

This Is **Woman's Work**

**Calling forth your inner council of wise, brave,
crazy, rebellious, loving, luminous selves**

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sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO

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an introduction

Our Unclaimed Hallelujahs

Why is it important for women to define themselves? While it is important for everybody, everywhere, to do that work, for me, there is an urgency for women. When you have inherited a construct that names, describes, and practices out an ideology that women are somehow less important, less necessary, then the work of defining yourself carries with it a kind of fury—or Fury.

In Greek mythology, the Furies were three women born from the blood of Uranus, the god of sky, when his son Cronus wounded him in battle. In other words, the blood of a wounded warrior gave rise to these fiery women. The metaphor for me is luminous. In a patriarchal context (and we *are* living in a patriarchal context), the machinery that often drives politics oppressive to women is borne out of a wounded warrior motif and the inheritance of war that passes between father and son. I have long believed that if men had not been conditioned to be conquerors, then women would not need to be regarded as a designated underclass. To that end, one might argue that, on some level, in order for women to have authorship of themselves, they often travel through the fire, through the bloody constructs that have been built by wounded warriors.

The Furies were imagined as hags, storm-bearers, replete with serpents for hair and bat wings. They are often written as monstrous and venomous. But what the Furies were catalyzed by was a profound sense of justice. The Furies meted out punishment to those who had committed wrong swiftly and often severely. They were unapologetic about tormenting a tormentor. The murderer was punished, the destroyer of

family was punished, and the one who pillaged and plundered was punished for causing so much wounding. They were strong women insisting on justice and operating in the full utility of their magic. They showed up big and were unapologetic about seeking balance when wrong had been done.

The Furies also, and perhaps more importantly, represent the ways in which the nature of goddesses can be so riotously misrepresented and why being a goddess/woman requires us to author ourselves. The Furies show us *Woman*, in all of her complicated and necessary forms.

As a child attracted to mythology, I was drawn to particularly stories about “ruined” women—women we were not supposed to revere, women we were supposed to loathe, fear, or pity. Women like Medusa, an extraordinarily beautiful woman whose affinity for herself had to be met with punishment. Poseidon raped beautiful Medusa in Athena’s temple, and when Medusa spoke of her violation, angry Athena transformed her into the snarling monster with serpents for hair. I’ve never loathed Medusa; I empathized with her. I saw countless examples of her in my neighborhood. In the same way, I never feared the Furies; I respected them. Oh, how I wish *they* had lived in my community when I was a little girl. They would have known what to do about the battering husbands that peopled my block, the little girls who refused to be authored by any hand other than their own and so were punished. How I wish there were fierce, modern-day justice-driven goddesses who could strike down the Poseidons and Athenas who lived in the neighborhood I matriculated from—goddesses who could call down the thunder and magically restore the Medusas to their original beauty. These canonical examples of fiery women show not only what we are composed of, but also the ways in which we can reclaim our own fire in our own way.

Most canonized illustrations of women authored by men portray them as purveyors of evil and the downfall of man. In stories, women must *always* be punished for being too big, too beautiful, too brilliant, or too brash, for forever communing with snakes. The lesson is always the same: women like this must be reviled and feared, shunned and

shuttered. Yet I am inclined to bring those women into my family and add my name to the list of those with wings and rage and a wide capacity for self-definition. They are all welcome here.

To author ourselves, to own the expanse of our voices and our stories, is critical for us as women. We are the utterance of so many unclaimed hallelujahs rushing suddenly forth to bear witness to the birthing of our names. Many of us, by virtue of birth order, or demographic or cultural identifiers, or societal expectation nonsense, negotiate a context that asks our voices to be softer, our beauty to be dim. To regain access to our wide and widest selves, we must recognize that our identities are supposed to be in our handwriting. The only permission you need comes from you.

How do we do all of this magical transformational work? It's not so easy. I know that. In order to (re)create and define yourself, you first have to *know* yourself. Not the “you” that was handed to you by your parents, your community, your friendships, your schools and communities, your lovers, your spouses. I am talking about the complete you that can only be accessed by an inward journey.

This getting to know yourself might sound like metaphysical hooey, but it is, in fact, a stunning act of bravery. It is no small thing, the business of knowing yourself. Because women show up in the world in myriad ways. And like the Furies, we have many different, complicated, and sometimes contradictory forms; we have been misappropriated and misnamed from the outside and from the inside. And to fully know yourself is to reckon with *all* of these forms, all of these incarnations of womanness—to embrace, finally, the community of women that lives in all of us. For me, that journey necessitated that I identify myself for myself. That is what I hope this book can guide you to do.

This book is seeking to inspire wider conversations about womanness and the authorship of the self. For me, clarity came most profoundly when I took an aerial view of the feminine template as *I* had experienced it, and I acknowledged that there were observable patterns of behavior that kept showing up for me and for the women in my life.

When I studied Jungian psychology, I was fascinated by what Carl Jung had to say about archetypal behavior and how instructive it can be. I also noticed that his treatment of these archetypes did not quite capture all that I had either seen or been. Therein begins the reckoning. I do work well with thinking about these archetypes; these ways of knowing, these ways of positioning ourselves on the planet, what purposes they serve and in what ways they can hinder us.

I started naming them for myself about ten years ago. At first, the list was a comfortable one. I was deliberate about avoiding ones that caused me discomfort, either because they seemed to be anathema to what I thought I wanted to validate, or because they represented an old wound for me. But then it changed. If my truth was that I, as a woman, am vast and comprised of much, then to limit my interaction to just some of their many forms, in the interest of being “right” about things, was counterproductive and hypocritical. I couldn't live with that. So I made myself more available to the conversation.

Part of how I accomplished that was to think about things empathetically and to pay greater attention to the things that created dis-ease for me, and to try to hunt down *why* my response was what it was. Before I knew it, I was dealing in the repressed parts of my psyche. I had also inherited some languageless self-loathing that I did not even know was there until I dug a bit and risked the discomfort. Reckoning with the archetypes changed the way I came to view myself and define myself, because I saw myself in each one. Some more than others to be sure, but they were all belonging to me. That fact opened up important conversations about limiting beliefs and how predispositional thoughts can keep us from ourselves for a very long time.

Each chapter of this book introduces you to an archetype, named and described as I have come to know her. My hope is that I did not superimpose myself too much on the treatment of each archetype, but rather give them all a wide enough consideration to allow you to experience them in your own way (which is the point, really). Each chapter also includes writing exercises to help you become more acquainted with the archetype and how you interact with her.

Why writing exercises? What is it about writing that fuels an appropriate reckoning? For me, writing is a meditation. It is a form of self-expression that, when engaged deliberately, offers a way in to the parts of yourself that you are, perhaps, unaware of.

Writing also asks us to grapple with and have an intentional relationship with language. This is a critical relationship because language creates pictures in your head, and those pictures, when strung together, create a reality for you—one that you consent to. I have discovered that because so many of us do not have a deliberate relationship with language, the words we use and the pictures they create are sometimes devastating to our development. In other words, if the language I am using is designed to keep me small, then I will be small. And because I don't realize language is the carrier, I can be poised miserably in an undeclared life and participate every day in my own marginalization unknowingly.

Writing holds up a mirror. It shows you your own subconscious. In my experience, many people are interested in being right about their worldview and not having their paradigm disrupted by anything, even if the paradigm they have is damaging to them. When you write, you invite your hidden parts to dance. You invite them into the room. They start to take up space on the page. After a while, you will start to notice things about your language and even how hard you are working to not tell the *whole* truth. There is an inclination to self-protect when we are approaching the kind of clarity that can make us change our perspectives. The writing exercises are designed to help you navigate that clarity and the potential change in perspective in a way that keeps you safe, yes, but keeps you honest too.

Writing has been, for me, the thing that catalyzed my being whole, my positioning myself in the world the way I wanted to be, with real deliberation. Writing then, is about the insistence of myself, the naming of myself, the claiming of myself, and the defense of myself. So even if you do not regard yourself as a writer in the first degree, even if the writing feels a bit foreign to you, I invite you to *try anyway*.

I have not learned nearly as much about myself when I was interested only in remaining comfortable. You have all of this data about what you are like and what the world is like when you operate from comfort. You might as well find out what you are like and what the world looks like when you risk discomfort. I mean this both in terms of the inward exploration of yourself via the writing and the engaging of *all* the archetypes, especially the ones you may not have fully embraced yet.

There were things I did not know I knew until I started writing this book. For example, I was excited to write about the Rebel Woman, with whom I believed I identified with entirely, but loathe to write about the Willing Woman. The Willing Woman, for me, looked like brokenness. She looked like a white flag. She looked like a victim. Whereas the Rebel Woman looked like strength; she looked like fight. She looked like necessary resistance. And, for most of my life, she looked like me. I was certain I knew how I felt about each of them. And then I started writing, and everything changed. My absurd streak of idealism and perfectionism needed to be interrupted, and it has been. The masonry of what I believed about womanness was toppled by my willingness to look at it—all of it—another way, with another lens and a wider understanding. I'm grateful for that.

You might encounter archetypal behaviors within you that do not necessarily match up to the archetypes you thought you most identified with. And that's okay. It's better than okay—it's transformational. Let it be. Let that new awareness have residence within you. Write down what makes you most uncomfortable about the discovery. What is at risk for you if you engage this archetype? What might this new awareness teach you about yourself and how you have been processing? Remember, you cannot really have authorship of yourself unless and until you *know* yourself—and that means *all* of yourself.

If you find that there is an archetype that you don't think applies to you at all, one of two things could be happening. First, you could be in projection. Our ideas about a thing are not necessarily the reality of the thing. The only way to know for sure is to engage it fully. If you

are having a big reaction to one of the archetypes, and perhaps that big reaction looks like an intense desire to avoid her, it is likely that you are operating from projection or, as was mentioned before, an old wound. But the only way to have access to the clarity is to go through the experience. It is also possible that archetypes that do not have resonance with you are more like distant cousins than sisters and mothers for you. And that's okay. You are still relative to them. We all share blood and bone with each archetype to varying degrees.

You may also have the experience of reading this book and feeling like there are some archetypes missing from the photo album of womanhood *you* have come to know. And that's okay too. Remember, what is offered here is not exhaustive, but it is demonstrative of *my* experience. It should, in no way, invalidate your own. With the archetypes, I tried to capture the energy patterns that I have experienced and observed most pervasively, with the understanding that the list is by no means exhaustive. There could easily be fifty more. We are that large, larger even. This work is about *my* truth, not necessarily *the* truth. And I offer it as a means to help you find and navigate *your* truth.

Owning your narrative requires stillness. Stillness and quietness are opportunities to empty out and to sit in that emptiness until the sound of your true voice comes flooding in, to refuse to speak until you are sure that you're doing so as *yourself*. Any time you are creating, the universe opens up to make space for you. In other words, the universe will support your efforts to define/create/author your identity. This is not meant to be romantic language, because, while things show up to support your inward journey, other things will absolutely show up to challenge it. Do not lament that. There is balance in that, and I believe in balance. Besides, in my experience, we learn more from conflict than confluence.

The art of self-creating and self-exploration is a ritual—the deepest kind if you mean it. If you're willing to be still enough. If you're willing to be empty. If you're willing to be full. If you're willing to stand in the gales of your own desires and say, “I want” and “I need.” If you're willing to open your mouth and let the daylight in. Let this book be a

guide. Come ready to name yourself, come with questions, come with clarity, come see what you have done with the cracking crimson of your coliseum heart.

My hope is that this book can be a tool, a useful guide, a way forward for women who are ready to spring into the fullness of themselves. My hope is that there is fire enough in you to light the altar of your heart, of your becoming.

You are invited. You are welcome. You have *always* been welcome. This is a reckoning. This is where the light is located, where the wild in you is kept. This is where the fire, your fire, your *fury*, is to be found.

one

The **Shadow** Woman

She cannot wait to be born. She is always waiting to be born.

Pulled up from dust
You are at home with secrets . . .

A nighttime quiver

A hacked up midnight

The growl we keep
In the dark and low places
We cannot bear to name

An old familiar knowing
We turn away from every morning

Shadow Woman clutching your blackness
So tight . . .

You are all that is left

Of the longing



The Shadow Woman is mostly unborn. She is the deep silence before the water breaks. Jungian psychology talks about the shadow as the unblessed or repressed parts of our personhood, the things about ourselves we do not wish to honor or integrate. For me the Shadow Woman is the secret self. The underbelly. And as pejorative as that may sound or seem, the shadow is necessary. It is what we have not yet reckoned with, but what we *must* reckon with to have full command of the self. This archetypal energy is tricky because it is purposely hidden, intentionally tucked away and guarded. It is the part of us that we gatekeep and manage. The Shadow Woman is perhaps unrealized. She is a woman in waiting. Hers may not be a fully actualized life—not yet.

If this is the holding pattern you are creating from, the thing that is at the front of the experience is silence. A silence you believe in deeply, because this silence is your home.

Some silences are inherited or bequeathed. Sometimes silences are set up for us to reside under before we are even born. Some of us live our whole lives accommodating a silence that does not serve us. But there are other silences that redeem us.

Silence in and of itself is not the equivalent of voicelessness. Voicelessness is a lockbox for which you have misplaced the keys. Silence is different. Silence is meditation. Silence is prayer. Silence is refusing to speak until you are ready, until the language is entirely your own. In my adult life I access that kind of silence all the time now. I know just where to find my own big, beautiful emptiness. I know just how to retreat to the shadows to regenerate. And I know when it is time to return to the light.

The other kind of silence, the one that hisses or insists that I should remain guarded and hidden, is far away from me now. But I remember what it felt like. I remember how I carried that silence, how seductive my closed mouth seemed after a while. This was adolescence for me. The world was noisy and possessing of too much. It was not a thing to step into. It was not safe. It was not capable of honoring me. These were the messages I played in my head the most. My secrets became the biggest parts of my personality. I was *committed* to them, to the keeping