

light reading series

featherproof 



Jay Ponteri

IN THE DREAM,

I sleep in the basement bedroom my daughter Lydia sleeps in. Our house slopes down an incline so that the basement opens out into the backyard, its mossy woods blanketed in morning fog. Perched houses climb up the Berkeley Hills. They are like giant, steep steps; one must take them slowly. Leaves and needles, tree boughs, and bark saturated with dew—everything glimmers. It's as if I were a child again, left alone in my bedroom.

In the dream, I do not feel the pain in my hipbones, stripped of their cartilage, scraping together, an incessant collision. I cannot feel the tangled arthritic vines wrapping around my knuckles and wrists, the vice grip clenching my heart. I pull in a breath of chilly air without pain. I can smell the fir needles and damp mud, the cherry blossoms and pitosporum. I exhale, without slipping into an extended, throat-wrenching, emphysemic coughing fit. No glass on the nightstand in which to spit gummy, green mucus. My hands do not tremble, my mouth does not taste like soggy bread and coffee and cigarettes. I am not ugly. My skin is smooth, tanned. In the dream, someone raps on the sliding glass door. I sit up. I see the moonlit stucco walls, the deep pile carpet, a stack of record albums, a pile of clothes, recently stretched canvases. The knocking continues, the noise ricocheting off the walls. I realize I need to let this person in, that staying frozen in bed is akin to death, skin decomposing over frail bone. I walk across the room, pull back the curtains.

Seven obese men wearing long black trench coats brandish steel pipes. Some wear brass knuckles.

The first few times I have this dream I wake up screaming into the empty space of our pitch-dark bedroom. My wife, Tonia, she's the mythic California girl—stunningly blond, her face with its small features. She's quietly emotive, careful about the gestures she chooses. She tells me this scream is the worst sound she has ever heard. She describes it as the sound of an animal suffering the pain that precedes death. She says it's muffled as if there were a pillow on my face. She pushes the hair away from her consoling eyes and takes hold of my left arm the way a guide leads the blind. She is so kind. Her marvelous long fingers breeze through the hair on my arms. Later that morning, at the breakfast table, Lydia, a 17-year-old version of her mother—a young Julie Christie—suggests that if the dream recurs, I attempt to stay in its horrifying fold to I find out what the obese men want.

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In or go with them if they want me to follow, and the first man screams every direction—in their endless line. I slide open the door to let them

The obese men stand slovenly—hips slouching, flat, fat feet pointed in for an open seat," I said, "And they're very patient."

I wake up screaming, and Tonia shushes me gingerly, wraps her arms smack the ground.

Like the onset of a headache, deep in the temples, as if a blood vessel my skull has been severed—that is how the dream hurts. I feel the dread of a child, the worst kind of dread because it is purely emotional, cannot be tempered by reason. This is a story of the body. I pull back the curtains and see the seven obese men in black trench coats brandishing steel pipes, wearing brass knuckles. They stand in a line. Their faces are pasty, slick and pockmarked with red welts. They wear urine-yellow mustaches over their thick pink lips. A colleague of mine believes you can die in your dreams, if you begin falling and you don't wake up out of terror, you can actually

I'm an old man, 73, fumbling through the year of my death. I am certain of this, certain that the shoddy mechanics in my heart will implode, and my brain, without any oxygen, will close the eye of my consciousness.

inarticulate words, foreign words, high-pitched, piercing, constant. I awake, screaming myself. That day, I hobble from my studio to my attorney's office to put the finishing touches on a will, to pay for everything, to make the arrangements so Tonia and Lydia don't have to. To ensure the casket lid remains shut. Nobody will see. I limp along Shattuck, crossing University. Spilling out of doorways are homeless, transients, nomads. They are lost souls, cocooned inside torn sleeping bags and blankets. They are body bags. My heart wrenches as pain shards ride my veins from elbow to wrist.

I can no longer smell the putrid body odor of the homeless, the curry from the Indian restaurant or the Costa Rican coffee beans in the coffee shop, the cloud of marijuana smoke pluming from a group of dirty kids dressed in tattered clothes who beg for money. Lydia calls them trustafarians. She says they don't need money, that their panhandling is a *lifestyle choice*. Is death that much closer to the young? Why do the young choose to live as ghosts? I cannot smell the oils, varnish and glue with which I make paintings, and the mineral spirits with which I clean brushes. I have asked my attorney to lay my brushes and paint rags and easel, charcoal, oils and acrylics, an unstretched canvas, a piece of lumber, my Plexiglas palette, chalk pastels and pencils—lay all of this stuff across my body before I am cremated. There was Jan Hus, the great Czech radical who, in 1968, immolated himself in Wenceslas Square in the name of political freedom. Imagine pouring gasoline over your clothes, swiping a match across its frictive strip, your skin igniting. Imagine hearing flames lick away your body.

Did Jan Hus feel loved at the moment the match tip ignited? My wife and daughter love me, not passionately, but the way one loves an elderly man, a recluse—kindly, with loyalty and pity. They embrace me, they ask me about my work, they cook for me, they urge me to visit a doctor. Stepping off a curb into the crosswalk, my hipbone hops on itself. The pain is familiar, accessible, a razor tunneling up from within, piercing the skin like a swimmer breaking through the water's surface and gasping for air. I'm alive with this pain. On Shattuck, among the cafes and designer eye-frame shops, outside Chez Panisse and Black Oak Books, among new, used, rare, and out of print, across from vitamin stores and massage studios, the young folks of Berkeley—dressed impeccably in pressed suits, slim blouses and skirts, black leather coats, brushed suede—wander lazily. They talk on cell phones as if they were making arrangements with God to live eternally.

Almos, I think, our bracelets jangling on our tiny wrists.

left legs and arms. Right. Left. Not perfect, but almost.

I don't care that we have passed the park some time ago, I don't care who Scottie is, I don't care that Carrie Zilmer and I are not kissing or wrestling—because we are running together, because we are wearing each

Only the two of us, and I beg that those downy moments will slow, find it. You see, love is fleeing, and if I hide it away, it will hold.

No, she says, we need to pick up Scottie.

No, it's this way, I say. I thought we were going to the park.

away from Neary.

This is Carrie Zilmer, my girlfriend. We are going steady and have agreed to speak out of our houses and head to Neary Lagoon. The year is 1943.

They laugh without inhibition, at just the right moment. They are a gaggle of bare shoulders, arms, legs, thighs, ankles, sandaled feet—flying through oppressively golden-lit skies. The sun inflames the psoriasis on my arms. I stop outside a perfume shop and try to smell the fragrance. I fixate on my raspy breathing, a blade bobbing against the lining of my throat. A man stops, asks me if I need assistance. What my face must look like to him—its pallid skin, sunken pupils, bulbous raspberry nose. It is a ghostly sight.

The next time, I withstand the scream by closing my eyes to it, gritting my teeth. The noise is shrill, it floods over me. It flays my skin, rattles my organs. My penis recedes inside itself, tiny hairs from my beard fall to the floor, the balls of my feet arc upwards. This, I think to myself, is what it feels like to die inside a dream. A chorus of obese, trench-coated men scream. The pain is my imagining the sorrow crushing Tonia and Lydia's faces as my body is cremated.

The first obese man tips across the threshold into the room, the noise halts, the other obese men disappear. Where are they? I am staring into an empty space. Like a patch of soggy earth discovered underneath an embedded rock.

Where have the others gone? I ask.

They disappeared back inside of you. This is a dream, you know. They were you. I am you, and you are late. The obese man speaks in a hoarse voice. We're supposed to meet at Neary Lagoon. Look outside, at the darkness, it's almost dawn.

I peer at the cobalt blue sky spread across a web of black branches.

I turn back to him. In his place stands a girl, maybe 13 years old, long chestnut-brown hair, an oval-shaped face with small chiseled features, her eyes brown dots, her thin lips the color of salmon meat. She smells like rain. My first thought is that she is a friend of Lydia's, but she is too young.

I can't believe you fell asleep, she says, Are we still cruising to Neary?

Where are we going?

Neary Lagoon, silly.

She stares at me in a dogged way, as if I were still asleep. I look at my wrist. It is thin, without hair or wrinkles or flakes of dried skin and I see a pin of light winking off a silver chain bracelet, one she has given me. A thinner bracelet circles her wrist, it gleams faintly: *Wade*.

Outside, she says.