Bathroom Songs: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as a Poet

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Rousseau has disappeared. The narrator fervently vows to know himself, and mercifully falls asleep. In his sleep, he sees two beautiful women, Asia and Ashtar, approaching. He has a frightening hallucination concerning them, and awakens.

When I awoke, it was as it had been.
Ashtar and Asia still approached the spot
Where I upon the flat and brightening plain

Lay still. At last they reached my grassy plot
And stretched to me their white and open hands
Which I accepted. Words they uttered not,

But drew me to my feet to see me stand
A head above them, and then drew me on
With fleet, mysterious steps across the land.

I felt a curious clarity at the run
As if to move beside these dark-haired women
Were moving through a tortuous maze headlong:

Or seeingly interfolded in the dimming
Maze of Astarte’s soul, in its turning;
Or musically lucid, to be skimming

Asia’s heart, while in her breast sojourning.
So was my heart by motion intertwined
In the purest light, with the acutest burning,

Nor has it ever since been still — or blind.
And then we stopped. I saw a barren place
Without a trace of other humankind,
A mountainous rock, with others at its base
Carelessly strewn. I felt unwilling awe:
Such God-abandoned barrenness of space!

And then I felt the speechless sisters draw
My body to the ground, and lay my head
Gently upon a boulder — hot and raw,

A companionable, if an ungentle bed,
But I could not be still, and so Ashtar
Bent over me, and quiet-voiced she said:

“Stranger, we have travelled very far,
And this is a hallowed place. Be still therefore.
We cannot say what mysteries these are,

But here the earth to heaven has a door,
and wisdom here rewards the vigilant.”
Then by a name I cannot speak she swore,

And round the mountain, through the boulders slant
In the desert afternoon whereon the sun
Shone without mercy, they began to chant

And chanting, round the landscape wild to run:
Their song was strange and soft. When they began
I feared to die beneath the heavy noon,

But through my agitation soon there ran
A visionary grace from their wild song;
And soon my mazed eyes beheld a span

Running from earth to heaven all along!
It was a ladder reaching from the sky,
And down the ladder multitudes did throng:
An army in its triumph walking by;  
Without a marching order or parade  
They passed and passed in natural array,

Both up and down, with quiet promenade,  
Each on his own implicit purpose bent.  
Then Ashtar drew me from where I was laid

And took me to the place of the descent.  
Modestly hid, we watched the men progress  
Flushed on by a continual increment:

They swelled and passed in numbers limitless,  
The floodgates of the sky being flung wide,  
As if a race mighty and numerous,  

Impelled into an onward-rushing tide,  
Were yet moved on each by his energies:  
For though the human torrent had no guide,  

It came upon the rocks with purposeful ease  
And seemed, in sort, to moderate the scene,  
Creating from the barrenness surcease,  

And swarming the vast boulders in between  
Making them seem familiar and sweet:  
As on a map of an unknown demesne  

Names that we know we may with pleasure greet.  
No, this was not the blind, anonymous mass  
That shows its vain desires in every street:  

I marked in every face as in a glass  
Such well-known, individual lineaments  
As when our dearest friend we overpass
Upon the road; but never had I met
A man of these! Yet were their faces clear
And intimate, although magnificent

And in a mass they moved in their career.
I turned to Ashtar’s beauty with a cry:
“Who are the men that pass before me here
And sweetly scale a ladder from the sky?
The stately progress of the human wave
 Strikes godlike my all-too-unsteady eye:

Are these the gods or ancient heroes brave?
What is the lasting certainty they follow
That makes their faces confident and grave:

Is it some mystery of long-ago,
Philosophy or religion, or are these
The envy of my blinded guide Rousseau,

Who by their introspection have found peace
And knowledge? –Surely these are men who know
Themselves — and thus the hungry fates appease —

Say ‘ya!’” Ashtar turned slowly to me. “No,”
And sate me down with strange serenity.
“I will detail to you this human flow,

Then will my sister guide you to the quay
Whence to embark a voyage semblable;
But now relax; observe; listen to me.”

But sorely was my nerve irritable,
And agitation kept me from repose:
I heard with vast astonishment her fable
And fear lest it my soul should discompose:
But she was calm and secret. She began,
Taking me in her long arms to inclose:

“Here is the truth unfathomable of man:
Take all your little words of what and why
And fit your little knowledge in their span

And thus explore the world until you die:
Define, propose, corroborate, and prove;
And only death will teach you that you lie.

You have beheld Rousseau, whose words reprove
Like murderous acts the impulse of his soul,
For with his body died the springs of love

Because he would his love as fact enroll
Down to its various parts, which namèd are:
As if a million names could make it whole!

And this is where philosophers must err:
Not that they don’t but that they think they can
Begin to know themselves, as if they were

A list of parts and passions, not a man:
As if the word were not a mere invention
Of human thought, but rationed out its ken.

The greatest mystery is not definition:
In naming out our parts, we name our chains:
The mystery awaits the comprehension

Of those who see that wholeness is humane:
To be themselves must comprehend the world:
To name ineffable mysteries is vain.
And now before you, multitudes unfurl
Who seem to walk in peaceful certainty:
But it is only mysteries encurled

The deeper into their humanity.
The incredible void is deeply intervolved,
And at its center there is poetry.

Shakespeare is there, in whom the void resolves
At last upon the world like heavenly dew:
He encompasses but does not name his love —

Fantastically, knowing that nothing is true
But what transpires on us beyond expression
In the dark night when every old is new.

And so the metaphors in sweet succession
Radiate from a center of unknowing:
Murder, senility, and dispossession

From mystery to poetry outgrowing:
Love moves within, but love unnamed, unknown:
Its immemorial agitation slowing.

Shakespeare proceeds with gravity, alone.
Behind him Wyatt moves who sought a stay
In poetry between the dark and dawn:

He turns with us again the winding way
To make us know eternally the fleet
Point before we emerge into the day —

Embodying the mystery of conceit
As if it could be borne like England's crown.
And there beside him is the cockney Keats
Of whom I cannot speak.”
She stopped. I, in an unspeakable fear,
For some more certain matter cast around.

At last: “And what of Plato? Is he here,
Or all that is not mortal of him?” “Yes,
Plato, invisible, is very near,

But is not as the rest, for bodiless
And comfortless he wanders; he assumed
The mystery, but did not acquiesce

At last to bear it freely, and is doomed
In part therefore to suffer ignorance.”
Suddenly Ashtar was in tears, and dumb.

I brooded until Asia’s advance;
And then we could not speak, but hand in hand
Began to walk across the world of trance.

The vision disappeared as it began,
And then we walked in tears a little way
Till Asia stopped and said: “You are a man.”

And then she kissed my brooding tears away
And took me in an intimate embrace
And stirred within my heart such disarray

As nothing from my memory could erase.
And then she rose and quickly turned away
Nor let me see the corner of her face
And left me in the desert where I lay.

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I waken here, but do not arise
For every motion is within me rolled
As by the sea; I am devitalized

And comprehend vitality untold
Around me, like the still dreams of the brave.
Our words are acts, but the truth interfolds

Motionless in the center of the wave,
In metaphor and the mystery of love.
For Shelley turning in his watery grave,
All human agitation stillness proves.