

## Layers/Letters to my Shadow

When I look at Heather Agyepong's *ego death* (2022), I think about my layers/archetypes:

Persona – I wonder if it's imprinted on me instead of something with which I arm myself

Self – I continue to learn how to love through gentle interrogation

Shadow – I inch toward accepting

Animus – in my depths, my protector, the sword in my flesh

These are the four main archetypes that psychiatrist Carl Jung identified. Heather's work examines the Shadow - a part of the unconscious that keeps repressed ideas, desires and fears.

If I look at them in a mirror, will they peel themselves off, leaving me bare?

Leaving nothing?

Will I feel comfortable?

Or will I have evaporated by this point?

I rarely seek out my reflections; those parts of myself that I've experienced, but which I've let hang off me, like loose threads on the raw edge of a piece of fabric. They always come back to me, rubbing up against who I am now, through memories: whether it is rereading something I've written years ago, sifting through boxes of childhood photographs, going back to an old haunt – schools, old flats, or in my dreams. Every time I see Me but Not Me, I realise I've changed, morphed, hopefully evolved, see myself more fully. I see how my Shadow has crept in, I see how I have grown away from the things that have held me back. Those nebulous parts kept in darkness. Only the outline I can discern. In light, they evaporate under the heat of a warm scrutiny. I see more clearly the path that I've taken, whether it be guided by my Persona, my Self, my Shadow or my Animus. The more I see the mass floating menacingly under the crepe-thin surface, the more I want to pierce the barrier. The more I want to let it out, let me in. The more I want to become whole.

This led me to do something I fear, something that might hurt.

To speak to that part of me that lurks and quietly steers me down my path while I look out the window, taking in the view, without considering the hands on the steering wheel, the feet on the pedal.

I decided to write a letter.

Then, I got a response.

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Hello,

I know we don't talk often. To be honest, you scare me. I've been told that in you, I will see the things I dislike so deeply about others, egoism, arrogance, all the things I think are bad. I don't think I want to have a full, long conversation. There are too many floorboards holding this home we've built together in one piece. I fear turning them all over will cause the structure they support to falter – creak, bend and crack – leaving the entire thing to fall into an undecipherable pile of rubble.

*Hi. Yes, it has been some time. You're right, we don't speak often. I mean, a weekly check-in would be cool, but whatever.*

*Your loss.*

*I am longing for that long conversation you seem to dread. I promise I don't bite, you may find more in me than a crushing critique of who you are. The unknown isn't as terrible as you think – and to think, you call yourself an adventure seeker.*

*If it's cool with you, I'd like to assign you some homework.*

*Tell me about that dream you had on Saturday night. The one where Dad was crossing College Street, that particularly busy part of it at the south border of University of Toronto, where we went to school. He crossed the road as cars were coming and going, and you were FREA-KING OUT, but he crossed it fine, like you know he would. I want you to think about that. I'm telling you a story, try and decipher it for me.*

*You know how much I like riddles.*



Weird (annoying) flex, but okay. Fine. I'll give it a go.

Earlier in that dream, Dad and I were getting some hot dogs, you know I love street meat, and the mustard bottle was jammed. All that was coming out was watery, yellow-tinted water. It was gross. I kept on shaking the bottle until finally it came out on my food. I was getting so angry up until that point. Was I mad that I wasn't getting the result I wanted on the first try? Yeah, that's probably my impatience and perfectionism speaking.

Dad was fine, unbothered. Then somehow we were transported to the side of College Street. When I saw him walk out into the road, I got so anxious. I get anxious about him. I know if and when he's no longer in my life, I'll feel destroyed. That's the word that comes up for me. Again and again.

Destroyed. I know it's an impending wound I'll learn to live with, but that's how I think about that moment in the future that's hovering over the timeline of my life, like a pin poised to prick.

Back to the dream – I remember feeling panic setting in, welling up to my neck. I was yelling at him not to get hurt, to come back to my side of the road. He seemed to be half-listening, which annoyed me. I get annoyed when people don't listen to me, or maybe it's when I feel like I'm not being heard. As he was walking across, Dad would look back and signal for me to walk through – to follow him. I was so afraid I'd get hit by a bike, a taxi – remember those Beck taxis? Tangerine orange and a deep spearmint green, such a weird colour scheme for a taxi... Okay, don't get distracted. Stay on the task at hand.

I was anxious, in that awful chest-tightening, sweaty-faced way, but eventually, I walked. I put one foot out and then the next. As soon as I was in the road, all the traffic became some sort of blur. They were like multicoloured clouds. Through them, I could make out Dad, safe on the other side of the road. I just walked toward him. I trust him, so I know it'd be fine even if I couldn't fully see my way through. I didn't rush, I walked at a normal pace – in real life I know I'd probably be dead or have caused a major pile up on a major road, but as I walked, I felt calm.

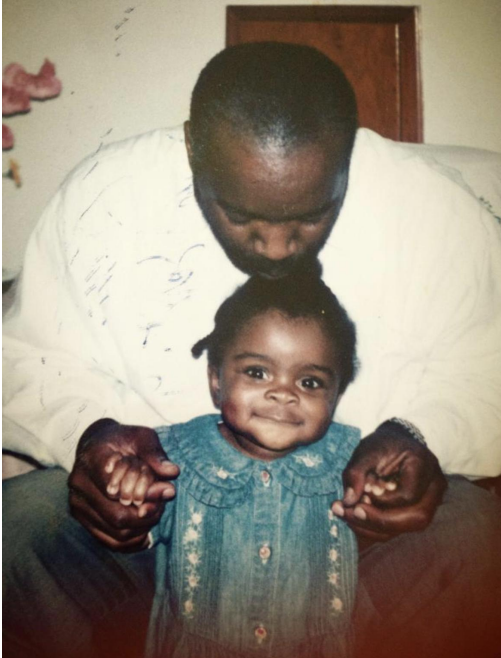
Then I got to the other side of the road. I was with him. He hugged me. Then I woke up.

*Good. Great. See? That wasn't so bad. You made it through that awful little exercise. So, tell me now, why do you think you felt calm when you were walking across that busy road?*

You really like your follow-up questions, huh?

*You know I do. Go on.*

Okay, I felt calm because I trusted Dad. Because I trust Dad.



*And what do you think Dad represents?*

I think he represents my instincts. I think he represents a fearlessness that I have, but that I don't always rely on. I think he represents a part of me.

*\*reclines in chair\* Very good, very good.  
\*scribbles\**

Stop mocking me.

*I'm not! This is good for you. Good for us.  
Continue, please. \*adjusts glasses\**

Okay. *\*sighs\** *\*dramatic eye roll\** He represents my fearless nature, but one that I'm afraid to follow on many occasions, one that can guide me to safety or at least to a place I haven't yet been. One that can literally take me forward. I think the anxiety I felt seeing him walk out into the street was the fear I feel when I want to follow that fearless instinct.

*Aha! I think you're onto something. Now, can you tell me more about how you think the part of the dream about the hot dogs relates to this?*

Yeah, I think I can.

I think the impatience I felt with mustard bottle is about the impatience that holds me back from following my instincts. I think sometimes instinct is a slow thing. Something you have to feel your way through with trust. I like immediacy or certainty, but as with the gross mustard water, I know I'll ultimately persevere until I get the desired result.

*Hmm.*

Hmm? Nothing else?

*Okay, so you seem to be liking this. Why do you think this happened back home and not in London, where you are now?*

I guess because that's a place where the two of us would likely be together. I guess also because it's a place that's both home and in the past. I think that in this context, that means that this issue of trust is an old one. It's one that I've had for a long time - maybe something I've been born with. That would explain a parent representing trust. It also makes sense in terms of instincts - the things that are hardwired into you. Maybe this is why it's so hard for me to overcome.

*Good, good. This has been productive... Maybe if we check in another time, you know, not just when you have a weird dream. Maybe I can fill you in on some other stuff.*

*Gotta keep you interested, you know?*

No, I don't. You're not funny.

*Maybe your feelings about your strange sense of humour is something else we can pick up at another session? \*winks\**

You're annoying, but okay.

*So to recap, what has this conversation shown you...?*

I need to trust myself, my instincts and accept the nebulousness, let go of the impatience and know that I'll make it through to the other side. I need to remember that I can make myself safe.

*Yeah, that's it.*

Thank—

*You're welcome.*

Okay, okay.

Until next time.  
*Until next time.*