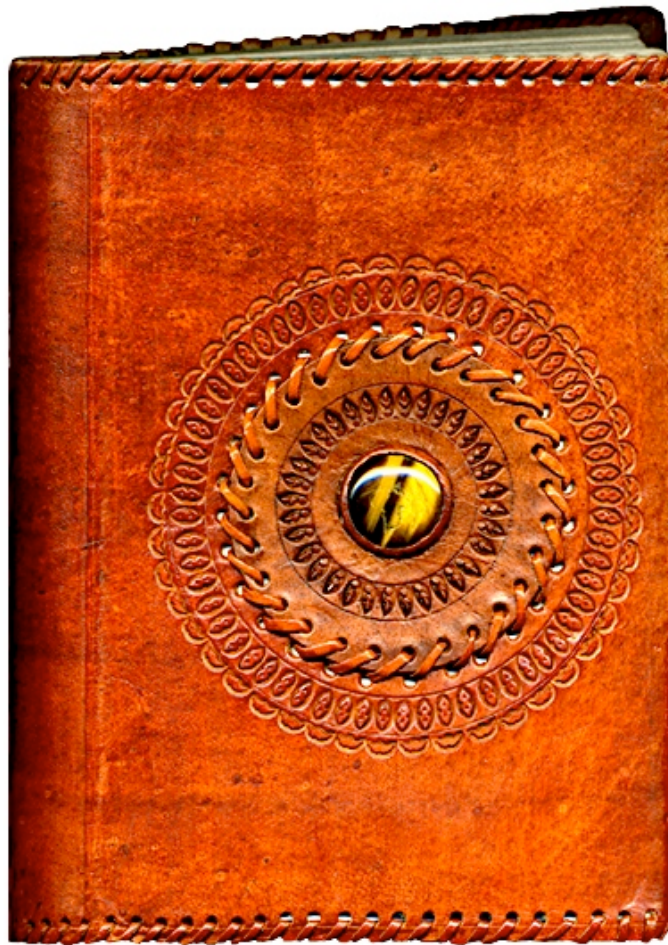


Book of Dreams - Part 5

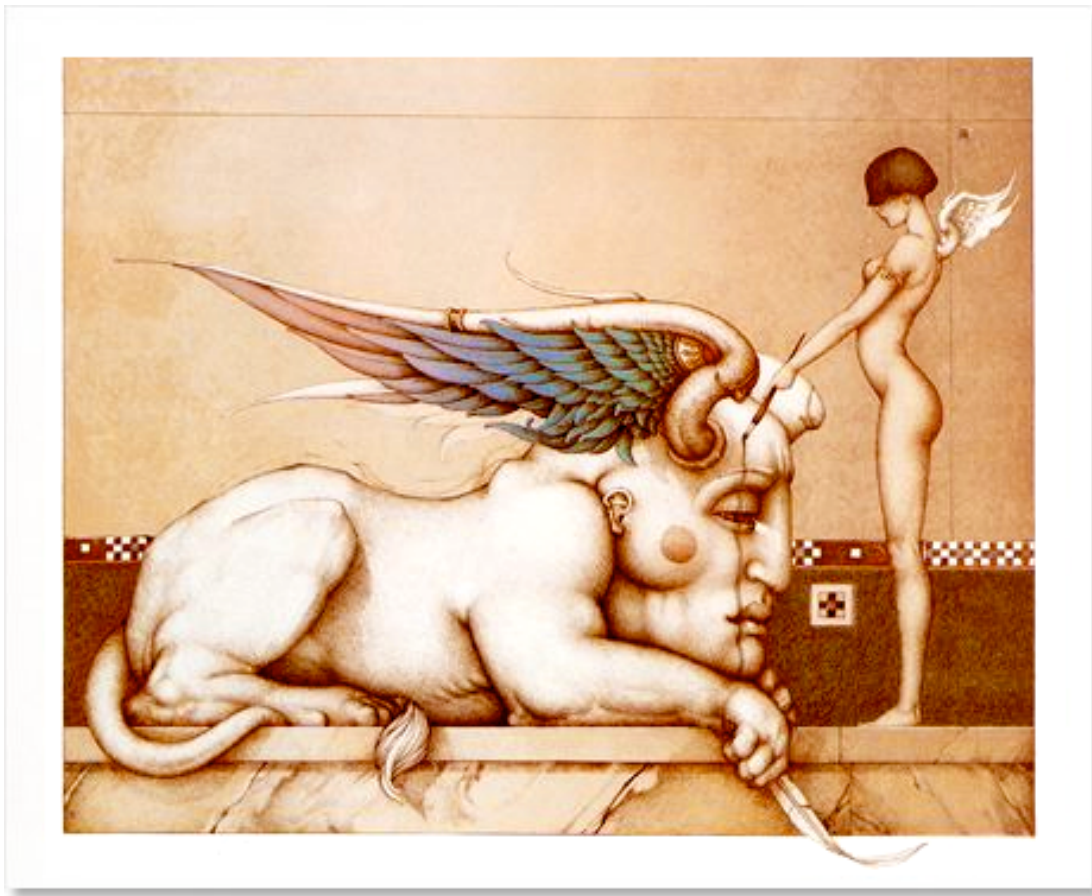


A M E M O I R

THE BOOK OF DREAMS - PART FIVE

CHAPTERS

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Part V

OBSERVATIONS & QUOTATIONS

**When Chagall paints you do not know if he is asleep or awake.
Somewhere or other inside his head there must be an angel.**

- Pablo Picasso

**I do at least three paintings a day in my head.
What's the use of spoiling canvas when nobody will buy anything?
- Modigliani, penniless in Paris in his mid-twenties**

**Reality is not always probable, or likely
-Jorge Luis Borges**

**Is my swan costume ready?
- Anna Pavlova, on her deathbed**

**My memory and intellect have gone to wait for me elsewhere.
- Michelangelo, at age 83**

**"Doesn't anyone ever realize life while they live it? Every, every minute?"
"No. Saints and poets, maybe; they do some."
- Thornton Wilder, *Our Town***

**No one truly believes in his own death.
- Sigmund Freud**

**"What is it? My dear?"
"Ah, how can we bear it?"
"Bear what?"
"This. For so short a time. How can we sleep this away?"
"We can pretend that we have all the time in the world."
- A. S. Byatt, *Possession***

**There is nothing like a dream to create the future.
-Victor Hugo**

18. TIME TRAVEL

Do we retain a sense of the birthing process? Is this meta-memory the origin of the “light at the end of the tunnel” beheld during near-death experiences? What other pre-verbal, pre-contextual memories are folded into our minds as intuitive impulses? As spiritual expectations?

Does anyone truly remember when they learned to read? It’s one of those things that just happens, isn’t it? After one becomes a reader, it’s very difficult to imagine not being able to, or what that felt like. How many other life conversions include that “never able to go back” aspect? (or, is the “pre-conversion” experience always present, just below the surface, never truly gone, lurking as an underconscious-memory, like the birthing process “light” might be?)

Does the ability to read affect our dreams? Did people dream differently before the invention of the written word? Before movies? I know my dreams are often directly related to what I’m reading at the moment. (The dream at the end of this chapter is an example.) I wonder if movies have more of an impact on dreams than books. Although I read a lot, I think films work their way into my dreams more often than books. TV shows rarely follow me past sleep, however. (I sometimes wonder what sort of mental stain things like television advertising causes on the human psyche... and what it would feel like to have never witnessed any advertising, to have lived before advertisements of any kind. I’m glad my dreams are free of them.)

Do we ever question the accuracy of our memories while dreaming? (I can’t recall ever doing this.) What is it that nags at us when we can’t quite remember something correctly, what part of our brain is challenging what other part? How do we know if our recollections are illusory or factual?

What would it be like if we never forgot a thing? If we were always certain of every recollection? Part of our experience of time is how far removed we become from accurate, detailed memories. If we never forgot, would we feel the passage of time differently?

Memories wink and nod at me throughout the day, memories I have no idea if I am making up or not, if they came from dreams, or if they’re vestigial artifacts of my waking life long buried (their actual contexts forgotten), or if they were merely a story told to me (or read, or viewed). Little first-person snippets thrown up on the shoreline of my consciousness by a deep sea Id. I sometimes wonder, *what am I to believe?* And yet, emotional, I usually seem to know.



In *THE TIME TRAVELER’S WIFE* (the book by Audrey Niffenegger that I was reading when I had the dream described below), the character *Henry DeTamble* is unable to convince people that he indeed travels through time... unless they witness him disappearing. Foretelling future events (since he’s lived them already) is never enough, no matter how astounding or detailed the prediction. They need visual confirmation. Only their eyes will provide sufficient proof. When they actually see him vanish, or appear out of nowhere, it finally confirms the (formerly) impossible.

“What kind of proof are you looking for?”

“Clare said you disappear.”

“Yeah, it’s one of my more dramatic parlor tricks. Stick to me like glue, and sooner or later I vanish... I’m very reliable that way.”

The flash and flow of my imagination is like that.

Memory (and dream) appears out of nowhere. Disappears into nowhere.

I disappear. Or, parts of me, at least. And new parts appear. At least, that’s what it feels like. A temporal jigsaw, we.

Living so much of my life in my head (making up stories, composing music, planning photo shoots, designing websites), I feel like a time traveler. How are remembered “virtual moments” in one’s imagination distinguishable from “lived” memories? While caught in a virtual reverie, out spins a web of conjured histories. Returning to the Real can be disorienting. Especially since I wear the same clothes in both “worlds” most of the time.

There is a belief, even while in the midst of dreaming, that imagination can’t really change anything. Yet, even knowing that, it is impossible to go back to the person you were before you imagined this new thing. So, maybe it changes more than we know.



At the end of my senior year in high school, I played the character of Mr. Webb in Thornton Wilder’s *OUR TOWN*. (I ended up suffering a collapsed lung and couldn’t participate in the opening, never got to play the role in front of an audience. Rehearsals are often more intimately fulfilling, however, since there is less pressure, less distraction, fewer sets of eyes. I remember them better than actual shows.) During a rehearsal, we ran my most important scene: My daughter, Emily Webb, has traveled back through time, from the grave, to visit her family. She watches me greet a younger her, hug her, lift her up, all the while standing off to the side, a ghost. I pantomime my actions, holding my hands out to nothing, joy in my eyes at seeing my daughter (who is going to die soon, unbeknownst to me). Yet, at that moment, all I could visualize, as a 17 year old, was my sister, Toni, whose death was still very fresh. Tears rolled down my face as I pretended to smile. I heard weeping among the crew in the wings.

This is what Time Travel must be like. Each expected tragedy as ever-present. Alienation as the sub-text for every gesture. A teenager playing the adult father Mr. Webb hugging the air as his daughter’s ghost looks on from a dead future. Timelines forever confused.

"We don't even have time to look at one another," Emily says.

After one last look at her hometown of Grover's Corners, one last look at being alive, Emily tells the Stage Manager she is ready to go back to the graveyard. She asks, "Doesn't anyone ever realize life while they live it? Every, every minute?"

The Stage Manager responds. "No. Saints and poets, maybe; they do some."

The words came like a *déjà vu*. Like a job description.

The play drives home its moral when George Gibbs approaches Emily's grave and collapses in tears. (That's when I was supposed to cry.) Emily, watching this, is saddened and amazed at how the living "don't understand." (In the 1940 film version, Wilder agreed to a happier ending in which Emily dreams her death, but does not actually die.)

After death, time stops traveling altogether, I suspect. Except in fiction. The Time Traveler's wife lived her entire life with Henry popping in and out, from when she was 6 years old to the last months of her life. Even after his death date, Henry would still leap (forward) into her present. To her, time remained continually scrambled. Her grief could never settle, take proper root.

I sleep all day. Noises flit around the house - garbage truck in the alley, rain, tree rapping against the bedroom window. I sleep. I inhabit sleep firmly, willing it, wielding it, pushing away dreams, refusing, refusing. Sleep is my lover now, my forgetting, my oblivion... Everything is reduced to this bed, this endless slumber that makes the days into one day, makes time stop, stretches and compacts time until it is meaningless.

Sometimes time can have too much meaning, too many folds of spacial fabric. Too many fingerprints on the grimy lens of our souls. Henry explained:

Does knowledge set you free? Knowing the future? What if you aren't able to change events, what if everything happens only one way, and no matter what you know about the outcome, you're never free to change it? What kind of knowledge would that be?

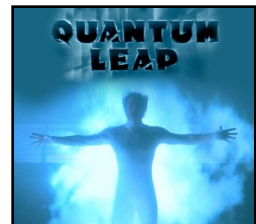
Causation only runs forward. Things happen once, only once. Nothing can be changed. If you know a thing from having lived it already, from having traveled in time, things you are powerless to change...

No, time travel is not a form of freedom. I feel trapped, most of the time. If you are in time, not knowing, then you're free. Trust me.

And so, my dream...

I materialize on the cobblestones of a colonial village. I'm wearing a puffy-sleeved pullover shirt, short leather pants, ill-fitting boots. I'm instantly aware that I've time traveled. Yet it is more like I'm inhabiting the body of someone who actually lives in this new here and now: I know I have to discover my role in this village, the people who know me, my place.

Jean calls to me from a garden gate, waving for me to come over, as



if I'm already late. She's excited about something, cleaning, wiping her hands. I figure she's preparing for guests, a party maybe. She's my wife, that much I can tell right away. (I am aware, in the dream, that in Real Life she's my ex-wife. But having her here, in the dream, makes it easier to play along, as opposed to time-leaping into a body that's married to a stranger.)

She's enjoying herself, setting everything up perfectly, talking a lot, giving happy orders. I have to listen very closely in order to discern what it is I'm supposed to already know. I don't want to appear like I have no idea what's going on or that I'm not paying proper attention.

I glean that our son will be visiting, coming over for dinner. He's bringing friends. It will be a feast.

I'm in charge of grilling salmon over a large wrought-iron grill. I leave to gather sufficient firewood and other colonial era party favors.

As I walk through the village streets, details fascinate me (I'm gaping like a tourist), but I never stop trying to fit in, to appear natural. It must be somewhere between 1450 and 1760. Even though everyone is speaking modern American English, I have a feeling this is a coastal city in Europe, perhaps outside Lisbon.



Sensing my estrangement, a local touches my elbow and leans into me with a conspiratorial grin. “Are you looking to place a bet on European soccer?” he asks, feigning innocence. “*Barcelona?* Or *Manchester United*, perhaps?”

It's Robert Downey Jr, dressed in buckskin and ribbons. The impish glint in his eye indicates that he knows I'm time traveling... and that time travelers from the future often turn out to be soccer fans. He nods towards an alleyway, presumably in the direction of his upstairs apartment gaming room.

I shake my head, wondering, in turn, if he, too, is from the future. He has his Tony Stark goatee which gives him a *Mercutio* air, witty and skeptical, always ready for a good time, one step ahead of the constable.

When he realizes I have no money, he immediately loses interest. Three steps later he is at the elbow of an elderly couple who look like they've just stepped off a tour bus from Sun City (c. 1988). Hawaiian shirts, cameras around their necks, brightly colored tote bags. Completely disoriented. Obvious time travelers. They follow him into the alley, nodding and relieved.

I look around the village. Time travelers account for 1 in every 100 people, I figure. But the locals pay them no mind. Unless they are spending money, no one notices them.



I gather what's needed for the feast and return back "home."

Jean is now emotionally deflated. It seems none of our son's friends will be able to make it. He'll be coming alone. But she's still setting up the feast for a large party.* Our son is due any minute.

I stack the wood and start the fire. I love grilling out. I hadn't realized that I have to clean and dress the meat first. (One of those time traveler oversights.) I have my hands full for a while.

As I gut and prepare the salmon, I look over at the various tools strewn about the yard and wonder what it is I do in this quaint old world village. I decide I must be some sort of artisan. There are several blocks of limestone and marble tiles leaning against the side of the shed, sculpting tools and a long leather apron. I put the apron on, a little too late to protect my breeches from salmon gunk and scaly smells.



While I work, a boy wanders into the courtyard. He has curly blonde hair and a very intelligent face. He reminds me of Heath Ledger** in THE PATRIOT, only younger. He tests out some of my tools and makes small talk until finally getting around to asking the question he came to ask.

"I'm trying to sail across the ocean, discover the New World. But I can't get my canoe into the harbor. The current is too strong upstream. I keep getting pushed back. Can you help me?"

Even though the main plot of the dream is the impending feast and our son's homecoming, I find this boy's subplot far more compelling. He is a traveler like me, a traveler of the mind. Although I'm certain the boy is of this era and would have no idea what time travel means, I feel a deep affinity. I have to help.

"What's your name?" I ask as we make our way through town, towards the shoreline.

"Chris Columbus," he replies, without a hint of self-consciousness.

The boy's canoe is nestled in short reeds, sitting atop a long stretch of mud. Very long and very narrow, like an Ivy league sculling boat, I wonder if it will hold enough supplies for a transoceanic voyage.

The tide must be out. We struggle through mud, dragging the boat into the receded river. Once we get in deep enough water, the boy climbs inside and begins to paddle. He has infinite energy but cannot make any headway against the current. He shrugs. I help him pull the boat back toward shore.

"I'll figure something out," I tell him. "Want to come to dinner, in the meantime?"

"No," he says, perking up. "I have another idea."

I leave him to his boat and new idea.

* This reminded of a Christmas party we planned around 1992. I had wanted to send out special invitations, but Jean insisted on merely including the invitation in the handwritten portion of our regular Christmas cards. I thought people wouldn't notice the invitation, since many people don't read their Christmas cards very carefully, but she said, "I read every one more than once. We don't need to waste money on invitations." Also, she referred to it as an "Open House" with no need to RSVP. As I recall, no one came. We called a few friends, none of whom noticed the Open House comments on their cards, to come over before it got too late, to help eat all the food...

** Heath Ledger was in the news that week, having died of an overdose in Manhattan.

Mud cakes my legs and hands. I try and clean myself off before Jean sees me. To my surprise, she doesn't even notice how dirty I am.

Our son has arrived. (His name is Anton, but looks like Woody, who is, by the way, the bigger soccer fan.) Our son is telling stories, holding court. None of his friends have come with him, but the gathered household staff provides a festive enough audience.

Jean asks me if the fish is on the grill yet. I tell her it will be, soon, and then mention the boy trying to make his way to the harbor.

"Why not grab on to one of the barge's anchor ropes as it sails by. It could pull him along," she says.

A brilliant idea! I walk toward the grill to begin cooking. The new idea overwhelms me. I drop my tongs and spatula and snatch up a coil of rope. I sneak off to help Chris Columbus.

(I pass by Robert Downey Jr and a new couple wearing Bermuda shorts and knee socks.)

"Try this," I yell, tossing the rope over the mud to the boy. He secures one end onto his boat and shapes the other end into a lasso. As a tug rumbles past (never mind that it is the late 1400s, or the middle 1700s), Chris swings the rope overhead and lets it fly.

The rope snags something along the railing and goes taught.

His canoe starts sliding along the mud towards the river.

We've done it. He's on his way!

I *whoop* for joy.

Other people begin to run to the shoreline, cheering. Pretty soon the entire town is waving, yelling.

The boy never looks back. He's intent on making it, reaching the harbor and beyond.

I can tell the dream is nearing its conclusion. My vantage point begins to rise, like a camera at the end of a blockbuster film. (The cinematography is spectacular). I follow the tug and the canoe along the river as I rise higher and higher. The far shore reminds me of Darien, along the Five Mile River, lined with gracious mansions and manicured lawns. I see a cluster of our son's friends waving, having a good time. A tapped half barrel of beer stands among plastic chairs and coolers. I recognize Fro, Todd, Joe Johnson, John Miller, and several kids from the original Menasha high school lacrosse team. (I look for Dan Knudsen, Anton's friend fighting in Iraq, but don't see him.)

As I soar ever higher, as more and more of the harbor and distant islands come into view, I hear myself narrating. This really is the end of a movie. I'm talking about dreams, about new worlds, about the indomitable spirit of discovery. Chris Columbus cuts himself loose from the tug boat and begins paddling into the ocean, alone, under his own power. Soft, wispy mist curls around his bow.

My inspiring narration is interrupted by Jean. Her voice is just behind my right ear, as if she's been float alongside all along.

"I can't believe they didn't come to the dinner," she says, referring to the group of guys crowded around the keg on the far shore. "Thoughtless jerks. Highly annoying. I don't know why I bother..." Then she realizes that her words are being amplified, as if the soundtrack of the movie can be heard by everyone in the dream. "But they're nice boys," she says, trying to make

up for the insult. Her words echoing along the riverbed. “They’ve been very good friends to our kids...”

I’m not listening. The main plot of the dream has been replaced by the boy Columbus. I don’t want to revisit anything else.

I start to cry. Hard. Overcome with emotion.

I can’t finish the narration.

The canoe reaches open water. A long, thin white wake marks its passage back up through the peaceful harbor.

I wake up. Returned to my own time. I open the book on my bed table.

From the pages of *THE TIME TRAVELER’S WIFE*, I read:

“Do you worry sometimes that the really great stuff has already happened?”

“No. Well, sort of, but in a different way than you mean. I’m still moving through the time you’re reminiscing about, so it’s not really gone, for me. I worry that we aren’t paying close attention here and now. That is, time travel is sort of an altered state, so I’m more aware when I’m out there [time traveling], and it seems important, somehow, and sometimes I think that if I could just be that aware here and now, that things would be perfect.”

He smiles... and I allow my guilt to subside, back to the little box where I keep it crammed in like a parachute.



19. HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

A PREFACE

You may wonder, after reading the title of this chapter, why I would put it last instead of first?

Surely, you've discovered your own method of reading this book, if you've gotten this far. (Unless you've jumped ahead to see how it ends, only to find you're back at the beginning). Perhaps you noticed the title of the chapter in the index and thought it would be helpful to start with a "preface." In that case, email me and I'll send you a prize!

I put this at the end mainly because it would be too boring to put it at the beginning.

Maybe something I'll say in these last two chapters will make you consider rereading some of what you've already read. Sorry about that. I hope you can remember some of what you've read, though, and that will be good enough. Maybe the images and conjured stories will even haunt you, in a good way, providing a kind of fertilizer for your own dreamscapes, a new lens for your ongoing observations. The Ghost of Pages Past.

Such is life.

We all evolve from ghosts.

It makes me think... How we remember things can become more important than the actual truths of the event. It's mostly from memories (as well as continuing-to-ripple consequences) that we determine an event's meaning. Yet, it may be that, regardless of what we remember (accurately or not), no matter how well we think we've retained (or repressed) this or that occurrence, Residual Truth lives on. Inside us. There is more living material percolating below our surfaces than our conscious mind can willfully discern.

Dreams percolate with such truths.

As we live, as we grow older, we simultaneously move through stages and add on layers. Sometimes, layers from previous stages leap out like **jack-in-the-boxes** and present themselves, unchanged. Or so it seems. But then we shake our mind clear and realize, no, it *is* different. We are **MATRYOSHKA DOLLS**, onion people. We carry the weight not only of our past actions, but our expectations, regrets and misconceptions, along with other people's expectations, woven in folds inside folds of our soiled human fabric. As I re-read these dreams, I feel the touch of those who lived in them, the breath of those I imagine listening, the incompleteness of that forming person (still named Tobin Mueller), and a warming vanity (that I imagine is simply self-ascribed wisdom). More than anything, I feel the layers (and people) that cannot be husked, a shared density of anticipation. The interplay of discovery and redemption.

To be without the weight of so many lives, that is the unbearable lightness of being.



If we did not have our matryoshka layers, we may not have enough armor to sustain. It may be what keeps us sane, this whispering cacophony of banded ghosts. (And why reading is so much better than watching television: We are still able to hear the ghosts breathe as they bend over our shoulders.)

I'll let you be in my dream if I can be in yours.
- Bob Dylan

As you read this book, know that I have willingly and thankfully inhaled all these spirits. And that the ghost I am evolving into is still learning how best to exhale them. (Just thinking about this creates a cadence of aspiration within me.)

Each word, each juxtaposition of image and recollection, dream and biographical context, is important to me, more like poetry than narration, more a living moment shared than a diary of recollections written down.

This book, deep down, is a poetic memoir. It merely uses the vehicle of dreams.

I wanted to create an account of an inner life, not an outer one.

Truth is often spoken in whispers (or with a certain amount of laughter). Mostly, it remains unshared. A source of doubt, worry, even fear. Ironic. Shouldn't truth seed courage?

The measure of a life is not linear. It's mosaic. A 3-dimensional constellation. This is why I chose a "memoir of dreams," for it is necessarily a puzzle, easily set against the night sky. I wanted the literary form *itself* to serve as an analogy. And an apology. I wanted *form* to frame *content*, like a *living being*.



The original manuscript (the handwritten "first draft") was written in pencil onto hand-made paper (stiff linen embedded with flower petals) and bound (hand-stitched) with an embossed leather cover whose focal point was an inlaid circular stone. The empty book was a gift. It had to be so. Suzanne gave me this book so that I could fill it up and give it back to her, in turn. The entire act of giving, writing, reading aloud, perfecting, adding on, and giving back became a metaphor. All that passing back and forth is part of the text/context. *Part of how the words need to be read and understood.*

Last night I saw an old movie in which a character remarked, "Only boors share their dreams." After all, they rarely make sense to other people. They're too intimate, often surreal and untranslatable.

That we think any experience is *translatable*, that is the greater illusion.

When we start with something that has no objectivity whatsoever (recounting one's own dreams), there is no illusory pretense. I wanted to write something without trickery by grounding it in pure imagination. That is how I try to write music, as well. It is what I hear,

that's all. In this book, it is what I saw (on the back side of the movie screen inside my head). I've tried to avoid boorishness by sharing intensely affecting moments. Intensity breeds universality, occasionally. As does honesty.

As you read, please consider why I chose to include this or that detail, especially as it relates to the characters in the dream. Try and guess the correlations as if such an effort will lead to something important. (How poetry should be read.) In this manner, you might begin a journey that has less to do with storytelling than internal texture. You might travel less like a sleuth and more like a lover, which is what dreams call for.

Dreams circumvent the conscious censorship of our daytime mind. They even try to get past the deeper censor of our submerged psyche, employing characters and analogies that do one thing yet mean another. Meaningfulness is derived from the character's reactions to what happens, to a detail noticed or a component that seems out of place. The heart of the matter is rarely the plot or initial story line. Stroll off the beaten path with me and let the thorns prick. Then follow the furrowed contours of the wound into a new garden, alone.



Life is not résumé-able. It is motion, momentum. ("I" is more a verb than a noun, in the internal sense, a perspective defined through the interplay of changing fields.) The courage and curiosity of an artist dedicated to turning things inside-out can only be understood by way of puzzle-making. Puzzle-deciphering. How else can discovery be communicated on a visceral level?

I have tried to describe my own set of keys.

I trust the Reader to find their own doors.

I wrote this for my children. If you've read this far, please note...

Anton (my first son, chronologically speaking): read these dreams as if we are acting everything out, like when we mapped the neighborhood pretending to be Lewis & Clark back in the middle '80s. Feel the movement in your bones.

Will (my second son): read generously. Don't measure, find proportion. Read as if it is the HISTORY OF ELVES from the ancient forests of Glacier National Park, passed down to you by their younger cousins who've survived among the weeds and wildflowers in the vacant lot next door. Find the seeds caught in your own hair. Visualize the way there as a tunnel made of RNA.

Woody (my third son): read as if you are studying McEwan's ATONEMENT. Analyze, integrate, look for *meta-memoir* stylings. Hear the voice inside each voice, like when fans cheer on the Packers at Lambeau Field. There is a lot of Civilization in those cheers.

Sarah (my youngest): read it as if you wrote it yourself. Let the words surprise you. They may, at first, feel foreign; but don't dismiss them as random. Ask why each illustration was used, why each scene ends the way it does. Get close enough to your answers to sense their authenticity.



To all my children: Focusing your attention is like sprinkling pixie dust on your brain. Paying attention is a matter of choice, not merely a matter of being well entertained. The brain is especially malleable when you determine something significant is happening. Have the courage to be transformed, like you used to when you were little. As if you actually care what your father is saying. Of course, it would be easier if you cared a great deal, but some things are difficult to request. If it doesn't touch you this instant, don't stop. There are many eras within a lifetime, even within a moment; pick up this manuscript again when the right one comes along.



If you can dream it, you can do it.

- Walt Disney

I wrote the first draft of this work for myself, in 2008, like one would write in a journal. I wrote the second draft for Suzanne, reworking it on my computer. I wrote the third draft, in which I included illustrations and footnotes and additional asides, for my children. I edited it again, in 2012, for everyone else who might happen by. (Special thanks to readers who've sent emailed reactions.)

On one level, I have never written for an audience. I have created my scripts and music for the sheer joy of The Making. I rewrite and rewrite many times out of my desire to perfect, to sculpt, to define, to understand, to complete. This may be the most important thing to keep in mind while reading:

The joy of letting yourself play.

I have played with the details of my waking and sleeping life, one aspect informing the other. If there is one through-line, it is: *I love where I am this instant. And: each instant reflects the whole.* (Really, that's one through-line. Just bad punctuation.)

I live my life as if I am just now waking from a nap in the Garden of Eden. It makes no difference whether or not I have been offered The Apple. I delight in opening my eyes. I delight in closing them, too. I am god's companion, a fellow speaking spirit. (A dream, not of God, but of companionship, of a table at which the process of creation shines from every candle, reflected in every eye.)

I can imagine an Eden behind any wall, so long as Eve is at my side and I can reach out to her in the middle of the night.



20. DAYDREAMING

AN EPILOGUE

Since writing this memoir, I've stopped writing plays. In fact, I've stopped writing lyrics. Words seem less important. I've purchased a piano whose sound is changing me, it is so resonant, so earthy. It is my voice, most days.

Health issues might have something to do with caring less about words. I have a lung disorder and can't sing. Well, I can still *sing* (unless I happen to be recovering from yet another lung collapse), but I can't sing like I used to. And singing is often painful. I wonder if being unable to sing has made me care less about shaping words?

(Not to contradict myself, but I'm currently recording some of my favorite songs - written by others - during weeks when I feel better. You can check them out on my website, www.tobinmueller.com. I'm organizing them under the somewhat ironic title, *Song Of Myself*. Some of the songs have been quoted in these pages. So, you see, there is a tie-in.)

I also try to avoid crying. It has an instantly negative effect on my ability to breath. Like getting pneumonia, suddenly, in five minutes. Not just shortness of breath, but internal tugs and aches akin to having several arrows shot at me from various angles. I keep my distance when watching tragic films or listening to beautiful music (which is unlike me), in order to avoid these sorts of episodes. I wonder what long term personality change it might be causing?

I also need to avoid stress. (Another reason to just play piano and stop writing words.)

I had always wanted to be a poet. Being a poet was like being a prophet, only with skin. I believed a poet was a way of life, not a profession. I began cherishing words with religious zeal.

And then my sister died.

Her death was a ruse. There was no finality to it. It lingered and lingered, until it became the pigment of my poet skin. Words became pregnant with tears. My plays flowed like smoke around pain and loss, giving them ambience, shape, transcendence.

And then my mother died.

Her hopes rang in my ears. Peered out from mirrors. I rediscovered poetry, liberated somehow. Words bled with life. Perhaps the old agitation returned, to make me worthy through the metaphor of art. (Her final words to me: "Don't... worry... about... money; ...make ...history.")

And then my marriage died.

I spent my days and nights working, writing, composing, rehearsing... I identified the parts of me that needed nourishing: The artist. The father. The honest man. Parts of me I needed to compartmentalize: The savior. I protected myself from the ravages of depression. I wrote nearly a song a day. For other people to sing.

And then I met Suzanne.

Love was real, empowering, no longer tragic. Even as 9/11 tried to cast it's pall, life opened wider. And one night, while playing the piano after dinner, she said I should record myself for others to hear. I began a series of works for piano that ended up being the most satisfying project I've ever worked on. [*Morning Whispers.*] No words. No orchestrations. No producers or directors. Just me at the piano. Dreamlife and Real Life coalesced.

And then my father fell into dementia. He lost his ability to remember, to learn, to plan, to decide what is best. (But he always knew what was right.)

I stopped my life to help him regain what he could of his last years. And then to help him die, thinking that it would be my final poetic act of family, the closure that would provide me with a sense of completeness.

But death is not a single event. "Closure" is a counselor's word, not a son's. I was his voice during the last years; we became entangled.



I am tethered to this world, to my work, to processing my thoughts in a communicative way. I fear losing that tether, sometimes. I only daydream so far. Even though I enjoy it. I prefer to sit at the piano.

My dreams with the seagulls fly
Out of reach out of cry
- Joni Mitchell

Of course, I've skipped the "And then my children were born" parts, or the "And then my musical was performed at the John Houseman Theatre" parts, or the "And then my CD won the Best Jazz Recording of 2009" parts, etc. I've skipped all the moments in the kitchen, cooking. (Very good moments, indeed.) Historically, happiness and productivity have had less to do with my dreams than death and loss. These things don't seem to inhabit the same space, have the same connection to why I do what I do. They are what I've done, something altogether different.

Then again, while editing these pages, I realized I no longer dream the same things. Perhaps not even in the same way. Suzanne is in my dreams now, and she never used to be. There is much less isolation, gloom, or a sense of searching. I can't recall the last time I dreamt of one of my shows, much less being near a stage. I'm less the author, more the actor. There is less listening, more singing (metaphorically speaking). My dreams continue to bring me comfort and insight, but in different ways. I may need them less. My life has changed.

This collection captures an end of an era for me.

My dreams have moved on.

I've never thought of dreams as a form of escape, as astral-projections to another land. They are tactile and present. Grounded. There is vastness within these walls of dream-and-self, continents I have yet to explore. (Like a boy paddling toward the deep ocean.) But I doubt I will write down any future dreams. (Even though I have experienced some fascinating things recently.) Doing a thing for a while is enough; I don't need to do it forever. Time to try a new form of exploration.

Plus, I have a new piano.

In fact, as I catch myself daydreaming, I think an idea is forming. Like a window opening. One more chance to learn something I didn't know before, a new project, an excuse to hobnob with gods, something that might stave off guilt, erase regret, fill in empty spaces. I may invent a moment that might (the thrill is taking hold) blend my internal and external world, make something new **Known**, something that could lend worthiness to my time here.

Imagine...