

1840-1923

The dead spoke through her and people filled halls and theaters to listen. They sat and they listened and many of them thought to themselves *she makes it look so easy*.

It looked easy because when she closed her eyes up there at the rostrum, all that remained was a little of that warm human smell of all those bodies sitting so close together. Every last one of them, for as long as the lecture lasted, mostly disappeared, from the time she was about twelve, most days of the week, over many decades, across continents, for as long as she lived on the earth.

It looked easy because she was not really there.

She was not really there but still she looked like she was because the dead spoke through her. They spoke through her and her body knew what to do. Her body knew where to put the weight, how to lean one leg forward and when to do so for emphasis. Her body knew to use every bit of itself while she was gone and the dead spoke through her. Her body knew to keep strong and moving. How to keep the head tipped high and chin angled.

x

Journalists chose the course of her narrative as journalists are want to do. And no narrative ever got written without including some physical description of her body as it appeared at the rostrum.

*Golden curled, flaxen haired, unrestrained, rose cheeked, brightly complexioned, demure.*

*With a white rose in her belt.*

*Her figure is commanding and graceful.*

Followed by some interpretation of her as a lecturer.

*Challenger to established philosophies, sciences, theologies, morals—without any preparation on her part.*

*A conduit through which the spirits arrived.*

And the lectures themselves.

*Necessarily somewhat abstruse.*

*Arrant transcendentalism of the diluted kind.*

*Even those who have the greatest repugnance to lady ' orators ' must admit that her discourses are pleasant and intellectual in the extreme.*

Sometimes followed by some claim of how none of it was her fault.

*No way in control of the experience.*

*Not liable.*

*Simply like a telegraph, a mechanism in no way responsible for the message.*

Sometimes followed by some declaration of her authenticity.

*A leading light of the Spiritualist movement.*

*A hard worker in the cause so dear to her.*

Or, by some declaration of her fraud.

*No doubt she is an opium drinker.*

But she would come rather early to believe the words of the journalists had no lift off the page, just black on white and small.

No, the words that counted to her were the words the dead spoke through her.

And those that came for the words? Those bodies sitting so close together in the halls and theaters? They chose the course of her narrative, too. Because had they not come to hear the words of the dead spoken through her, over all those years, across all those continents, there would have been no living to be made off of having her body at the rostrum. And if there had been no living to be made, then what might have become of her body?

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She wore a caul veil at birth, and underneath it, there was clarity to her eyes. Her eyes roamed as though they knew everything in a room and had always known it as it was. Her mother and father always said it was how they first knew she was not like any other child.

*It was your eyes, they would say to their daughter. Your eyes gripped at things in ways far from ordinary.*

The doctor who delivered her knew, too. It was he who suggested the name Cora. A name meaning poetess, priestess, seeress.

x

The dead first spoke through her at age twelve. Their words came out in block letters on her school slate long before the lectures in halls.

The first time it happened she was sitting with some friends under an apple tree on her family's farm. Her friends, those first witnesses of the dead speaking through her, assumed it a trick and they laughed. But she did not respond to the laughter as she normally might and the children ran, afraid of their friend who had been there and then was not really there.

They ran to her mother.

*Cora was writing in her sleep, they said.*

*I was not there, the child would explain.*

*I was there and then I was no longer there.*

*They said you fell asleep,* her mother said.

*I was not asleep. It's only that I was not there.*

And the second time she was no longer there, days later, while composing on her school slate, her mother sat at her side.

She watched her child write something, though her child was no longer there and her eyes held no light and her face went ashen. And when the child came back, some minutes later, when the color returned to her and she was sure her daughter could hear her, she said, *I watched you scrawl that out in your sleep.*

The child watched her mother's face go hard, the blood leaving the surface. It was a letter signed from her mother's long dead sister that read: *The spirits want you. And through you much will flow.*

*I was not there,* said the child, responding to the look on her mother's face, afraid she was in trouble for causing harm.

Then a third time. Again the child and the mother. They sat together sewing. It looked as though the child had fainted, her head down to the table with a sudden drop, then back up, hand writing in the air with her sewing needle.

Her mother found her slate and slid it across the table.

The message said *We are not dead.*

*It is the dead speaking through her,* the mother and father said of their daughter.

The family came to refer to it as the *waking sleep*—this leaving and returning of their child right before their eyes.