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SIGNS AND WONDERS

The Greeks have a god for every emotional facet of our daily life: Nemesis, the goddess of revenge; Tyche, the goddess overseeing good fortune. Then there is Hypnos, god of sleep, Pasithea, the goddess of relaxation, and their son Morpheus who stands guard over our deepest subconscious joys and fears.

I have always believed in the divinatory power of dreams, mysteriously weaving our past into our future in a paper-thin tapestry of our life's completed book. In our dreams there is no past and no future, just one immediate concretized present where actions and events have already been completed and are only waiting to be picked apart as our tapestry unravels. Dreams are prescient, and to the discerning and receptive imagination lulled into profound relaxation by gentle Pasithea, they can foretell the workaday events of our life to come.

On this morning, Hypnos induced me into a leaden state of sleep, but it was his sinister son Morpheus who shaped, or morphed, my dreams into a fiendish prediction of things to come. It happened so suddenly, one of those lucid dream states where you feel you are awake as if in total control of the spectral imagery evolving before your eyes, and yet you are above it all, almost controlling the scenario like a distant producer moving backdrop props at whim — a remote viewer looking on from afar, shifting the spectacle to fulfill a preordained script. I knew I was asleep. I saw myself in bed, almost like an out-of-body experience. And then out of nowhere, a soft crackling noise disturbed the silence and sent a tingling sensation up and down my spine. Something darted from above my head and flashed across the wall behind the headboard paralyzing my senses. The popping sound gradually increased like a stampede of tiny feet scurrying inside a covered bulging pot — tiny feet, tiny clicking nails. I twisted my neck to look up over the headboard and spotted another object with a tail streaking upwards and slinking into the crown molding at the top of the ceiling. I could hear my heart thumping in the silence that followed. I jumped out of bed and padded to an adjoining room where crinkling noises filled the air like the rush of wings. And when I looked up, the ceiling exploded and ballooned open with an onrush of rats — brown Norway rats of all sizes scurrying about in clumps, hundreds upon hundreds of them, clinging together, dashing about and tumbling over each other in a frenetic, hysterical assault across the wall and back up the opposite side of the room where they simultaneously disappeared into a loosened flap of swirling, silvery marbleized wallpaper hanging under the roof. Nature is beautiful, isn't it! a derisive voice seemed to say in my ear. Was this Eiron, the goddess of irony, enjoying a sarcastic joke at my expense?

The ensuing silence told me the dream was over. So, it was indeed a dream after all, and I was mercifully released from Morpheus' sinister grip. Rats, I pondered, as I got up to prepare a pot of calming chamomile tea. Why rats? Had their tortured souls come to haunt me for setting up traps in the basement crawlspace? Was I to be castigated by a pack of querulous rodents for wishing to live unmolested in my own home? Did the little baby rat with a mangled hand I had found and released outdoors

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

only to be devoured by a neighborhood tomcat summon his fellow horde of disgruntled rodent souls to seek revenge on me? Was it the soul of the dead, desiccated rat squashed by a passing car I had picked up and fearlessly swung by its pencil-thin tail scaring away my playmates at the age of five that finally avenged itself for the humiliation I had perpetrated upon its mummified body? Or, could it have been the headless rat whose body I searched everywhere to discover a few seasons ago? It had been a hot, sticky, oppressive summer, with temperatures festering in the upper nineties. For weeks, the stench of fetid, putrefying Genoa salami seemed to have been seeping up from the floorboards and deepest recesses of the house, and I assumed it was just the noxious state of the city's soupy and polluted air. Until the evening when I went downstairs, pulled open the crawlspace door, and discerned the rat's head moving preternaturally, ever so slightly, twitching here and there. I moved closer, and saw to my horror that it was being cradled about like a storage bin filled with thousands of white, moving, swarming larvae ravenously sucking at the bits of brothy flesh.

But the question beggared itself: If this is the remains of a head, then where is the body? Follow the smell, my nose counseled me. In the dark, dirt-floored crawlspace, I searched everywhere until the nasty effluvium led me to a hefty old wooden 'Apartment To Let' sign and a dusty traveling steam trunk, treasures from the 1920s stashed away and long forgotten. Gagging from the obnoxious odor, I pushed the heavy trunk away and discovered the liquefied, decomposing carcass of the unfortunate vermin. Not a dignified death, not even for a rat, and now it had found its revenge by invading and persecuting the quietude of my dreams and pricking my conscience.

But wait, I pondered. It is the Year of the Rat, a fortuitous sign in Chinese Astrology. I checked the dream dictionary whose dog-eared pages lay ever-ready for my matutinal perusal. It can be a good omen from the animal spirit world, a sign of abundance, wealth and surplus. Or, concomitantly, it could just indicate an infestation: an invasion versus good fortune. I always chose to see the cup as half-full. This had to be a favorable portent. Morpheus would have no hold over me.

The fog of the morning's reverie was still clinging to me when I heard new words planting themselves in my mind's ear: Bake a cake, the thought-seed seemed to be saying while growing subliminally to fruition. Who had sown such a thought in my mind? It was incongruous. Bake a cake? For what reason — as a sacrificial offering to Demeter, goddess of grain and wheat, all the good things the Earth had to offer: flour, eggs, milk and salt? Was this the very same goddess who had been revered as Mother Nature down through the ages? And was this cake-sacrifice intended as an act of atonement to quell the restless rat spirits that languished unavenged in the Animal Underworld?

Alright. I would bake a cake and propitiate the gods. But that would mean using an oven that had lain unutilized for months, in a part of the house that was more or less unfrequented. There must be some method to this madness, I reasoned. Intuition never fails. What a quaint idea: a marble cake, a cloyingly sweet confection to officially celebrate the Year of the Rat and thus launch a new era of domestic prosperity.

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

The ingredients were assembled and whipped up into a frothy batter then deposited into the neglected oven. What an inviting room, I thought: lovely crown molding, quiet, secluded, with an aerial view of the backyard maple tree. Why not sit and linger awhile. How exciting, the cake is rising nicely, ballooning upwards and outwards with beautiful marbleized striations. Take a look out the window, something prompts me. I lift up the blinds to enjoy the gathering afternoon light and seat myself at the table. Hold on now — the neighbor's child had another party? What is that balloon doing floating under the eaves? What a nuisance, why must I be plagued with such workaday annoyances. Can't people be more considerate? Not to bother. Sooner or later no doubt a gust of wind will set it free. A grey-colored balloon? Odd, lackluster shade for a children's celebration. Why is my heart suddenly thumping so wildly? I walk over to the window and look upwards under the roof's soffit. This can't be a balloon. It's huge, massive — two, three feet in diameter at least. And what are all those swirling striations, like overlapping oyster shells forming incredible purling designs, almost like marbleized, Venetian endpapers? Isn't Nature, beautiful! that derisive voice seems to taunt again.

Maybe the roof caulking has bulged out and leaked, creating some strange, freakish chemical reaction? But Nature is alive, perpetually morphing itself into the most awe-inspiring and terrifying shapes. This can only be what I fear most. This is a hornet's nest, a hive of stinging wasps the size of which left me shrinking in dread. I must get a broomstick and knock it down. Then I check myself. This is the home of thousands upon thousands of flying, poisonous insects whose venomous bite could kill. It is known that wasps can sting repeatedly, unlike bees, and do not die afterwards, using their stingers like lethal swords and butchering their victims senseless.

Don't catastrophize, Morpheus' reasoning voice interjects my racing thoughts. It's winter. The wasps are long dead, the queen has flown off to hibernate somewhere. This is just a paper shell. Take a broom and knock it down. Just do it — be fearless. Be the feisty little rat-swinging girl again and just get rid of it.

I open the window cautiously, peer upwards, and aim the broom handle at the bulbous umbrella-sized paper lantern looming above. With several sharp thwacks, the contents implode like a papier-maché Piñata, spilling flaky shards of parchment into the air. A thrust to the left, a gut punch into the hive's center, and the outer shell tumbles to the ground below, exposing the dense interior, a gummy, sticky exudate made of wasp saliva and regurgitated pulp. For a lucid moment, I marvel at the extraordinary feat of engineering as one interconnected chamber leads into another unveiling an intricate labyrinth of catacombs, almost like our dreams which morph and shape-shift from one thread to the next in an endlessly intertwining master tapestry. Poking and pummeling in frantic desperation, I finally scrape away the viscous brownish marrow leaving behind stubborn telltale stains of honeycomb imprints all along the eaves.

The window is securely latched and sealed, the broom stored back into the closet. But then, the fretting begins: Will the intruders return? Have the rat souls won again? Appealing to the goddess of peace and quietude, I sit down and eat some cake.