

the book of names

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by Eko Svenningsson

sample

The Book of Names

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FOREWORD

A name is not neutral.

It is a tool.

It can be a handle, a hook, a receipt—proof that you were counted and therefore manageable. Long before it becomes intimate, a name enters systems: attendance sheets, forms, inboxes, mouths that have learned to say it without asking what it costs to hear.

Some of us learned early that being readable was safer than being real. We became fluent in legibility the way others become fluent in trust. Tone, posture, silence, compliance—these were not personality traits, but techniques. Survival strategies refined until they passed for character.

This book is not a confession.

It is version control.

Each name in this book produces two records.

One tracks what occurred: the sequence, the atmosphere, the negotiation.

The other records what remains: the structure that does not change when explanation is removed.

They are not equal.

One accumulates. One reduces.

One attempts coherence. The other determines it.

These poems track what happens when a person is repeatedly misfiled—by family, by institutions, by desire—and how the self adapts by performing coherence. Not to deceive, but to remain intact. Not to disappear, but to pass through rooms without being broken by them.

Reclaiming a name is often described as a return. That is a kindness, but not the truth. It is a rewrite. It requires understanding that the original record was

never innocent, and that refusal can be quieter than rebellion. Sometimes it is letting the wrong word pass. Sometimes silence. Sometimes writing anyway.

The systems in this book are ordinary ones: mirrors, classrooms, lovers, documents, messages left unread. Their violence is subtle because it is procedural. They do not shout. They categorize. They reward legibility and punish friction. They call it chemistry. They call it fit. They call it love.

And still: the record matters.

Paper decides access.

Tone decides safety.

Categories decide the room.

This book does not reject structure. It studies it. It asks what can be held inside it without being erased—and what must be carried elsewhere, unnamed, until it is safe enough to breathe.

If there is tenderness here, it is not offered as cure.

If there is coldness, it is not cruelty.

They are both intelligences.

What follows is a ledger of names, masks, refusals, and returns. Not to be believed wholesale. Not to be solved. But to be read as evidence that a person can be processed, misread, archived—and still retain authorship.

Language cannot save you.
But it can build a room
small enough
to stand in
without performing.

water



BRIGITTE: *Litany of the Gravel Drive*

the long story

I. THE LEAVING

You left when I was five.
You said I was so bad
you couldn't stay.
You said:
tell your father
I'm not here anymore because of you.

Then the car—
gravel firing from the tires,
the yellow house behind me
fixed in its color,
its windows blank,
walls refuse testimony.

I ran barefoot.

Crying.

Calling your name into exhaust.

I watched distance construct itself—

dust lifting like a veil,

tail-lights thinning,

the engine dissolving down the road

until leaving was no longer motion

but law.

Alone, I prepared the sentence

I would deliver to my father.

I practiced blame

until it sealed behind my teeth:

I made you go.

I was unbearable.

You couldn't stay.

If I had been better,

you would still be here.

When you returned hours later

nothing was examined.

No rupture named.

The door closed.

Dinner was served.

But something had already exited.

II. THE MICRO-CLIMATE

After that, I learned your micro-climate.

Inside the house
air behaved differently.
Pressure shifted without forecast.
Heat gathered in corners.
Cold moved along the floorboards.

You could reduce yourself to vapor.
You could fill the ceiling.
You starved the room.
You overfilled it.

No pattern published.

I never heard the word sorry.
I heard I love you daily—
regular as breath,
warm against my ear,
true—
and unable to reseal
what it had split.

You would flare,
then withdraw,
as if contraction could revise

impact.

I learned to measure atmospheres.

To read the kitchen table
for condensation.

To sense voltage in doorframes.

Morning arrived bright and staged.

Windows opened.

Light poured in.

Everyone agreeing

the night had been temperate.

III. THE CAPE

And still—there was your making.

You stitched the figures

I wanted to inhabit:

pirate, musketeer, Batman—

cloth cut on the kitchen table,

pins resting between your lips,

thread drawn tight through cheap fabric.

You fastened courage

at my collarbone.

Once, we built a battlefield
for my Lego soldiers—
papier-mâché hills,
netting for camouflage,
trenches carved with a spoon.

A small territory
where damage had borders
and loss followed sequence.

Now you are smaller than me.
Wrists narrow as kindling.
Shoulders folding inward.

In your reduced outline
I see years carried
without shelter.

So I say it without dividing it:
you wounded me.
you sheltered me.
you left.
you returned.

No one has shaped me more.
No hands have held me longer.

I became the larger body

and did not return it.

To remember your hands at my throat
tying the knot of a cape—

go.

be brave.

come back.

Brigitte.

BRIGITTE: *Litany of the Gravel Drive*

the short story

You left.

Leaving became law.

I made you go.

You said I love you.

It did not repair what it had split.

you wounded me.

you sheltered me.

you left.

you returned.

No correction.



SANTIA: *The Long Walk to Compostela*

the long story

I once read about pilgrimage—
the road to Santiago de Compostela.
I was nineteen, hungry for an ending
that would make the walking mean something:
a stamp in a booklet,
a shell on a cord,
a cathedral that would say:
you're done now.

I thought a person could be that.
A body you walk toward
until wanting finally stops.

And then there was you, Santia.

Not miracle.

Not sign.

A chat window.

A green dot.

A door that said online

then nothing

then typing...

then silence again.

You set the messages to disappear
after twenty-four hours.

Something brief must be precious.

You blocked me once.

Unblocked me later.

I called that heat.

You never promised arrival.

You said sleep now.

You said maybe soon.

You said yesss.

I built the altar out of notifications.

I checked my phone

like a pilgrim checks the path.

Signal became scripture.
Delay became trial.

Desire became discipline.

Five months.

I knew.
I stayed.

I wanted to be chosen
with the finality of architecture.

Walls.
Stone.

Something that would not evaporate
at midnight.

No one person is Santiago.

The only thing that walked the whole way
was my projection.

There is no cathedral in that.

Only a screen going dark.

SANTIA: *The Long Walk to Compostela*

the short story

I built the altar
out of notifications.

I knew.
I stayed.

No one person is Santiago.

Only a screen going dark.



mirror



KELYRA: *Litany of the Kevlar Dove*

the long story

I. MISREAD

They see the outline first—
shoulders, jaw, the old blunt geometry—
and decide they already know
what to call you.

They say he like a shortcut.
Like a verdict delivered
before you open your mouth.

Born into a body
that arrived already categorized—
blue tag, correct box,
future implied.

So you learned early
how to occupy it
without belonging to it.

How to stand without inviting correction.
How to lower your register
so it didn't betray you.
How to smile so the room
could stay certain.

How many times did you swallow your name
and feel it sit there—
bright, impossible—
while your given one did the talking?

The mirror does not argue.
It documents.
Male. Obvious. Closed file.

Every reflection an affidavit
you are expected to sign.

But you did not sign.

You began in the smallest hours—
when the body is tired of being supervised—
to move yourself back inside yourself.

Not as performance.
As correction.

II. ROYALTY

Princess, yes—
not ornamental,
not naive—
sovereign in refusal.

Not because the world crowned you.
Because you crowned yourself
against instruction.

Royal in the way you hold your name
like a document smuggled through inspection—
creased, heat-warped,
still legitimate.

Cold, sometimes—
because warmth has been weaponized.

A body learns exact measurements
when affection arrives
with prerequisites.

Be simpler.
Be less visible.

Be grateful we tolerate you.

Love with terms
is compliance rehearsed as intimacy.

You learned to anticipate rupture.
To fix things before accusation.
To tighten control when panic rose.
To offer stability so no one would leave.

And still—
you wanted to be chosen
as a girl
without debate.

Without footnotes.
Without negotiation.

Recognition is not indulgence.
It is oxygen.

III. KEVLAR

This is what they miscalculate:
how softness can coexist
with structural endurance.

A dove—

not decorative.

Migratory.

Crossing hostile weather.

Kevlar under the skin.

Steel along the spine.

Mercy intact—

access restricted.

You learned to carry your most intimate truth

like volatile material—

not because it is shameful,

but because you have watched

how quickly it becomes spectacle.

You are not asking permission

to exist.

You are asking them

to stop rewriting you

for their comfort.

And when they refuse—

when the old pronouns resurface

like archived data,

when the dead name is spoken

as if repetition could enforce reality—

you hold.

Though your hands tremble.

Though it costs you.

You remain.

Not symbol.

Not exception.

Royal.

Armored.

Here.

Kelyra.

KELYRA: *Litany of the Kevlar Dove*

the short story

They named me before I spoke.

The mirror recorded.

I did not sign.

I moved back—

not as performance.

As correction.

I chose my name.

Held it

without permission.

Not for them.

For ground.

Still held.

Kelyra.

mirror



ROB: *Through the Glass*

the long story

We are about to leave—
when you catch your reflection,
fingers pressed to the glass.
“My body’s deteriorating,”
you say,
as if the mirror might answer.
Someone speaks. I don’t hear what.
You turn—roll your shoulders loose—
and say,
“I’m beyond that.”

Maybe you are.
Not old, but *past*—
past proving your worth,
past the kind of love
that inventories what survives.

Still—
you look at yourself
like a candidate.
You've carried abandonment
so long it learned your posture,
lives in the angle of your shoulders,
in the way you brace
before anyone speaks.
You bring offerings
to a temple
that forgot how to kneel.
And still you knock.

“Will they let me in?”
you ask.
“Do you think the girls like me?”
I say, “They'd be lucky.”
But you weren't asking
to be wanted.
You were asking
to be held.
Not admired.
Not scored.
Held.
Without audit.
Without having to become
whoever stands highest in the room.

ROB: *Through the Glass*

the short story

You wanted
to be held.

You introduced
criteria.

Nothing qualified.

You continued.



pen



KAIN: *The Scribe of Temporary Things*

the long story

Behind the amphitheater's roar,
where Céline Dion's high notes scatter
like secular hymns into the afternoon,
I find Kain kneeling with his spray cans
before the city's exposed vertebrae—
that slithering, serpent-backed concrete
we still call a wall.

"What is a city
but an altar?" he asks.
He does not look at me
when he says it.
"What is society
but a temple we build
to sacrifice to what we cannot name?
We train our priests—

artists, teachers—
and let our leaders draft the psalms
of progress, of good, of necessary.
But this—”
His palm rests
against the graffitied skin.
“This Wall is the real temple.
It governs the bells of this city.
It decides what survives.”

Wind moves along the concrete
like breath through a ribcage.
And if it speaks,
it does not promise mercy.
Break me.
Broken things gain surface.

Paint fumes sting—
eyes, lungs—
a raw incense.
Ssssch.
The can exhales.
Pressure released into color.
Names swallow names.
Layer upon layer.
Each tag a brief republic
declaring: *I was*.
No permanence.

Only insistence.

I understand then
what ritual requires.
From my inner pocket
I draw the Golden Pen—
metal warm from other inscriptions,
attached to its narrow chain.
I hesitate.
Not from doubt—
but from the knowledge
that permanence can be a kind of theft.

To my right,
Richie meets my gaze
and nods once.
Witness.

I extend the Pen.
Kain takes it
as if accepting something heavier than metal.
For one suspended instant
spray, stone, breath,
and sun align.
He does not carve.
He writes over drying color.
Letters flare—
not deeper than paint,

not stronger than weather,
but exact.

Already fading.

Already sufficient.

Around us, Mauerpark hums—
a busker bending “My Heart Will Go On”
into something cracked and human,
tourists turning fragments of concrete
into private relics.

The Pen swings lightly

from its chain

when he returns it.

A pendulum.

Time does not stop.

The Wall does not crumble.

Berlin does not tilt.

But something accepts inscription.

And isn't that the hunger—

not to last,

but to be received?

To press breath against stone

and feel resistance answer?

On this Sunday,

before a monument that failed

and therefore multiplied,
Kain signs—
not into eternity,
but into surface.
And the surface,
for a moment,
does not refuse him.
And that is all we ever ask of the world.

KAIN: *The Scribe of Temporary Things*

the short story

Nothing holds.

Still—
we write.

Not to last.
To be received.

Surface
is enough.



EKO: *Litany for the Ritual of Rewriting*

the long story

I. WATER

I did not arrive as a person.
I arrived as a registration—
a name aligned to a box.

In water, the body does not negotiate.
Salt enters.
Breath leaves.
One summer I went under
and the surface sealed above me.
Long enough
to understand
how quickly *fine* becomes fiction.

If you cannot be safe, be legible.
If you cannot be held, be exact.
So I became quiet
in a way the system could keep.

Tell me—
what did you rename your fear
when you began wearing it
like manners?

II. MIRROR

The mirror did not reflect me.
It confirmed me.

Are you consistent?

Are you still the same file?

I practiced faces for clearance.

Smile: access.

Neutral: passage.

Laughter: stability.

I became fluent in approval.

Honesty feels holy—
but you did not yet know
the difference
between revelation
and compliance.

Micro-scene:
Someone asked who I was.
I offered the version
that would prevent departure.

Who benefits
when you remain interpretable?
Who calls you “too much”
only because they refuse
the labor of seeing?

III. PEN

Then the pen—
not as art.
As boundary.
I wrote my name
until it stopped being a label
and became mass.

EKO—I remain.
Not because I cannot break.
Because I return.

Staying legible
was erasing me.
I refused the story
where I am footnote to my own life—

where I disappear quietly
and call it maturity.

This is *The Book of Names*:

not archive,
but resistance.

I write them
so absence cannot pretend
it was inevitable.
Names as anchors.
Names as refusal.
Record as a form of love
that does not ask permission.

O pen—
be mercy in the hands of others,
and weight in mine.

I will not be authored
by fear.
I will not remain
legible at the cost of self.
You do not write me.
So I cannot write you.
I can only place the instrument
back in your hand.
Take it.
Write.

ΕΚΟ: *Litany for the Ritual of Rewriting*

the short story

I was a registration.

In water,
the body does not negotiate.

If you cannot be safe,
be legible.

The mirror confirmed me.

Consistent.

Clear.

Approved.

Until—
a line did not match.

I chose it.

Not for safety.

For self.

I write

so absence

cannot call itself truth.