

## How to Make Magic: Writing the Dream Poem

### Exploring the Dream Source

One morning I awoke after dreaming of an overheard conversation between two men. One of the men, a learned anthropologist, said that he believed that humans originally had two heads; however, one of them had over time become enslaved. The anthropologist had evidence which supported the theory in the form of an iron slave collar which had been placed around the second head's neck. This, he went on, eventually caused the neck to wither and die; thereby, leaving only the remaining first head in place. The first head initially had difficulty adjusting to the loss of its twin and sometimes without meaning to would turn to kiss the missing head. Then suddenly, as it caught itself in this futile gesture of affection, it would jerk itself awake. The anthropologist went on to say that this is why even today as the body begins to fall asleep, it will often jerk itself awake.

After I awoke from this dream, I wrote down as much as I could remember. It was, indeed, strange and not something which I could find any trigger for in my waking life. Yet, I was fascinated by the strangeness of the dream conversation and, as a working poet at the time, decided to retell the dream in a short poem—a form which I thought particularly suited to capturing its evocative power.

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### The Face We Cannot See

Man first had two heads,  
but he was unable to reason with himself.  
So, around his second neck  
he placed an iron collar --something  
he could control  
and believe in, yet,  
as he grew it cut its throat.  
The second head suffocated  
and withered on its stem.

Sometimes we still turn to kiss  
this face we cannot see;  
touching only air,  
we jerk awake.

As I continued to explore the nature of dreams, I started keeping a dream journal and began working with dreams in different ways. I realized that the more attention I paid to dreams, the more of them I could recall upon waking. As Greg Orr writes in his poem,

"Washing My Face":

Last night's dreams  
disappear.  
They are like the  
sink draining:  
a transparent rose  
swallowed by its  
stem.

Too often, we forget our dreams. We do not remember their particularity unless they are extraordinarily vivid or somehow because of their timing in our lives, significant.

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Yet, as Carl Jung writes: "The two fundamental points in dealing with dreams are these: First, the dream should always be treated as a fact, about which one must make no previous assumption except that it somehow makes sense; and second, the dream is a specific expression of the unconscious." (Jung, 32)

Since dreams do delve into the inner complexes of the unconscious, it is imperative that writers explore them both for self understanding and because they provide a ready source for poetry. The dream can provide us with a way to understand ourselves on both a personal and transpersonal level. Traditionally, writers, artists and scientists have used dreams as sources for their creative work. Coleridge wrote his famous *Kubla Khan* as simply a retelling of a dream; and, Robert Louis Stevenson spent years looking for a way to discuss his belief in man's double nature only to have the plot of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* revealed to him in a dream; Kekule, a 19th century German chemist, discovered the formation of the benzene ring based on his dream of a snake biting its tail (Jung, 38); and film director, Ingmar Bergman, often has based his films on dreams. Ira Progoff writes: "The film which began as Bergman's dream becomes, even if fleetingly, the dream of the audience and in that moment when it has become the audience's dream, it opens access to the entire dream level of the psyche for each receptive person in the audience." (1979 Taped Interview) This transpersonal element of the dream, becomes for the artist, a source of inspiration, a place to begin both the healing exploration of self and, in

the process, to engage the receptive reader on a deeper level as well.

### **Collecting the Dream**

As I began to explore the nature of dreaming through various books and articles, I also began the process of maintaining a dream journal, a practice instrumental in the writing of dream poems. The journal provides a forum for the dream: a place to record it, explore it, and expand it. As Ann Faraday writes:

Dreams are fragile, and the brain appears to be in no condition to lay down memory traces when in the sleeping or semi-sleeping state. This is why the dreams we sleep through, or forget on walking, are usually gone forever. The only sure way to catch a dream for future reference is to write it down or

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tape it immediately on waking, before it starts to fade. (39)

In time I developed the following procedure: as soon as I would wake from a dream, I would write as much of what happened as quickly as possible. I would try to capture as many details from the essential experience as possible, particularly, actions, settings and clear descriptions of characters. In addition, I would record feelings I had or clothing and colors I could recall (Yes, I believe we all dream in color!). Later, I would read over the entry and include any associations or dream facts which I might have not initially mentioned. The notes I took just after waking helped trigger more details as I reviewed the dream. This process

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of keeping the journal does two things: it collects the dream details are the raw material for the poem; and secondly, it validates the unconscious and, by doing so, helps the dreamer remember more dream material in the future. Often people who say that they do not dream or cannot remember dreams have not turned attention to their unconscious. Again as Ann Faraday writes:

The bulk of the evidence, however, suggests that nonrecallers are decidedly reluctant to remember their dreams, just as they tend to avoid or deny unpleasant experiences and anxieties in everyday life. In fact, nonrecallers have been shown by means of psychological tests to be more inhibited, more conformist, and more self-controlled on the whole than recallers, who tend to be more overtly anxious about life and more willing to admit common emotional disturbances, such as anxiety and insecurity. The willingness to confront this dimension of experience --some have called it self-awareness which manifests a close interest in the inner, subjective side of life, is probably the crucial difference between recallers and nonrecallers. (52)

What is significant is that by consciously recalling and working with dreams, the dreamer is able to become more aware of unconscious material. The more one tries to recall dreams, the easier it becomes to remember them.

The journal also becomes the basis for exploration and elaboration. It becomes a place to record the dreams over time and, by doing so, to maintain a record of what has come before. By having such a record, the dreamer can explore the themes which emerge over time and see if there exists a thematic pattern.

Finally, the dream journal is the source for the poem. It provides the raw material which can later be elaborated into a poem, a play or a story. The following journal entry became the basis for the poem, *What It's Like to Die*.

Dream: I get up and go into the bathroom. Coughing up thick patches of black pitch and blood. I know that I'm going to die. This is what men are made of. I look in the mirror. I crawl out the bathroom window. There is a flat roof covered with snow. I lie on my back and look up at the sky. I don't feel the snow; it's warm. So this is what it's like to die.

The poem is simply a retelling of the dream event and is simply one distillation of the initial dream experience. At the time, I was struck by the apparent matter of fact tone of the dream itself and the ease in which death came. By writing the dream as an lyrical poem, I both elaborate the it with the opening metaphor and distill the essential elements of the experience.

#### What It's Like to Die

The night dawns--  
a fish stirring  
the mud  
with its tail.

Staring  
in the bathroom mirror,  
I cough up thick  
pitch and blood

then crawl out  
the window,  
feeling on my back  
warm snow.

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## The Poetic Interpretation of Dreams: The Art of Making Magic

Writing a poem from a dream is essentially an interpretive act. Unlike analytic interpretations that often divest the dream of its mysteriousness, a poetic interpretation retains that original strangeness and, at times, may actually deepen it. It is inherently more Jungian than Freudian. For Jung, the evocative power of a dream has more to do with its transpersonal picture of the whole psyche than it does with censored personal secrets. Instead of being analyzed, Jung believes that dreams should be amplified or expanded. This process happens naturally when the dreamer turns the dream into a poem or performs it as a play. It is this amplification which lies at the heart of the dream work. Whether it is role playing dreams or amplifying a central dream symbol into a poem, the practice of transforming a dream into a creative product keeps the distinctive integrity of the dream alive while allowing for a poetic interpretation of the event. It is one method of treating the dream as reality.

### Exploring the Dream: Shifting Points of View

Playing is one method of coming to terms with who we are and of working with the ambiguity inherent in creative process. The old maxim: "Families who play together, stay together" is true of the psyche as well or as the poet, Richard Hugo, writes: "You owe reality nothing and the truth about your feelings everything."<sup>(6)</sup> By exploring different aspects of the dream, one can better understand its significance.

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When I first began writing dream poems, I simply retold the dream by eliminating what was redundant or less important and expanding what remained with metaphors and similes. I soon discovered that for the purpose of keeping the poem alive; I had

to do more than simply retell the experience, I could, in fact, add amplifying situations from my life. Since the dream is an unconscious prod-

uct, it naturally suggests specific memories from the dreamer's life. By relocating the association in the writer's autobiography, the significance and mystery of the dream situation deepens. In the poem, *Father*, I expanded the dream scenario by adding the third section which stemmed from a memory I had of my father waking in the morning and leaving for work.

#### Father

1

It is cancer my father,  
you might not live  
till my wedding.  
Under the porch  
in coarse weeds,  
I search for the blue snake.  
A man with a Nikkon  
and thin fingers leans  
on his parked car--  
flipping ashes,  
he's oblivious  
to the hornet  
circling his legs.

2

I walk through  
marsh grass  
over tree stumps  
and a log covered  
with moss.

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I try to kiss an alligator,  
hissing, her white jaws  
a pocket of snow.  
In one dark pool,  
diamond-shaped creatures  
stare at me.  
I grab one  
with both hands and  
turn it over--  
it is my father's lung.

3

It is early,  
the heating pipes  
thump  
in the gray light.  
Up at 6:30  
eating cereal in the dark,  
the clink of the teaspoon  
in the cup,  
the smoke curling  
from his lip--  
the squeak of shoe leather  
and smell of Old Spice  
as the front door quietly clicks,  
he is gone.

This last section of the poem provides a counterpoint to the two previous sections which are retelling the dream. Yet, each section echo's the missing father motif: loss by death and loss by departure. Though in this dream poem, the nondreaming event is contained in a separate section, I do not always separate the dream material from the memory associations quite so starkly. In fact, in more recent poems which use dreams or dream elements, I may integrate a dream image into the poem in a more subtle manner intent, rather, on maintaining the integrity of the memory alive rather than the dream. In such a case, the dream's elements may be utilized to echo a life image or even suggest a different dream altogether. By working from different dreams

which might have recurrent elements, the dreamer may need a thread to connect these disparate elements together. This, can best be addressed by providing the poem with a specific viewpoint. Maintaining a specific perspective throughout each dream or memory association, helps the reader have a point of reference for access into the different situations.

This method of exploring the dream from a viewpoint, came to me from reading *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*. Fritz Perls would often use dreams as vehicles for therapy by having the dreamer first retell the dream and then to tell it from different perspectives in the dream. By doing so, Perls would often watch for conflicting voices to emerge and would then have the dreamer role play these conversations until the dialogue revealed the essence of the conflict.

Though the dream poem is not simply a vehicle for therapy, this technique is a valuable method for working with dream material. Though speaking in first person has some limitations (it limits the focus of the experience, other information may have to be eliminated in order to maintain a viable character), the first person point of view is extremely powerful. It has a sense of authority lacking in the distance inherent in third person, and a strong sense of immediacy. Often this first person point of view echoes Beowulf's heroic boast or Whitman's cosmic first person in "Song of Myself."

The following poem is based on the first person point of view. Ironically, it was not until I had reached the last two lines that I realized who the pig represented in my own psych and in my family as well. It is these little revelations which make the writing of the dream poem personally significant.

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Pig Piece

Blunt nose, woman hog,  
guardian of the basement,  
I grunt rooting through  
what's come before.

My speckled back, baby skin  
bunched around my bones,  
I trowel up skulls like truffles.

Squalid, squat squint-eyed,  
I thrive in the dark  
swallowing my children  
with love.

I borrowed another approach to the dream from the poet Richard Hugo who captured the essence of the dream experience by shifting it to a 2nd person point of view. This, of course, re-directs the focus of the piece and the unfolding of events appears as if it is happening to the reader, herself. In *31 Letters and 13 Dreams*, Hugo uses an approach which captures the quick relocation of events inherent in dreaming and maintains control over point of view by writing in second person. The poem, "In Your Young Dream," begins by locating the speaker at a basketball practice in high school, "You are traveling to play basketball." However, like in a sleep dream the narrative shifts because of a need the speaker has to have nets on the hoops, the speaker tells the coach, "We need nets on the hoops." However, when the speaker and another player leave to buy nets, he end up in a motel room with a woman he once loved who is surrounded by children, and suddenly, the speaker realizes, "you know you are

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old. You are troubled. You know you need nets on the rim."

Notice how Hugo moves through time in the poem. Each shift in time or relocation is believable because of the second person view-point and because (as the title tells us) it is a dream. In addition, the second person point of view engages the reader. In this poem, it is almost as if we are the "you" of the poem. It is strangely familiar.

Dreams which have dialogue or those which have a strong narrative line lend themselves to a third person retelling. Since third person point of view distances the event from the reader and the dreamer. Dream material which might be too sensitive to relate in first person can often be written if psychic distance can be maintained; consequently, the third person point of view does just that by establishing an objective view of the dream. In addition, this view often provides a context for the speaking of different dream characters. In the following poem, *Worm Rings*, the conflict in the situation is heightened by the disparity between the two characters:

Worm Rings

A young girl in a black dress  
enters the room with two pictures of  
her father;  
she gives them to the gray-haired man  
rocking by the window.  
Wearing a white suit, he lifts them to-  
wards the light.  
"But these are only lips where is your  
father?"

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His gray eyes study her face still hidden  
in the room's afternoon shadows.  
She does not answer.  
Puzzled, he stares at the pictures  
until the lips become worm rings  
moving across the page.  
As he lifts them to his ear,  
he hears whispers as if from the sea:  
"I could never kiss my little girl.  
I could never trust her lips. I drew  
her close to me and made of her lips a  
zipper,  
so she could never harm me."  
As he looks across the darkened room,  
he notices the glint of silver at the  
corner  
of her mouth and knows she will take  
these pictures to other men.

The strangeness of the dream is recreated through several devices: the story line itself is out of the ordinary and there are few concrete details to help orient the reader. The room is not described nor are the details of the characters discussed. Consequently, the dream focuses primarily on the action of the two characters and the transformation of the lips. The emphasis is on the narrative plot rather than on the thoughts and feelings of the characters. A third person point of view is a useful method for working with such a dream.

Making magic is how dreams can benefit us. It is this magic of the self, the transformative power of working the dream into an art form which is important here. This process of turning dreams into poems is one of the myriad ways in which this can be accomplished. Yet, it is unique in that

it provides the student, the writer, or the dreamer with an avenue into the depth regions of the psyche in a way which pushes the limits of the imagination, a way which opens the door to that magical space within us. In a culture which prefers reason over imagination, logic over non-logic, and rational understanding over a sense of mystery, the dream poem moves us closer to that intuitive nature of ourselves and helps us to establish a sense of wonder and mystery. Jung writes: "We have stripped all things of their mystery and numinosity; nothing is holy any longer (94)." Perhaps, by moving into this other world, we can rediscover through the mystery of the dream and the serious work of the imagination that sense of wonder so often challenged in our daily lives.

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