



NIGHT TERRORS

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by Isabelle Albuquerque

T H E R E were a few nights while I was growing up when I would get out of bed as if possessed, unable to keep my body or my mind still, dashing restlessly through the house with a madness coursing in me. My parents could not calm me. I remember a few times my mother would come and read to me from my favorite books, stories and descriptions of wonderful machines. But my mind refused to cling to them and I would break away, stand up and pace around the room as if moving could take my away from my own self. The words would brush away irrelevantly, empty of any pertinence. I was in a different universe than them, and I could think about nothing but that

universe itself. Its presence was the only recognizable presence and it terrified me. And then after maybe half an hour I would understand my mother's voice again and fall back to sleep.

The content of the dreams would change, though there was never any question when it was occurring. Once I heard the voice of Queen Elizabeth I asking for me perform unfathomable accounting tasks for her empire. Another time I was running from a giant boulder. What distinguishes these from the whole rest of life is the sensation of their scale — being aware of a tremendous space all around, like the inside of a cathedral or a hollow sphere the size of the earth. Every detail of the place is forced on my mind, every feeling, smell, touch,

and every voice, vividly and simultaneously. Each overflows in importance, the shimmering divinities of incarnation and it feels as if the universe will stop the moment I turn away from even the tiniest thing. Yet I want nothing more than to be able to. The task feels impossible, packed into my tiny mind that cannot absorb so much, cannot attend to so much, a whole universe each instant bound up to me by notice and responsibility.

I sometimes still nearly stumble into that place, the familiar sensation of space that haunted me those few nights. It is an impossible feeling to forget. Now, though, it comes not out from sleep but far more mildly, as I lie in my bed waiting for sleep to come. It eases in pleasantly and finally goes away just

the same. Perhaps the cause is the lapse of a thing in my brain, or perhaps I am being granted an extraordinary vision. I have come to welcome these unmistakable echoes of a different universe from childhood. A bit of personal mythology has sprouted around them, that somehow this infinite place is my true home, where I will someday be welcomed when I die or discover the truth of what I am. So I take it as a gift. But in full force those several times as a child, this place made me wild, ready to tear clear out from my skin for air.

What strikes me about the sensation of these moments, what makes them feel so pure as to be holy for me, is the blunt impossibility of their attention. My senses feel cast toward everything at

once, a scale forced upon them that they cannot possibly measure. The terror I felt as a child stems from a feeling of violation by the knowledge of everything upon my mind, which is unable to integrate it intelligibly. Thus I was made to know the limits of my mind with excruciating acuteness.

In this, however, there is a sense of simplicity, a constancy. The world I experience in that place is not a varying one, always shifting in scale. No matter what actual events seem to be occurring in the dream, it is not them but the place that is ultimately important, the sensation of sensing itself. Though the experience may feel impossible, attention to it and the thing itself do not feel separate. To have exactly all things in their tiniest details

pressing upon one's attention means a fundamentally unchanging state despite changes within the circumstances of things, the fact of *all* cannot change. What is perceived, therefore, becomes just as constant as the self of the observer. There is no variability of scale in my mind's eye to contrast with the scale of self. If they move, the move is imperceptible because they move together. Immensity joins the self as the self-evident, the *res cogitans*, and we merge together as the foundation of our logic. What sublimity I feel know when the place comes back comes from this simplicity. Aristotle's logic, too, found the aesthetic of divinity to be a kind of thought in which the thinker is unified with what is thought. "Divine thought thinks," he

concludes, “and its thinking is a thinking on thinking.”

Certainly I claim for my little dream-place no divinity in itself. Like all human images of the gods, mine falls profoundly short of the infinite because it is intelligible. It fits into my finite categories quite well enough for me to remember the sensations it brought as well as any experience. On a material scale, I can see no reason why these dreams are different from other sorts of human life, no evidence or need for a irreducibly miraculous dimension. It is enough for my purposes to define the miracle along the circuitous route offered by Wittgenstein “it is the experience of seeing the world as a miracle.” I will not contend that my dreams cannot be unpacked by the scales of

neuroscience or the like, explained by natural forces and put to bed, as it were. But I nevertheless will cling to the significance of what they point to and what they suggest, the concepts and categories they might lead me to discover, even at the risk of being misled. A human concept of the divine, and indeed of all scales beyond ourselves, can only be a signifier within the human scale, an inhabitant of intelligible categories that are incompatible with the signified.

In this case, it is precisely this claim about intelligibility that is the signified. In my terror at the sensation of everything I am inspired to draw a line and erect a category around what I interpret to be admissible and inadmissible. What this happens to be, I believe,

is the difference between my own human scale as determined by the sense organs of my body and the nervous system connected to my brain, the physical *res cogitans*, and all else, which can only be bearable and intelligible as *res extensa*, signified extensions of the self. But it is also a dream of what else might be. In its milder form as I experience it from time to time nowadays, the place signifies a trace sensation of what divinity might experientially be, a reminder to be attentive to its presence, to keep that category and prejudice available. I may take this to be a miracle because it is a moment of enlightenment, the opening of a new category to my consciousness. As the introduction of something completely new, the dream is no less

than revelation, the discovery of a possibility. But no miracle stays a miracle for long, provided it is accepted and integrated. Then it simply joins the company of collected determining facts about the universe.

The category of mind that I call imagination, that which is capable of interpreting scales beyond the human scale on the ground, cannot operate independently of what can be made intelligible to the more-or-less static self. It is limited by what can be placed in the categories of the mind and what new categories can be created out of previous ones. A dexterity of scale, though it may appear to lead to ceaseless relativism of all sorts, does not entail the destruction of self and divine and absolute. But the truth and

importance of these things depends on the real finiteness of what people are. Imaginative signifiers (interpretations) should not be mistaken for the signified (scales of phenomena). Any interpreted instance of relative systems is still grounded in the absolute of the human scale to which it is intelligible, and for which it is a tool.

As a tool, scale through imagination is unquestionably powerful. Variability of scale in material science and temporal projection comes in a great deal of handy. It is because of the existence and use of these tools that this entire discussion has meaning, that the categories that define it can be established. Through scales of relationship, meaning is

communicated and the self is established. The discovery of further scales among ideas makes possible reconciliation and its avatar among people, forgiveness. By spiritual practice, these skills of dexterity can be honed and perfected against the suffering caused by the phenomenon of conflict. In the imagination of the foreign and other, the self is able to discover its notion of *home*.

The dream-place feels like home because it reminds me of something so deeply intrinsic to myself, marking the borders and the lines of the self-place. Against the illusions of interpretation and imagination, which can make a person feel like many things other than simply a person, my vivid childhood terror assures me of the immovability of

this certain class of human bondage. When that world finally passed, held tightly by my mother, I would very happily recognize the self again as home, glad to be in the house, the town, and the human race. But now when it comes again I am reminded not so much of home as where there is to go, what is present, what tremendous things go all this while unnoticed.



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