

OUTWARD EYES

Jacob Russell Dring

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Acknowledgements

I want to thank music for inspiring me to remember what this piece is really about. And to that extent I want to thank all of the good people in the world. Embrace your virtues and strengths because our flaws are not worth dwelling upon.

Most of all I want to thank you.

Foreword

I'll make this quick.

I wrote this over the course of two nights, two sittings. Got the idea that was as gossamer as most passing thoughts are, but the song playing in my ears at the time made me run with it. So, I ran. And I didn't stop until I reached the end of my valve. The only goals I have in sharing this is to garner feedback of any kind and hoping that a certain audience read it.

Keep an open mind, enjoy, and provide feedback. In that order, preferably.

I also have recorded a reading audio for this piece, in my voice, and it's available online for your free ears. If you're listening now, know that feedback from you as a listener is just as important as from a reader. I've recorded this in three sittings as per three chapters. It is not perfect. But, as you read—or listen—on, you'll realize that there's more to us than that.

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1

I took the microphone last night. The cold steel screamed quietly in my hands, clammy and trembling. My lips touched the mesh briefly and my voice wept the veracity as if it were blood.

My eyes expanded color but my lids drooped lazily. I saw everyone in the room for what they were; the beautiful, the ugly, the frightening. There were specks of heaven in the form of people I couldn't explain with words even if I were the Man Himself.

Instead my throat reverberated softly and I spoke of you and your features. Your skin, irrelevant, but existent nonetheless. Soft, I can only begin to imagine. Your lips, features I've longed to taste but can't dream of ever acquiring. The nimbus encompassing you every time we meet, even for a brevity, is most enthralling. I've felt my lungs shrivel at the sight of you and I felt a fool seize my throat, claws dug beneath the skin. What

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little I had to say was not worthy of your ears.

You are not a deity. You are not an angel. Perhaps this is why I am so baffled. How a human can be so beautiful, beyond the skin or her carnal features, and why my calloused hands will never have the joy of gracing her cheeks...

My soul bled for you that night. My pores cried more than my eyes did. They never tasted the slightest tear. My vision was as clear as it had ever been.

I have seen a nimbus like yours far too seldom in my young life to feel comfortable with my future. To feel safe in this world, crisp at the edges. Parchment dappled with too much ink and not enough style. It is people like you and the too few whom I pass on a monthly basis on the streets that I sustain a morsel of hope for this planet.

I would like to believe there are more.

So I sing of you to keep my faith alive. My voice is almost as precarious as my hands have become, but never the words it breathes. I couldn't be so sure of anything in my life.

Passing from your aura to your gaze is like crossing a bridge flooded with water. You know you are going to drown but you have to reach the other side. And by the time you're halfway you're out of your head, you're so out of your head you might as well be walking on water for all you care.

My eyes lock with yours and I'll jump off that fucking bridge as soon as I know they'll be the last things I ever see.

Whatever my logic is, I know it isn't right. I know that my love—if such a flimsy word is righteous for this emotion—for you is somehow or another misplaced. I am confused and imbecilic for believing this way. And then I see your eyes again, and I tell myself it's all bullshit.

All my doubt for what I feel is bullshit.

I will fall knee-first into wet cement knowing that the acid in my veins speaks the truth in my brain. The connection between my gaze and my heart is a rusty link of chain to say the least. I am as at fault for falling for you as I am at fault for being unnaturally afraid of arachnids.

The microphone might as well have been unplugged last night. The people sitting in the crowd were dumbfounded. Bug-eyed if not falling asleep. Where was I? A fucking AA meeting? I can't recall. But the place felt dead. I saw mostly bleakness in the sea of people before me. There were a couple of beauties and they seemed to glow subtly with recognition.

Did they know? Could they see me too?

And I ponder, with an ort of selfishness, how I appeared to them.

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With all my regrets and all the shadows of my past nipping at my heels, did they see a shroud of murk on the stage? A silhouette of darkness outlined with a glow, or a glow outlined in darkness? Or neither. An ambivalent figure of neither color nor light.

As bleak as the mesh into which I sang.

I felt like I was moaning, more rather. My voice wept and bled, alright. My voice was only the tongue for the heart, though. I've always known this.

Plug my heart into a Fender amp and let me emotionally cripple the audience. I will blow their minds and they will call the police. I'll spend the rest of my life bouncing off padded walls in some building where they have Bugs and Tom and Daffy stowed away. I've got too much bitterness and too much sweetness for any one group of the general public to digest without developing IBS right off the bat.

I want to see you again.

It's already been a Saturn's stopwatch since I've let your gaze wash over me. My skin hasn't crawled that way in ages. Time is irrelevant. Only light. Only the misinterpretation of luminance from your eyes.

And the sad thing is I haven't even mentioned your voice yet.

As if my problems weren't sizable enough as they are, your shortcomings never seemed confident enough to shake my hand. They hide in your abysses,

diffident and daunted. By what, I can't imagine. My flaws are enough to pack a dozen dumptrucks to the rim and still have some leftover to haul to the landfill on Staten Island.

Sometimes I reckon that my flaws are so much that they blind my view of your own. Am I so naïve to believe you don't have any? Everyone does. Even those with coronas brighter than yours.

Now there's a laugh.

I don't think I've encountered any of those yet.

Nonetheless, it has become obvious enough. I'm too wrapped up in my own faults and your own gifts that I cannot see past the haze they form when collision occurs. I want to press my face against the dashboard and sever the seatbelt from my body so that I may fly through the windshield and into the chaos of it all. Sometimes I beg the disarray to rape my world so that I can realize this is all one big chess game whose ultimatum is utter bullshit.

And then it hits me.

It hits me like a metaphor with no sense but all the truth in the world—

This disaster has already happened. It continues to happen on a weekly basis, if not daily. My own will is to blame, maybe, or perhaps it's just my conscience playing games with me.

But aside from this violation, I see the world as it

is. I do not live a dream for what I see. I do not breathe a nightmare for the limits and extensiveness that I'm subjected to in full clarity.

Neither burden nor gift.

Although I do have a feeling that, without your aura so palpable to me as it is, I would still be able to perceive it in one manner or another without the sight I've been given.

And then I hear your voice.

Am I the one being delusional here? I am, aren't I? I'm some kind of joke, a big decadent chunk of naïveté. I'm like that last slice of cake that you know you shouldn't have because it will mess with your stomach for the rest of the night and possibly give you problems in the morning.

And then my heart squeezes and hiccups.

Forget the nonsense. Forget the self-dissuasion. I know what I feel, and I know it's real, no matter how ridiculous it might seem.

Your voice isn't angelic. It isn't godly. It isn't the voice of a harp or the keys of Mozart's piano off your tongue. Let us be reasonable people here.

Your voice is normal. I cannot place why, but it is beautiful nonetheless. It is normally beautiful and beautifully normal, and yet somehow or another I detect a savory uniqueness to it.

I know what you're thinking.

I'm fucking crazy.

How can something be normal but special at the same time? I don't know. Ask her.

Every word you speak catches my ears as strongly as it does lasso the veins in my legs. I stand still. I let the waves of reality crash into me and I am your world's audience in one person. I am all ears, all mind, and all heart. I will listen and respond and sympathize.

And I will fall for your deceit, should you throw any my way.

Why? Because I'm stupid.

However, with the eyes I've been given, I see that you don't have any to lather me with. Even if it was well hidden and kept subliminal, you aren't one to subdue me like that.

And if you were, then God help me—'cause I know I won't be able to help myself.

As my voice spilled through the mesh last night and filled the practically hollow room, I saw my nearing grave and tasted the dew on the cold night air that will soon surround me. And I continue to sing, crying my feet out, wanting to leave the stage but never desiring to embrace silence.

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When the moon died that night and my voice faded to the recesses of my lungs, I knew the next day would be painful. I wasn't so much wrong as I was right. The woe crept beneath my skin and played with my viscera as if they were old friends. I tossed and turned until my sleep rolled me over and beat me with my alarm clock.

When I woke up past noon that day I realized I hadn't garnered much sleep at all. My voice from the previous night still sang of your features in my head and I knew I wasn't going to get rid of it so easily.

How could I, afterall?

Your aura has yet to leave my gaze. I blink until I feel my own reality peel away like tattered wallpaper. There is certainly warmth but it's masked in layers of cold I can't manage to chip away.

As time extends its claws I know the next day is going to be worse.

Passing under streetlamps is nothing like gazing into your eyes but at least outside of your presence I know I'm not alone here. There are others with radiances unseen to the common eye and I happen to be one who can see them. Unfortunately, a gift does not come without a curse, and the ugly faces are most abhorrent. However, with trust so thinly apportioned in this world I have to feel thankful for my vision sometimes.

It is like a cheat-sheet dangling from my brow and I know who to greet and who to avoid. I know who to thank and who to ignore. I know who to feel grateful for and who to feel shame.

We are all in this for the big picture, no matter how trivial our lives seem. We all part of mankind and it hurts me to see how twisted some of these people have become.

But it is people like you, and the few others who I glimpse in passing, their glows visible from afar or most brilliant up close...these are the ones that lend me a hand on my darkest days. Squeeze my shoulder gently and whisper in my ear that it will be alright.

Whatever my purpose is, I needn't rush to find it. I am young and the world is old. But time is slow to present itself for the better and I have to be patient.

I am thankful for these people.

I am thankful for you.

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My body shudders at the notion of somebody wronging you. I simply don't grasp certain aspects of life sometimes. Why do the ugly feel they need to vilify the beautiful? And I don't mean ostensibly beautiful. The ones whose glows emanate from within, the ones that I can see so well, versus the ones who are malformed shadows beneath the skin, no matter how gorgeous their eyes might appear to be or how perfect their bodies. Some are so terrible within that their superficial beauty grows and they use it advantageously.

Fuck, these people deserve so much less than they get.

If anyone ever wrongs you in my presence, I cannot imagine my reaction. I hear about it all the time and I don't understand. The only way I'd be separated from you is by your doing because I know in my lungs that I would never voluntarily take a lick at you.

Physically, emotionally, mentally.

Some people do not realize what they have is special until they have erred their ways and thrown it into the gutter.

I would never even get to that point. My realization is lucid and radiant from the start. And without these eyes I would be able to tell just the same. Surely I would.

I think back to the words I spoke and the sounds

I sang on that stage last night. They floated into the mesh and out of the speakers like whale's moans. I remember that the small handful of nimbuses in the crowd appeared enrapt by my voice. They felt consoled, they felt touched.

Maybe I am not as useless as I find myself to be more times than not.

Regardless, I feel the weight of your absence grind itself into my shoulders. My feet bear into the ground heavier than ever before. Whatever my plight, it is more than you being gone. It is this vision I have, these eyes, and the heart within a most flexible cage inside. Sometimes I feel my entrails throw fits of rage, trying to escape my body because they are fed up with all the nonsense.

And I am as well, far too often.

That night was hardly any different than other nights on that same stage. Or stages miles away, seasons apart. That particular venue has probably seen enough of my griping. I've groaned over you as much as I have screamed and bawled. I've dedicated odes to your voice. To your eyes. To your superficial features even, albeit less notable than the more prominent traits. The traits only the truly attentive and kindhearted can see, the traits that only I can see so clearly without having to strain one bit.

And am I so different from the other songwriters,

the other musicians?

We remember that one person who resembles everything we have ever looked for in somebody. They might have flaws, but can we unravel the armor around them? No. We are too busy with our own flaws and the faults of this world to nominate attention to them. To shed light on a true beauty's flaws is to forget what true beauty is in the first place.

No matter how much we lie to ourselves, we know the blemishes exist. They are either too superficial to care about or too trivial to take notice of.

Maybe I am just too fucking selfish.

I desire someone like you to see me the way I see you, void of imperfections and weaknesses, a canvas of a person marked with appeal and the vacancy to add to its already vivid array.

But these are diffident desires in themselves. What I truly want cannot be had, I am aware. And by this time I realize that I'm not making sense, so I stop and start afresh.

But I will not backspace, I will not smear the eraser across my brain, because I am trying to shed regret. I do not miss out on a single word because if I mean it, it goes down. If I don't, then it never materializes. We all make mistakes. I want to be done with mine but I never will be.

In that case, I just won't regret them.

We will start anew sooner or later, but ultimately it will always be the same story. The same song. The same menagerie of confusion and beauty and misery. It will be the grandest smorgasbord you've ever lain eyes upon.

And in the mess I will find those deserved of better treatment. Even if I'm not one to distribute it, I will make it my goal to see that you are happy.

I know that is my curse, in the end. I care too much. It has nothing to do with my eyes. Not the ones everyone else sees, that is. The pair hidden beneath the flesh, beneath the sinew, behind all the false sanguinity.

Just because they are veiled does not mean their vision is obscured. I have never seen so clearly as I have when I'm looking your way. Despite the confusion which occasionally plagues my voice and my gait, I know my sight doesn't fail me.

And I am grateful to have ever lain eyes on you.

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Not remembering why, but I washed my hands just the other day. They did not look dirty. I hadn't just woken up. I hadn't attended the bathroom. I cannot recall doing anything that might warrant me washing my hands. Maybe I just wanted to wash away the doubt that they have held onto for so long. I wanted to lather up the bad memories and the regrets and the dejection and let it spiral down the fucking drain.

And when I was done I didn't look in the mirror. I couldn't stand to. I don't think I've looked in a single mirror since coming to terms with my peculiar sight. Why? Because I don't want to see what shade I am. I don't want to see my nimbus in all its brilliance, or in all its recession.

Whatever color I am to my eyes, it can stay in hiding. It can remain on the foul line, cowering in my peripherals, sinking below the chainlink fence's casted

shadows. I don't need to know, because if I did, then I might as well know the time and setting of my death.

Put you in front of me with a mirror as your backdrop, though, and I wouldn't mind looking. Because I know that however bright I am, it isn't as bright as your corona, not the one I'm forced to see anyway. So set me in front of you and that mirror any day and I will stare until my eyes forget they even exist.

I no longer subject my mind to thoughts of you and I. why dream of the impossible? It is only the cruelest form of torture.

The last dream I can recall of us included you in a sea of smiles. You were the happiest you have ever been, in or out of my presence. Whoever was making you smile that much, whoever was warming your heart over, it wasn't me. I could not seem him. I could not place a name, an occupation, an age, even an outline. I knew only that his nimbus was bright, too, and together you two were more together than I have ever been with myself.

My smiles were copious, too.

I possessed the knowledge that you were happier than you could ever imagine yourself to be. So, I imagined it. Without me in your arms and vice versa, I knew it was the only way to comfort myself. So we laughed and had a blast. The rocket seared away the

sky above our heads and I knew that I was either dead or sleeping, perhaps both, and you were somewhere far away but just within reach—of my eyes, not my fingers.

And it was best that way.

Still is, should the notion ever cross my mind again. In ambivalence I hope it does as much as I desire it to never return.

It's difficult seeing someone you have fallen for basking in a happiness not only greater than your own but with you omitted from their life. And I don't mean fallen head-over-heels. I don't mean a high school infatuation, even if that's all it feels like in the end. I mean when I fell for you, I think I broke a leg or two because for a while I couldn't pick myself up again. And when I did, I staggered into a limp. I used memories of your laugh to manipulate my crutch until I fully recovered. But, while I was down though not out, I had fallen through the ice of my own doubts; through a thousand leagues of cold desperation and vain stupidity I tumbled.

Somewhere nearer the surface, when I finally found my way topside, I realized something heavier than the notion of you and I together at all...

I realized that me falling for you was just a twisted surrealism. An abstract cornucopia with too many flavors and not enough explanations. I saw

through a clearing haze, lit ablaze by your nimbus at the ever-shifting edges, that I hadn't quite fell in love—for lack of a better term—with you, but with your essence. With your glow, your soul, your voice, your eyes.

I might be dense sometimes but I'm not entirely numbskulled. I fucking get it, okay? I get it when I sit down to write a song, which might as well be when I'm talking to you and then when I'm standing on that stage spilling my reservoir into that microphone. I get it when I'm recalling our times spent together.

The only time I don't grasp the concept is when I am actually there with you. Because I'm too captivated by you and your slew of appeals that I'm blinded by what really draws me nearer.

Your glow. Your goodness, the reason why I see you brighter than others. I know they exist elsewhere. I am young, surely I will cross paths with others. I just have to open my lids wider and raise the gate to my brain a bit more to accept that fact.

I will never be able to taste your lips, or bask in your gaze the way I wish I could. I will never be able to say "I'm so proud that you're mine" and feel like nothing could come between our hearts. I will never become the part of your life, even for passing months, that I wish I could be. At my least desires I will never be able to cup your cheek and tell you how beautiful

you are.

And I should be alright with that.

I damn well better be.

You are not mine to have. You are the sun in someone else's sky. As much as Vedder reminds me of you anytime I listen to "Black" I know it just isn't meant to be. God, I wish I could change it. But I cannot. I cannot seize the moon with my hands and give it to you as a gift. I cannot read minds or lift cars or shoot laser beams out of my fucking eyes.

I'm too human for all of that.

I just want you to be happy.

And, someday, I will be too. I will find another source of light, another glowing figure not too dissimilar from you. She might look different. A whole lot different. Her voice might be an entirely unlike tone. Her skin, a different shade. Her lips thinner, or thicker. Her eyes darker, greener, bluer, brighter.

But her glow will be present. And I will know.

I am not a man of optimism. I hate myself for too many reasons. I don't need a mirror to tell myself I'm too many shapes and shades from belonging to a circus. I don't need a DeLorean to remind me of my past mistakes and the beasts lurking in the rearview.

However, every time I speak of you I feel a weight ascend from my shoulders. I remember the way you smile and laugh, moreover the feathers you set

flight to beneath my skin.

And I know the meaning of faith when I blink.

