

DEADLINES AND DIVINE DISTRACTIONS

Audrey Wollen

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Dear Mama,

I'm so glad you are feeling a bit better, glad the therapist is good. Please promise me you won't do any more "magical rituals," like over the phone reiki or whatever is the miracle du jour. Let's stick to our usual placebos: acupuncture and pilates for you, SSRI's for me, etc. You always tell me, take care of myself like you would take care of me, and now I get to say it back to you, take care of yourself like you would take care of me. Or like I would take care of you, or like we would take care of each other, or something.

I've been thinking a lot about divine visions and instant cures, for obvious reasons. I feel like being young and sick is the same sensation as seeing your crush across the room at a really crowded party, and watching them like a magnet, but not being able to maneuver the distance, not ever being able to get to them, just watching them laughing or whatever from afar. I had a dream about a fleet of cyborgian nuns, skimming the low air, floating in strict formation as they pass through town after town, looking for their sanctuary.

In Lourdes, there's a wall of crutches abandoned by those miraculously healed by the grotto's divine waters. People travel from all over the world to find this restless cure. They crawl their way there, and they float away. The sanctuary is a stream, where a fourteen-year-old girl once pointed and said, there is a woman, she is made of the sun. She was led to the grotto by wind and roses. The girl's name was Bernadette, she was sickly and destitute, she lived in a basement room with her eight siblings and her parents, a room that used to be a dungeon. After seeing the body of light in the mouth of the grotto, she told her parents and her town, and it was the townspeople who decided it must have been the Virgin Mary. At first, Bernadette had only one word for what she had seen: "aquero" which means "that" in the mountain dialect of Gascon Occitan. That! It's sometimes translated more specifically as 'that which I saw.' I saw that which I saw. Can you describe what you saw? It was that. I saw what I saw, the that-ness of it.

I love that: The divine tautology of teenage girlhood-- a self-affirming reality that slips through the strongholds of language.

Pilgrims have a strange relationship with border patrols. Most countries that receive a lot of pilgrims have special religious visas that lift travel restrictions over certain holidays. It's generally one of the more lenient border processes. Saudi Arabia, overwhelmed by visitors performing the Hajj, has implemented a five-year rule: if you have done the pilgrimage any time in the past five years, you won't be approved for a return. (No hoarding of divinity! Make room for the rest of us.) Before national borders existed as we know them, traveling on foot across long stretches of foreign land was dangerous; religious pilgrims in Medieval Europe wore special outfits to alert people of their intentions, broad wing-like hats with small strips of reflective metal pinned on, pilgrim badges, glinting in the sun. Nations, by and large, didn't interfere.

I generally think that American freedom of religion is grossly under-utilized by the Left: the conservative right does so much political organizing under the tax-haven of various churches, why can't we??? I've looked up the legal process of declaring yourself a religious institution, it's actually pretty easy. All you need is a constituency (roughly five or more people), a text (holy), a system of ritual (worship, as you choose to conceive it), and a place of gathering; the state is not legally permitted to judge the content of any of these things, only the structure. It is essentially a genre distinction, and once you're in, you're in. We could invent a pilgrimage, hand out visas to anyone who wanted one.

What do you think? Live streaming nuns, with pockets full of passports. Fourteen-year-old girls, listening to roses, monosyllabic. House parties every Sunday that only play 90s house music, reverent river swims. A love interest, across the room, as a kind of prayer.

I miss you.
Sending love, stacks and stacks,
Buckets and buckets,
Audrey