

Braiding the Dreamscape

by Cathie Sandstrom

It's dark on purpose so just listen.

Lawrence Raab, "Visiting the Oracle"

The doors into the gallery were massive: 10 feet tall and 3 inches thick. But when I pressed my palm against one, it opened with so little effort I remembered turning a 19th century lighthouse lens on a frictionless mercury float. At the slightest nudge from my finger, the 4-metric-ton lens rotated. I felt that same sense of wonder at the door's surprising weightlessness as I slipped inside into a dream-like darkness broken only by pools of light.

Illuminated free-standing glass cases held sculpted figures taken as if from someone's dreamscape. Each one held a fragment of narrative but offered no answers, only caused questions to rise. In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Jung says, "The crucial thing is the story." As I moved from case to case through four rooms, I felt compelled to braid the images into a narrative I could understand. I wanted to know why I was so affected by this exhibit, why I was so drawn to it. I went back to it over a dozen times looking for a thread of story to help me navigate its mystery. Each time I entered the gallery that odd, mute, all-my-senses-on-stalks feeling would enfold me and silence would descend over me like a glass bell.

The works in the gallery were by artist and sculptor John Frame, who had been jolted awake from a dream in the middle of the night. In "The Handmade Imagination of John Frame," from *Three Fragments of a Lost Tale*, David Pagel tells us, "As soon as he was conscious, he had a waking dream that felt like a massive download from a source he still does not fully understand. What was clear to him was that...he would spend the rest of his life...using the vision he had just had as the source for...a cast of characters in elaborately detailed settings from a haunting story that he witnessed from start to finish.... To ensure he didn't miss anything, Frame sat up in bed, turned on the light, picked up a notebook, and began recording the details of the story."

Long a recorder of my own dreams, I identified with Frame's experience. Years before I'd had a war dream in which I came under friendly fire so vivid and startling, I'd sat straight up and demanded of the dark, *Whose dream am I having??* At fifteen I'd been hauled to wakefulness by the incessant barking of a dog. An instant later, my 4-year-old sister down the hall had cried out from a nightmare, and I was the first to reach her. When I got to her and held her, she sobbed about a terrifying dog, barking and snarling. Even now, when we sleep in the same room, I wake just before her nightmare begins.

John Frame's vision/dream was saturated with a pervasive sense of melancholy and loss. It opened after some catastrophe had happened. A whole way of life had disappeared and the one person who might remember how to restore things was The Crippled Boy, the last one known to have been working near the practitioners of the mystic arts. Frame had given up on art, closing his studio in 2006. But the dream sent him back to work with a renewed sense of purpose. He began to work on the sculptures depicting the characters in his dream. His *Three Fragments of a Lost Tale* opened at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, on March 12, 2011. The exhibit was so popular it was extended twice. I'd likely still be visiting it, even after all those hours I spent wandering through the exhibit, watching the short animated film, listening to its original score, knitting together what I could of the tale; piecing together the parts of me, and later of my older son, that seemed represented by Frame's characters.

I'd come late to Jung, introduced to *The Red Book* in February of 2011. It lay on the coffee table where I was visiting an old hiking pal in New Mexico. Cary Baylor's account of Jung's son struggling with a dream he couldn't wake from resonated with me, so I kept reading. Three months later, I found Jung's story of carving the stone at Bollingen in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. His description of the tiny homunculus, Telesphorus, sounded so much like Frame's character Pip that I went online immediately to find an image of the stone. Like Telesphorus, son of Asclepius, Pip wore a coarse tunic with a symbol on the front of it (was it trapunto?). Did Pip, whose head was a skull and who felt like a monk to me, wear a cowl also?

I found what I was looking for: images of Jung at Bollingen, bending over the stone he'd carved, a close-up image of the homunculus on one face of it. It looked so like Pip that I emailed John Frame, asking if the similarity were intentional. I was hoping for a clue to the elusive narrative behind his exhibit.

Frame responded in minutes. No, it wasn't intentional. Would I send him the link? I did. Frame had never seen that image, had not read Jung, and yet the figures were strikingly similar. Both of us were dumbfounded. For me, it intensified the mystery. Was this the collective unconscious at work?

In Frame's film, a part of the exhibit, the character Argus "narrates." (Argus is the Latinized form of the Greek Argos, a giant with a hundred eyes. In the animated film, Frame's Argus wears a coat studded with blinking eyes.) Argus announces "The Tale of the Crippled Boy" on ticker tape that issues from his open mouth in fits and starts: a partial word at times, then several words at once. Rather like the psyche making itself known, one fragment at a time. "Listen," the tape reads, "and I will tell you the Tale of the Crippled Boy."

Frame's Crippled Boy snagged my interest and my emotions. I kept coming back to him, standing in front of the marionette theater that featured him. Against a backdrop of sky, scrim of

hills and trees extending from the wings, the Crippled Boy was onstage alone. Though young, he used a crutch and his right leg was in a brace (echoes of Menotti's Amahl in *Amahl and the Night Visitors*). A twig with new leaves grew from the Crippled Boy's long nose. There was an air of hopefulness about him that was wrenching because we knew his tragic end. He didn't. Finally, it occurred to me that he embodied my older son who was struggling with alcoholism. Frame had shown his Crippled Boy young and old. Seeing both of them felt like I was watching the timeline of my son Phillip's life.

Poems started to come. I wrote about each of the characters Frame had created—all, it seemed to me, victims of a profound uncertainty. And I wrote about being in the gallery because each time I came out of the exhibit, I stood

... in a place without language, wrapped
in a caul of knowing/not knowing.

Rendered immobile. Not by loss, exactly—
but a widening isolation.
A deepening unspecific grief.

(from my poem "The Tale of the Crippled Boy")

I continued to read Jung, recording my dreams and doing my best to mine them for meaning, for direction. Seven months later, in January 2012, I began seeing a Jungian analyst every two weeks.

It didn't take long. In April, a lost boy showed up in my dreams. In the first dream, a young girl I knew took me through woods to an isolated house on the banks of a stream where the boy lived alone. He looked to be about six. He'd been abandoned by his parents, the house emptied but for an open suitcase and a single bed in one room. Bandy-legged, he stood before me wearing an oversized duffel coat of stiff, boiled wool buttoned all the way up so that only the top of his head showed, a cowlick sprouting above the tightly buttoned collar. His muffled voice came through thicknesses of fabric. He didn't seem to think there was anything unusual about his situation.

Returning to Jung, in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*: "The crucial thing is the story. For it alone shows the human background and the human suffering, and only at that point can the doctor's therapy begin to operate." I had shared enough of my own life's story that my analyst and I were finally at a place to begin. I accepted that the little boy had to be part of me. I tried on the idea that he represented the inner child I'd lost contact with as a result of early trauma. It fit.

My experience of John Frame's exhibit shifted for me as I realized that while my son Phillip might be the Crippled Boy, I was certainly the Lost Boy. It was very sobering. A new path opened as that little abandoned boy began to appear more often in my dreams. He carried a wounded part of myself and the changes he went through seemed to be symbols of the progress I was making.

Looking back, I think John Frame's visual recreation of his dream created a map for me to explore my own psyche. That this particular body of work of his rose from a dream provided a safe point of entry for me, a way to be immersed in something mysterious, something I didn't understand but knew was emotionally deep, very sad, and not without some frightening intimations. The exhibit allowed me to revisit that material, and my own story, over and over until cracks of light began to appear in my own dreams. The edifice I'd built to protect myself from early trauma, and my habitual way of not dealing with it, began to break apart and with that, my analyst and I began to make real progress.

Through 2014, the boy who regularly showed up in my dreams appeared most often as a child. In her essay "The Young Boy in an Older Woman's Dreams," Gloria Avrech writes,

"In general, the presence of a young boy figure in an older woman's unconscious material can help connect her with her spirituality and femininity, with her past and with her possible future. He looks backward yearning for the father and repair of that relationship. He looks forward toward the establishment of a positive relationship with the masculine aspects within, toward self-knowledge, (and) he understands self-expression in creativity and play toward a new phase in a woman's life with experiences and ventures into the unknown...."

Avrech's mention of the young boy yearning for the father brought to the forefront my own impaired father-daughter relationship and history, an issue I am still exploring. As I continue to work with the abandoned boy, he has appeared in various stages and ages: bouncing from a young man to an adolescent and then, as quickly, to an adventurous 11-year-old. To date, he seems to be steadily making his way toward being my peer.

Again from Avrech's essay:

"Chetwynd, in his book *How to Interpret Your Own Dreams (in a Minute or Less)* ... suggests a dream with a boy might be urging the dreamer to connect to a part of his personality or potential left behind, and urging the dreamer to pay attention to this younger self that is growing, immature but with this future potential."

In *Aion*, as he discusses the masculine elements in the feminine psyche, Jung writes, "... the animus is a psychopomp, a mediator between the conscious and the unconscious and a

personification of the latter. The animus gives women's consciousness a logos quality and a capacity for reflection, deliberation, and self-knowledge."

The pieces of the puzzle began to come together for me.

Toward the end of his exhibit's second extension in June of 2011, Frame came to speak about the pieces in person. He stood just outside those tall black doors to the exhibit as probably 60 – 75 people pressed to hear him speak. Most were art students. Many of them were very young, but there were people of all ages and ethnicities. For about forty minutes the artist spoke about his process and answered questions. At one point he was asked what the show "meant." He looked down for a moment, and then he looked up and said what evolved into the last three lines of my poem "The Tale of the Crippled Boy."

Look without thinking.
There are no answers,
only meaning.

Eighteen months later, in December of 2012, my son Phillip was living in his car in Riverside, California. A 90-day residency program for alcohol abuse and two years of living in sober houses had not had the desired result. It was hard not knowing how he was and equally hard to hear from him. The phone call I'd been expecting and dreading came in the first days of March. He'd been found unresponsive in his car and paramedics had taken him to a hospital where he was admitted with pneumonia and liver failure. It had taken the hospital ten days to find me, days he lay in an induced coma. It was late in the day, almost four, and he was 60 miles east. I live in Los Angeles. At that time of day travel time was bound to be almost three hours. I went the next morning.

Before I left, I checked email, found an offer from a Bay Area poet to send 27 writing prompts for 27 days for \$27.00. I considered it. Maybe having someone one send "triggers" to start me writing would be a small luxury. But a voice in my head asked, *You know how many books we got in there?* Meaning my bedroom. *You know how many letters there are in the alphabet?* I did.

Standing before my bookcase that held poetry, I selected an "A" poet, thinking to open the book at random, select a line and start writing from that line. My hand lit on Anna Akhmatova. I drew down *Poems of Akhmatova*, opened it to "Everything Is Plundered" and my eyes stopped on this line: "Death's great black wing brushes the air...." I copied it into my journal and started writing from there. Then I drove fifty miles to Parkview Community Hospital. To see my son on a respirator, intubated everywhere, his body swollen and jaundiced with liver failure, his scraggly beard. I thought he looked like Howard Hughes, demented and ill.

The second morning I chose from a friend's books. House-sitting for a friend in Los Angeles, I found I'd forgotten to pack a poet. From her shelf I pulled down Ciaran Berry, an Irish poet unknown to me, and opened *The Sphere of Birds* to the title poem. This line caught me: "Everything moving toward elegy in this season of lost light." Reading it, I thought, *Metaphor... so like dream.*

That's when I knew how I'd get myself through the loss I could see coming—by inhabiting every single minute, noticing every single detail and writing it down. I felt compelled to live the experience fully, no matter what it cost. It took me 31 days to get through the alphabet.

Phillip died nine days before I got to Zagajewski.

I had thought I'd work on the poems in the order they were generated, but that's not the way it worked out. I'd run my hand over the collection to sense where the heat was, and work on that poem. Later, I added other poems, some I'd written earlier, some later. By September of 2014 I had a full-length manuscript with notes and an essay that I began submitting to publishers. In July, 2016 it was named a finalist in a book competition.

Avrech says in her essay that the boy in an older woman's dreams understood "self-expression in creativity and play toward a new phase ... with experiences and ventures into the unknown." Those initial dark days of losing and then having lost my son were like no other unknown I'd lived through. But the creative process of writing it all down and working with it was healing. It led me through devastating loss.

In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Jung says, "The importance of consciousness is so great that one cannot help suspecting the element of meaning to be concealed somewhere within all the monstrous, apparently senseless biological turmoil, and that the road to its manifestation was ... found *as if by chance*, unintended and unforeseen, and yet somehow sensed, felt, and groped for out of some dark urge." (italics mine)

After discovering *The Red Book*, the experience of seeing John Frame's dream imagery enacted had struck some note that resonated in me, motivated me to work with a Jungian analyst, and in the end, helped me reach into my own unconscious to discover and then own what had happened to me, and to my son.

That last phrase from Jung, "somehow sensed, felt, and groped for," encapsulates my experience that began in the gallery and my motivation to see it through to its eventual outcome. The trigger, the "element of meaning," was the uncanny visual similarity that tied Frame's Pip to Jung's Telesphorus. That John Frame, unaware of Jung, had created something so similar seemed proof of a collective unconscious.

Here is a translation of the text Carl Jung carved on the stone at Bollingen:

This is Telesphorus,
who roams through the dark regions of this cosmos
and glows like a star out of the depths.
He points the way to the gates of the sun and to the land of dreams.

Telesphorus, son of the god of healing and himself the god of convalescence, had healing powers. In his temple were underground cubicles where patients slept, then told their dreams to the priests/doctors to help with a diagnosis. Through someone else's dream, I was able to enter and work with the images and symbols in my own dreams. Looking at them through different lenses and amplifying the ones that seemed the most freighted led me to a greater understanding and acceptance of my own psyche and the complexes that directed much of my behavior. Unknotting them with the help and guidance of a Jungian analyst has been liberating.

The languages of dream and of metaphor, voices I've listened to for a long time, felt like separate dialects to me before coming to Jung. The braiding of them has been healing. The catalyst was surely *The Red Book*.

“... *found as if by chance*,” indeed.

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