and Powers; Principalities, Archangels, and Angels. There are sometimes thought to be four or seven archangels, depending on the tradition. See the chapter "Archangels" in *From Gabriel to Lucifer* by Valery Rees.

"...demand your wrestling arm" recalls the story of Jacob wrestling with an angel. Interestingly, the text refers to this "angel" as a man, humanity on the collective level, and God, but not, in fact, an angel. This story became important elsewhere in the deck; see *It's True* (No. 25).

"Naughty angels — The Fallen — taught us…" references the apocryphal Book(s) of Enoch that deals with the idea of fallen angels, forbidden knowledge, and the Nephilim. The biblical source of Nephilim is Genesis 6:4: "The Nephilim were on the earth in those days — and also afterward — when the sons of God went to the daughters of humans and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown."

"Well I'll just lick an angel…" is from the song "Take a Byte" on the 2018 album *Dirty Computer* by Janelle Monae.

"Consider that you, too, are an angel" recalls Lawrence Kushner's take on angels when he writes that, "I do not know how many times in one's life one is also a messenger. But for everyone it is at least once. One to whom it is given to know that their errand is completed is blessed and rare. Not so for most of us. Remember only that you are not always going where you are going for the reasons you think you are. See *Honey from the Rock*, p. 68.

Dream (No. 18)

"Don't dream it, be it" is a line sung by Tim Curry in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975). This movie, Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, Janelle Monae's album *ArchAndroid*, and the epic of Gilgamesh and Enkidu are some of the most meaningful stories in my life.

"…*to the healing temples where*…" references the practices surrounding the cult of

Asklepios, the Greek and Roman healing god par excellence. See the works of scholars such as Kimberley C. Patton and Patricia Cox Miller.

This card and *Big Love* (No. 13) come from my own experiences — experiences I've variously described as spiritual, mysterious, oracular, imaginative, and, on occasion, mystical.

A visual note: like the card *Heal* (No. 8), the description didn't want to live in the meditation (other than the line "Thermal vents on the ocean floor"). This card is a field entirely of shades of pink and many downward-turned triangles: some are a solid pink, some have geometric designs in them. Solid black orbs rise from the bottom or meet at the tips of the triangles.

Delta (No. 19)

"...my beloved is mine..." recalls a line from the holiest of Christian and Jewish scriptures. "My beloved is mine and I am his; he pastures his flock among the lilies. Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle or a young stag on the cleft mountains." (Song of Songs 2:16-17).

"The only lasting truth is Change" is from Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. It is the third line of the opening verses of scripture, *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*. The entire refrain goes: "All that you touch, you Change. All that you Change, Changes you. The only lasting truth is Change. God is Change."

"generous creatrix" is from the "QUEER MORNING BLESSINGS / birkot hashachar" by Dori Midnight and Randy Furash -Stewart.

Echo (No. 20)

"d.m.t. fever dreams" is as close as I could get to describing my experience with this compound. See the note for *Inward* (No. 2).

"move into this chamber" suggests the mood of the biblical verse, "Draw me after you, let us make haste. The king has brought me into his chambers" (Song of Songs 1:4).

"a delicacy disrupted by war" refers to *Undrowned* by Alexis Pauline Gumbs. She writes: "Gray whales are world shapers…And they have been missing from the Atlantic Ocean since the end of the transatlantic slave trade. What happened? Marine biologist say it is still a mystery why…I wonder if the toxicity of the slave trade and its impact on the ocean have been under-reported. Lucille Clifton says the 'Atlantic is a sea of bones.' What is the half-life of the transubstantiation of life into servitude? Does it ever dissolve?" (p. 118).

Echo has a mythical connection, but this (like most everything in the creation of the cards) was not intentional. In Greek stories, Echo was a mountain nymph who Zeus used to protect himself from his own decisions; they'd been seeing each other, but Zeus wasn't being up front with his wife, Hera. So Hera put on Echo a terrible curse: to only repeat

the words last spoken to her. What were those words, spoken and heard, for you?

Medicine (No. 21)

I can say no more about *Medicine*.

Play (No. 22)

A note on card order: the pink "figures" in the central part of this image are similar to those in *Archangel* (No. 17) and *Hallowed* (No. 23). Perhaps these are the three trios of angels from the *Celestial Hierarchy*? They may be. It's important to keep this trio of cards tethered in our minds — archangels carry a message, something to do with the deep holiness of play.

A visual note: I have been told that the figures look similar to certain Hebrew letters. This was unintentional. There's a story to be told of the long history of the occultist urge to merge various traditions, including Jewish mysticism, into a singular system of esoteric knowledge. It was this sort of syncretic urge that led to the creation of the modern tarot by Pamela Colman Smith and A.E. Waite — the progenitor for most tarot decks that have come after. I didn't mean for the visuals of these cards to reference either Hebrew letters or Jewish mysticism. Still, I am grateful to Jewish creatives and teachers — especially Dori Midnight, Rebekah Erev, and Lawrence Kushner — for the depth they've brought into my life through their work. Also, the black "panpipes" appear in *Sweat* (No. 28)

Hallowed (No. 23)

"why rush so quickly…" is a line from the song "Who's God" on the 2013 album *Ceremony* by Raashan Ahmad, who is quoting the Persian poet Hafiz.

Rot (No. 24)

"Decomposition," as a general concept, recalls Walt Whitman's poem "This Compost," one line of which reads, "Something startles me where I thought I was safest." Angels remind us, however, to be not afraid.

"There's a Tower quality…" is referencing The Tower card in traditional tarot, usually positioned between The Devil and The Star.

A visual note: there's a central green orb divided down to the core in four places (slices), yet it's largely connected. Black squiggles erupt from the core. A tongue of peachy orange and dense black squiggles moves to the left. Black lines connect orbs up top — some simple and straight, others lashing and electric. A black line is off to the left. A peachy area, curving upward at a steep pitch, is like an exponential line on a graph. A tie-dye band of yellow and green rests above the word "Rot."

There are four cards that are iterations of twelve: *Damage* (No. 12), *Rot* (No. 24), *Filth* (No. 36) and *All of it* (No. 48, the final card). That subterranean thread could suggest "undesirable" aspects of the human experiences are nonetheless essential to this journey, to this circumambulation of our own lives.

Fourth Suite

It's True (No. 25)

"…like Jacob wrestling the angel…" is a reference to this story from Genesis 32:23-29: "After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, 'Let me go, for it is daybreak.' But Jacob replied, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.' The man asked him, 'What is your name?' 'Jacob,' he answered. Then the man said, 'Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.' Jacob said, 'Please tell me your name.' But he replied, 'Why do you ask my name?' Then he blessed him there." For more on Jacob, see *Archangel* (No. 17).

Touch (No. 26)

Some form of the word "touch" has existed for nearly a millennium; the first hit (and that is what it means, to "hit" or "strike") is from about 1100 CE, and within 100 years it was used to mean not only making contact with something, but also to "touch on" a subject. We bring so much to the cards that animate our lives — our uncertainties, anxieties, hopes — but the cards can only touch on those mysteries. Yet even the gentlest touch can strike us profoundly, reverberating throughout our bodies and spirits.

A visual note: I'm seeing two purple stars (each made of three intersecting lines of paint) and an almost cellular structure of purple and orange, which is ringed in blue. I find it strange that for a card called "Touch" so few of the colors actually touch each other; there's a tiny, almost unnoticeable dip of purple into blue, but that's it.

"...microscopic and cosmic…visible and invisible…" speaks to the collective trauma and realities of the global coronavirus pandemic, which has stretched on for nearly the entirety of the creation of the *So Damn Divine Oracle*. I made this card sometime around January 2020, as it was all starting. Touch. *"How long have you gone without?"*

Fancy (No. 27)

"*To thine own self be true…"* is here a line from the song "Fancy." It's been covered by Orville Peck and Reba McEntire, and was written and first performed by Bobby Gentry. The song's protagonist, Fancy, is describing a locket her momma gave her. The line is originally from Shakespeare.

Sweat (No. 28)

"thy throes, thy perturbations" is from the Walt Whitman poem "Thou Orb Aloft Full-Dazzling."

"the scent of these armpits…" is from the Walt Whitman poem, "Song of Myself."

"the word 'sweat' shows up twice" references two instances of the word "sweat," one in the Hebrew Bible and the other in the Christian New Testament. The first (Hebrew *zeah*)

is from the verse, “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground” (Genesis 3:19). This is during God’s long curse of Adam, Eve and the serpent. (Incidentally, the root of the Hebrew word for serpent can mean “divination”). God is casting them out of the Garden of Eden, scared the humans would become gods themselves: “And the Lord God said, ‘The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever’” (Genesis 3:22). God even stations an angel — a cherubim — at the gate of Eden to keep them out. This is the only place in the bible that this Hebrew word appears. The second instance of “sweat” is from the scene where Jesus is praying in the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives the night before his execution: “An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground” (Luke 22:23-24). Again, this “sweat” (Greek *hidrós*) is the only place this word appears in the Bible. Two gardens, two angels, two sweats.

“They say the mythical River Dinur…” is referencing the entry about the “hashmallim” in Gustav Davidson’s *Dictionary of Angels.*

Crying (No. 29)

“...moved so quickly into confrontation and anger…” alludes to the way many masculine-gender people are conditioned to suppress the rawest emotions, save for anger. Two books that have helped me learn about this within myself, Lama Rod Owen’s *Love and Rage* and bell hooks’s *Will to Change*.

“He is dangerous” is a line from the song “This Jesus Must Die” from the 1973 album *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

“a thousand teardrops can’t be wrong” and the next quote are lines from the song “C’mon Baby, Cry” by Orville Peck, from his 2022 album *Bronco*.

Revelation (No. 30)

“...the thirteen winds” refers to the fierce winds that Shamash unleashed to help Gilgamesh and Enkidu battle the forest guardian Humbaba. They were the “south wind, north wind, east wind, west wind, gust, and gale, tempest, blizzard, winds of evil, demon blast, thunderstorm, whirlwind, and hurricane.” See Tablet II of most *Gilgamesh* translation; specifically, see Sophus Helle’s translation, p. 48.

“Wildfires release vast, swelling energy into the sky — a birthing” references so many things about wildfires, especially the megafires that are burning now in the twenty-first century — a new type of “uranian epiphany” (See note on *Thunderclap*, No. 8). The word “pyrocumulonimbus,” describing a type of wildfire-induced storm cloud, first appeared in the New York Times in 2021.

The Book of Revelation, also known as the Apocalypse of John, is worth a read for its dizzying images, from which so many ideas in American culture come. Take, for example, the archetype of the Devil. Revelation conflates all previous biblical mentions

of this character (of *these characters*), so we have a merging of Lucifer ("the shining one," a fallen angel, who liberates a third of the angels with him), Satan (an "adversary"), Leviathan (a sea creature as long as the stretch of sea upon the earth), and the Great Red Dragon. Who are the individuals and archetypes of your own revelation?

Fifth Suite

So (No. 31)

"So sweet...I love you so" is from the children's book *So Many Stars* by Andy Warhol and his mother, Julia Warhol. The book "explores the concept of 'so.'"

"So be it. See to it." was how Octavia E. Butler ended so many of her affirmations, declaring that something would come to pass and taking responsibility for making it so.

A note on card order: *So* is the stitching (if you will) between *Revelation* (No. 30) and what's right *Here* (No. 32). How do you translate a mystical thought or word, move it from there (ethereal, ineffable) to here (material, everyday)? Sometimes you know something is *so… so… something*, and so we keep trying to find the words, the visuals, the symbols, to move through the *so-ness* of it all.

Here (No. 32)

"Be Here Now and all that…" is a broad gesture toward *Be Here Now* by Ram Dass. Simple as that statement ("be here now") may be, it can be hard to practice. Be here? Now? In the midst of so much suffering and with the apocalypse — a deluge or fire or virus or zombies or armed insurrection — seeming so close at hand? Yes, he says:

> At this moment if you set the alarm to get up at 3:47 this morning and when the alarm rings and you get up and turn it off and say: What time is it? You'd say: NOW / NOW! Where am I? HERE! HERE! Then go back to sleep, get up at 9:00 tomorrow. Where am I? HERE!What time is it? NOW! Try 4:32 three weeks from next Thurs. By God. It is — there's no getting away from it — that's the way it is, that's the eternal present. You finally figure out that it's only the clock that's going around…It's doing its thing but you — you're sitting HERE / RIGHT NOW / ALWAYS (p. 80).

Honey (No. 33)

Bees — honeybees (*Apis mellifera*) and the thousands of other bee species, such as the tiniest bee in North America, *Perdita minima* — are all portents, omens, or rather angels ("messengers," see the notes for *Archangel*, No. 17). In the woods by where I grew up, there was a hollow oak tree where a hive of bees once took up residence for a couple of years. They eventually went away. What was that message? I still wonder. However, hearing about the bees dying off…that message, that ominous warning, seems clearer.

And (No. 34)

"I Am That I Am…" is from the episode of Moses and the Burning Bush. "But Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has

sent me to you," and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I am who I am'" (Exodus 3:13-14). The name can also be translated as "I will be what I will be" or "I will create whatever I will create"; see Robert Stone's entry in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*.

A note on the word "and." The word appears on the card *Sol + Soul* (No. 44). The "+" in that card — the "and" — is silent, the two words are said as one.

Shine (No. 35)

"Hear me illustrious…" and all italicized, quoted sections are from the Walt Whitman poem "Thou Orb Aloft Full-dazzling."

"Darkness has a shine to it too…" and *"dark rays of illumination"* recall St. John of the Cross and his theology of darkness, as well as Pseudo-Dionysius. (See the notes for *Sol + Soul*, No. 44).

"...in the black belly of" is from Lucille Clifton's poem, "the earth is a living thing".

Filth (No. 36)

"Circular Paths" is the Sabian Symbol for the fifteenth degree of Libra. Dane Rudhyar's take on this symbol is that if we can identify with vast cosmic rhythms we can free ourselves from emotional and group tensions and so move "serenely and at peace" along circular paths. He's talking about astrological rhythms, but we can expand it to include specifically human and earthly rhythms, too: rhythms of our bodies, our families and friends, our communities, moments of collapse, movements for justice, etc.

Wreck (No. 37)

"One can wreck something ('I wrecked the truck')…" is a personal story. I did wreck my truck. It was on a bridge spanning a river gorge 800 feet deep. I survived but was shaken, like the rattle of steel. I had to make meaning of the fact that this bridge, where so many people have taken their lives, is where I averted death (that time). It started me off on a healing journey that led to a pilgrimage, moving across landscapes and communities, creating this deck — a journey that still isn't over.

"A soul tearing itself to pieces…" is from St. Teresa of Avila's *Book of Her Life,* Chapter 32. She is describing a mystical vision of descending into hell. This vision was a major turning point in Teresa's reform of the Carmelite order, as that's when she decided to start the process of founding a new monastery. (She founded seventeen of them).

"It initiates GREAT WORK" is here a reference to *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner. The angel has just crashed through the ceiling, above where Walter Prior is in bed, deathly sick with AIDS. The phrase "great work" also shows up in the Bible in Nehemiah 6:3; the word for "work" (Hebrew *melakah*) is from the same origin as "angel" (Hebrew *malak*), meaning "messenger."

Yes (No. 38)

The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that "In older usage yes was usually considered to be the proper affirmative reply to a question framed in the negative, whereas yea was considered the proper affirmative reply when the question was framed in the positive." When you asked your question of the oracle, did you frame your question in the positive or the negative? You can always rephrase and refine your question.

The fifth suite of cards is both the shortest, having only six cards, and in my estimation the strangest, with *Yes*, *So*, *Here*, and *And*. We can play with any and all abstractions.

Sixth Suite

Cooking pot (No. 39)

"...so simmer down my pot of clay…" is from *Strega Nona* by Tomie dePaola.

"political encampment, prayer camp, source of all action" is in gratitude to water protectors of the indigenous-led movement against the Dakota Access Pipeline. See the note for *Prayer* (No. 41).

"wash the dishes…holy enough for me" recalls two teachings. St. Teresa of Avila wrote, "Don't be sad when obedience draws you to involvement in exterior matters. Know that if it is in the kitchen, the Lord walks among the pots and pans helping you both interiorly and exteriorly" (see *The Book of Foundations* in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, vol. 3*, Chapter 5.8). And then there is Thich Nhat Hanh's perpetual wisdom to "wash the dishes to wash the dishes" (See *The Miracle of Mindfulness*).

Tidal (No. 40)

Tidal wisdom is good medicine. Alexis Pauline Gumbs writes in *Undowned*, "Most Black-and-white dolphins live at the shoreline. They collaborate to push sardines out onto the sand then follow them to eat, stranding themselves on the beach for a while and letting the waves take them back. Could I trust myself that much? And remember to breathe? Here on the shoreline, could I know in my gut that my home will reclaim me? That the dry spells will end?" (p. 122).

Prayer (No. 41)

"...having learned water is life" is a gratitude to all the blessed Water Proctors of Taos and elsewhere who taught me much about prayer during the #NoDAPL movement and the gathering of the Oceti Sakowin Camp. *Mni Wiconi. Agua es Vida. Water is Life.* See also *Cooking Pot* (No. 39).

"But what the hell…is there?" is from Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, p. 243.

Death (No. 42)

This is all I have to add. There's so much to mourn and grieve in this world, in the course of a life. So mourn. So grieve. So set it on a pyre with kindling. Lay it in a grave with kindness. Mark it with a stone. And every year (or as often or as infrequently as you

need), return to that place (in the land, in your heart) and say out loud the names of your beloveds. Even now, you can say their names. Even now, you can say their names. Even now, you can say their names. May we all do so.

"versions of me / who have / needed / to die" See the note for *Cielo* (No. 10).

Wasp nest (No. 43)

"Cosmic Deep" comes from a brief part of a vision or dream as told in Zechariah: "In the night I saw a man riding on a red horse! He was standing among the myrtle trees in the glen; and behind him were red, sorrel, and white horses. Then I said, 'What are these, my lord?' The angel who talked with me said to me, 'I will show you what they are'" (1:8-9). The Hebrew word here translated as "glen" (*metsullah*) has a number of possible renderings, including "cosmic deep." The word was often used to refer to watery depths, though in this verse it carries more of a connotation of shadows and something growing dark: an obscuring, an occulting, the way night and dreams come over us and take hold. The "cosmic deep" interpretation references back to the "primordial abyss" of Mesopotamian religion. See Mark J. Boda, *The Book of Zechariah*, p. 124-125.

Sol + *Soul* (No. 44)

"...these dark rays.." is pointing toward *Mystical Theology* by Pseudo-Dionysius. Part of the opening of this short work goes,

> Amid the deepest shadow
> they pour overwhelming light
> on what is most manifest.
> Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen
> they completely fill our sightless minds
> with treasure beyond all beauty.

This "divine" and "brilliant" darkness is beyond all knowing; if we can get past all our ideas about ourselves and the world, perhaps we "will be uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow which is above everything that is." (See *The Complete Works*).

Chaff (No. 45)

"...like chaff before the desert wind…" invokes two biblical passages. Jeremiah 13:24 reads, "I will scatter you like chaff driven by the wind from the desert." And Hosea 13:3 reads, "Therefore they shall be like the morning mist or like the dew that goes away early, like chaff that swirls from the threshing floor or like smoke from a window."

Rose (No. 46)

The rose is a flower of Venus, of Aphrodite, and these meditations were written under her blessed watch, as well as the illuminating flame of Octavia E. Butler.

The phrase "I never promised you a rose garden" is from "Rose Garden" by k.d. lang.

"What I'm trying to do isn't quite normal" is from Butler's *Parable of the Talents*, p. 81.

Perfect (No. 47)

The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that "Among the senses of classical Latin *perfectus* are: fully realized, complete, finished, having all the essential qualities, fully accomplished or trained, fully grown, (of a number) equal to the sum of its divisors, designating a verbal tense which denotes a completed action; in post-classical Latin *perfectus* also has the sense 'spiritually perfect.'"

All of it (No. 48)

The deck starts with a tiny seed —you could hold it in your palm — and grows into everything, into *All of it*.

"A transit across the heart…" is describing the visual of black dots moving over the glowing orb, as an exoplanet would move across the face of a distant sun. Space is so holy. In the same way that the first card in this oracle, *Flight* (No. 1), seems to echo the essence of The Fool in the Tarot, this card, *All of it* (No. 48), seems to echo the Tarot's final card, The World. Among the many interpretations you could imagine for these cards, *Flight* certainly suggests separation, while *All of it* suggests unity with all that is; in that way, it is a healing journey through these cards, a journey of return to wholeness.

This card, *All of It*, was not created to reference anything in particular, though I have since found several quotes that illuminate aspects of what I'm trying to say with the phrases "All of it" and "The Muchness," and the card itself.

The first is from Walt Whitman, when he says in the poem "Song of Myself" (p. 34),

> All truths wait in all things,
> They neither hasten their own delivery nor resist it…

The second is from the sacred scriptures embedded in Octavia E. Butler's *Parable* novels, *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*. One of the verses reads,

> Create no images of God.
> Accept the images
> that God has provided.
> They are everywhere,
> in everything.
> God is Change —
> Seed to tree,
> tree to forest;
> Rain to river,
> river to sea;
> Grubs to bees,
> bees to swarm.
> From one, many;

from many, one;
Forever uniting, growing, dissolving —
forever Changing.
The universe is
God's self-portrait.

Though I don't hold to the iconoclastic commandment of the first few lines (weren't these cards doing just that?), the rest of it is a deep and necessary medicine.

The third comes from Howard Thurman, a Black theologian who writes in *Disciplines of the Spirit*,

> To Jesus, God breathed through *all that is*: the sparrow overcome by sudden death in its flight; the lily blossoming on the rocky hillside; the grass of the field and the clouds, light and burdenless or weighted down with unshed waters; the madman in chains or wandering among the barren rocks in the wastelands; the little baby in his mother's arms; the strutting insolence of the Roman Legion, the brazen queries of the tax collector; the children at play or old men quibbling in the market place; the august Sanhedrin fighting for its life amidst the arrogances of empire; the whisper of those who had forgotten Jerusalem, the great voiced utterance of the prophets who remembered — to Jesus, God breathed through all that is (p. 89, emphasis mine).

And this quote from *Be Here Now* by Ram Dass (p. 77) also describes "All of it" well:

YOU ARE THE UNIVERSE
YOU ARE ALL FORM
YOU ARE THE BREATH
YOU ARE THE RIVER
YOU ARE THE VOID
YOU ARE THE DESIRE TO BE ENLIGHTENED
YOU ARE ENLIGHTENED

Sitting down with the oracle cards is just like Ram Dass says (p. 108):

YOU'RE STANDING
ON A BRIDGE
WATCHING
YOURSELF
GO BY

WOW! LOOK AT THAT!

Be well, my friend. Be well.

The So Damn Divine Oracle

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Gratitudes

Thank you, thank you, for ***joining me in this journey*** and for ***allowing me to join you*** in yours. I truly believe that we are radically interconnected—fundamentally rooted in each other's reality—and that, in these moments, that connection is just a bit more obvious than it usually is. It is with so much gratitude I thank you for being with me, right here and right now.

And I offer my ***deepest gratitudes*** to the dear people who helped make this project what it is, in ways both overt and subtle: Andrew Heinrich and Michelle Heinrich, Kass Urban-Mead, Theo Weinberger, Nathalie Levine and A.R.G., Eva Seligman, Lóre Stevens, Prince Jenkins, Katie Dudzik, Diana Marin, Heather Wakefield, Hannah Mogul-Adlin, Becka Gandy, Sabrina Gill, Danielle de Preux, Harvard Divinity School professors Kimberley C. Patton and Stephanie Paulsell, Nao Udea (d. 2014), Kalypso Oceanrider (d. 2020), my beloved ancestors and chosen guides, and so many others. Thank you, thank you.

Even more gratitudes can be found throughout the Notes of this deck. And, of course, everyone in the bibliography is so very appreciated for their wisdom, writing, and many sacred offerings.

✳

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We Are Each Other's Oracle

an essay exploring the creative, divinatory, historical and ministerial dimensions of the *So Damn Divine Oracle*



By Cody Hooks

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Submitted May 13, 2022

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Prologue

I'm trying to speak—to write—the truth. I'm trying to be clear. I'm not interested
in being fancy, or even original. Clarity and truth will be plenty,
if I can only achieve them.
— Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*[1]

Then I said, "What are these, my lord?" The angel who talked with me said to me,
"I will show you what they are."
— Zechariah 1:9

I speak in images. With nothing else can I express the words of the depths.
— Carl Jung, *The Red Book*[2]

✳

Here we are at the altar of the oracle, the oracle of our own divinity, of me myself and you yourself, and, *blessedly*, we ourselves. You and I are together, right here and right now, for a moment. To share some small space with you—meeting for a blip in the vast span of time and space—is a marvelous thing. I want to slow this miracle down just a little, turn it over in my hands and notice its shape, its weight, what it could mean. I call it a "miracle" but, in truth, we could call it so many things. A meeting of the minds. A joining of paths. A divine encounter. An oracular pronouncement. Yes. All of it.

Everything depends on this essential togetherness. This interbeing.[3] This radical connectivity where we are rooted in each other.

There is, for a moment, no space or time between us. In creating and sharing these cards, I am journeying with you. In picking up these cards or reading these words, you are journeying with me. We are companions. As is said of Enkidu in the story of Gilgamesh, "His wise heart told him to find a friend."[4]

Thank you, thank you, my friend. Let us begin.[5]

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[1] Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2016), 134.
[2] Carl G. Jung, translated by Sonu Shamdasani, *The Red Book: A Reader's Edition* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009), 123.
[3] This was articulated by Thich Nhat Hanh, which I discuss throughout, especially in the second part, *Rooted*.
[4] Sophus Helle, *Gilgamesh: a new translation of the ancient epic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 10.
[5] Addressing the reader as a "Friend" is borrowed from *Meditations on the Tarot: a Journey into Christian Hermeticism*, translated by Robert Powell (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2002).

Introduction

I do not know when you will read this, but at the time I am writing it, the spring of 2022, the world has experienced a recent deluge of crises: worsening climate change and ferocious wildfires, uprisings for racial justice and reactionary movements against them, and, of course, the global coronavirus pandemic. This last crisis, starting in the United States around March of 2020, plunged many of us into an epic solitude: a necessity for public health but an existential challenge nonetheless. For me, it became a type of monastic enclosure, offering a quiet for deep study and deeper reflection. Like a lot of people, I leaned on my spiritual practices and communities to get through the great flood of unknowing. Something surprising was borne out of that time of silence, stillness, and shadow: the *So Damn Divine Oracle*.

It started as a side project in a class during my first semester in divinity school, right before the pandemic began. It was seemingly nothing more than a playful experiment of using Crayola watercolors and a black Sharpie marker to make a few Tarot-esque cards that I could share on social media.[6] I had no real plan, just intuition. But once I started making these cards, they commanded my attention, weaving themselves into my life and drawing energy from a source more vital than curiosity, a source of inward depth. The cards, and whatever they were pointing to, was something necessary and healing.

This oracle, both the original handmade deck and the published version that is to come, are my sacred offerings brought to the altar of each other's divinity. This deck is meant as a divinatory tool and a means of sustained contemplation. They are meant to be held, experimented

[6] I was unintentionally participating in "the most common form of computerized divination," that is, the "drawing virtual cards." See Marianna Ruah-Midbar, "The Sacralization of Randomness: The Theological Imagination and the Logic of Digital Divination Rituals" in *NUMEN* 64 (2014), 625. Furthermore, the artistic style of these cards could be said to align with the "low art," "kitsch," "folk" and "campy" styles indicative of many modern decks. See Emily E. Augur, *Tarot and Other Meditation Decks* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2004), 9-10, 36-37.

with, used individually and shared between and among people. The cards are the first offering. Each card comes with a meditation and accompanying notes, which are the second and third. Think of these written components not so much as an explanation of or commentary on the cards; instead, I hope you can experience them as an echo of my own shifting presence. This essay is still a further offering. Something like an extended artist's statement or a personal essay, it is a way of bringing you into my creative process and attempts to answer what have become, for me, essential questions: *What is this thing I made? What creative, historical and spiritual wells was I drinking from as the cards flowed from my hands? Who is it for? What are its limits? What is its potential?* Following these questions has led me toward what I have come to call my "oracular philosophy." I could just as well have called it a personal theology, because trying to articulate the meanings of these cards has pulled me within myself and asked me to wrestle with the divine, prayer, ceremony, and the nature of reality. But when it comes to such lofty matters, I am certain of little and ambivalent about much. I am a seeker along many paths. Yet one thing has emerged as a central theme of this deck: our fundamental, woven-together existence, our rooting, always deeper, in each other. Everything hinges on this.

The organization of the essay is in five parts. In the first, *Emergence*, I share the story of how the deck came to be. In the second part, *Rooted*, I explain how the notions of "shared wisdom" and "interbeing" are essential to the entwined practices of spiritual caregiving and card reading (cartomancy). In the third, *A Brief History of Tarot*, I track the development of tarot as a recognizable form of divination. The fourth, *Oracle Across Context*, touches on both ancient Greek oracles as well as those of more contemporary esotericists in order to move toward my own oracular consciousness Finally, *Meaning and Ministry* is my declaration for what I envision

to come next in this journey with the *So Damn Divine Oracle* — namely, caregiving and community.

A note on the style of this essay: like the deck itself, it is at its core autobiographical. I discovered while writing this thesis that the cards, meditations, notes, and this essay were together trying to find some solid ground in the midst of my spiritual ambivalence and wandering, and the collective thrashing of a distressed humanity. I have written this essay in a style I hope reflects the personal transformation that this ministerial undertaking has brought me through. Who I am—*who I was, who I seem to be, and who I am becoming*—emerge not all at once, but slowly through the interrelated pieces of this thesis. There will be a degree of repetition throughout the sections of this essay and the project; even as I discuss the history of tarot, theories of oracles, or the hallmarks of spiritual care, I try to bring it back to my own evolving spirituality and the creation of the deck.

I. *Emergence*

Essential Background of the *So Damn Divine Oracle*

This deck has a story that I need to share. Telling the story is how you can come to know me and understand the relationships and experiences that have led to its creation. I made these forty-eight cards during my first year at Harvard Divinity School. I had just moved with my two partners and two cats from rural Taos, New Mexico, to Quincy, Massachusetts. Leaving the Southwest was hard, yet I could only vaguely say why I was here: I had "felt the call."[7] Perhaps it was to become a hospital chaplain or a chaplain for wildland firefighters; those were the forward-moving ideas that stirred my desire to be some kind of a spiritual caregiver. But then, the cards happened. The project was initially just eight: *Flight, Inward, Other side, Shed this, Rest, Ember, Thunderclap,* and *Heal.* Those cards, like a bend in a river, slowed that initial rush to "train up" to be a "professional chaplain." Something even more intriguing was emerging. I had to trust that I would find my way to it.

This is not to say that I was without guides along this journey with the cards. One of my teachers was a general American culture of tarot and specific communities that I have practiced in.[8] I wish I could recall when I got my first tarot deck, but all I remember is when my mom

[7] I use this and a handful of other overtly Christian phrases for a variety of reasons. For one, I was a member of, resigned from, and have since grappled with my experience in a Baptist church; it is part of my spiritual heritage. Secondly, among my ancestors were preachers in Southern churches, and I seek to understand the intersections and divergences of our lives. And three, Christian phrases are ingrained in the educational frameworks of this institution, as pluralistic as it aims to be. Consider that the Master of Divinity thesis asks students to write about their "ministry" and "vocation," or that even our most communal services, such as Noon Service, still have a Protestant ritual flavor. On the matter of only "vaguely knowing" why I came to divinity school, I appreciate that this is a common-enough facet of sacred journeys: "We were not sure why we had come. And then after a few moments, we understood." Lawrence Kushner, *Honey from the Rock* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Light Publishing, 1992), 54.

[8] It can be difficult to define this culture. Danny L. Jorgensen (1992) called it a "cultic milieu." But I prefer the description of a "loose" community of tarot practitioners, who are seen as a particular facet of an American culture thoroughly inculcated with tarot and its symbolism; see Patrick Maille, *The Cards: the evolution and power of tarot* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2021), 70.

threw it away; this was the 1990s and the Satanic Panic was still strong in the South.[9] But I eventually found my way back to the tarot, divination, magic, meditation and other spiritual technologies that became vital sources of healing from traumas, religious and otherwise. The first deck that found its way into my practice in a sustained way was *The Collective Tarot*. It is a beautiful cacophony, a collaboration between many artists, working in many styles and media, and offering many pathways of interpreting the cards. It is a liberatory vision for the tarot, as well, in that it brings queer, femme, disabled people and people of color front and center into the cards, which has more often than not been illustrated with Euro-centric, white, and heteronormative characters and scenes. *The Collective Tarot* deck also incorporates anarchist, animistic, and humanistic thought. In all of these ways, this deck taught me that tarot was not bound by what I thought it was supposed to be. Rather, "divination" could include simple rituals of reflection to support political praxis, radical community and spiritual unfolding.

At some point in my spiritual seeking, I made the shift into oracle cards, a broad branch or subspecies of tarot.[10] Though oracle cards are not unified by the traditional imagery and structure of the tarot,[11] they nonetheless have internal cohesion that allows a practitioner to learn the deck's visual and symbolic languages and use it as a form of divination or meaning making. As Hong-An Wu writes, "an integral part of Tarot as a technology lies in the deck of cards as a

[9] Billy Graham, an evangelical preacher who was a household name in my youth, spoke out against tarot, saying: "Playing this game could make your son think that things like astrology, tarot cards, palm readings, Ouija boards and similar activities are simply harmless pastimes. But they're not because they may bring a person into contact with occult spiritual forces that are absolutely opposed to God." See Maille, *The Cards*, 76.

[10] Oracle cards are distinct from tarot but similarly used. Tarot decks are "reliably comprised of 78 cards for divination, 16 of which are 'court cards'...40 of which are 'pip cards'…and 22 of which are 'major arcana cards.'" See Melissa F. Lavin, "On Spiritualist Workers: Healing and Divining through Tarot and the Metaphysical" in *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 2021, Vol. 50(3), 319. In contrast, card creator Rebecca Schoenecker writes that "one of the most significant developments of occult tools in modern times is the development of oracle decks. Unlike tarot cards, oracle decks do not have a set structure. The structure is created by the artist. This gives artists and creators the chance to do something that hasn't been done before." See Schoenecker, "How to Create an Oracle Deck," Laughing Eye Weeping Eye Divination, April 29, 2021.

[11] When I use expressions like "traditional tarot," I primarily mean the tarot deck created by Pamela Colman Smith and E. A. Waite in the early twentieth century; as the Smith-Waite-Rider deck is the most popular deck in the United States, I am comfortable calling it the "traditional" version over and against which I am describing oracle cards.

recognizable and yet flexible boundary object with various associated interpretive strategies circulating across different communities of practice."[12] Oracle cards became my main form of contemplation. It is no wonder that during the personal and collective turmoil of the past years, I should reach for the cards.

The *So Damn Divine Oracle* deck, beyond being influenced by *The Collective Tarot* and similar decks, is also situated between the creative efforts of two mystics who have been important inspirations for my artistic development. First is Marylou Reifsnyder (1922-1990), an artist who lived in New Mexico and created her playful, storybook-like art through the Spiritualist practice of automatic drawing, letting the hand create without directing it.[13] For Reifsnyder, a brief period of visions from a mystical "Dark Night" experience became the foundations of much of her later art, which she described as an "overflowing" of the light, imaginative world into the denser, material one. The second person is Elsie Wheeler (1887-1938), a Spiritualist medium who in a single afternoon in 1925 channeled the Sabian Symbols in collaboration with astrologer Marc Edmund Jones.[14] The Sabian Symbols are short phrases that correspond to a degree of the zodiac.[15] Jones had taken a stack of index cards and written on one side a degree of the zodiac. He shuffled the cards and then randomly asked Wheeler what she saw. These channeled or "oracular" symbols have come to be an established, integrated aspect of some modern astrology. It was with these two women in mind that I felt empowered during my first year of divinity school to take on the role of both artist and intuitive

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[12] Hong-An Wu. "Tarot as a Technology" in *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education*, Vol. 37 (2020), 205.
[13] Robert M. Ellis, et al., *Head into Heart: The Visionary Art of Marylou Reifsnyder* (Taos, NM: The Harwood Museum of Art of the University of New Mexico, 2001), 42-47.
[14] Marc Edmund Jones, *The Sabian Symbols in Astrology* (Stanwood, WA: Sabian Publishing Society, 1972), 133-137. See also, "Elsie May Wheeler – Spiritualist Medium With A Gift For The World." Sabian Symbols by Lynda Hill.
[15] For example, "A table set for an evening meal" is the Sabian Symbol for the twentieth degree of Pisces, and "A retired sea captain watches ships entering and leaving the harbor" for the sixteenth degree of Libra. See Dane Rudhyar, *An Astrological Mandala* (Vintage Books: New York, 1974), 281, 182.

to “channel” something—that is, make a piece of art that was intentionally divinatory. My creative process (sacralized doodling, if you will) was something like Reifsnyder’s automatic drawing. It also seemed my cards came out of a distinct phase that was similar to her period of visions, where the visions were the fodder for the work that was to come. And calling on Wheeler, I took seriously the idea that these discreet “visions,” or scraps of imaginative insight, are worthwhile and could be investigated for a network of meanings.

Briefly, my creative ritual went like this. I would sit down at my desk, usually in the mid-to-late afternoon when the winter light was strongest in my windows. I would paint two cards at a time, since two would fit on each sheet of watercolor paper. I had a list of words jotted on a stack of index cards; these random words, images or concepts would be the basis for some of the cards. But I did not keep myself bound to this list; sometimes, I would just paint and then decide which word resonated with the image. It seemed I was just watching what happened, almost outside of myself during the hours that went by. It would be fair to call it a light trance, easy and mellow. I was in a slow-going conversation with the cards and they with me. I finished the last card, *All of It*—and so the deck itself—at around 5:40 p.m. on Friday, January 17, 2020. It was incredible. It was as if I had taken my most diffuse but urgent questions—*What am I doing here? Who am I? What is the meaning of all this?*—with me into the darkened chambers of creativity and emerged with this oracular pronouncement. I was then tasked with figuring out what it meant and what to do with it. As circumstances would have it, I would have plenty of time, years even, to do this; though the deck was created before the words “pandemic” and “coronavirus” was on everyone’s mind, the harvest of meaning has happened since then.

Unlike a more traditional tarot deck where the cards have a long tradition of symbolic interpretations, my cards did not. But I could not quite figure them out. I asked myself: in the

context of this deck, what did *Flight* suggest, or *Medicine*, or *Tidal*? Why did they go in this order? What does another person most need to know about them? What can I say that is most true? Admittedly, some cards were easier to work with than others. *Rest*, for example, seemed a fairly straightforward piece of advice in an academic setting where rest can be hard to either value or experience. The same was true for cards like *Inward* (go inside your experience) and *Rot* (decomposition leads to new life). But what about *It's true* (What, exactly, is true?) or *Down low* (What isn't being said)? It was an enticing mystery.

Relationships became the only way I could start to make sense of this deck. Friends would ask me to do readings for them, specifically requesting these homemade cards. The joy and potency of these readings was not in telling them what the cards meant, but in wending our way through a conversation that, by the end, allowed us to see with more clarity what we only had scintillations and shadows of before. We could easily spend two or three hours looking at only two or three cards; we talked through their questions, picked apart the visuals of the card and our associations of them, and shared our experiences, memories, dreams, hopes, scraps of wisdom and intuitive ideas. So much emerged in each card session. *We were the oracles*, I realized; the cards were more of like guides (messengers or angels, even), or perhaps a catalysis for something already primed to manifest between us.

What I found was that doing card readings was not altogether different from the one-on-one chaplaincy I did at a hospital in Boston. It was during a Clinical Pastoral Education program in the summer of 2021 that I more fully appreciated that my "vocation" and "ministry," at this stage, may be different than the one I had so tidily planned. Just maybe, my vocation was indeed as a spiritual caregiver, but not exclusively in a hospital or on the fireline; perhaps I could reach people best by fully developing this tool of contemplation and divination. And so one

necessity (to create the deck) eventually yielded to another (to share them with the world). I was on a path of taking seriously my gifts both as a chaplain and as a card reader—as both a professional spiritual caregiver and as an oracle of the human spirit.

This would be no small feat. Beyond the logistics of publishing the deck, I knew that an essential part of the process would be to write something that would stand in for me and act as a through-line to whoever would one day pick up the *So Damn Divine Oracle*. Though I think that words as often cloud spiritual matters as clarify them, writing these meditations felt as gravitational as making the deck. It became the thrust of this thesis project. As with the deck, I did not worry about imposing a structure from the outset of this creative process, so the meditations reflect a continual and kaleidoscopic playing around with fundamental themes and questions. Some of the meditations are more like poetry, others a list of questions or affirmations; some are explorations of word origins and still others are structured by meaningful quotes or a series of free associations. I realized that writing these mediations was almost a hermeneutical task—re-envisioning or interpreting the "scripture" that I had created in the deck.[16] But I should hope the meaning is not fixed by these meditations. Rather, the mediations and the essay express what I understand of the deck at this particular place on my spiritual journey. Each time the cards are used, their meaning is again revealed as if for the first time. It is our interconnection that makes it so.

[16] I learned from Harvard Divinity School professor Charles Hallisey, drawing on Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a "formula" for scripture. It is: person + text + (sense of) transcendence = scripture. Key here is that a text (e.g., the Christian Bible or a Buddhist sutra) is not itself scripture. Scripture is the experience of looking into a text and it *looking back*. It is the crucial point of collision or collapse between a reader and a "text," be it a book, a piece of art, or a spoken story.

II. *Rooted*

Shared Wisdom, Interbeing, and Radical Connectivity

The most dynamic and revealing way that I have understood the *So Damn Divine Oracle* is through my relationships with other people and the meaning-making enterprise of card readings. We root ourselves in each other's origin stories, thought-worlds, ways of knowing, and conceptions of the divine. This method of caregiving and reflection honors the human capacity for oracular consciousness and is possible because of the essential interconnection of all people and things in the cosmos. In the following section, I share three foundations on which I believe this to be true. I first draw on "shared wisdom," an idea found in the spiritual caregiving profession. The second foundation is "interbeing," as taught by Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist teacher and founder of the Plum Village lineage. The third foundation is Earthseed, a cosmology found in Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. Like the deck, this section is eclectic. Yet these constitute the theoretical foundations of the interpretive project.

SHARED WISDOM

Spiritual caregiving can be thought of as both a profession and a set of principles, skills, and vocations. "Pastoral care" has traditionally meant caregiving by religious professionals in Jewish and Christian communities.[17] This care is often crisis intervention in response to a sudden and traumatic event, or it can be ongoing, longer-term care, in which case a caregiver might visit with people, provide spiritual direction and facilitate ritual milestones.[18] "Spiritual care," especially in healthcare or other institutional setting, is similar in form and function to pastoral care; but rather than attending only to people within a particular religious tradition, spiritual care

[17] Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: a postmodern approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), xxii.
[18] Doehring, *Pastoral Care*, xxii.

reflects and engages with religious difference.[19] The goals of spiritual care are multifarious: healing, transformation, reconciliation, communal attunement, etc. Ultimately, the goals are contextual to the specific caregiving relationship and factors such as each person's cultural background, trauma history, and strategies and supports for resilience.

The work of spiritual care is in some sense the shared responsibility of humanity, falling on people because of the simple fact of their relationship or availability to another person who is in need. Yet spiritual caregiving is a robust and rigorous profession. In the example of a multifaith chaplain (which I and many other students at HDS are training as), besides earning a relevant graduate degree, such as an MDiv, we must also train in field work, putting in thousands of hours before achieving professional certification. At the same time, we develop the necessary skills to competently and ethically fulfill our role: reflective listening with patients, being a compassionate and non-anxious presence, inner spiritual reflection, assessment of ethics (biomedical and otherwise), and harnessing one's spiritual heritage and core beliefs. But training to serve people of any religious or philosophical background does not erode spiritual authenticity. As Carrie Doehring writes, "caregivers bring their theological formation, education, and training to the collaborative work of experiencing the religious and spiritual worlds of persons, families, and organizations."[20] Spiritual caregivers must tap into their inner sources of divinity and authority in order to help others make meaning of the events that have happened. Creating this oracle deck has been a significant step in my recent journey of understanding and harnessing my own spiritual heritage.

A touchstone in developing my technique of divination and spiritual care has been Pamela Cooper-White's *Shared Wisdom*, a psychoanalytic approach to pastoral care and

[19] Doehring, *Pastoral Care,* xxiii.
[20] Doehring, *Pastoral Care,* xxi.

counseling that explores the dynamics of transference and countertransference. Though written for the context of more typical pastoral relationships, I found that its central premise spoke insightfully into what I was beginning to call my "oracular framework"—that is, the idea that we are all each other's oracles and that it is through our exchanges that a "divine" message can come through. Cooper-White argues that it is the "intertwined" and "relational matrix" of caregiver and client that is the source of wisdom, insight and meaning at the heart of pastoral counseling.[21] She writes, "meaning arises not in either subject or object, but in the shared wisdom, conscious and unconscious, that arises in the 'between,' somewhere along the spectrum of transference and countertransference, of 'I' and 'Thou.'"[22] In this model, the insight is not a singular event or a stable sense of understanding. In actuality, the insight can move within this pastoral container. She continues, "insight (or, perhaps in its literal sense *re-cognition*—that [which] goes out and returns influenced, to be rethought again) flows back and forth between the participants."[23] While this relational matrix might be said to describe almost any intentional conversation,[24] the role of the spiritual caregiver—be it a chaplain or card reader—is unique and carries with it particular responsibilities and modes of behavior. The caregiver is intentionally using their whole being to facilitate the conversation. Cooper-White writes, "The helper uses his or her own self, not only as a channel of information about his or her own inner knowledge and experience, but equally as an empathic receiver of the other's affective state and the shared meaning that is emerging between them."[25] The difference between the caregiver and care seeker, she writes, "is

[21] Her therapeutic sequence for healing is similar to a tarot or oracle reading. "(1) bringing the unmetabolized and unnamed mental contents up to a level of conscious awareness (however inchoate); (2) symbolizing this material via words or images that can be given words; and finally (3) facilitating an integrative process of meaning-making and working through." See Pamela Cooper-White, *Shared Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 7.
[22] Cooper-White, *Shared Wisdom*, 25.
[23] Cooper-White, *Shared Wisdom*, 56, original emphasis.
[24] "The next message is where you are when you hear the next message. Whenever Youre [sic] ready youll [sic] hear the next message. The interesting thing is theres [sic] always a next message and its [sic] always available to you. Now! That's a hard one!" Ram Dass, *Be Here Now*, (San Cristobal, NM: Hanuman Foundation, 1978), 102.
[25] Cooper-White, *Shared Wisdom*, 56.

primarily an ethical one: the helper has been entrusted with the responsibility to care for the other."[26] The caregiver is subjectively shaped by their training and education, and so their style and role in calling forth "shared wisdom" is particularly inflected. For example,

> The pastor or pastoral counselor *is* a professional helper in this dance, not just another dance partner, because of his or her training and experience in recognizing that a dance is happening and in bringing the steps of the dance into conscious awareness in order to make decisions about how to respond so as to be as truly pastoral (focused on the growth and healing of the helpee) as possible.[27]

In all these ways, from the pastoral responsibilities to the practical skills to the overall relational matrix, spiritual caregivers are a distinct group of caring professionals.

At the same time, the practice of spiritual care cuts across religious traditions. As the religious demographics of this country change, with people becoming less attached to traditional houses of worship or religious institutions, and more likely to believe in and embody a syncretic mix of spiritual ideas, it should not seem so strange that tarot, oracle cards and other forms of divination are emerging or re-emerging as robust forms of spiritual care. Recent scholarship demonstrates as much. Hong-An Wu proposes extending the academic understanding of tarot beyond simply divination, instead reframing it as a "technology of care" that can support activists and justice-seekers among marginalized communities who are searching for new ways of connecting to imaginative, ancestrally informed wisdoms of resilience. She writes that "we converge on our practices of Tarot to care for ourselves and our interdependent relationships in this world at least in parallel with our social justice activism, if not as a way to imagine and manifest it directly."[28] In other words, tarot both creates space to strengthen these relationships. As a tarot collective, Wu and others read for one another and create cards together in community. In this way, their tarot practice expresses a type of care that is "a species of activity that includes

[26] Cooper-White, *Shared Wisdom*, 59.
[27] Cooper-White, *Shared Wisdom*, 59, original emphasis.
[28] Wu, "Tarot as a Technology," 200.

everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible."[29] Furthermore, scholar Melissa F. Lavin attends to metaphysical caregivers, "tarotists and other 'psychic' workers [who] are reputationally and structurally marginalized," which happens to "allow them to embrace porous and wide-ranging identities as quasi-therapeutic workers rooted in a metaphysical worldview."[30] These porous identities, like the chaplain, are situated within relationships, ethics, and modalities of spiritual caregiving.

INTERBEING

As I have journeyed with these cards over the past two years, I have come to understand that an essential element of my worldview is the interconnection of all things. Particularly, I have found clarity in Thich Nhat Hanh's notion of "interbeing," a new way of speaking about the Buddhist concept of "emptiness" that is at the core of one of the most important sacred texts in various schools and lineages of Buddhism, the Heart Sutra (*Prajñāpāramitā*). Nhat Hanh explains interbeing with the example of a cloud, writing,

> If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there can be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper inter-are. "Interbeing" is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix "inter-" with the verb "to be," we have a new verb: *inter-be.*[31]

Nhat Hanh writes that the word inter-being emerged while leading a retreat in the 1980s at the Tassajara Zen Center. He asked participants "whether there was a word in French or English that could describe how the chair existed along with all the other non-chair elements."[32] He suggested

[29] Wu, "Tarot as a Technology," 200, citing J. C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: a political argument for an ethic of care* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
[30] Lavin, "Spiritualist Workers," 317.
[31] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Other Shore* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2017), 27.
[32] Nhat Hanh, *The Other Shore*, 27.

"togetherness" at first, but finally offered "interbeing" because it sounded like a better expression of this concept. Interbeing has become a central feature in his lineage of Buddhism.[33]

This short origin story of the word "interbeing" illuminates the way new truths emerge from the cross-cultural and collaborative fermentation of language, images, and spiritual teachings. There were other English-language expressions that touched on this idea, including emptiness, interpenetration, and Interdependent Co-Arising.[34] And yet, something even more useful could emerge from the "shared wisdom" of teacher and students. Not only do I see interbeing to be a fundamental description of the world, but I also find great significance in the framing of it as a verb. We are fundamentally connected, but we can further that reality by taking on a more active role in the process. "We are each other's oracle" is, in some ways, a different phrasing of that same idea.

EARTHSEED

As a final entry point into my understanding of the oracular rootedness, I lift up some key verses of Earthseed, the philosophy-religion found in Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. This text is one of my scriptures, a source I turn to for wisdom, insight and understanding.[35] The main character of *Parable*, Lauren Oya Olamina, repeatedly tells people that she did not invent her Earthseed religion, but discovered it by carefully watching everything that happens in the natural and human world. Lauren writes that, "all I do is observe and take notes, trying to put things down in ways that are as powerful, as simple, and as direct as I feel them."[36] I offer these verses (and the deck) in that same spirit. The most repeated idea of Earthseed is:

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[33] The organization of monastic and lay practitioners is called the Order of Interbeing. "What is the Order of Interbeing," Order of Interbeing | Tiep Hien, https://orderofinterbeing.org/about/our-history/.
[34] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching* (New York: Broadway Books, 1999), 225.
[35] I appreciate the expansive definition of a wisdom text found in Lama Rod Owens, *Love and Rage* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2020), 73-74.
[36] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 88.

All that you touch, you Change.
All that you Change, Changes you.
The only lasting truth is Change.
God is Change.[37]

This verse also reflects interbeing and shared wisdom. The first two lines point to the "dance" that Cooper-White identifies as going on between caregiver and the one seeking care; there is mutual change in the exchange. That "God is Change" suggests that this element of ever-moving transformation is the essence and identity of divinity. Yet Earthseed does not only describe the world, it also offers an aim. "The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars."[38] Journeying into space and reaching other habitable planets (given forethought and hard work) is the eschatological destination of Earthlife. Humanity, rather than continue its existence solely in our home world, is invited to dream bigger and work toward a material reality where we are planted in a place wholly different than our own. It is a practice in rooting ourselves in the "other," in the "Thou" to our collective "I." It is profound work. As another verse states, "We are Earthseed. We are flesh—self aware, questing, problem-solving flesh. We are that aspect of Earthlife best able to shape God [Change] knowingly."[39] To be self-aware, to quest, and to solve problems is to be a skillful agent in the unfolding in our universe. I offer these verses as a genuine expression of what I see as the possibility to make skillful changes in the world through introspection and thoughtful action. Cartomancy and *The So Damn Divine Oracle* are just particular ways of actualizing this innate potential.

[37] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 89.
[38] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 229.
[39] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 157.

III. *A Brief History of Tarot*

I now turn my attention to the most overt lineage of my deck: the tarot. Firstly, I acknowledge the scope and limits of my approach. Then, I sketch out a brief history of the tarot deck, especially the Smith-Waite-Rider deck and tarot's more recent transformation into a tool for personal reflection and healing.

Since my master's thesis is primarily creative, I have not attempted a more traditional academic analysis of the religious phenomena of oracles and tarot guided by a focused research question. Many lines of research would have been worthwhile had I pursued this topic through those theories and methodologies. I could have researched theorists of symbols, semiotics and the transference of meaning between signs, time, and context.[40] I could have focused on meaning-making as a tool for religious professionals.[41] I could have looked at art as a theological activity or at the theories of magic and its relationship to the study of religion. Just as importantly, I could have examined the impacts of racism, sexism, orientalism and ableism on tarot and the many ways contemporary artists and occultists are disrupting that history.[42] But my ministry called me—yet again—toward the creative. I will reference these areas of research where they are most relevant to illuminating my process.

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[40] See Inna Semetsky, *The Edusemiotics of Images: essays on the art~science of tarot* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2013).

[41] See John Trokan, "Models of Theological Reflection: theory and praxis" in *Catholic Education: a journal of inquiry and practice*, Vol. 1, Is. 2, July 2013.

[42] This is an important site of further investigation and I hope my own research and others will address it. For example, Pamela Colman Smith is the artist who painted the images of the most famous tarot deck in the United States, the Waite-Rider-Smith deck, yet a critical biography was published only last year. See Elizabeth Foley O'Connor, *Pamela Colman Smith: artist, feminist, and mystic* (Clemson, SC: Clemson University Press, 2021).

Furthermore, I need to acknowledge the incredible richness of divination,[43] cartomancy,[44] and oracles. These are global, cross-cultural, and trans-historical religious phenomena. From the I Ching to the use of playing cards in Caribbean Vodou, these types of practices are common means of assessing the divine in people's everyday lives and religiously singular settings. Yet because of the nature of my deck, I have focused attention on esoterism[45] and thinkers whose work has most impacted the development of tarot, broadly, and my own oracular thought.

Since tarot, in both form and function, is the primary source of my deck, exploring tarot's history allows for nuance and contextualization of a divinatory practice that has fueled my spiritual life. Throughout its history, tarot has not been static, a mere repetition of the same set of cards. Tarot has continually transformed, likely originating as a game, then becoming an esoteric device par excellence and, more recently, transforming again into a more free-form tool for personal development and healing. As Helen Farley writes in *A Cultural History of the Tarot,* "it is the social and cultural context in which tarot is operating that imbues the deck with meaning."[46] Tarot decks have a continuity of form even as variation and innovation change its structure, symbolism and aims.

Farley notes that the objects and related practices that we now recognize as tarot have moved far outside of their original context. Tarot seems to have started as a type of entertainment; the first set of playing cards were documented in 1299 in Sienna while the oldest

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[43] Divination "is the art or practice of discovering the personal, human significance of future or, more commonly, present or past events. A preoccupation with the import of events and specific methods to discover it are found in almost all cultures." See Evan M. Zuesse, "Divination: An Overview" In *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., edited by Lindsay Jones. Vol. 4. (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005): 2369-2375.

[44] Cartomancy is card-based divination, whether that be tarot, oracle, angel, or playing cards. See Zuesse, "Divination," 2373.

[45] Esotericism can be "understood as a historical construct, not as a type of religion but as a general label for some currents in Western culture that display certain similarities and are historically related." See Antoine Faivre, "Esotericism" in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. by Lindsay Jones, 2nd ed., vol. 4 (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005): 2842-2845.

[46] Helen Farley, *A Cultural History of Tarot: from entertainment to esotericism.* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2009), 4.

surviving tarot pack, the Viscenti Dimodrone, comes from Northern Italy in the first half of the fifteenth century.[47] "The cards that circulated in Germany and Italy around the beginning of the fifteenth century bore figures reflecting the culture and social problems of the time, and they multiplied rapidly thanks to the progress in the art of engraving."[48] Farley suggests that tarot emerged not out of a single source with a set structure, but as interrelated decks across Europe.[49] During the sixteenth century, tarot moved from Italy to France and then to Switzerland. In this time, there was morphing in the cards and deck structure. For example, the Tarot de Marseille (the version which became standard for most card makers in Europe and is still the most popular tarot deck there), saw the addition of The Tower and The Devil cards, as well as a stylistic change where the name of each card is placed at the bottom.[50]

Beyond the question of geographical movement, a significant innovation was the shift from tarot as a game to tarot as a divinatory tool. The use of the cards for cartomancy is documented in Bologna in 1750, when a pamphlet was printed that contained the meanings of thirty five tarot cards.[51] A book interpreting the tarot, which was published two decades later, is evidence for the growth of cartomancy in France. Indeed, it is in French society that Farley identifies this development in the spiritual inflection of the cards.[52] In the eighteenth century, France was the site of emerging rationalism and nationalism that eroded the power that the Catholic Church once held over religious life and society. People had new fields of thought into which they could sow their questions about God and the nature of reality. "In an increasingly

[47] Farley, *History of Tarot*, 8 (note 13), 18. Tarot scholar Jean-Pierre Laurant suggests that card games cannot be dated back further than 1375. See Laurant, "Tarot" in *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, edited by Wouter J Hanegraaff, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2006).
[48] Laurant, "Tarot."
[49] Farley, *History of Tarot*, 90-1.
[50] Farley, *History of Tarot*, 93-4. My deck follows this convention of including the card name at the bottom.
[51] Farley, *History of Tarot*, 95.
[52] Laurant also pins this esoteric development in France, noting that it happened "after the number of cards and the figures on them had become sufficiently standardized." See Laurant, "Tarot."

secular society, each individual becomes empowered to pursue different forms of belief."[53] Yet this period was not characterized by a one-way dominance of ideas over intuition. The currents of scientific rationalism spawned the reactionary movement of romanticism, marked by the idea that "deeper realities could be fathomed by unleashing the imagination to perceive hidden connections between all things; investing the cosmos with unity and significance."[54] The foment of these charged and competing discourses opened a renewed interest in occultism, astrology, prophecy, alchemy and divination.

Élphas Lévi was a central link in this development. Farley writes that he "was perhaps the most important figure in the history of tarot in France and was largely responsible for the subsequent association of tarot with esotericism."[55] Lévi, who had been on a path to becoming a priest, was barred from religious life because of his inappropriate relationship with a young woman under his care. He then studied different occult topics and published his books on the matter in 1854 and 1855. They were not encyclopedias, but they were encyclopedic.Lévi's sweeping work was a "vast synthesis" of Kabbalah, alchemy, Hermeticism, astrology, high magic and tarot. These were brought together into a unified, transferable Western esotericism.

Tarot was key to this whole project. Lévi wrote: "The tarot, this miraculous book, inspiration of all the sacred books of the ancient peoples, is, because of the analogical precision of its figures and numbers, the most perfect instrument of divination, which can be used with complete confidence."[56] Yet, as Farley explains, Lévi believed tarot's "most valuable purpose was that of conveying all the wisdom of the universe," not more commonplace divination.[57] This revelation of universal wisdom was the essence of esoteric practice. Lévi's lasting impact on

[53] Farley, *History of Tarot*, 96.
[54] Farley, *History of Tarot*, 97, note 33.
[55] Farley, *History of Tarot*, 111-113.
[56] Laurant, "Tarot," quoting Lévi's *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*.
[57] Farley, *History of Tarot*, 113.

tarot was the cementing of a system of correspondences between Hebrew letters, the astrological Zodiac, elements, and the suits of the cards. Though he never produced a deck himself, his interpretations of the major arcana provided fodder for later decks.

Tarot would later move from France into England. Arthur Edward Waite translated Lévi's works into English, which both established Lévi's place in this esoteric transmission into the English speaking world and also fueled an appetite for occultism in Britain. In this context, the esotericism that had been developing in France was further influenced by interest in Freemasonry, the Celtic revival and Christian mysticism.[58] This would lead to the founding of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.[59] Again, tarot provided a set of symbols through which all of these various and shifting beliefs could be expressed.

Both Waite and Alister Crowley (each of them famous members of the Gold Dawn) would produce commercial tarot decks, but it was Waite's, illustrated by the artist Pamela "Pixie" Colman Smith (also a Golden Dawn member), that would take hold. The deck is nothing short of genre-defining. The Smith-Waite-Rider deck is by far the most popular tarot deck in the United States and England.[60] The deck was unique in that it spoke across strata of society.

> Magic in the popular culture and magic amongst society's elites was often on two different tracks. Indeed, historians of magic often study their subject in these two separate categorical distinctions. Tarot cards, however, have developed strong connections to the history of elite magic as well as the popular culture.[61]

The Smith-Rider-Waite deck is the progenitor, the source text, for the seemingly ever expanding iterations of modern tarot and related decks.

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[58] Throughout these phases of development in France and England, tarot interpretations were mostly aligned with standard Christian theology and practice.
[59] Farley, *History of Tarot*, 121.
[60] I am choosing to foreground Smith's contribution to the deck by putting her name first. She was a racially "othered" person who was paid a flat sum of money for her work on the deck, which included the significant innovation of having individual scenes on the pip cards. See O'Connor, *Pamela Colman Smith*.
[61] Patrick Maille, *The Cards*, 43-44.

It is from this cultural stream that another phase of tarot development occurred in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Farley notes how "New Age" currents shifted the focus of the tarot from either divination or understanding esoteric wisdom and toward more meditative, reflective practices, as well as goals of self-transformation and psycho-spiritual healing. The structure and internal cohesion of the deck gave way to a proliferation of alternative "tarot" decks, decks that were loosely based on a theme of the creator's choosing but were not bound by the confines of Smith-Rider-Waite.[62] The structure was in fact subservient to the purpose.[63] Patrick Maille suggests that "an excellent illustration of this new direction in Tarot is the [Vikki] Noble *Motherpeace* round deck which was introduced in 1983. It reflects a stream of feminism as it has developed in the Goddess movement."[64] It is worth noting that not all tarot innovations in the late twentieth century were aligned with the New Age or abandoned more traditional interpretive strategies of the tarot.[65] Even though these alternative decks had little consistency in organization or symbolism, there was a continuity of the objects of divination-type decks. This loosening of form speaks to the emergence of both oracle and angel cards.

The power of the decks lies not only in what they were, but what they can become. Two archival collections highlight this sense of possibility. At Yale's Beinecke Library is the Cary Collection of Playing Cards.[66] The collection reflects five centuries of the development of playing cards, of which tarot (including the Visconti deck from fifteenth century Italy) is a

[62] Farley does not call these "oracle" decks but that is one name now used to classify these "alternative" decks.
[63] Farley, *History of Tarot*, 175.
[64] Maille, *The Cards*, 62.
[65] "One of the most remarkable examples of the tarot's capacity to furnish a basis for esoteric and mystic meditation can be found in the works of Valentin Tomberg, *Méditations sur les 22 arcanes majeurs du tarot* (1980), prefaced in the French edition by the Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. The latter situated the enterprise in the framework of 'spiritual readings', supported by Christian as well as non-Christian traditions and by esoteric exegeses. Tomberg's 'inner experience' illustrates the expansion of the field of tarot to embrace literature and the arts," See Laurant, "Tarot." I have opted to use the word "Meditations" in the *So Damn Divine Oracle* thanks in part to this work.
[66] Cary Collection of Playing Cards, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

notable part. But at the MIT library in Boston is the Indie Tarot Collection, which contains almost 400 decks created between 1992 to 2019.[67] This archival collection consists solely of decks "with spiritually and religiously diverse revisions on traditional tarot narratives and archetypes." Overall, it focuses on decks with themes of feminism and queerness and those created by people of color (similar to *The Collective Tarot*). The collection represents the most radical departures from and re-envisioning of what had become the dominant form of tarot in American society. Indeed, as Maille suggests, "one of the more significant evolutionary changes to Tarot as a result of its 'Americanization' is that its place in the popular culture has become much more relevant."[68]

It would seem we are in the midst of a creative swell of tarot and oracle cards, where an endless number of innovative decks are driving new ways of using the cards and new ways of understanding their impact. The Indie Tarot Collection demonstrates at least that much. Even my own small collection of tarot and oracle decks (partially listed in the Appendix) reflects this publishing trend: most were produced or re-released in the last fifteen years. The meaning of tarot, angel, and oracle decks will continue to shift along with the social, cultural, religious and political contexts that the decks are made and used within. No doubt, the *So Damn Divine Oracle* can be understood in the long cultural flow of divination and the interrelated practices of tarot.

[67] Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Indie Tarot Collection, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Distinctive Collections, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
[68] Maille, *The Cards*, 68.

IV. *Oracles Across Context*

As I have shared my love of tarot with other people—reading cards together and talking about the development of my deck—I have had to wrestle with how I think cartomancy, oracles, and divination "work."[69] Incidentally, this puts me in a long line of curious thinkers who have ventured guesses and described cosmologies related to the mechanisms and forces of divination.[70] Among my peers and the tarot community I have practiced in,[71] there seems to be two primary suggestions for the efficacy of the cards. One line of reasoning goes that the cards, when pulled randomly and with a ritualized initiation of introspection, are nothing supernatural, only a set of images to prompt one's active meaning making. This could be seen as humanistic, perhaps even disenchanted, in that the "divine" aspects of divination are entirely concentrated into the human ability to observe symbols and extract their meaning. There is another line of reasoning that could be summed up as "the cards know," that is, that there are forces at work "in the universe" that lend the cards an ability to penetrate into a question and provide a focused answer. But I was never satisfied by either approach. One was too devoid of magic, the other too reliant on outside forces. I am finding equanimity in my ambivalence.

The word "oracle" is more novel than necessary in the religious landscape of twenty-first century America. Though I have not been able to identify the historical moment when "oracle cards," as a branch of tarot, came into use among tarot enthusiasts and professionals, I have chosen to take seriously this classification of these types of decks; rather than consider the

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[69] This is a central question for practitioners as well as scholars. For a seemingly obligatory discussion of how tarot "works" by either supernatural intervention or simple psychological stimulation, see Maille, *The Cards*, 8-9.

[70] "Already in the mid-fifth century [BCE], [Greek and Roman] intellectuals debated whether divination worked or not…and as the centuries rolled on, they composed numerous treaties that took on the questions of whether it worked, how it worked and why the gods (or whatever) had established it." Sarah Iles Johnston, *Ancient Greek Divination* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 4.

[71] This shifting group of oracular spiritual companions has largely been made up of millennials; queer folks; religious "nones," people with multiple religious belonging, and people with religious trauma; and various types of activists, artists, and public servants.

descriptor as "just another word for tarot cards," I am interested to know if their specifically "oracular" qualities can illuminate the spiritual topography of modern, care-based cartomancy. As Sarah Iles Johnston writes, "divination is here, and for whatever reason, as a culture we [contemporary Americans] take some trouble to make the simpler forms of it readily available."[72] I would extend this to oracle cards, which continue to be produced with astonishing variety.

As an outline for what is to come, I first discuss the oracular outlooks of two influential figures in modern esoteric thought: A.E. Waite, creator of the most popular tarot deck in the United States, and Dane Rudhyar, a twentieth-century humanistic astrologer who helped popularize the Sabian Symbols channeled by Elsie Wheeler.[73] From there, I explore the notion of oracles in the ancient Mediterranean. What becomes clear is that oracles, like tarot, have filled a variety of religious, cultural and political needs, depending on their contexts; they can be a filter of theistic divinities, as in ancient Greece, or they can be a tool by which semi-rational processes of meaning making are undertaken. By the end of this section, I use these sources to articulate my own "oracular consciousness." I do not suggest this framework for how oracles work in any universal sense; rather, by excavating the history of oracles, I can better understand the "oracular" possibilities of both the *So Damn Divine Oracle* deck and the practice of spiritual care in my future ministry. Even while triangulating my oracular consciousness with these contexts, I return to the notions of "shared wisdom," interbeing, and radical connectivity as the foundations of this deck.

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[72] Johnston, *Ancient Greek Divination*, 3.

[73] It is regrettable that there is no scholarship on Wheeler. In fact, the most detailed account of her life I have found, besides an obituary, is a YouTube video by an astrologer who uses Sabian Symbols and has privately funded research into Wheeler's life. (See Lynda Hill, "The Sabian Symbols: Elsie Wheeler's Birthday Sept 2015." YouTube. September 4, 2016). This speaks to the marginalization of women from occult and esoteric history; indeed, Marc Edmund Jones only worked with Wheeler on the channeling of the symbols and not in the interrogation of the symbols over subsequent decades. Since I do not have easy access to writings of the women who are most influential to my creative practice (Wheeler, Reifsnyder, and, to a lesser extent, Colman Smith), I have turned to figures who operated in a similar milieu and left a published record of their understanding of oracles.

ESOTERICISM

I begin with Waite because he was a vital link in the transmission of tarot into the English-speaking world. While Colman Smith painted the images of their seminal deck, Waite wrote the accompanying text of the cards. His *Pictorial Key of the Tarot* provides not only individual meanings but also an overall interpretive framework. Tarot is what he is most remembered for, but his spiritual life was vast and varied. Waite practiced alchemy and forms of high magic as taught in the Golden Dawn, techniques aimed at transcendent states and spiritual transformation. Given this, we can examine his work beyond tarot for notions of oracles.

Waite understood oracles to be only one form of divination. His *Manual of Cartomancy and Occult Divination* is a hodgepodge of practices, including various "oracles." The most prominent is the "Oracle of Human Destiny." One arrived at an answer in Oracle of Human Destiny not by lots but through a systematized tabulation of known facts; numerical values are assigned to factors such as the letter of the person's name as well as the day of the week. Added together and divided properly, this equation points to a particular pre-written answer in the oracle. In that way, the oracle functioned because of a degree of rationality: answers followed a system, not intuition. This is more obvious when compared to another "oracle" in the same book, "An Universal Oracle, Given Answers to All Questions." This divinatory tool is also a written oracle, except in this process both the questions and answers are meant to be written on cards and then drawn at random (a procedure more similar to modern tarot). He writes that this style of oracle is "not an occult process" and is meant more for "diversion" than "divination."[74] It is striking that, given the current popularity of tarot and the iconic status of his deck, card-based randomness was a quality that stripped a practice of its possibility for spiritual transformation.

[74] A. E. Waite, *Manual of Cartomancy and Occult Divination* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 1995), 119.

The humanistic astrologer Rudhyar is another meaningful source of "oracular" thought, especially because, as an American who died only a few decades ago, he is closer to my own context than is Waite. It was through the Sabian Symbols that I encountered his theory of oracular efficacy. When the Sabian Symbols were channeled, studied and taught to students of esotericism in the early twentieth century, they were part of that occultist urge to entwine multiple ways of knowing: astrology, divination, Spiritualism, and channeling. Rudhyar, writing in the late-middle of the century, took this urge even further by synthesizing the Sabian Symbols with the Chinese divinatory practice of I Ching. Key for Rudhyar's conception of an oracle was the process of making meaning. He writes that "to experience events is one thing; to release from them vital and creative meanings is another. What counts, spiritually speaking, is the *harvest of meanings* a person is able to gather from these many and varied experiences."[75] Symbols help people do this work of coming to "see each personal event as a focalized and particularized manifestation of one phase of the whole cosmic process of existence."[76] Rudhyar understands this process of personal meaning making with symbols as an oracular event. "At the precise moment when [a person] asks a question from the oracle, the entire universe comes down, as it were, to give him the necessary answer."[77] This is an intuitive practice of oracular consultation. However, Rudhyar was not dissimilar from Waite in that he also insisted on a certain quality of rationalization for a set of symbols to be more than mere curiosity. He writes, "*no cyclic series of symbols can be considered significant which does not reveal some definite kind of internal structuring, however interesting and apt isolated symbols may be.*"[78] We can understand Rudhyar, writing from within the New Age,[79] as providing a transference of an oracular

[75] Rudhyar, *Astrological Mandala*, 14-5, original emphasis.
[76] Rudhyar, *Astrological Mandala*, 23-4.
[77] Rudhyar, *Astrological Mandala*, 23.
[78] Rudhyar, *Astrological Mandala*, 16, original emphasis.
[79] "'New Age' was originally a buzzword that achieved widespread popularity in Europe and the United States during the 1980s. It referred to a wide array of spiritual practices and beliefs perceived as 'alternative' from the

consciousness, one that is focused on making meaning of the human experience and that is a "vast synthesis" of different strands of spiritual, esoteric, and cross-cultural thought and practice.

ANCIENT GREECE

Outside of "oracle cards" and the "Oracle" character from *The Matrix*, the only oracle I could imagine before undertaking this research was a simplified image of the oracle at Delphi, which I pictured as a young woman breathing in vapors and delivering divine messages. I was not alone in this. David Aune notes that in the Western context, the meaning of the word "oracle" has been defined by "traditional perceptions" of Greek oracles, especially that at Delphi.[80] Yet oracles, as a type of divination, were incredibly important and diverse in parts of the ancient world. Michael Flower writes, "Divination was a major system of knowledge and belief for the Greeks and was practiced in regard to every sort of important question."[81] It seems hard to overstate just how important divination was in the lives of ancient Greeks. Indeed, Sarah Iles Johnston writes that, "it's likely in late antiquity, most people practiced or witnessed some form of divination at least once every few days."[82] With this project, I have researched oracular phenomena in ancient Greece to interrogate any inherited archetypal images of oracles and understand their actual role in their own context.

Oracles were an exclusive member of the larger family of divination, which, broadly, is "the art or science of interpreting symbols understood as messages from the gods."[83] More common types of divination were the casting of lots (games of chance) and haruspicy (the reading of entrails, especially livers). Oracles were generally understood to be both the message

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perspective of mainstream Western society." New Age interests included ancient metaphysics, nineteenth century esotericism, New Thought and UFOs. See Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "New Age Movement" in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 6495-6500.

[80] David Aune, "Oracles" in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 6831.

[81] Michael Flower, *The Seer in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 2.

[82] Johnston, *Ancient Greek Divination*, 3. Many users of tarot and oracle cards have a daily, or at least regular, practice that matches the frequency of these ancient trends.

[83] Aune, "Oracles," 6831.

itself and the venue, that is, the pronouncement and the specific place where these pronouncements were delivered. Often, these were sites of pilgrimage as well as political pomp and circumstance.[84] In English, "oracle" can also refer to the person giving the pronouncement, such as the character in *The Matrix* or that common mental image of the entranced young woman at Delphi. Yet oracular centers were difficult to reach and therefore religiously elite; as Flower notes, "the individual who faced an unexpected decision or the commander in the field who wanted to know whether it was a good day to fight needed a more immediate access to divine knowledge and guidance than oracular consultation could possibly provide."[85]

Though oracles were united in their privileged position in the religious landscape of the time, oracles were also quite diverse. Aune writes, "in the ancient Mediterranean world three distinctive techniques were used at oracular shrines to secure three kinds of oracles: the lot oracle, the incubation (or dream) oracle, and the inspired oracle."[86] Lot oracles are those that use some technology of randomness to respond to a question. A basic notion was that a lot oracle expressed the will of the gods, or that it "occasions insight into the course of events by providing a clue to an aspect of that interrelated chain of events that constitutes the cosmic harmony."[87] The lot-type oracle at the shrine of Herakles Buraikos used a form of divination called astragalomancy, or knucklebone divination; bones with a number written on them were tossed and the resulting digit would corresponded to a previously channeled pronouncement that had been inscribed on the wall of the sanctuary. By contrast, dream oracles are those such as at ancient Asklepieia; the pilgrim (who had some ailment for which they were seeking relief) would

[84] "A common motivation for pilgrimage, at all periods of classical antiquity, was the consulting of oracles, ranging from major shrines such as Delphi, Dodona and the oracle of Ammon at the Siwa Oasis in Libya to numerous oracles with a narrower, regional appeal." See Jaś Elsner and Ian Rutherford, *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Antiquity: Seeing the Gods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 12-15.
[85] Flower, *Seer in Ancient Greece*, 2.
[86] Aune, "Oracles," 6832.
[87] Aune, "Oracles," 6832.

journey to a distant sanctuary, undergo a ritual purification, and then dream in hopes of meeting the god Asklepios and being healed of their ailment.[88] Meaningful dreams and oracular pronouncements were not so dissimilar, as healing dreams also concern a person's future by either the relief, transformation, or continuance of their illness.

Inspired oracles were localities where gods, especially Apollo, were thought to speak through a "cult functionary," who we might also call a channel, medium or intuitive. These functionaries, while in an altered state of consciousness, would give pronouncements in the god's name. The sibyls are an archetypal example of this oracular trance state.[89] Some ancient writers, such as Plutarch, understood the oracles to work because of a network of celestial messengers known as *daimones* (also referred to as "ministers of the gods,"[90] as well as "overseers, watchmen and guardians of this tempered [ecstatic or enthused] constitution"[91]). These middle-spirits, somewhere between gods and humans, acted almost as a grid of sacred power; they enlivened specific oracular sites and their priests, such as at Delphi, with a "prophetic current" that was "most divine and holy."[92] As with other types of oracles, a ritualized procedure prior to asking a question—a purifying bath and the offering of a sacrifice—was expected. The pronouncement may be clear and straightforward, or enigmatic and in need of interpretation. If it was the latter case, interpretation was provided by a temple priest or a freelance *exēgētai* ("expounders"), who stationed themselves outside the temple and provided this interpretive

[88] Kimberley C. Patton, "Ancient Asklepieia: Institutional Incubation and the Hope of Healing" in *Imagination & Medicine: The Future of Healing in an Age of Neuroscience*, ed. Stephen Aizenstat and Robert Bosnak (New Orleans, LA: Spring Journal, 2009).
[89] Trance states (also called flow states, altered states of consciousness, ecstasy, or even "collective effervescence") are a widespread religious phenomenon. See Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Flow Experience" in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 3138-3139.
[90] Plutarch, "The Obsolescence of Oracles" in *Moralia, Volume V*. Trans. by Frank Cole Babbitt. Loeb Classical Library 306. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), 399.
[91] Plutarch, "The Obsolescence of Oracles," 493.
[92] Plutarch, "The Obsolescence of Oracles," 469.

service for a fee.[93] In this way, oracles and oracular centers can be understood as a particular manifestation of the divinatory arts, which were supported by a cast of characters with various degrees of institutional investment and spiritual authority. The different levels of cultural authorization were tied to efforts to distinguish and classify oracles and the divinatory essence that empowered them. For example, Johnston notes that some ancient authors divided divination between "natural" ("untechnical" or "unlearned," such as in trance or dreams) and "artificial" ("technical" or "learned," such as astrology or reading livers).[94] Furthermore, Plato (fifth century BCE) and Cicero (first century BCE) were two of the writers who suggested that oracles were associated with a specific god (e.g., the oracle at Delphi was associated with Apollo, while the oracle at Dodona with Zeus). Aune claims that oracles, because of their necessarily linguistic character, suggest a belief in an anthropomorphic supernatural being who was the source of the pronouncement.[95] Still, the distinction within and between divination and oracles was hazy.

I would like to briefly shift focus away from oracles, as a particular category of divinatory technologies, and toward another pivotal religious figure, the seer. Whereas oracles were exclusive, the seer was more widely available to common people. The practitioners of this specialized craft were people known as the *manteis*, who had emerged in the Greek consciousness as early as Homer.[96] Flower writes that the most successful of these solitary seers "were what Walter Burkert has called 'migrant charismatic specialists'... 'migrant' because they traveled throughout the Greek world from South Italy to Asia Minor, 'specialists' because of their claim to arcane knowledge, and 'charismatic' because of their ability to inspire confidence in their extraordinary talents and because of their self-conscious awareness of their special

[93] Aune, "Oracles," 6836.
[94] Johnston, *Ancient Greek Divination*, 9.
[95] Oracles were distinguished from prophecy—also a verbal, divine pronouncement—in that prophecy was "unsolicited verbal revelations meant to ignite social change" rather than a message in response to a question. Aune, "Oracles," 6831-2.
[96] Flower, *Seer in Ancient Greece*, 2, 22-23. *Mantis* is also translated as "prophet," "diviner," "sooth- sayer."

relationship with supernatural powers."[97] The seer, though a specialist, was extensively knowledgeable and valuable for it,

> In the Greek world a seer, who operated by a combination of skill and charismatic inspiration, was the most authoritative expert on religious matters...Their competence was exceptionally broad, encompassing all of the various forms of divination that are found in our literary sources. These methods include the interpretation of the movements, behavior, and cries of birds (augury) and the interpretation of dreams and of portents (such as lightning, thunder, earthquakes, eclipses, and any unusual occurrences).[98]

Indeed, the seer was also involved with matters of healing and purification, related but separate phenomena from divination.[99] Though there were other divinatory practitioners in the ancient Greek world, such as the *chrēsmologoi* (oracle collectors or chanters) or *bakchides* (entranced male cult functionaries, similar to sibyls), the seer helps illuminate even more of the religious landscape in which divination was so embedded in everyday life.

TOWARDS AN ORACULAR CONSCIOUSNESS

Having surveyed perspectives of oracles from two pivotal occultists and in ancient Greece, I am endeavoring to use these histories to articulate my own emerging understanding of oracles. As Johnston writes of ancient Greeks, oracles "prompt[ed] consideration of what divinity is, existentially, and how it could ever join itself, even temporarily, to a feeble human body."[100] I no doubt do the same. But first I want to add a note of caution. There is often a desire to "look back" and to ground contemporary spiritual systems in "ancient" practices and thought-worlds as a way to legitimize their current use. Scholars Dylan M. Burns and Almut-Barbara Renger write that,

> Religious ideas and interpretive systems constantly claim to belong to ancient traditions and to derive from venerable and remote authors, texts and cultures. Generally, such

[97] Flower, *Seer in Ancient Greece*, 29.
[98] Flower, *Seer in Ancient Greece*, 24.
[99] Flower, *Seer in Ancient Greece*, 27.
[100] Johnston, *Ancient Greek Divination*, 9.

> cases present 'creative misunderstanding' that reinterpret ancient values, ideas and aesthetic models for contemporary use.[101]

Though the Greco-Roman world is often the inspiration for these moves to legitimacy, ancient Greece was just as susceptible to it. Burns notes that "invocations of hoary antiquity in the service of self-authorization are not new either. Already in ancient cultures, the principle 'older is better' was utilized in strategies of claiming authority or truth."[102] As someone who seeks to provide spiritual care to people through my *So Damn Divine Oracle* deck, and to do so with an ethical and thoughtful approach to my craft, I want to be careful to reach for antiquity not for legitimization but for context. Indeed, I am coming to understand myself as a keeper and caretaker of oracular lineages. And yet, my spiritual authority must be my own, the product of my own grappling with questions of divinity, divination, and the power of bringing one's most urgent spiritual questions to an oracle. Like the *So Damn Divine Oracle* deck, this section is making truth claims to further expand my own oracular consciousness.

My work is both broadly divinatory and particularly oracular. When I do a card reading for someone, I do not claim to supernaturally reveal the nature of future events, only to provide images and conversation that can illuminate "critical information regarding the future or the unknown" (of self-understanding, self-doubt, relationships, spiritual healing, etc.).[103] This form of divination is not "fortune telling"; yet the situation explored during a reading is rooted in the past, examined in the present, and certainly has implications for the future. Indeed, using Aune's definition of divination as simply coming to understand the "unknown," all card readings accomplish this since they respond to the void of information, context or processing that is represented by the question itself; the readings are meant for contemplation and discernment.

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[101] Dylan M. Burns and Almut-Barbara Renger, "Introduction" in *New Antiquities* (Bristol, UK: Equinox Publishing, 2019), 2.
[102] Burns, *New Antiquities*, 5.
[103] Aune, "Oracles," 6836.

This quality is in keeping with the "diagnostic" (reflecting and describing the problem) rather than "prognostic" (foretelling its outcome) tradition of Greek and Mesopotamian divination, which had significant overlap with ancient medicine and healing modalities.[104]

Among the qualities of Greek oracles that I am choosing to carry with me into my work is the foundational idea that oracles are an expression of the "voice of the god." To be clear, I am not claiming to be "the oracle," or rather, the cult functionary. When I use my cards in a reading, I am not claiming to speak on behalf of Apollo, Zeus, a Christian God, an angel or any other sort of deity or supernatural being. It is not "channeling" in that sense—though I certainly don't exclude the possibility of "enthused prophecy" for either myself or others. From my perspective, the universe is an essential joining of the material with the spiritual: the seen with the unseen, the revealed with the hidden.[105] This pantheism has also been called, in New Age thought at least, holism.[106] Put another way, all people are divine, in as much as "divine" (as something separate from the mundane, or something that is essentially unknowable or ineffable) is a useful category for myself or the client in the context of our reading. The oracle is the message, everything that comes up in the course of a conversation: the intermingling of stories, free associations, each person's perspectives, and the meaning that is ultimately made through the encounter. The experience itself is the divine pronouncement. I will keep the English use of "oracle" as the person who makes the pronouncement, but I don't contain that authority to myself as the card reader; rather, I distribute that power between both reader and seeker. When two people engage in a card reading, they have together sacralized their conversation. They have, in essence, channeled "the god" (that is, "the god" within themselves). While I prefer to keep the oracular

[104] Kim Beerden, "Defining Divination" in *Worlds Full of Signs* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2021), 40-42.
[105] For a poetic rendering of this idea, I appreciate Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself": "I believe in the flesh and the appetites, / Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle. / Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch'd from, / The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer, / This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds."
[106] Burns, *New Antiquities*, 5.

potential vested in the people who are involved in the search for meaning, the deck—the cards and meditations, both separately and used in tandem—are also oracles. Creating them felt like a trance state, quite ordinary (doing art) but deeply transformative.[107] The cards felt like a divine pronouncement; the mediations are an echo of that initial oracular event; and each card reading is still another echo.

There are also oracular qualities I accept from esotericists, especially Rudyard. Namely, I am choosing to foreground the observation that a card reading can help someone with the "harvest of meaning." Indeed, *harvesting* implies *gathering together*; and so, like the ancient Greek collectors (*chrēsmologoi*), the *So Damn Divine Oracle* meditations are a collection of other other "oracles" (wisdom texts, music, film, etc.) while each card reading is a "harvest" of each client's divine insights. Like both Rudyard and Waite, my oracle relies on a degree of systemization. I have considered the deck's "internal structuring" in order to reveal more of the deck's potential for meaning. For example, it was only through this thorough process that I realized the figures of *Archangel* (No. 17), *Play* (No. 22), and *Hallowed* (No. 23) were a trio of abstracted angels; it was also through this process that I realized the deck was a "healing journey" from *Flight* (No. 1, symbolizing separation or incompleteness) to *All of it* (No. 48, symbolizing a return to the fullness or wholeness of existence). And like the general trend of tarot of the past two centuries, my deck represents a sort of "vast synthesis" of many sources, religious scriptures, spiritual practices, culture, art, and landscapes.

However, I depart from both Greek and esoteric notions of oracles because of an exclusivity that was either inherent or intentionally upheld. Unlike the oracular centers of Delphi or Dodona, which required would-be care seekers to make an incredible journey during a limited

[107] Like Riefsnyder's "Dark Night" and subsequent artistic practice, there was an "overflowing" of the spiritual imagination into the material world through time.

window of time, my deck (once published) can be used by anyone, anywhere, and at any time.[108] They are portable, not emplaced; each one of us is the omphalos, as it were. Furthermore, prominent occultists, especially those connected with the development of the tarot, were invested in a troubling degree of exclusivity, perhaps borne out of their preference for formal initiation to organizations of high magic. Waite and Lévi both tried to draw distinctions between proper divination and what they considered to be the less legitimate forms of fortune telling. "Lévi expressed contempt for both the cartomancers and their practice of cartomancy" while also seeking to "disengage the cartomancer's influence by associating the tarot trumps with letters of the Hebrew alphabet and hence with kabbalah."[109] It's likely that such attempts to gatekeep the power of divination was due in no small part to sexism. For example, we know that despite Pamela Colman Smith's "significant involvement in these important [literary, artistic, occult, and political] networks, she was continually marginalized and often excluded from these groups by their better known (male) leaders."[110] Again, both Smith (with the famed tarot deck) and Elsie Wheeler (with the Sabian Symbols) were only briefly involved in the production of what would go on to become two recognizable divinatory tools in American culture.

I hope that the *So Damn Divine Oracle* is an adequate expression of a different tendency: inclusion and accessibility rather than exclusion and restriction. I have tried to frame my oracular consciousness and spiritual caregiving practice this way, relying on a sense of shared divinity: "shared wisdom," interbeing and radical connectivity as expressed in the works of Octavia E. Butler. The cards, their meditations, and the notes are also reflections of this effort to

[108] Plutarch's writings reveal a degree of openness for all people to receive divine messages, though this ability was not frequently utilized. "Souls therefore, all possessed of this power, which is innate but dim and hardly manifest, nevertheless oftentimes disclose its flower and radiance in dreams, and some in the hour of death, when the body becomes cleaned of all impurities and attains a temperament adapted to this end, a temperament through which the reasoning and thinking faculty of the soul is relaxed from their present state as they range amid the irrational and imaginative realms of the future." See Plutarch, "The Obsolescence of Oracles," 467-469.
[109] Farley, *History of Tarot*, 113.
[110] O'Connor, *Pamela Colman Smith*, 6.

democratize the practice of divination. Indeed, the spiritual heritage of the deck is vast, pulling from the Bible, apocryphal Christian texts, Black theologians, freethinkers, Jewish history, Buddhism, Occultism, New Age texts, Afro-futurism, queer films, Greek and Mesopotamian mythology, and scholarly research. In that way, this deck is also in line with the Americanization of tarot that scholar Patrick Maille described as blending and speaking to both "elite" and "popular" culture; no doubt, having access to Harvard's library is an expression of the former trend, while quoting country music and campy musicals reflects the latter. Lastly, by including only those texts, ideas, and experiences that have been personally meaningful in my spiritual journey, and by giving credit where it is due, I have tried to thoughtfully address any underlying dynamic of cultural appropriation or inappropriate synthesis of religious traditions. Oracles had a multitude of meanings and significance in other religious contexts, and they do in mine as well. By grounding myself in the history of tarot and the long river of concern about the nature of divinity and divination, I can more thoughtfully and ethically build on my personal and professional oracle card practice.

V. *Meaning and Ministry*

Journeys in Oracular Care and Community

For all the divining that we've done, for as far as we've come, what's next is still to be seen. Where do we go from here? What are the urgent questions? To consult the oracle, knowing this much is essential. But so is a willingness to let go of our certainties and enter, for a brief while, more fully into the mystery of our own becoming. If I can do this much, I might just find my way along the path.

✳

Tarot and oracle cards were not so much on my mind when I first came to divinity school. The move to Massachusetts was. The loss of my community in the desert was. The worry and excitement of something new was. But the cards were not. That does not mean they were unimportant; they were, it is only they were hidden in plain sight, so commonplace in my spiritual life that I took for granted just what a profound and necessary teacher they already were and would soon become. When I embarked on this thesis, I knew so little. I had the cards in hand but did not really know them: their order, their disorder, their eccentricities, theologies, spells, prayers or depths. I did not know what they were calling me into. I did not know what needed to be done or how to find out. But the answer was there, all along: *ask the oracle*. Only now can I see that is exactly what I have been doing. Only now can I see the drawn-out oracular pronouncement that I have been seeking, listening for, hearing and intoning within myself.

Furthermore, throughout the last three years, I have witnessed other people—my colleagues and friends—seek out the power of the cards, and in them I saw my own seeking reflected back. There was an afternoon at a bar in Cambridge when several of us first collectively interpreted a single card on the wooden table in front of us. There was the HDS-wide tarot event the week before the pandemic forced us to shift our classes, social life, and most intimate relationships online. Even through the awfullest parts of the pandemic, we would bring our decks

to our computers and, across a web of screens, gather together. There were the new moon parties among the pagans and tarot enthusiasts where cards seemed to always take center stage. And at an HDS Noon Service in honor of the Spring Equinox not long ago, the room was packed with people trying their hands at divining a message from a dozen different tarot, oracle and angel decks. As with a card reading, the end is more clear than the beginning; this thesis has helped me to more fully appreciate this low-key network of card readers and spiritual seekers for the marvelous community that it has become. As my time at divinity school comes to an end, I can look back and see with great clarity that this community has helped me take the cards—*my cards*—into my hands with the reverence, curiosity, and anticipation we all deserve. They have helped me take my questions more seriously and hold my answers playfully and so much more imaginatively. They helped me see that "the oracle" is not any one of us, but all us. I've said this all along—*we are each others' oracle*—but they helped me to believe it even more deeply.

I have attempted to more fully integrate oracle cards into all levels of spiritual journeying: my own contemplative practice, one-on-one divination sessions, and those dynamic, public events where card reading becomes a collective effort. This integration has allowed me to find flow and rhythm in my style of reading the cards. At the same time, my ethical obligations as a card-reading caregiver are in sharper focus, as are the pastoral and ministerial skills that allow me to be as effective and supportive as possible. And, perhaps most significantly, I have created, used, experimented with, analyzed, expanded, and invested in my oracle deck, a yearslong undertaking that I hope can launch me into my next phase of vocation.

Where do we go from here? This thesis project has given me a route along which I can envision what comes next: for the deck, for my caregiving practice, and for the ever-emerging tarot and oracular community. The deck must be published. I scaled my thesis project down from

my original vision and ambitions, which included all of the designing, organizing, planning, and fundraising that it would take to actually produce, print and distribute the *So Damn Divine Oracle*. Before I could do that, I had to write the Meditations and Notes, as well as work out the underlying philosophies and frameworks that empower the deck to do what it does. Both the deck and I needed the long and slow reflection on what was most essential to communicate. But now that these words have presented themselves, I am ready to embark on the entrepreneurial leg of the journey to release this deck into the world. Just as the power of oracles was revealed in my relationships, it will take relationships to make this next phase happen. I will be calling on friends and colleagues—the folks who have asked, from the start, "When can I buy a copy of your deck?"—to help produce an initial run of *The So Damn Divine Oracle* deck printed. I should hope that this is not the only oracle deck I will create; now that I see how rewarding of an endeavor it is, I am hoping to execute on plans to make other divinatory decks and tools.

Yet getting this deck into other people's hands is only the material manifestation of a larger move into a more full-time practice of spiritual caregiving. Said another way: as the deck moves out into the world, I hope I will also move further into the world, allowing my inner hermit to become the roaming teacher—allowing the contemplative to become the active—while still protecting the prayerful solitude I have learned to cherish and work with throughout the pandemic. This could look many ways; that's the mystery of it. Certainly, I have dedicated myself to an artistic path; I acknowledge that, in some ways, that has been my path all along, but my commitment to it has been strengthened by the experience of creating this deck. Further, I will be expanding my oracular spiritual care work, establishing a business and taking an independent or "wandering" approach to this "ministry" of card reading: cultivating clients, further honing my approach, and networking with other professionally oriented and mystically

inclined artists, creatives, and caregivers. And I want to teach, to find more interactive ways of passing on the knowledge, experience, and creative and spiritual techniques that have supported this whole project. Indeed, it would be satisfying to help other people create their own handcrafted decks of cards, to see young people and adults alike take seriously their own artistic gifts, their own wise counsel, and their own revelatory intuition. I hope to use the *So Damn Divine Oracle* deck as a launching point for my art and research about dreams, sacred journeys, pilgrimages, and ancestral practices. I cannot say in what venues these longings will happen, but I can say that the oracle has helped me realize and embody the profound joy in walking a path lit by something as campy, playful and exploratory as this deck has been.

✳

Here we are at the altar of the oracle of our own divinity, of me myself and you yourself—and, blessedly, we ourselves. Thank you, thank you, my friend. Be well. And with circumambulation done, let us begin again.

Appendix

Meaningful Tarot and Oracle Decks

These decks have been important to my journey with divination and contemplative practices.

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*The five authors listed in the main entry were the founders of the Tarot Collective. Additional artists and collaborators on this deck include: Adee Roberson, Azsa West, Britt Ashley, Dana Ullman, Devon Haynes, Ellery Russian, Freddie Fagula, Gloria Diaz, James Brawn, Katie Maxwell, Mat Defiler, Moe Bowstern, Monica Villarrael, Noelia 'Nolita' Tejada, Sarah Gottesdiener, Sara Kolp, Lola Kolp, Sarah (Sass) Biscarra-Dilley, Stevie Ann Depaola, and Tino McPonyfuck.

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