

In the Ords: CSUMB Literary Arts Journal

Volume 5
Issue 1 *Fall 2021*

Article 12

12-2021

Learning to fly ~ Don't hold my hand

Zoe Atlas
California State University, Monterey Bay

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/ords>

Recommended Citation

Atlas, Zoe (2021) "Learning to fly ~ Don't hold my hand," *In the Ords: CSUMB Literary Arts Journal*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/ords/vol5/iss1/12>

This Hybrid is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Journals at Digital Commons @ CSUMB. It has been accepted for inclusion in In the Ords: CSUMB Literary Arts Journal by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CSUMB. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csumb.edu.

Learning to fly ~ Don't hold my hand

ZOE ATLAS

Name¹ - noun

1. A word or phrase that constitutes the distinctive designation of a person or thing, a word or symbol used in logic to designate an entity
2. A descriptive often disparaging epithet
3. Reputation
4. Family, clan
5. Appearance as opposed to reality

Name, you

Name, me

Name, us

Here we are, together in name

Name this moment

Name our love

Name your home

Name my soul

Name the silence

Name the song ||: life | this pulsing rhythm | we play together :|| What's your

name?

Name your truth so it can't be stolen

Name your secrets and whisper them to the night breeze

Name your gods as drawings in the sand so they are

reborn with the tide

Name the child and she may rename herself in time

Names to touch the ineffable

Names to tame the untamable

Names to dismember and remember

Names to call upon ancestors who never stopped
speaking if only we would turn down the noise and
listen

Names are lies

Names are stories

Names are connections

Names are constellations

Names are contradictions

Names are legacy

illusions

possessions

projections

Names are wild creatures with sharp teeth

Names are acknowledgments

Names mortify and names honor

My name is Zoe Lillian Atlas.

My name was a gift my parents arranged for me before
looking in my then purple eyes or seeing the capital
letter Z inscribed in blood vessels on the skin between
my breasts. I was born on a new moon, branded by the
first letter of my first name at the center of my body.
My body. My vessel, my home.

But it's not mine and I don't belong here.

At least that's how it's always felt. I come and I go. This body feels more like an airport hotel room I long to check out of for good and quietly return home— to my real home. Except I'm stuck in the airport, cringing watching the sluggish conveyor belt of people and luggage while dreaming of flying. My flight is grounded, but I still take off on my own sometimes.

Many of my childhood memories are dreams. I insisted to myself that's what they were because nobody ever told me, while I am "awake" my body could be one place and I could be somewhere else. Dreams are an acceptable way to speak of personal experiences outside the body with the divine, the non-material. I used to dream of cloud people who glowed in different colors, of insurmountable masses of substance and energy, a grandmotherly presence guiding and protecting me, and a home I felt in my marrow but was too deep— I could not reach it, I could not name it.

"That which cannot be named is a disturbance." ²

It is Kol Nidre, the eve of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. I am 15 years old, outwardly impenetrable and aloof, and I just sat through services centered around the power of our word, naming our broken promises and asking others for forgiveness, forgiving the self, and deciding how we choose to live as we enter the new year. To close services, we are invited to walk a

labyrinth laid out in a grassy field under the few twinkling stars that can be seen in Venice Beach. I enter the maze behind my father and begin walking at a steady pace. He is singing a prayer on loop that always makes me want to crawl out of my skin. One foot in front of the other, round and round, Here I Am, at the same place but deeper inside, Here I Am, the singing continues, breath is shaky and shallow, stars blurry, Here I Am, walk the path, there's one way in and the same way out, we go round in circles until we break our cycles, Here I—

I am not breathing.

My body is hyperventilating. My body is laying in the center of the labyrinth. My body is leaking my disturbances. My body is now empty and surrounded by my father who finally stopped singing, and the rabbi, chanting my name as she did the prayers that haunted me and chased me from my body. “Zoe”

“Zoe”

“Zoe”

my name is a three letter song
everyone sings to their own tune
a roundup call
summoning home this ostensibly incidental muss
of shadow and light
which becomes
my constellation
my torn labyrinth
who can spiral me against myself
or dance me to the center of beauty



Lillian, my mom's mom's mom who left Earth a year and a half before my birth. "Lil, Lily", who "would've never let go had she known you," says Grandma in a tender, small voice, now talking down to her hands after reliving stories of summers they ran free on their farm in Toms River, New Jersey, raising chickens and picking wild berries, and how she used to interrogate everyone about what they wanted her to make for dinner while they ate breakfast. My great grandmother makes sure I know her loving presence as the wafting aroma of fresh cut lilies that live and die atop my bookshelves and bedside table.

Great Grandmother's essence
fragrant presence
an olfactory
incarnation
of
Shalom,
Hello, Goodbye, Peace.

The scent of lilies mixes with my breath greeting me at dawn, lulling me to sleep, and offering moments of familiar joy in between. I've gotten to know Great Grandma Lily in dreams and dreams. She is goofy; she plays with the piano music box my mother gave me after a piano recital, and while I am eating she nudges me to plan my next meals. I hold no doubts that she is always here since a 3x5 photograph I nor anyone

else had ever seen before of her and Great Grandpa Moishe at my parent's wedding in 1987, arms linked and sharing a smile from his ear to her's, appeared in my passenger seat the day after cleaning out the whole damn car. Growing up, I did not have a language to understand my out of body experiences nor did I have anyone I felt I could confide in. I like to think of Great Grandma Lily as my flying mentor. As my left hand forms these words, my right hand grasps the gold and enamel butterfly necklace she once wore that now rests above my heart, reminding me it is the women like her who give me wings.



Atlas reminds me I am both part of and here to carry forward on my shoulders Earth and the heavenly bodies. Atlas, the Greek Titan god of strength, endurance, and astronomy; my last name calls on me to persevere and dedicate myself to this physical life. To follow my soul's map and the map of the stars to understand and transcend detachment and anguish. Those feelings obscure my vision and insist I am too lost for a map to do any good. Detaching and leaving my body, ignoring my map, is how I have learned to cope, escape, and protect myself from the brokenness, loneliness, and suffering in the world.

The story of Atlas shares that we have it within ourselves to carry the burdens of our worlds, but we need others to offer a hand and help cushion the weight of our load.

I interpret the story of Atlas as a being who was neither here nor there. Since he was tasked with holding up the worlds, he was not in a world but in some space around or between. This place between that is neither here nor there is, for so long, where I have been most comfortable and most alone.

Letters are maps of sounds.

Names are maps of souls.

My being is a living atlas, a book of ancestral maps— a gift passed down to me and of my creation. To name is to shape breath to describe inherent meaning, individual existence, bridging presence with sounds to establish a relationship of caring.

A map reflects features with symbolic depictions to emphasize relationships or themes. To map also means to plan or chart a course. Mapping and naming. Our names given at birth are our first personalized map, blank but for a small star indicating now you are here. With that map, we carry forward our unique human selves born from and never lost to the oneness of all life.

Why Am I Here?

What is *the* purpose?

What is *my* purpose?

Tikkun Olam: do something to improve this world and all of time,
have the bravery to
create harmony
from cacophony
to reveal what is
concealed
in Creation.

Hineni,
Here I Am,
Present, eyes wide open
grounded feet deep in Earth, extended arms reach for Sky
my hands find each other and meet at my heart
to unite broken pieces
in the name
of creating
Peace.



Notes:

1. "Name." *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/name.

2. *When Women Were Birds: Fifty-Four Variations on Voice*, by Terry Tempest Williams, Picador Usa, 2013, p. 186.