



# Compass Rose

## Literature and Art Journal

### This Myth, Like All Myths

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#### I. To Explain Certain Phenomena

My sister Daphne tells me that she's getting married over the phone, two weeks after I've come back home from visiting her in Chicago. She speaks low and slow, her voice sliding over the words like caramel. *You'll never guess!* Daphne says. Try me, I answer. She alternates between exclamations and whispers, taking turns like hopscotch. I can hear the girl who lives above me stomping around in her signature platform shoes.

“Don't you think you could have told me this was going on *before* I left?” I say.

“Shouldn't I be with you when you tell me so we can hug and squeal and do girly things?” I am trying to keep the sarcasm out of my voice, so I channel my energy into wrapping the phone cord around my finger a hundred times.

“Thisbe, I didn't know it was going to happen,” Daphne says with an implied “*silly girl*,” as if I should know this, as if it's common knowledge. And maybe she's right because I have heard this story before, checked off like a list: it was a complete surprise, there was a black velvet ring-box, he was down on one knee. It's what the girls I know have whispered to each other from grade school forward, just one of the stories they tell, except with this one they write themselves into the myth.

Daphne is still talking, spinning plans like cotton candy, sweet and light and almost all air. The color pink is mentioned. I find it hard to believe that this is my sister, the same

one whose Barbie dolls had unfaithful, invisible husbands and long, terrible marriages in milk-crate houses. My sister who has been a bridesmaid six times, never worrying about the “never a bride” superstition and always cursing the dress.

“Are you listening?” she asks.

“No,” I say, and she, exasperated, begins to repeat the whole story.

*of all the bookstores in all the world, she had to walk into this one*

Our parents named us from the myths. This may have made sense if we were Greek or if they had been classics scholars with twin dissertations on ancient civilizations and early religions, but my mother is a clinical psychologist and my dad teaches chemistry. Really, the whole thing started with a copy of Edith Hamilton’s *Mythology* bought in a used bookstore on Lexington, something my mother picked out of piles of books no one wanted, while inhaling the dust of a thousand stories. My mother was reading this book when she went into labor with my sister. She clutched it the whole way to the hospital and halfway through the birth, until there were five little dents on the cover from her fingertips. My father read her bits of the stories while they waited for my sister to appear, to “take her mind off it,” he says. (*There is no taking your mind off it, my mother told us later, pretty stories or not.*)

Three years later while they were waiting for me to be born, my father read to her from a pile of psych journals. I appeared sometime during a study of language development during infancy, screaming at the top of my little lungs. It didn’t matter what she was reading, though, my mother had already picked out my name—Thisbe—because she liked its pretty syllables.

I read all the stories. Spread the books in front of me on the kitchen table or the edge of my bed, learned the family trees, the cross-references, the maps of ancient Greece. It

might have helped stave off my obsession if I'd been given some other paradigm to look up to, but I was raised by a pair of very-lapsed Catholics. For a time I really believed that Zeus and Aphrodite and Apollo lived up in the sky. But then, I suppose it's all the same.

The copy of *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, printed in the year of my birth, was my favorite. I liked its tight, yellowed pages packed with alphabetized lists; its concise, don't-waste-a-word explanations and the way the author said: *we are all Athenians, in a sense*. I read it until I could rattle off the gods' names like spelling words, pronouncing them with their accent marks intact.

Daphne appears in Ovid as a wood nymph, daughter of the river god. She refused to marry (*who needs it*, she said, and dashed off to frolic in the trees). Though her father lamented about the grandchildren he'd never have, she just laughed and hugged him and eventually he forgot about it. Apollo fell in love with her—his first love, if you can believe it—but she told him he didn't have a chance. He was taken aback by her rejection, pouted and began to walk away. It was then that he remembered, *hey, wait, I'm a god*, and went after her.

Daphne ran like some kind of inter-forest track star, but Apollo followed right at the heels of her sneakers. Here's where, for me, my sister takes the wood nymph's place: running, lane 6, in her maroon and white track uniform, number 37 pinned to her back. Only my Daphne usually placed second or third, at least, and nymph-Daphne—her feet went numb and heavy, spreading out and taking hold of the earth, and her fingertips fanned out into glossy green leaves. Her father turned her into a laurel tree.

The story I was saddled with, Thisbe's story, is just an earlier version of *Romeo and Juliet*. Only this one involved a lion, a mulberry bush, and a bloody shawl. The double suicide with its slow near miss is mostly the same, though they both die by the sword.

You may not have read the story, but I'm sure you can fill in the rest. We all know how it ends.

*howdy there, partner*

I don't really know Henry that well, only that he runs a little theatre on State Street, because Daphne took me to a play there before I even knew he existed. I sat there in the near dark wondering why we'd come to see a play that combined pop songs from the 80's with the dreary story of three middle-aged Czechoslovakian immigrants. *It's an anti-musical*, Daphne had told me while we waited for our turn with the ticket-taker. *A comment on the way society subjugates women by placing them in rigid roles.* Even then I thought she sounded suspiciously like playbill-copy, and I couldn't quite put together why from time to time one of the actresses would stand still mid-dialogue and softly sing the Pointer Sisters or Debbie Gibson. It was cold in the theatre and I pointed this out to my sister.

"I'm wearing my mittens," I said.

"So?"

"I'm indoors!" None of this seemed to be Daphne's style. She likes plays with a clear beginning and ending, no songs involved. Afterward, when she led me over to a tall, good-looking guy with a wide smile and coffee-colored eyes, I figured it out.

"The jig is up," I said in what I imagined to be a 1930's private eye accent. "Now I see why we were huddling in the dark watching an anti-musical." She shushed me, introduces the man as Henry, and we three walked to a restaurant down the block.

"That was just a stunning performance," I said to Henry, and this was true in a sense. I still hadn't figured out why the actresses were constantly cutting out paper dolls and

flinging them about. He thanked me, and Daphne smiled. She thought I had decided to behave.

“Yes,” I continued, and Daphne’s smile abruptly disappeared. “I too think that Pointer Sisters have contributed to the downfall of mankind.” Henry looked as if he didn’t know whether to laugh or not, but he did, and that made me like him a little bit more.

The place Henry took us to was Italian, small and dimly, warmly lit, candles flickering against the brick walls. Later, I found that the bathroom had candles too, and baskets brimming with potpourri. It was enough to make someone nervous.

“Are we on a date?” I asked my sister while Henry spoke to the hostess. We were shown to a small table in the back of the restaurant. “So long as he’s paying, it’s fine with me,” I whispered, and Daphne glared.

When we were seated, I noticed that Daphne slid her chair a few inches closer to Henry. I actually caught her twirling her hair around her finger while she talked to him and suddenly felt threatened: my hackles rose, I wanted to surround my sister with that yellow tape that says CAUTION in big black letters.

“Your name is very formal,” I said to Henry halfway through the meal. I had had three glasses of wine. Henry didn’t seem to know what else to do but smile.

“Really though,” I continued, pressing, “does anyone ever call you Hank?”

At that point, Daphne shot me a look, but she knows she has to do better than that. “He’s a theatre director, not a cowboy, Thisbe.”

I smiled, picturing Henry in a ten-gallon hat. I suddenly felt five years old.

“Do you at least have a horse?”

## **II. Dictionary of Mythological Husbands**

**Erysichthon** (er-i-sik'-thon)

He told me he was a gypsy. Sat holding my hand in the school-gym-turned-ballroom, Peter Gabriel blasting through the speakers, till the music seemed like a place, seemed solid and tangible. It created a cocoon in which we lived, curled in those folding vinyl seats things ready to metamorphose. He held my hand palm-up with his fingertips, both of his hands cradling mine, and read the shallow fault lines that crossed and crossed. You will live a long life, he said.

Really, he wasn't a gypsy, he was half-Vietnamese, with glossy black hair falling into his black eyes and a smile so lovely it was almost ridiculous. He got kicked out of his farmland high school because someone called his younger brother a gook. Broke the boy's nose, he told me, the dark cherry-colored blood staining his shirt and then the floor. They called his mother then, and she came from home with her head still caught up in the spider-web of soap operas and carpet swatches. She was remodeling their house, but by the time I knew him, he didn't live there anymore.

He lived with his grandmother in a neighborhood my mother would have called "rough," an upstairs apartment that I only saw once. I remember little things like snapshots: a long crack in the living room window, the bedroom door that wouldn't close, three tiles missing in the center of the checkerboard kitchen floor. Mostly, he came to me, riding the long streets on buses with headphones clamped tightly over his ears. Sometimes, he'd stay too late and miss the last bus, but he'd return me to my house and leave to wander around till dawn. I don't know what he did out there, I could only watch him take the turn off my street at the end of the block, watch until he was out of sight. I imagined that he spent the time thinking about things—the stiff, well-off Catholic boys at his new school; his brother,

who still went to class at the school he'd been asked to leave; his mother and her paint chips, "thirty different shades of the same blue, and she swears there's a difference."

All these wars waged over a word, I said. Semantics, I said, just letters arranged in a certain way. Fortune-cookie characters, hieroglyphics. Of course I was wrong, but I could say all that because back then I didn't even know what the word meant. "I prefer my wars abstract," he said, and smiled, but before long he was kicked out of another two schools for fighting over much lesser things, and after that stopped riding the bus to my house.

### **Picus** (pi'-kus)

I met him in my Spanish class in college. He sat down the row from me, and wore thin button-down shirts always open at the collar. I learned his name from passing his quiz down, and sooner or later we began to talk to one another instead of just looking in that sideways way.

I would go see his band play on weekends in one smoky bar or another, sitting on a barstool in low-rise jeans, my legs crossed at the ankles and one of his cigarette burning between my fingers. He read me bad poetry he'd written sometimes before he dropped me off at my house, and I was too infatuated to make fun of him, even to myself. It was only after he told me that we couldn't hang out anymore—something about another girl, his first love or something, he had to figure it out—that I saw his sonnets and cigarettes for what they were.

Later-later, months after, I ran into him at some show or another in a high-ceilinged, low-lit club on Washington Street. I ignored him but he came over, holding his cell phone in front of him like a sign.

“Look, your number’s still in here,” he said, his green eyes wide like he was beginning a story, like he had something to say, like it mattered.

### **Seth** (seth)

This last one, he says that he’ll quit smoking someday, just not now. Maybe when he has kids, he says. Or when something tells him it’s the right time. Like when they have to remove your lungs, I say to him, and he just smiles, impervious to my brand of sarcasm. Now, he’s never without his slim box of cigarettes, packing them in his palm, pulling one out to rest between his fingertips. He even leaves one lit and dangling from his lips when he plays the guitar, and it drives me nuts.

Pancakes are the only thing he knows how to make, and he still has a rotary-dial phone. I know this because when I call the bank to see how low my balance has dipped in the past month, I always have to wait for the operator. We met in a bar and we don’t really have a story yet. But I like the way he drives my car home when I’m too tired, how he knows the names of about half of the stars, how his hair is always a mess.

His name is Seth. He’s not only the latest entry, but the only one still around. I could tell you his is the only name I remember, but that would be a lie.

### **III. To understand ancient civilizations**

My sister and I have been playing Scrabble since we were little. It started out with my father, the master of wordplay and coerced fun. He thought that it would help us build our vocabularies, and wanted us to amass words like an army preparing for war. At that point, I just liked holding the dictionary, the Random House unabridged edition. I thought of it as a

list of all the things humans have needed to talk about, so far. I figured there must be a whole other list of words, not yet realized, that just haven't come up.

This time, smew is my word. Doesn't sound like it, but it's real. I brought a dictionary on the train to the city and flipped through for a while when we were passing near Toledo. It was heavy, but I wasn't bringing much else. Now, the game board is spread out in the center of Daphne's living room, and she is spread out beside it.

I spell it out with the little tiles. S-M-E-W.

"Smew?" Daphne says. "That is not a word."

I pull out my dictionary and flip through the S's. I've marked some of the best and most random entries, the ones I know will drive Daphne crazy.

"Smew," I say. "A certain type of small duck."

Daphne leans back on the couch. She knows I am in one of my moods, as she calls it when I come armed with an arsenal of obscure words that aren't even that good for points. She pulls her fingertips through her hair and I remember all the teasing she used to get for sharing a name with the ditz from Scooby Doo. But there's little defense, as you might guess, to retort, "I'm named after a nymph!"

It followed her into high school, the Scooby jokes, though it wasn't malicious because everyone loved her. They just couldn't resist referencing the cartoon in almost every conversation. She's tall and pretty, but her hair isn't red, it's brown, and though she wears it long it lacks the curvy, cartoon look of her namesake's.

"But you don't wear miniskirts," I told her when she was in ninth grade and I was in sixth. "Or mix purple and green. And there are no fake ghosts constantly following you around."

“It’s just frustrating,” she said, applying mascara, her eyes wide open in the mirror. “Daphne was the daughter of a god.”

I fell back on the bed and met her eyes in the mirror. “A B-list god with bad judgment. You might be better off with the miniskirts and the ghosts.”

#### **IV. A Short Guide to Matrimonial Mythology**

The wedding shower is held at my aunt’s house a few days after Daphne gets to Buffalo, arriving just hours before Henry’s family, the “troops,” I’ve been calling them, start to appear. Aunt Kate’s husband left her three years ago and still she doesn’t have a decent wine bottle opener, or for that matter a coffeepot or a microwave. These were the things he took. I survey the kitchen as Aunt Kate arranges chocolate lace cookies and strawberries on a platter. I open the wine with the corkscrew on my Swiss Army knife and hand the bottle back to my aunt. I tell her that my motto is *be prepared*, like Nancy Drew and Girl Scouts, and she smiles and cuffs me on the ear.

The bridesmaids are as follows: our cousin Kim, tall and dark and here from New Mexico, wearing enough turquoise to be mistaken as a priestess. Daphne’s friend Jenny who sounds, with her low, smoky voice, like a hooker, but doesn’t look like one—she’s subdued with librarian glasses and trim charcoal-colored suits. There’s Lane, Daphne’s best friend from first grade, who is largely pregnant and flashing her own shiny engagement ring. Last, there’s me. My hair has begun to grow out from last year’s Tinkerbell phase, and I can manage tiny, pointy pigtails. No updo for the wedding, I guess.

“Your hair looks sort of freaked out,” Daphne says. “Not bad, just frightened.” She is wearing a huge, hideous carnation corsage on her wrist, baby’s breath fanning out over her

little poking bones. I roll my eyes at her, but I let it go. Really, I am just glad no one has made her wear a crown of wrapping paper bows.

If one was to take a straw poll among my mother's friends here, sitting on the couch and leaning against the kitchen counter eating cake, most would say that Daphne's long overdue for this wedding shower, this wedding, this marriage itself. Most of my mom's friends, miraculously, are still married, and have spent the whole time telling their own cute and inspiring stories of marriage's ups and downs.

My Aunt Kate, she'll say something different. I know this because my mother digs her fingers into my palm when Aunt Kate gets up to make a toast, still holding her cake-plate.

"Daphne should have gotten married earlier," she says, holding her fork in the air like a torch. "That way she'd figure out the mistake she's making when she's still young enough to start over."

My mother is standing wide-eyed, her friends sit stiffly on the couch like a set of unnested nesting dolls. Daphne bites her lip. Between us, silence smooth as glass.

"That's a hell of a toast, Aunt Kate," I say. Someone shifts, our film reel resumes.

"I'm holding cake, not champagne," she says, though her wine glass is just within reach. "I'm allowed."

## **V. To Authenticate Customs and Beliefs**

My sister gets married on a Saturday morning with the sun high in the sky and birds actually singing in the trees, as if flown in from some Disney movie. Among the film that the videographer rejects will be me, motioning to catch his attention, mouthing, "Look, real birds!"

But now I'm wearing pink in my parents' backyard, standing in the bridesmaid line and looking at my father, whose fingers clutch the back of the chair in front of him. He knows the Daphne story—whether he knew it or not when he named her, I've told it to him a hundred times. “How could you do it, Dad?” I always say. “How could you pick a story where she ends up as vegetation?”

I look at my father and then at my sister, watching her fingers for leaves.

*explain...*

Myths, the books say, were created to explain the unexplainable. Within them, in the thick books I used to carry around, everything makes some sort of sense. Fly too close to the sun, and your wings will melt off. Misbehave, and you end up fastened to the sky with stars. Fall in love, and you'd better make sure that it's worth the consequences, because if it isn't meant to be, it won't.

My sister and I, we're living in the shadows of Daphne and Thisbe. We try to learn from their example, at least in love, which is all we really know about them anyway. Should I have been seduced by my phone number waiting lazy in a cell phone, or given birth to beautiful, one-quarter Vietnamese, faux-Gypsy babies? Or should I choose Seth and eat pancakes for the rest of my life?

There's another choice, of course, to refuse to become one of those star-crossed couples. The thing about these boys, they always have stories stretching out ahead of them like kite string. Come join my story, they say. I have a place for you. But if you pick the wrong one you'll lose any chance at your own story—some of these boys, they don't make room.

If you look up Thisbe in the *Short Guide to Classical Mythology*, all you get is this: **Thisbe** (thiz' be) was beloved of **Pyramus**. I saw that and asked, wasn't she the one who came back and braved the lion? After Pyramus was so stupid as to kill himself upon just seeing her cloak in the lion's mouth, she ran the sword through her own heart, and that's when she lost her story. What's to learn from that? You can love, but be sure your lover knows the boundaries—what stays your story, and what you're willing to give to him.

*no lions, tonight*

When I get home I call Seth and wait for him to answer or not, counting the rings with each flower I untangle from my hair. When he answers, I'm up to six, and his voice is soft with sleep.

"So how was it?" he asks, his words curling around each other.

The whole evening is laid in front of me like snapshots on the table, the so-sweet-it-makes-your-teeth-hurt wedding cake, the line of matching bridesmaids' shoes along the edge of the dance floor, how Henry scooped my sister up in his arms when they were ready to go. Seth yawns into the phone. I think about the pancakes we will have in the morning, if not tomorrow than some other.

"Well," I say, "the good news is, she didn't turn into a tree."