

In Magdala (when I was mad), I would awake before the dawn, haunted by a smell, and light a lamp to begin the chase. Weeping, barefoot, hair streaming in my eyes; I cursed its name – I knew its name then, but not today, soon it may possess again the cobweb of my consciousness. I alone knew the demon, hated its breath -- dogged its hinting, hanging, whispering presence in the dark. I alone left my bed and followed my nose. I growled, “Show yourself!” And when the demon did, I would chase it, picking up pebbles to pummel it into the ways that I wanted it to go. Throwing rocks that ricocheted off my sleeping neighbor’s homes, I ran it – No, willed it to the village center. “To the well,” Triumph rang! The drooling dam thing, would cower before my lamp, as if I were a hundred with torches in their hands. Always I would win – hear it fall. Perhaps in my madness it was only a stone that dropped from the ledge and into the void – ringing, clattering, against the rocks that row upon round row formed our well. The one thing everyone in the village depended upon each day was that well. Nights beyond counting I chased the hated beast into the well and risked poisoning them all. I am sorry, but this on those nights was the only way for me to return to sleep. In bed again, muddy, sweating, feet staining the Roman sheets of (what was his name?) the centurion who kept company with my loneliness in that distant time. Snoring, he would not awake or notice that I had been a questing; so little did he care to look at me when he left his bed in the morning for more important matters. When Jesus came he ended these things and I would not remember Magdala except for what awoke me this morning. A smell came creeping into my bed.

So I left my sister’s ordered home in Bethany before the dawn. But today I did not weep nor run headlong as I could when I was younger. I put sandals upon my feet and my hair, cut to a stubble, could not reach my eyes. Wanting not to wake a soul, I did not light a lamp or pick up stones to rattle my neighbor’s dreams. When Jesus came to Bethany, the place where I was born, he both blessed me and cursed me again. He blessed me by calling my brother back to life and letting him walk out of the round, rugged, hole of his grave, and into my arms. Like a stone rattling around the rocks, row upon row, down to some deep place, my mind raced to find some way to honor Jesus. But he was off again teaching elsewhere until the next Sabbath’s eve. Then creeping he came into Bethany so silently as not to be taken into the joy of Martha, my sister’s home. He accepted instead the invitation of Simon the Leper. That man’s grand house sits next to our well, like a pale white scar in the midst of our poverty. Yes, I was angry that Jesus chose to eat with the man who poisons the life of our people. How could I honor him now? I chased that demon until it fell into place; a plan that would both bless Jesus and embarrass the fat Pharisee. I found my alabaster jar with its perfumed oil and crept within the white-washed tomb of Simon’s lair. I anointed Jesus – No, bathed him with that most costly scent while he reclined at table; dinner now done, the entertainment has arrived! Then I wiped his feet with my hair and wept the tears of the truly thankful, my eyes only on Jesus. This was my *Eucharist*, my thanksgiving for what he did at Magdala and Bethany and all the places in between. Then I whispered into his ear, “Beware! Simon is a spy.” I knew it. He hovers like a nasty fly at the edge of our group, not quite willing to light and

taste the sweetness of Jesus. I showed him how to land. I cried for all to hear, “Sweetness for the sweet!” and poured my syrupy perfume on Jesus once again. How could Simon call for his desert to be served? Then I knelt upon the polished stones, weeping and barefoot and exhausted almost to the point of sleep.

Then Jesus made me mad by offering it all up to the demon. He said, “She is preparing my body for burial.”

I awoke the next day wanting to pull my hair out by the roots. The smell of its sweetness gagged me. No, it wasn't that the perfume smell still lingered so strong – it was Jesus planning to die and wanting to be buried with my anointing still upon him. So I cut my hair to erase his interpretation of my gift. Then I ran, with Martha my sister panting heavily at my side, I ran to the towering Eastern Gate – Yes, it too was Sunday, merely a week ago. Then taking that sticky matt of hair, I threw it at his feet as he paraded into Jerusalem. Others took palms; I took the long hair that I had braided since childhood. Yes, he did parade. Not what you expect from Jesus meek and mild or from someone who wants to live in this divided land for another week. He smiled, encouraging the crowds. That was when I knew that he would die. He would die because people like Caiaphas the Monkey and Simon the Leper and Judas the Dagger would chase him into the dark hole that is in the center of our people's hearts. We devour those who come to save us. We murder our prophets. We cannot tolerate that which is the sweetness of God to simply be light within our homes. We are mad.

It has only been seven days. Perhaps the smell of our perfume lingers in the home of Simon the Leper like a ghost of Jesus past. Bitter me hopes so. I have, though, another scent to chase (don't you see how inevitable it all is?). This morning I must leave my bed and run. Madness, that haunting-hinting-dripping-doglike demon, it challenges me today saying, “Chase me to the well!” Not the convenient well near Simon in Bethany, but the one in Jerusalem. I lace my sandals slowly, hoping for the sanity to resist it, because now I feel infinitely old and tired of the game. Leadily I go, drained of everything that made being mad in Magdala fun. The dimness before the dawn wraps me like a cloak. My loneliness radiates its black body warmth of unquenchable self-pity. It has a frayed edge that allows the wearer to say, “This is my loss more than anyone else's.” Even I, mad as I have been, can follow this thread of logic and see where it breaks from the truth. All of us are equally adrift in this solitude, that is, all of us who were his friends. He is gone, or should I use the word of blackest singularity, ‘dead.’ He is not simply invisible, like a dark fabric in a dim room (that we could take from him). Dead; and I wish that he was now dead a long time. It has only been three days (and here also I lie for my comfort by counting both the day that he died and today as if they are already past). If he were now (shall I say) ‘passed on’ long enough, then we could politely stop mourning. That's if he wasn't Jesus and if he hadn't died so wretchedly thrust upon a stake, surrounded by beasts barking their victory. Yes, ‘passed on’ could be used and mourning curtailed, even with this death, if Jesus were simply ‘our Rabbi,’ or teacher. But we let Jesus gather our wits into his now nail scared hands. I, Mary of Magdala, followed him into a strange new reality and I do not know the way back. What a wonderful thing it would be to follow some line of thought back to normal life; to be able to think, “Oh now its time to

put away solemn clothes and cease our mourning.” But his hands once wove together my sanity like wool on a loom. Jesus, you forgot to tie off the end. I am unraveled. I am alone and the guiding thread is not there.

I could have shaken the shoulder of my sister and she would have awakened to join me. I could have traveled with her or I could have whispered into the ear of brother Lazarus or looked for the strange Galilean women who wept throughout the Sabbath like rain in our kitchen (mourning in Bethany always brings a crowd). Instead, I wrapped my cloak around me with the feeling that I would be alone a long time and went to see his grave. Besides, if I chose a companion then I would have to explain the thing that has put me on the road from Bethany to the holy city before the sun has crested the olive mountain.

How could I have said to them that it was a smell? How do you explain a smell? What word will you find to share it? Martha might point to the broken bits of my alabaster jar. They lay by my bed nested on my brother’s folded grave cloths, a souvenir of the past when Jesus lived. I do not, did not, this morning smell them. Their pores are dust-packed with fallen hopes, how can they give forth smell? In the darkness another scent called me and I left the house alone. There it is again. Now I know the word to put with it: ‘lilies.’ Lilies do not grow here on the edge of the wilderness; they grow in Jerusalem in the gardens of the wealthy. They also grow near the crook where the old Western wall waits to be surpassed by this Herod’s grander plans for his capital. Untended and floating pale white, I have seen them in the deep quarry pools left behind when the Herodians took stones for their temple. Pools are like wells, and now I smile and say, “Perhaps this will make my run easier.” Outside the wall and near the lilies there is the grave of a rich man. When the others devoured Jesus, this rich man broke from the pack and provided what we needed most in that desperate hour of twilight before the Sabbath. He gave us his grave and into that grave Lazarus and the disciples put the sweet-sweet one, now broken in the dust. I watched and wrapped the cloak of my aloneness tight. Round rock and perfect darkness and words fail, though my witness is true; I know where they put him.

Is the demon headed to the grave where Jesus is buried? Does it mean to drip its foul desecration into my last well? So I run faster. Perhaps I can chase it into the pool where the lilies grow and save my Jesus. Purity. Did Jesus not say that the pure in heart would see God? I must keep his grave pure. I alone can do this.

Not alone. At the top of the Maccabean stairs I can now see the women who wept at his cross and in Martha’s kitchen throughout the Sabbath. They stop me and I cannot speak to them. Unable to escape their concern, I motion for them follow. They thrust a lit lamp into my hand as if they had been waiting for me to guide them. Unbidden, yet here they are: Mary the wife of Clopas, Joanna the wife of Cuza, and another woman whose name I cannot remember. They have bundles of spices and they babble a plan about anointing Jesus for burial. This makes a third smell and a second anointing, but I am not confused by these things. The demon’s breath still lingers near. So I take these recruits

under my wings. Have I become so old by watching Jesus die that I now need reinforcements to chase my demons?

“There will be a stone in front of the tomb. How can we move it?” Joanna dithers, “How will we anoint his body if there is a stone?”

“Hurry,” I motion. I know that this stone will not be heavy enough to stop the demon. Our only hope is to get there ahead of him and then chase him to where the lilies are.

“There will be guards at his grave,” another worries.

I shrug. Armed men are of little help in death’s warfare. I will spread my women so that they encircle the demon and like the pebbles of Magdala lead him to the lilies. I hurry my troops to the rich man’s grave. Above the half-made wall ahead I see the grave. Yes, the soldiers are there. But they lie upon the ground, asleep or slain by the beast, I do not know, nor do I care. One of the women stops to gawk and I push her forward.

“To the gravestone, see it there,” I point? The rock has rolled and fallen on its flat face like porch in front of the grave. It was not heavy enough. The soldiers were of no use. The women now leave me. The hole left by the gravestone is filled with emptiness. It is black and round. I fall into it.

In Magdala the well is very deep. One night when I was mad and living with the Roman centurion, rebel zealots killed the city’s guard. They took him from his post upon the gate and pitched his body into that well. When the word came that the gate was open and the guard missing, I sang a prophecy:

*He has not been bought,
Nor has he run from his post.
He is in Adam’s well.
He has fallen, as we all fall,
And like a pilgrim,
Baptized by the baptizer,
He shall travel through hell,
Before he is raised to join us again.*

The villagers changed that day and began to hate the zealots. They said, “These zealots could have spoiled our well.” When Pilate came, he found people in Magdala willing to tell him where to find the rebels. That was when I first saw people crucified. Seeing how they suffered made me think that the guard drawn from the well had been lucky. He had suffered less than those convicted of his murder. The Romans stripped the zealots before crucifying them, just as the zealots had stripped the guard before throwing him down the well. It seemed an odd coincidence. I stared down into the darkness of that well as the Romans looped a rope around their friend and drew him up. He emerged with such an innocent look of peace upon his face that I sang; “Now look, he has been born again!”

I breathe the stale air of the rich man's grave. It smells of lilies. My whit and where I am in this present darkness returns to me. I am in Jerusalem, not Magdala. I catch my breath. My lamp is still lit. Its feeble rays show me to the place where Jesus was laid. He is not there. Whirling I examine every corner. There, look at the grave cloths! How like my brother's -- see they are neatly folded. A demon would not do this. Bandits have taken his body. Rebels have slain the guards. This is why I thought of Magdala's well when I came in here. They have taken his sweet body and carried it away naked. The shame of it falls on me like rubble. I am buried beneath the earthen floor and descend to that artesian place where souls are melted and flow like water. Here I see the great truth; all of humanity is one. The gate guard and the zealots, the leper and my Jesus, perhaps everyone (dare I say it?) is in that final day striped free of their distinctive garments. *"Naked I came into this world, naked I fall into the next. Blessed be the name of the Lord."*

I awake for the second time this day to the smell of lilies. How long have I slept? Has earth's last day come and gone? I explode... not alone! Don't leave me alone here! I would brush aside angels to see a human face again. Rising like steam I spew forth from the cave. I babble and foam and curse the dawn that has swept his garden empty. Am I too late to join the living? No! Look, there are my women! They huddle in the shadows cast long by the trees. "Each one my friend," I weep. Their mouths are wide, breathing the breath of life. Startled? Afraid... as I am? "Wait, tell me," I say, "Let me share what I have seen. The tomb is empty. See his grave-clothes."

"Angels," I think I hear them say. Then they run and I chase after them. Like mice they separate and scurry into the crowd now filling the city streets. I jump in feeling the joy of jostling, being flotsam in the stream of life again. No, I am not mad – I am alive! I let myself be carried and ahead I now see the place where Jesus took his disciples to eat his Passover Eucharist. Yes, two of them now stand upon the threshold, framed by the empty blackness of the door. I sing to them as I pass:

*In Magdala there is a well
And Jesus, like all that fall
Is naked and where he lay,
The grave, I tell you, the grave,
Is empty.*

Peter and John, I know their names. I see them come into the street and against the crowd, turn to run. They are going to the grave. I realize this... but, a heartbeat too late. By the time I turn they have disappeared. The tide is against me. I must swim against the crowd. I want to warn them about the demon and about the hole they might fall into. Even though part of me wants to go back and see it again, I wouldn't go to that grave alone again, knowing what I know. The men shouldn't do it alone either. "Here, wait for me," I call in futility. "You need a guide who is familiar with the ways of wells and madness."

At last, I am on the stone that fell like a porch before the round-rock-hole that is his grave. I look in. There is no Peter or John. I am alone again. I am weeping, not for me, but for Jesus. I wish that I could have kept him from the demon that strips the dead. The stone is wet and I wish that I still had hair and perfume to give to him. If I could place every tear in a bottle – no a bottle would not suffice – it would take a well. It would take the deep, deep well like the one in Magdala. I look down to see that my sandals have fallen off and now I kneel as if upon holy ground. This stone will be for me the body of Jesus. I will never leave it.

Not alone. The sun is now high and I can see a man. I rise. He is there among the trees (his back is towards me). He must be the gardener and yet he is dressed in the finest shimmering robe.

“Sir, if you know where they have taken him... I will...”

He uses my name. He breathes. He lives. I awake and sing to my lily, “Jesus.”

I embrace him. He says to me, “Mary, when you die, you will not be alone. My love clothes people beyond the grave.”