

Book of Dreams - Part 2



A M E M O I R

THE BOOK OF DREAMS - PART TWO

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Part II

M O R E Q U O T A T I O N S

It is never too late to be what you might have been.
- George Eliot

**Dreaming permits each and every one of us to be quietly and safely insane
every night of our lives.**
- William Dement

The most pitiful among men is he who turns his dreams into silver and gold.
- Kahlil Gibran

I don't use drugs. My dreams are frightening enough.
- M. C. Escher

**Yet it is in our idleness, in our dreams, that the submerged truth
sometimes comes to the top.**
- Virginia Woolf

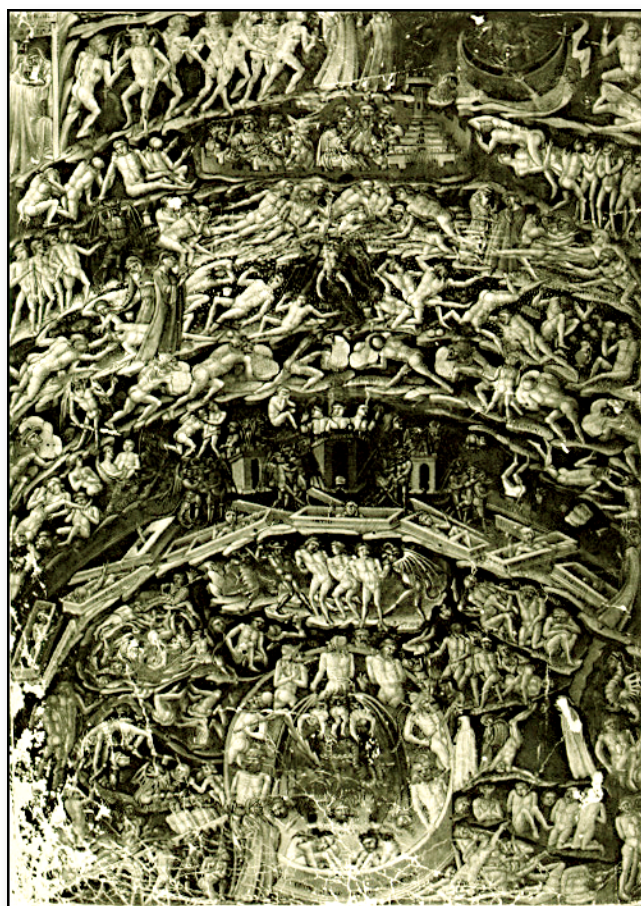
I was trying to daydream, but my mind kept wandering.
- Steven Wright

**What if nothing exists and we're all in somebody's dream? Or what's worse,
what if only that fat guy in the third row exists?**
- Woody Allen

4. THE DREAM IN WHICH I REALIZE I CAN BREATHE UNDERWATER

There is a moment in dreams, certain dreams, when you know you are dreaming. It is the special moment when you, the dreamer, or you, the dream character, become aware that something isn't Right, isn't Real, and the only explanation that occurs to you, sometimes as a revelation, sometimes as a creeping uncertainty, is that all of this *must be a dream*. Perhaps a stone begins to float, a pile of dried leaves turns into a flock of birds, or a doorway starts to laugh. Some law of physics that you hold too dear gets broken. The reasonable frame around you crumbles. But instead of being horrified, you're exhilarated. The very *Plot of Life* opens to your authoritative imagination. The universe becomes as malleable as a deck of cards in a magician's hand. You are now, truly, an interactive participant: both director and hero. You are able to change pasts and presents and expected futures. Sometimes you can even wake up.

Sometimes you can't.



In the last dream I chronicled (THE DREAM OF FINDING MY THEATRE TICKET) I realized I was dreaming when I saw my sister. That she is no longer alive is a fact too deeply understood to be forgotten (even while dreaming). I knew I was asleep but chose to stay that way, letting its currents carry me.

During unpleasant dreams, realizing I'm dreaming gives me the power to escape from helpless descend into a Danté-esque *Inferno* (left) or, worse, the sticky quicksand of Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (see the next page for one panel of that image).

A third choice is to "awake" within the dream. Not merely to stay asleep, but to shape... everything.

This is what is called "lucid dreaming," to realize you are dreaming and control (with wizardly prowess) the dreamworld you are moving through. Lucid dreams can be fascinating to the point of revelation (even if, like most revelations, the

source is omniscient delusion).

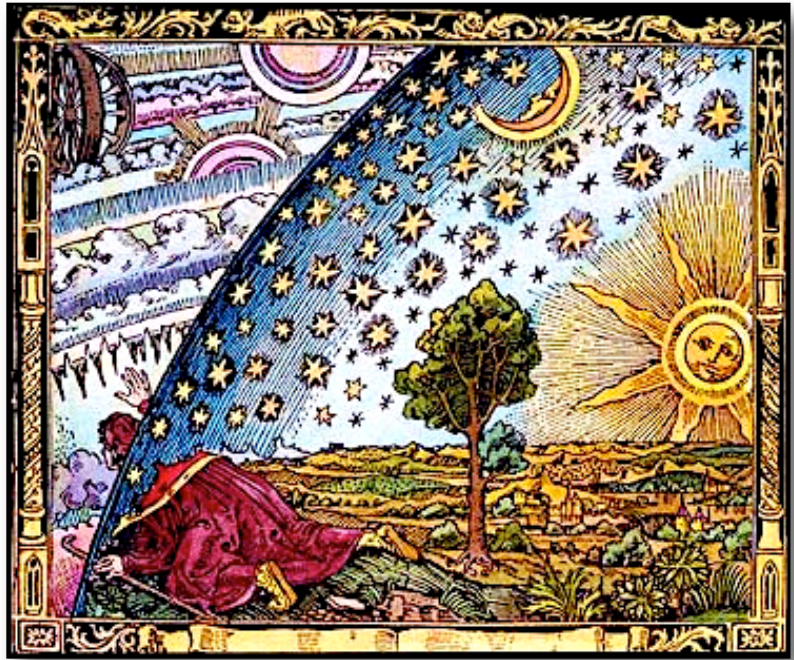


I float upwards into my dreams, into a world that exists beyond the starry veil of externalized heaven, a place where my unconscious self is free to explore and commune with other independent points of view. *Discovering the Heavens*, a 16th century woodcut, better portrays my journey:

I often fall asleep ready for innocent, trusting, unencumbered bewilderment. Or, on occasion, I let go in order to commune with the multiple soul impressions inside my own “infinite” depths.

Discovering The Heavens

16th century woodcut by an unknown artist



The first dream I can accurately call “lucid” begins *at the edge of a swimming pool*. I’m dressed in swimming trunks that highlight how skinny I am (which dates me in the dream: between age 13 and 28?). The instant I am *worried* about my naked torso, I look down and notice, without surprise, that I am now *wearing clothing*. (Many times in my dreams, when I think of something, it happens. Not the same thing as lucid dreaming.) I have on jeans (further dating the dream, since I didn’t start wearing jeans until I was in college, preferring corduroys while in high school). I also have on a thick denim shirt rolled up at the sleeves (adding to the perceived circumference of my scrawny biceps) and brown leather Bass shoes (the kind with the thick seam down the center, made in Ireland, a detail that makes me feel earthy, a tad counter-culture and eco-aware).

Being clothed doesn’t deter me from doing what I plan on doing: *diving into the water* (the reason I’m standing at the edge of the pool in the first place). As soon as I break the surface, I become concerned about the weight of my sponge-like clothing. My Bass shoes turn leaden. “*I’ll be swimming with the fishes soon,*” I whisper. The image of Captain Nemo walking along the bottom is only a mirage. I sink through dancing shafts of sun and shadow, wondering if I would be able to float if only I had more fat on my bones.

I become aware of how clear the water is. The play of light against the blue walls (or is it the pool’s floor?) is sharply focused, as if the water forms a lens. I become aware of the lack of temperature, the lack of cold-shock that usually sends embarrassing quivers through my bony body.

My descent stops.

I become aware of the lack of gravity.

I am able to drift this way and that without regard to current or direction.

In fact, I can’t tell which way is up, which way the newly healed surface lies, which direction I must struggle towards to be able to breathe again. I wonder how long I have to live.

I decide, in a moment of Gordian logic, that if I stay calm, I will undoubtedly float upward and, thus, discover the way to safety.

My father often recounted a story from his youth: He had always avoided learning how to swim. The dreaded day in gym class arrived. All the boys were crowded around the edge of the pool. While trying to work his way to the back of the line, another boy pushed him in. Dad crashed into the water, no chance to regain any balance. Laughter echoed through the indoor pool with *Lord Of The Flies* claustrophobia. Every which way he looked: blue walls, more blue walls. He had no idea which way was up. Trapped in a 6-wall stucco tank. In desperation, he pushed off with his legs and, luckily, emerged like a torpedo, gasping for breath [and, eventually, one day, 20 years later, had his fourth child (me)]. He would never learn to swim, even though he joined the Navy during WWII, sailed through the Pacific Theater and passed the Equator several times, surviving those bizarre Neptune hazing rituals. Like Max McGee avoiding wind sprints at a *Green Bay Packer* workout, Dad knew how to slip unnoticed to the back of the line.

I, on the other hand, never liked the end of the line. Therefore, I had learned how to swim (even though Wisconsin water is frigid, especially during early morning swimming lessons). Nonetheless, I'd absorbed my father's fear of losing direction underwater.

It took a great deal of self-composure to stay still, to keep from panicking, to wait for my natural buoyancy (did my skinning body have any natural buoyancy?) to kick in and find its way upward. I reasoned (as I calmed myself even further) that if, indeed, I sank like a stone, then at least I'd know I'd hit bottom and not one of the sides. Then I could use my legs to propel me to the surface, just as my father had done before me. (I had great confidence in my legs.)

While I'm gathering my calm, watching with magnified vision the bubbles that cling to the concrete around me, *another memory unfolds...*

When I was about 12 years old, my family vacationed for one week on the edge of a lake in northern Wisconsin: Rainbow Lake. (This was, incidentally, the lake on whose shores my sister lost her virginity, a secret I held from my parents all the days of their lives. I also tested the limits of my body that summer, but in a quite different way.) Along with several other 12-ish year old boys, I engaged in an epic challenge of endurance: diving from a narrow pier and swimming, underwater, through a weedy turtle-infested gloom as far as our lungs would let us. With a single breath, each of us determined to break the distance record of the boy who had gone before (and was still standing on his spot, marking it with dripping pride).

While waiting my turn, standing on the dock, I'd been breathing as deeply as possible, oxygenating my blood, expanding the dimensions of my chest, formulating special tactical advantages and strategies. (UFOs had been seen streaking past the setting sun just two days prior by my father, although he would never have admitted that they were flying saucers or anything other than meteors, which was still be pretty cool. I'd been looking down, reading a novel at the time, so couldn't offer my opinion. But I had a feeling that if I could win this particular swimming event, taking place as it did in a remote corner of hinterland, I would prove

myself worthy to any aliens who might be searching for a recipient of their special superhuman powers.)*

There was a lot at stake.

After one final rib-busting breath, I dove in. Gliding underwater, pushing my muscles to their prepubescent limit, I eventually approached the cut-off jeans of my adversary. His arms slapped the surface of the water in frustration as I passed.

It was no longer about merely winning, but winning in a Herculean way: swimming so far that I might pass into legend. (I'd long suspect I was part god.)

At that exact moment, overpowering pain cut into the back of my neck and drove deep into my brain, blinding me. At first I thought my head had struck a rock.** Reflexively, my feet skidded onto the mucky bottom. I stood, gasping for air, the most intense headache of my life threatening to split my skull open wide. Kids on the pier cheered wildly. The forlorn second-placer, a "mere" 10 feet closer to shore, began his heavy wade back. I realized I wasn't permanently blinded. Nor had any water gotten into my lungs. (I recall reading in a *MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.* paperback that if you were about to die from drowning, breathe in water and you'll go suddenly unconscious, avoiding prolonged agony.)

I'd survived.

I raised my stiffening arms in a picturesque victory salute, pretending it was all so effortless, that I could do it again, anytime. No one guessed that my brain had exploded moments earlier.

My first near-death experience.***

...Yes, I was once KING OF UNDERWATER SWIMMING. But at what cost? I don't want to risk repeating any sort of blinding headache. I need to find the surface... soon. As I continue to marvel at the clearness of the light-dappled water, drifting without direction, I try to remain calm. Refrain from panic.

How long have I been underwater? Searching my physiology for clues, for signs of nitrogen narcosis or carbon dioxide poisoning, I become more and more certain of an astonishing truth: *I must be dreaming.* How else could I remain underwater, beyond the effects of gravity, buoyancy, or the need to breathe?

Yes. *I'm dreaming.* Yet, I'm completely *aware*. I look at my arm, watching the little hairs gracefully twitch in the current. I'm able to control the ebb and flow, the rhythm of each follicle. I smile an Esther Williams smile, needing no air whatsoever.

Sometimes when I'm dropping off to sleep, at the edge of consciousness, I forget to inhale, especially if my sinuses are stuffed. If my mouth refuses to re-open, I wake up, gasping,

*As an interesting coincidence, I just took an online test to see "which superhero" I might be. I came in as *Green Lantern*, the one who did, indeed, get his powers from aliens.

** Had Thor's own hammer intervened to exact judgment for my hubris? I wondered.

*** It must have been oxygen deprivation, my cerebellum revolting in order to get my attention.



like a kid who has just swam 100 yards underwater. I don't want to wake up like that, not now, not just as I've discovered the thrill of being lucid inside my own dream.



Grinning like *Archimedes* in his tub, I decide to test myself. Even though I don't need to breathe physically, I need to psychologically. If this is indeed a dream, then I should be able to breathe underwater. The water certainly is clear enough, clearer than air. I inhale deeply, fully, eyes as wide as a giant squid. No choking. No waking.

I will be able to stay underwater for as long as I like.

It is an act of faith... faith in the power of mind over matter, in good fortune. I breathe again, easily, normally. It's cooler than being

Jacque Cousteau.

With my new found freedom (and faith in that freedom), I begin exploring the small blue pool.

Its confines soon become too limiting. The pool expands into a huge aquarium. Soon, all walls fall away. I'm swimming in a limitless underwater landscape.

The light seems a bit too dim. Multiple light sources appear.

My dreamworld begins to anticipate my expectations, my whims. I swim as fast as **Aquaman**. Sea creatures wriggle around me, curious. Fascination (bordering on worship) flickers behind their anthropomorphic eyes. **I'm an underwater Messiah.**



I have no idea how long I explore the limits of this new world. I recall encountering a handful of mythological beings, a few comic book characters and at least a dozen denizens from **Neverland**, but mostly I find realistic creatures and plant life, geologically possible formations. (My dreams are, for the most part, profoundly realistic, often indistinguishable from actual memory.)

Perhaps it's out of boredom, perhaps it's merely the capricious nature of dreams, but I graduate from the athletic joy of dolphin-like leaping into full out flying. Astonishingly, I'm flying head first, like **Superman** (although, instead of leading with manly fists, *I'm leading with my open hand* in a kind of effete forward gesture, like a flying ballet dancer). My dried clothes barely ripple, even at these high speeds, a fact which pleases me more than you can image.

This effortless Superman-straight-ahead-jet-like style is a quantum leap in ability for me. In every previous dream, the act of flying was beyond arduous. It took an immense amount of concentration and effort. I'd have to get up a head of steam, running at top speed. Then I'd lift my legs, as if sitting in a lounge chair, throwing my feet forward, relying on my momentum to keep my aloft. Once in this sitting position, with my legs juttied out in front of me (involving serious abdominal muscle exertion), I'd paddle the air with my hands, like a surfer catching up to the next wave. Even though I was quite aware of how ridiculous I looked, paddling and straining and barely going faster than a brisk walk, I was usually the only person in my dreams able to fly at all, so I felt a certain consolation knowing envious amazement lingered just underneath the muffled guffaws of onlookers.

No such feelings of silliness now. I embody the elegance and ease of Tolkein's *Eagles of Manwë*. Peasants in the field below are filled with awe and wonderment.



I'm the only human able to fly. Somehow, I understand this is my greatest limitation. No matter what feats I'm able to perform, I perform them alone. I'm unable to bestow onto others, or share with others, my lucid vantage point.

I fly everywhere. The vistas are stunning. Skimming over the tops of the rainforest, the canopy is dense, undivided. I imagine all the endangered species listed in my ecological musical, *TO SAVE THE PLANET*, safely grazing. Somewhere below, my old theatre troupe sings the opening number, *Save The Planet*, churning their arms with conviction, not noticing me as I glide overhead. I wonder if everyone's remembered to wear bug spray.

In another section of the jungle, a different iteration of my troupe is performing *ROBIN HOOD*. Strains of "*Out Of The Forest*" echo dully through thick foliage. I want to circling in, to wait for my 6 year old son Willie's *Hail To The Sheriff* solo, but I can't slow myself. I can't even make out individual faces.

The singers below me are perfectly content to perform on their own. I'm not needed. As I zip overhead I think what an amazing ability I have, to fly like this. As they recede from sight, I realize I'm also acutely sad. (*Aren't all great men sad? I so want to be a great man*, I recall thinking.)



[As I write, it occurs to me that this might be a recurring dream. I have a sense that I've used this dream before as a kind of portal, a way into lucid dreaming. The ending - effortless flight over impenetrable jungle - has changed in meaningfulness as my life progresses. I've become less enamored by flying across the face of the world. As I grow older, it is the solitude of the flight I find to be the most alluring aspect. Not sad at all.]

The last time I had this dream, I skimmed over the forest canopy without effort, waiting for the wave of sadness to affect me. It never hit. The lack of sadness made me look more closely at the world below.

I feel more like *Icarus* than Superman in this latest version of the dream. *An Icarus with no home to fall back into.* I can't afford his brand of recklessness. I try for a smooth landing. There's an island below, along a dramatic coastline. Somehow, I know I can find sanctuary there, one that will not require super powers or dizzying heights. One that, I hope, won't require sadness as an integral aspect of lucidity.

Ten days later I met Suzanne.



The Lament for Icarus
Herbert Draper

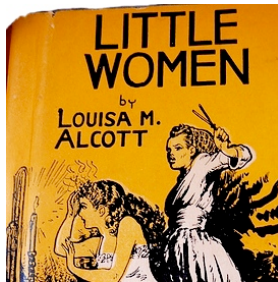
5. THE DREAM IN THE MIRROR

There is still the matter of the ingénue.

ingénue - an innocent or unsophisticated young woman; a part of this type in a play; an actress who plays such a part.
(See *ingenuous*: innocent and unsuspecting; gullible).

In real life, she is an actress. On many levels. However, she'd be mortified to be called *unsophisticated* (see above definition). Her poses too elegant, movements too studied. Likewise, *innocence* is a label that might escape her, for she never understood its virtue (although she understood its allure). In my dreams, she moves effortlessly, without the strain that so often showed on her forehead in Real Life (especially outside restaurants... she was bulimic), without the easy deceptions that were so second nature. We had an affair when she was 22 and I was 44, exactly twice her age. ("Affair," what an inadequate word.) The playwright and the actress.

In my dreams, she'd appear lighter than air, able to simply kneel on the bed, lifting herself with her fingertips, brimming with details of the day. A wisp of storytelling and adventure. A wilderness of curiosity. Uncaptured youth. A Wendy who knew how to fly better than her dear wicked needy Peter...



She is looking in a full-length mirror. We are in an attic, similar to Jo March's in *LITTLE WOMEN*. Unopened crates made of stained wood, piles of thick cloth (velvet curtains?) and old 78s scattered near a hand-carved Victrola serve as props. Several styles of hats await on antique chairs. I watch as she looks herself up and down. The mirror is mottled, as if the reflective surface behind it has molded. She straightens her back like a monochrome postcard.

She was always looking in mirrors, catching her reflection in windows, making sure she was portraying to the world in just the right way. While engaged in this combination of self-admiration and self-editing, I always stood alone, cropped out of the frame, out of site and out of mind. Like a unicorn, winter flourished around her aura, springtime existing only within.

Carefully typed dialogue is embossed on brittle handmade paper. The fragile sheets rustle like dry leaves as I bring them to my side.

She moves to reposition the mirror nearer to the light.

I walk around behind her, drawn by the smoothness of her shoulder. I want to kiss her there but know her reaction would be impatience, disdain for any distraction, and so I merely look into the mirror, imagining my hand on her skin.

It is not only my hand that fails to register in the mirror's reflection. The mirror is totally blank, a small, thin monolith (capable of absorbing bullets, as in other dreams, or the truth, depending on timing).

A shift of perspective:

She is now looking directly at me, desperately trying to find something. She turns, lifts her jaw, bends her shoulder forward ever so slightly, her eyes never leaving some part of me as they search up and down.

It takes me longer than I'd like to admit before I realize ***I have become the mirror.***

This being a dream, I am also myself holding the yellowed manuscript, standing behind my ingénue, wondering when we can get on with our attic play. I am both the mirror and the thing reflected.

She speaks, although I'm unable to remember the words. [At one point in our relationship, there wasn't a single phrase either of us could've forgotten, every exchange was memorized as if we'd both been star-crossed savants. A sign of true love? So we thought.] She looks suddenly frightened. Then perturbed.

I am a full length mirror standing before her, filmy yet capable of a patina glimmer. But she cannot see herself in me. The crates, the hats, the piled curtains all reflect. She, however, is a vampire in my glass.

I can see every detail of her dress, her hair as it falls in thin strands and catches on the lace, the tiny triangle of moles on her neck, her unprepared expression looking for something she can't find. I can see her in the mirror, but she cannot reflect in me. Her arms move with uncharacteristically awkward contractions. She is every inch a proto-adult, 22 years old yet not a woman, at least not in these mirror eyes.

For a brief instant I see through *her eyes*. I sense the feeling of being invisible, of seeing a man prattling on behind me when my own shape and life should be in the foreground. What must have crazed the queen from SNOW WHITE in front of *her* magic mirror. A shudder resonates.

She reaches into the reflected me and snatches a preposterously large diamond ring from where my mouth would be. The mirror cracks, like thin ice bearing too great a weight, then heals itself. She models the ring, as in a 1962 television advertisement; it reflects brilliantly from the mirror's surface (although the rest of her remain unseen).



I've never liked the idea of engagement rings, women wanting engagement rings, or the social custom that expects men to buy expensive engagement rings for women. I'm also a believer that a woman's view on engagement rings can be a litmus test, a key to other, more important, values. In real life, she'd never expressed a desire for such a gift. Ever. Nonetheless, the melodramatic response of the dream-her repulses me. (An innate bigotry I need to work on.)

Then, like she'd done so often while walking along the sidewalk, she leans back and catches her reflection in the attic window. She fixes her hair. The ring disappears. The advertisement shifts focus groups.

She takes the script from my hand and plops herself on a dusty old plaid sofa, greedily reading the scene with one finger between her lips, smiling slyly to herself, scribbling across the

page with her thoughts, somehow destroying the in-my-head purity of what I'd thought I'd written, what I'd felt so good about the moment the last word had been typed.

*I am left standing before myself, watching myself looking into **the mirror that is me.*** There is no panic. No consternation. Only quiet appreciation that the mirror had refused to reflect her, refused to pander, had healed itself so swiftly, so effectively. Quiet certainty that the mirror could see me exactly as I am, even if I could not. Like Plato's forms and shadows, the Real Me exists through the looking glass, not able to be comprehended by reflective surfaces.

At first, I'd worried that she could not see herself in me. I'd not considered that she was never there to begin with. In me. Or that such a truth was a good thing.



I'd left my first wife, in part, to find out if this muse was the secret to finding something hidden or lost or not yet forged inside me. I believed in, I truly saw, a new future which required her participation. What I hadn't imagined was a future without either of them, my wife or my mistress. I'm not good alone.

Both my wife and the ingénue are moved on. Instead, it is Suzanne at my side.

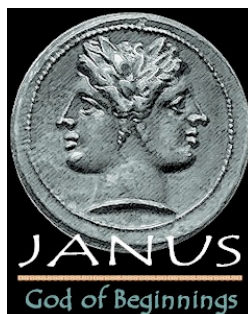
I'd given up expecting someone who was able to make me feel always seen. I'd wanted someone who made me feel like a genius, a confirmation, an inspiration. What Suzanne brought, among many other things, was unadulterated love. She would always be there. Yes, I'm a great man in her eyes, and she loves what I create; but she prefers dinners in the backyard and sharing wine and going to bed early. To share me with no one. To cover the mirror with curtains and simply be at my side. I could stop writing tomorrow and she'd not think less of me (although she might worry for my happiness). Feeling exquisitely safe, I am free to be alone in a way I had not imagined, alone in the artistic sense, alone in the sense of self-vision and courage. Free to

explore the honesty of the Looking Glass, carrying a lantern flamed by the joy of the innocent (kind of a mirror image of Diogenes).



Diogenes the Cynic
John Waterhouse

When I awoke from this dream, as Suzanne slipped out of bed to let the cat out, I felt nothing but comfort. I will never be alone in the human sense. I will never again feel like half a man.



6. THE DREAM IN WHICH SUZANNE FLOATS AMONG SEVERED BODY PARTS

After knowing each other for a few months, Suzanne relayed this recurring nightmare:

She sees herself swimming aimlessly. She's looking for a way out of the water. There's no land in sight. The water is murky, thick lake water, in an area as large as a sea. A ceiling of unbroken clouds hangs low in the sky, like drenched grey wool strung poorly from a line, oppressive and heavy. She has no idea how she got in the water, or why. The dream always begins with her already swimming.

As she continues to look for land, for an escape, she realizes that she's been bumping into things. With a gasp that alarms, she realizes she's swimming among human remains. (Although she'd been watching herself intently from above, she hadn't noticed the sorts of things floating all around her. She feels the jolting weight against her own shoulders and arms, experiencing it as the swimmer might.)

Decapitated heads. Random decaying limbs. Brutally severed forearms and legs chopped off at the knee. These body parts have been there for some time. Rot and stench pervades. An unclean place.

The warm, turbid water is full of blood. Instantly nauseated, she wants to vomit up the water she's already swallowed, but is unable. (More water than she cares to remember).

Her need to escape increases.

Then she wakes up.

She can never find a way out of the water, even though she's dreamed this dream a hundred times. She always wakes up (too soon? or, mercifully, before something worse happens?)

When Suzanne told me this dream, I asked if she was wearing clothes (like I always am) while in the water. She said, "Perhaps. It's as if I was dropped in the water, or thrown in, without preparation. I am alone. I hear only my own splashing. My feeling is nausea, not fear. Overriding nausea and exasperation."

I asked her if she knew what the dream meant. She shook her head. "I haven't had the dream since I met you," she mentioned, smiling. "Maybe it was just a dream I kept having because of my four and a half years with Frank."

Frank was a former boyfriend. It made sense, especially in retrospect, now that I know more Frank stories than I did then.*

* Frank emotionally and verbally bullied and abused Suzanne. He would only strike her where the bruises could not be seen by others. His drug use became pervasive and contagious. The potential for random violence, pathetic self-loathing and the need to prove his mastery was ever-present. He pushed her to her limit, knowing where that was better than Suzanne did herself, until that last day when she walked out of a restaurant and never saw him again (although visits from the police and her persuasive brother were needed to help convince Frank that enough was enough). I've also come to understand: she loved him.

Other theories also came to mind. Dreams involving water are often about mothers. Being stuck in the sea, engulfed by waves, often implies that you're smothered or dominated by your mother (according to certain books). I've read that paddling in an idyllic warm sea indicates an ideal relationship with your mother. Struggling against a tide or current suggests that you are gaining strength against a repressive relationship, most probably with respect to your mother. (These theories may not be psychologically valid, but they are interesting, nonetheless. I've begun reading academic dream researchers, like Jung and Siegel, to learn more.)

During the 13 years before she met me, Suzanne had been taking care of her mother. Her mother had been diagnosed with various cancers, mainly a voracious and pervasive skin cancer, and lived twice as long as expected. When I relayed what I'd learned from the COMPLETE BOOK OF DREAMS, Suzanne looked at this recurring nightmare in a different way. It was reassuring to her that the dream might not be about Frank, after all. Far more comforting if the dream was about her mother, a fearless and imperial personality, as opposed to an abusive boyfriend from 15 years ago who, on some level, if the dream had been about him, she'd been unable to shake. Moreover, Suzanne had always wanted her mother to visit her in her dreams. She mused that it would be just like her mother to choose severed body parts as a way to communicate.

Caring for her mother all those years, surrounded by her cancer, with no way out, no matter how many salves or drugs or herbal cures were tried, skin tearing off in her hands, rashes overtaking every inch, soars that wouldn't heal... "smothering mothers" hardly seemed necessary to explain the inescapable sea and its floating nausea. Every day for how long? No wonder she felt as if she'd been dropped into it without preparation and was never able to find land.

I liked the idea that the arrival of my optimism and energy into Suzanne's life had freed her from this recurring nightmare. More likely, it was this new interpretation. Or just talking about it with someone.

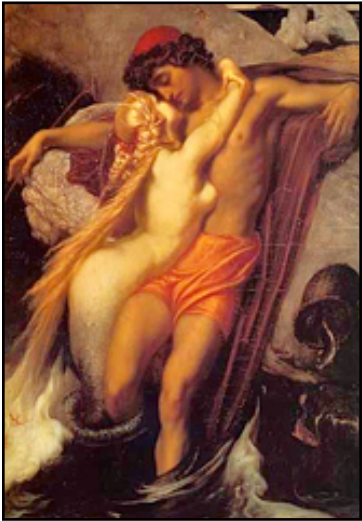
There's nothing like talking about it with someone.

That night, *I dreamed: **I am in a slow moving river, almost a lagoon, floating*** on a marvelous dark green leaf with curled fern edges, eavesdropping on a picnic through hanging moss and humidity. Something out of Tennessee Williams. A song is playing in my mind. The voice of Cassandra Wilson's contralto suspended over Judy Collin's metronome guitar, words sliding outside tempo, interdimensional. An unfurling of intimate thought. An unraveling of memory and hope.

I become a stranger to myself as I watch, someone without history, without an adhesive past. Someone entirely capable of being loved...

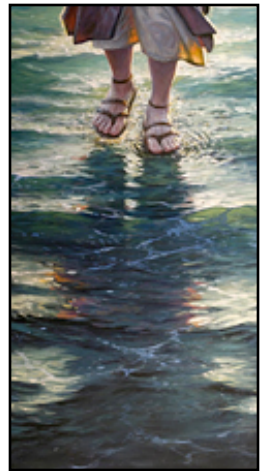
Suzanne takes you down to her place near the river
You can hear the boats go by
You can spend the night beside her
And you know that she's half crazy
But that's why you want to be there
And she feeds you tea and oranges
That come all the way from China





And just when you mean to tell her
 That you have no love to give her
 Then she gets you on her wavelength
 And she lets the river answer
 That you've always been her lover
 And you want to travel with her
 And you want to travel blind
 And you know that she will trust you
 For you've touched her perfect body with your mind.

And Jesus was a sailor
 When he walked upon the water
 And he spent a long time watching
 From his lonely wooden tower
 And when he knew for certain
 Only drowning men could see him
 He said "All men will be sailors then
 Until the sea shall free them"
 But he himself was broken
 Long before the sky would open
 Forsaken, almost human
 He sank beneath your wisdom like a stone
 And you want to travel with him
 And you want to travel blind
 And you think maybe you'll trust him
 For he's touched your perfect body with his mind.



Now Suzanne takes your hand
 And she leads you to the river
 She is wearing rags and feathers
 From Salvation Army counters
 And the sun pours down like honey
 On our lady of the harbor
 And she shows you where to look
 Among the garbage and the flowers
 There are heroes in the seaweed
 There are children in the morning
 They are leaning out for love
 And they will lean that way forever
 While Suzanne holds the mirror
 And you want to travel with her
 And you want to travel blind
 And you know that you can trust her
 For she's touched your perfect body with her mind.

- Leonard Cohen



The Siren
Sir Edward John Poynter

7. THE DREAM OF WALKING ON WATER

While Suzanne and I were discussing her dream of swimming among severed body parts (see previous chapter), she mentioned that she thought we were both old souls. Perhaps it was our current preoccupation with dreams...

Dreams let minds float outside time, beyond normal moral constraints and considerations, into places where consciously understood space and everyday definitions of “self” cannot apply themselves with the same sort of conviction (or necessity) that waking intuition embraces. In dreams, it’s easy to believe in past lives, since you can travel through time with ease, often without the power to stop. You view yourself without vertigo from out-of-body perspectives and never bat an eye at being in two places at once, or two beings at once.

Suzanne believes she has lived the same sort of life over and over as many different people, both men and women. Each time she is part of a servant class, often asked to cook, clean, waitress, make the required fuss over more privileged elites. (She’s never resentful, however, since she gleans a sense of inherent nobility in serving others and cannot envy the sense of sloth or false gravity so often displayed by royalty and extreme wealth.)

In meeting me, she said she’s broken her reincarnated purgatory of cyclic bondage. She thinks I was once royalty, but had the sense to transcend both privilege and servitude by achieving something akin to an artist’s/shaman’s independence. Her connection to me is the catalyst that is launching her new lives (in which she plans on meeting me at a much younger age than she did this time around).

You can see why I like her so much. It’s like being Siddhartha, Merlin, Leonardo da Vinci, Marco Polo and Christopher Columbus all rolled into one.



A page from *The Travels of Marco Polo* and two portraits

Portraits of four others...

During the first two years of our relationship, Suzanne often repeated that I was the most courageous person she knew. I think she was referring to what she perceived (through dream aided eyes) as my sense of self-containment and curiosity. (Curiosity often requires courage in order to become something more than momentary entertainment.) Perhaps it's not courage; rather, my capacity (innocence?) for being terrifyingly foolish, in the name of growth, which is, circuitously, how I met her in the first place (...moving away from first wife and family, spelunking through the Big City, exorcising demons, writing a musical about the Holocaust, and,

ultimately, answering an unsolicited email from an unknown Rowayton, Connecticut, woman who claimed to be 43 years old and loved to dance...)

Truly, her opinion makes me feel very good about myself. Indeed. However...

If anyone is courageous, it's she.

A bit of biographical information I didn't mention in the previous chapter, something that might be a big piece of the interpretation puzzle:

When Suzanne was 20 years old, she was brutally raped. I mean multi-guy, cut up and left for dead raped. If her severed body parts dream would have started closer to that time in her life, she would've attributed it to that incident, without hesitation. But it didn't and, anyway, she refused to let herself believe that any lasting negative consequences from that night would ever get the best of her.

She was on a beautiful island, St. Croix. One morning she awoke, believing she'd found utopia. She had lived there for a blissful six months, walking naked on beaches, befriending creative and new-minded travelers who'd come there from all corners of the globe, shedding worries and stress and other unwanted baggage from previous ruts and unfulfilled expectations. Enough time had passed to make her feel completely remade (or, at least, completely remake-able).

Later, at the end of that same day, while walking back from yet one more perfect late night party, filled with the kind of happy that comes only after sadness has lost all allure, the cruel irony of her early morning musing broke through. Two wonderful European guys were escorting her home, platonic mates making sure she got back safely to her A-frame hut just inside the jungle, on the poor side of the island. It was dark, nearly pitch black as the jungle began to engulf. The harsh lights of a pickup blinded them. Three machete-wielding men, dark-skinned islanders hell-bent on making some unsuspecting white person pay for a laundry list of pent up aggressions, perceived and misperceived insults, repressed failures and unfulfilled desires, every craving, every shame, came upon them, randomly, in an old pickup truck. The white-black politics of the day (1976) lent to certain people a license to destroy, indiscriminately.

Suzanne was thrown into the back of the truck. Alternately raped and threatened with death. Torn and abused. Left for dead on the side of the road.

Of course, there was more to it than that. One man kept brandishing his machete, swinging it to within an inch of her constrained arms, pulling it along her bare neck. Another had a gun he kept jamming against her skull, twisting his elbow in that sadistic way only junkies can duplicate. Suzanne stared back, said evenly (a little derisively) to the one with the gun, "If you're going to use it, then use it. Otherwise, put it down." She looked at them as she would at any coward. Eventually, the gun was lowered. The machete never left the other's hand. She said nothing more. She gave them nothing.

Many more things happened.

All the while, Suzanne's two friends pursued on motorcycles. It was a rugged road. They finally caught up with the pickup. The cyclists yelled and jeered. They threw things. They convinced the blacks they weren't going to go away. Suzanne was tossed over the side merely to make life easier. Simplify, discard.

"I'm alright," she said, on the ground, to her friends still on their bikes, engines growling to keep from stalling out. She couldn't feel a thing. "Go after them."

Before the motorcycle disappeared into the jungle night, Suzanne heard one of her friends call back, "Head for the light." He pointed up a wooded hill.

There was a single prick of light winking through the deep darkness. The only light visible for miles. She crawled through the vegetation. A small house on a long hillside. When she stood at the door, she was covered in layers of blood. Naked. A woman opened the door, wary. Suzanne didn't know what the woman saw first, her nakedness, her need, the blood, or that she was white, a danger. This woman, of course, was not. Her husband, perhaps all he saw was trouble. Hard to say. He covered Suzanne with his shirt and ushered her into the back room. The door was locked. Nothing was said until the police arrived. Suzanne understood why.

While she was waiting, she thought of nothing. Merely stared out the tiny window, looking for stars. She sat in the middle of the barren room and thought of nothing. Trying not to move. Trying not to aggravate any wounds, or even identify them. While in the back of the truck, she was certain she was going to die. It hadn't seemed that bad. She could see her father again. All the other dead. So many, really. It wouldn't have been that bad to die.

When she first told me her dream about floating among severed heads and scattered limbs, about swallowing blood and not being able to find a way out, I immediately thought of this incident. If she wasn't going to identify it as the reason, though, I wasn't going to either.

Nightmares are sometimes toxic, forcing us to relive past horrors.

They can also be *psychic vaccinations* that enable us to taste a bit of our fear and survive. Sometimes even to deal. We're forced to experience helplessness in a terrifying way. When we finally wake up, life's circumstances seem not so bad, not so surreal or hopeless or exposed. We end up being inoculated by the melodramatic overreach of our own nightmarish helplessness.

If you've lived through what Suzanne has, however, you may not need additional vaccinations. So we both agreed the dream was about her mother's cancer, Suzanne's years caring for her. A much more nourishing solution.

The day following her rape, she went to another party, walking through the crowd like an unblemished queen. Unless one found out through the grapevine where her cuts and bruises had come from, no one would know it had happened.

When the perpetrators were caught, she got a Sydney Poitier type lawyer, and prosecuted. They had to drag her from the court as she protested the defense's accusations that labeled her a spoiled white girl who'd come to the island for exactly this sort of "sexual fantasy with a black man." She sat on a swing in a playground across the street from the courthouse as the jury convicted the three men. When she was told, she might have cried.

Sometimes there are no winners.

Once, while idling at a stop light on the Post Road in Connecticut, she thought she saw two of the three men in the car next to us. 30 years later. Blanched, wordless, all thoughts again leached from her mind. It's never as far away as you want.

At least it's not in her dreams.

It never robbed her of self-confidence, of innocence, of wholeness, of being worthy of joy. She has her own bullet-proof tent around her soul.



You may wonder what all this has to do with my dream in which I walk on water. Well, the night she talked about past lives, about all the things she's lived and died through, about how she is certain, now, that her days of bondage are over, about how she always knew she'd find me, how she never doubted, I had this dream:

Merlyn is descending a curved stone staircase that's been cut into the side of a cliff. Over the edge of the cliff, behind him, just beyond sight, a fire rages, staining the sky, reflected like blood in the red water below.

I recognize the scene. It's from the opening act of my musical, MERLYN, a Celtic style personal-political tragedy I never completed: *Scene One - The Burning of the Books*, in which Roman soldiers ransack Merlyn's hidden sanctuary and destroy all written record of his life's work and thought. He barely escapes. Disguising himself as a statue in a dark alcove along a hallway, he waits for the soldiers to flood by before slipping down a secret stairway that leads to the sea.

The only problem is that, in my dream, no boat awaits. The staircase dead-ends into quietly lapping red-tinted water. If the soldiers discover the hidden passageway, and in time they surely must, Merlyn will be trapped.

This is a vibrant prime-of-life Merlyn, no more than 35 years old, not the long grey beard or wizened character of children's stories (or the panting on the left). He could be a prince, a Celtic warrior, a sorcerer-athlete. He doesn't know it yet, but he's about to age rapidly.



The Beguiling of Merlin
Edward Burne-Jones

What he doesn't know: he's been ratted out by his prized ingénue, *Nimue*, the pretty and clever apprentice (not to be confused with *The Lady of the Lake*, who, in my story, was Merlyn's contemporary, or *Morgan le Fay*, Arthur's half sister). To be fair, Nimue was forced to reveal the whereabouts of Merlyn's long-rumored hollow hill, betraying his deepest trust in order to save an enclave of holy novices held captive back at the *Lady of the Lake*'s hermitage. Nimue hoped Merlyn's mastery of the magic arts would be enough to save him, which, in the end, it was. And she'd hoped his insight and compassion would soon forgive her betrayal, which he did, although compassion and insight might not have been the reason why. She never imagined the Romans would burn everything. And she failed to foresee that after she confessed, all the novices, all the Holy Women who posed a threat to the advancing dark Age of the Roman Catholic Empire, would be slaughtered, regardless. Murdered. (If they were also raped, as was rumored, it's not a part of the official story, but it would always be a part of Nimue's shame.)

The only other living person who knew the location of Merlyn's sanctuary was The Lady of the Lake herself. Unlike Nimue, The Lady refused to reveal her knowledge and was thus the first to die. *Her* love for Merlyn could not be exchanged for any promise, any lie, any competing hope.

All this happens before Merlyn escapes to the water's edge, before the scene before me. (Having his Druid finger on the political pulse of world, as he did, Merlyn knew these events were more than probable, so he'd made certain preparations. In my play, one of his precautions was to moor a boat at the end of the stairs.) As I watch him search the empty water with an uncharacteristic sense of bewilderment, I have a fleeting sense *I have betrayed him*. Am I somehow like Nimue, responsible for there being no boat (even though I have no idea I am the Dreamer of the Dream)?

At this precise moment, *Merlyn ceases to be the character from my play*. The betrayer becomes the betrayed. He is me. Or, *I am he, dressed in robes and druid sandals*, with a thin strap of leather about my head holding my hair steady in the wind.

As I peer out over the vast boatless water, reflected flames supply the only illumination. A dark thin bridge begins to form in front of me. I furrow my brow, squinting slightly, trying to focus my vision. It's the shadow of something... something coming up from behind...

I turn. No soldiers. It's a towering yet graceful silhouette, towering because of the angle of light and cliff: The Lady of the Lake, casting a spell across the water.

Her shadow flows from the crest of the rocks. She stands as still as an empty cross, taller than humanly possible. In a chill, I fear she's too still, as still as death, yet the nobility of her form gives me no sense of danger or despair. Her shadow points the way.



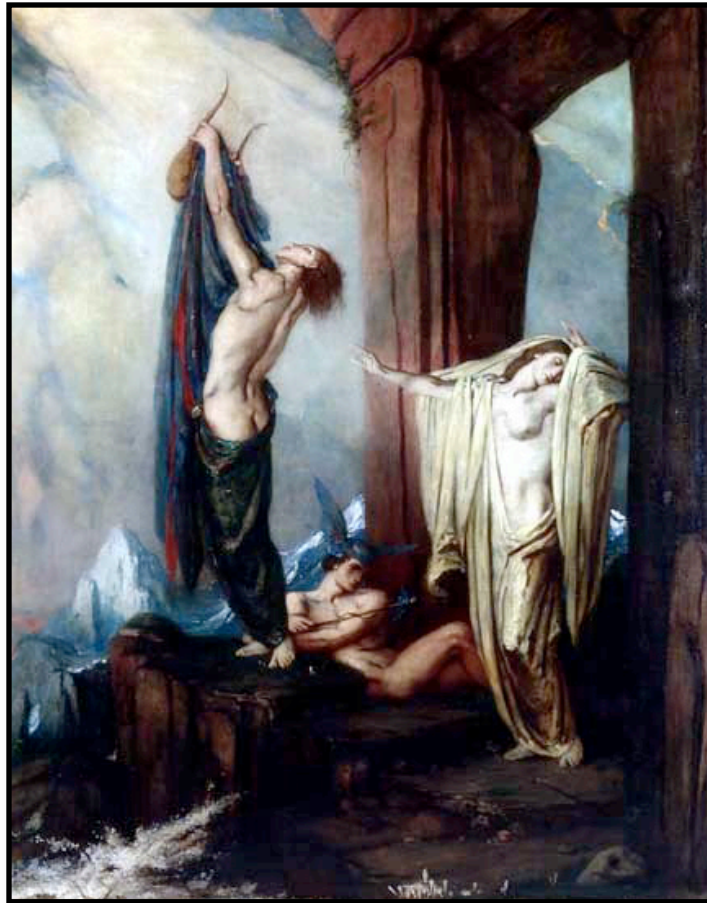
The Burning Man

My only avenue of escape is the water. Is her shadow an actual bridge?

Instinctively, I prick my wrist with the tip of a jeweled dagger, letting drops of blood mingle with the reflections at my feet. The darkness thickens around the drops. I step out, full of belief (or, perhaps, merely full of tragedy's sense of found home) onto the water. I don't sink. Or, more precisely, I sink less than half an inch, but that's all.

There, just below the surface, holding me aloft, are *a series of hands*, palms upturned, awaiting each footfall. Stepping stones. I know I must trust them. It's a trust I need to conjure, rely on; it isn't instinctual, like wielding my knife had been. I can't dwell on how hard it is to keep my balance or worry about the consequences of a misstep. Each time I need one, *another hand* appears, cupping the balls of my feet. Firm, unmoving, positioned just right to keep me safe.

If I hesitate, I fear the hands will disappear, leaving me stranded (or drowned). Yet I need to see her resolve. I turn my head, trying to keep my hips balanced and my knees forward. Orpheus wanting one last look. I know, somehow, that this is The Lady's final act, that she and I will never touch again as lovers, even though I, as of yet, have no direct knowledge of her murder. One last look, in gratitude, at least.



Orpheus and Eurydice

But she's no longer on the cliff.

Smoke from my burning books unfurls like a giant oak beneath the low reflective clouds. No shadow points my way. Like the first time when I came out of the subway after 9/11 and looked up to get my bearings, the sky was emptied of what had once been there. A rush of emotional vertigo.

I turn back, my momentum slowed. I need to be more careful, more cautious. Before I try another step, my heel gingerly hovering, my toe testing the surface like a bather, I notice something different in the water. Where a shadow once fell, there is a woman, a nymph, face upturned, needing no breath. Not the Lady of the Lake. She's as translucent as the water, glowing slightly, a moon behind swirling fog. Her eyes are wide, unblinking, caught between the worlds of the living and the dead, focused, at this moment, entirely on me. Transfixed, I stop progressing from the shoreline (as I know I must), even as I know the hands, my magical stepping stones, if they are still there at all, are sinking into their Atlantean grave, one by one.



Ophelia

John Everett Millais

In her eyes is an intense grief. As if she were trapped inside a mirror. I think for a moment that she's grieving for me, for my drowning that now seems inevitable. But I don't sink any further. (Nor do I move a muscle.) The last flares of my burning books reflect over her porcelain skin. Perhaps she grieves for them, the lost sum of my life curling into ash. Or perhaps it is simple pity for a stranger who happened upon her in the dark, whose fascination for her beauty made him dally too long. One more man to slip, unheard, beneath the unforgiving surface.

Reasons no longer matter.

I want her body to be The Lady's, but it isn't. Naked, young, purity of youth, the egg shell starlight of death. Maybe she is Nimue, the ingénue, a blonde version of Stephanie. But no. She isn't even that, my soulmate imagined. She is even more a figment. More a reincarnation of Toni, the moment when she was 15 (and I was 11) and we were laughing, doing goofy calisthenics with each other in the family room, and her sweatshirt billowing up in front of her face, exposing her breasts. After she pulled her shirt taut she looked at me with frightened eyes and asked if I'd seen anything and I said no, lying, not wanting anything like changing bodies to change us, the real Us. Maybe it is her, finally unable to stop the change that comes between like the rising of a bridge.

No. Not any of these. Something deeper. Farther below the surface.

Maybe it's me, I think, a metaphorical reflection. But, no, the eyes are not mine. What could explain the common grief we're experiencing, the locked gaze?



Nymphs Finding the Head of Orpheus
John Waterhouse

An idea opens like a palm onto my chest.

Does she want me to slide beneath the waves with her? No, I can tell from the movement of her eyebrows that is not it. That's not what either of us wants. Maybe I'm to step on her stomach, to ride her like a shell on the belly of an otter, away from here?

This is when I am certain the dream is no longer part of my Merlyn play, no longer part of a Merlyn story, no longer asking for outside context to find meaning or structure.

My robes are suddenly replaced with modern clothing. ***I become myself***, completely.

That I should be more myself, perhaps that is what she wanted, what she'd been grieving. (Aspects of self I'd lost).

Her gaze softens and, for the first time since appearing, she looks away. Toward where I need to walk.

My mind has trouble making sense of anything, remembering anything, planning anything. I try to think of something from the books that have been burned. I can't remember a word, think of a title, recall a concept. My forgetfulness seems a betrayal of my life's work, my forgotten potential. It is the most powerful emotion experienced in this highly charged dream.



Yet, I still feel the opened palm on my chest, inside my chest, like a power. A fullness. Something able to keep me afloat.

Although she doesn't beckon, doesn't lean from the waves, doesn't wink or nod, I know I can step forward, that I won't sink. Tentatively, I begin. The sea is no longer threatening.

I can walk on water. I can walk on uncertainty, on the deepest darkness, on the ashes of loss, on grief itself. Before I realize it, I'm picking up speed.



I'm so filled with courage, I am unaware of it.

As I skim over the surface, almost like a windsurfer, I wonder if Christ had seen a vision, had first found hands beneath the waves, had waited for a voice, had lost all thoughts of what he'd accomplished just before his destitute spirit quieted the waters. I imagine him staying out there a while, skating along the surface for the sheer joy of it. Hearing music. I'm sure he must've heard music.

I heard Suzanne preparing our morning chai in the kitchen below. I was awake. The tea kettle whistled like The Distant Siren. I cherished the myths we were weaving with our yarn of life/ memory/dreams. The tea kettle whistle withered into nothing, thankfully removed from the heat. I was already imagining the taste of the chai.

For some reason, at that moment, I realized Suzanne had, indeed, been in my dream. But not as The Lady of The Lake, as my dreamself had believed. (Well, she could've been, but that was beside the point that was coming clear to me while I sat up further in our bed.) As she appeared at the bedroom door, steam twirling lazily from the coffee cup in her hand, without a doubt... she had been *those hands*. The ones that had held me aloft.

She's the only person I know who would hide herself beneath the surface, holding her breath without fear of drowning, and offer her palms up like that. Then slip away when no longer needed. Wanting only my safety, until I found my own balance, my own magic, when I recalled again how to create my own miracle.

She has that kind of courage.

Another chapter in the Myth of Us.

Oh, and one more thing I love: How, when we discover these revelations of dream and layered life, they integrate seamlessly into the fabric of the day, each wide awake day we share. That's the best magic.



The Siren by John William Waterhouse

BAD DREAMS ARE GOOD

lyrics by Joni Mitchell

The cats are in the flower beds
A red hawk rides the sky
I guess I should be happy
Just to be alive...

...In the dark
A shining ray
I heard a three-year-old boy say
Bad Dreams are good
In the Great Plan

