COMMENTARY

Kenneth John Atchity

The dream is a memory, a warning, a wish, a belief, a proposal in the service of order. I think of my dreams as imagined projects, semi-conscious designs, first steps to waking creation and to the choice or avoidance of particular designs in my waking life and work. The imagined object is prelude to the imaginative, artistically created, product.

Nightmares are disorderly projects, expressing the possibility that orderly, controlling vision can fail—fails. Chaos, not order, will prevail, according to the nightmare preview.

In the following excerpt from my novel Owl, the main character’s nightmare weaves together images from the increasingly perplexing relationship among his daughter, Owl, their pet owl (called “Wol”), the real and sculpted Jesus, and Ben himself. Ben is a person who usually represses the memory of his dreams, and denies their meaningfulness because they do not reflect the rationalism of his controlling, fully awake mind.

This dream is too strong for him to repress—although he is strong enough to ignore its warning. Ben’s nightmare understands his present crisis better than he himself understands it. The nightmare is a private myth with an order of its own, which Ben neither understands nor controls. He is not privy to the subconscious workings of his mind; those workings, recorded in this nightmare product of them, will end up destroying him because he fails to interpret their relevance to his waking life. He is still working on the puzzle the moment he dies.
Ben slept like the log he was feeling himself to be. So irregular was his schedule for the past few months he hadn’t recalled a single dream and had been dimly afraid he’d lost touch with the alternatives his dreams provided. The dream that came tonight more than made up for the absence.

At first Ben was conscious of flickering lights and of being surrounded by an almost audible silence. The silence was pressing against his ears as though he were too far underwater, then gradually modulated into sound, as of something flapping loose in the wind, but not something heavy—something extremely light like pieces of plastic strips hissing from an air vent. Or like the snapping of beaks or the shrieking of ten thousand crickets. Then the sound accelerated into a high-pitched mechanical, menacing scream as urgent and as regular as snoring—that seemed to come from all directions.

And Ben could see himself now seated in the middle of a room walled in by machines. When he looked at the machines all around him on the identical shelves, he saw they were the source of the eerie flapping noise. They were all tape recorders—and they were all identical. The tapes on all of them seemed to be broken and hanging out of the machines like angrily spinning fists of spaghetti and, behind this noise, he could now hear the sing-song chant of a child’s voice, or the robot voice of a child, singing, “Let us sail away./For a year and a day/To the land where the Bong-Tree grows.”

The song was repeated three times in the alien voice that mimicked a child and dissolved into unearthly cackling as Ben watched himself put his hands to his ears, and then, to his horror, watched the ears come off in his hands.

They squirmed and dropped to the floor and became embryos, twin victims of what the machines were now shouting at him from all directions: “WHO WHO WHO WHO ARE ARE ARE ARE ARE ARE ARE YOU YOU YOU YOU YOU?” The last word reverberated like a gong through the sweating room, mixing with blue smoke rings that fell from the ceiling like hoops upon and around the seated Ben-figure until he seemed captured by the rings that tightened until he could feel the constriction and didn’t think he could stand the physical assault.

“What WHAT WHAT WHAT WHAT???” Ben thought he heard himself asking, watching his mouth open in terror. The terror increased as he realized it was not he, but the machines, mouthing the word that lured the twin embryos toward them until the embryos disappeared. But the shrieking, broken tapes continued: “WHAT WHAT DOTH DOTH IT IT IT PROPHET PROPHET PROPHET PROPHET???”
Question marks, some black, some white, as though they were reduplicating mirror-images, upside down and downside up, dropped from the brightly lit ceiling of the room—stalactites? Ben desperately wondered, or stalagmites?—slithering down like the blue smoke on Ben’s head and shoulders like snakes in pursuit of their broken off tails. Or lizards without heads.

Ben, inside the dream, desperately tried to figure out the profit as the question marks left decimal points behind them like eggs. What prophet? He didn’t understand and felt overwhelmed with terror because he felt he must understand or else suffocate. He opened his mouth to question and, again, the machines took the word away from him as though kidnapping his soul and left him speechless. "WHO WHO WHO WHO WHO WHO WHO??"

Suddenly Ben understood the terror that washed over him. Reeling with a pain that dried his mouth and constricted his throat, he fell off the chair onto the floor with the writhing snakes.

"WHO IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD? WHAT PROFIT SHOULD WE HAVE IF WE PRAY UNTO HIM?" Ben couldn’t see whether he or the machines generated this statement. He watched his prone figure, numb and lifeless, watched the eyes close. Then, to his horror—because Ben was on the floor helpless and unaware—the door to the room began to open slightly, and ever so slowly, widened, to allow the most intense light imaginable to enter.

Ben watched terrified as his dream body remained on the floor unaware now that the door was wide open and absolutely lost in its outlines to the influx of sheer light—as though the sun itself were standing there. Rays of light seemed to join in Ben and pulled the whole of his being upward until he felt himself losing consciousness so that only the observing Ben could see what was happening. The light streamed through everything in the room, melting the loose tapes and assaulting Ben’s nostrils with an acrid smell.

Now Ben could see in the annihilating light a shape, of something unspeakably human that caused his eyes to look away from it and back to the unconscious figure on the floor. Ben’s heart nearly stopped when he saw that the figure there on the floor was no longer himself. It was Owl, his daughter, blonde and helpless—limp.

He looked back in desperation at the figure emerging from the light and could barely force himself to watch its shape becoming defined as it advanced into the closet room. His eyes traveled with agonizing slowness from its feet upward.

Its shape was the shape of Ben himself, in stature and girth—the feet were clearly his at first. But the garments it was wearing were the garments of Jesus, the same rudely carved white robes of the Jesus he and Connie bought at the border gate in Tijuana that day—and, at the same time, they were the folds of Connie’s wedding dress—the image wavered between one and the other.

Then he could see the sign of the nails clearly on the outstretched hands—no, not hands, he realized with a shiver of horror that their nails were black talons, the light shining off the pointed ends like ungodly candles.

Ben’s heart nearly stopped when he looked upon the face of the figure now completely visible in the light. From the neck all was white. Feathers. A foreshortened beak. The dark brooding inhuman emotionless infinitely deep mocking eyes of Wól, of Owl—of both.

And Ben, as he looked into those eternally deep, eternally wise and yet terrible eyes, instantly knew what he had been searching for—what he had been seeking to
know. The knowledge—the truth—came like a fiery breath and made Ben gasp with terror—because he also knew, in the same instant, that the pressure of knowing was too much for him, knew even then he would not be able to remember what he knew that one moment.

Ben could feel himself with all the force of his will trying to tear himself out of the dream—before it was too late. He knew absolutely that it was almost too late. But he was trapped. There was nothing he could do. He watched helplessly as the monstrous figure stooped to pick up something from the black and white floor.

What it picked up was a thick length of melted tape—no, it was the rope ladder in Owl's bedroom—no, it was a snake—its flickering tongue shrieked: "WHO WHO WHO WHO WHO ARE ARE ARE ARE ARE ARE ARE ARE ARE ARE WHO YOU YOU YOU YOU IF IT IS NOT HE, WHO WHO WHO THEN IS IT?"

With the snake the figure began, methodically, dispassionately, almost ritually, to whip the sleeping figure of Owl until the child was stripped with the marks of the lashes and began to melt into the floor, crosshatched into the horribly striped pavement. As Ben's sleeping gaze focused on the sweet, innocent soles of Owl's feet, he saw them changing, even as they disappeared, into his own feet—into fish without heads. Ben wrenched himself awake.

He was in a cold sweat, trembling, unable to move, an unimaginable weight pressing on his chest. He was filled with a sense of overwhelming emptiness never experienced before in his life, as though a black hole opened inside him sucking his identity into its inaccessible depths. It took him a moment to realize Connie was shaking him.

"Ben!" she was crying, the sobs racking her body. "Ben! Are you okay? It was only a dream. You're all right, honey."

"Owl," he managed to say, "Have you eyes of flesh?" His mouth was stiff and dry and mechanical and he tried to leap from the bed but still could not move.

"Go—go check," he urged Connie, the desperation in his voice propelling her from the bed and out of the room.

She returned in less than a minute.

"Owl's fine," she said, reaching over to soothe him. At first he shook her hand from his shoulder brusquely. He tried to get out of bed to see for himself, then slumped weakly back into the pillows.

"She's okay?" he asked, his voice sounding almost boyish.

When Connie nodded, Ben closed his eyes. Then he opened them again, not wishing to return to the dream no matter what. She leaned over and, to her amazement, he reached for her and pulled her to him. Connie couldn't remember the last time Ben had done this. But his pressure was gentle and not at all peremptory as it had always been when they made love before.

This time it was as though they were both involved in a slow motion urgency, an underwater expedition. She realized as she let herself melt against him, on top of him, yielding to the pressure of his hands, his mouth, that Ben was moaning softly. He sounded like a little boy wounded by his new discovery of his awkwardness, wounded by recognizing the pain of being alive. And Connie comforted him with her arms at first, then with her hands, then with her mouth, and with every part of her that no longer seemed dead to him now that his need demanded life. When Ben was done, she rolled off him and smiled. His moaning stopped and he smiled back. Then his eyes closed and he fell asleep.