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PSYCHOTHERAPY AND THE MYTHIC JOURNEY



Cover art: Print of original painting by Deborah Stait Winegar. This is a 40" by 30" multicolored acrylic canvas with collage elements, entitled "Portrait of my Husband Jack." "DSW explains: "As I played with the sensuality of intense colors and a palette knife, Jack's strength and intuition emerged and took on mythic proportions. His capacity to look inward (with one blue eye and red pupil) while looking outward (with his other red eye and blue pupil) feels central to becoming heroic. I cherish this dual capacity in him and myself. Our quest for intimacy demands that we develop this capacity to the fullest."



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Whether we recognize the process or not, our lives are journeys, filled with plots and characters, pitfalls and triumphs. We can take the high road into the mythic or choose to focus on the mundane. As a poet, I was born with the choice already made, although it took a writing workshop in "Dreams, Myths, and Poetry" to make that choice conscious. What follows is the story of the journey that began with that workshop six years ago, moved into the landscape of the therapy office, and continues today with wonder and magic within the whole of my life.

I am used to the company of shadows. One I remember from earliest times, when as a child afflicted with serious bouts of asthma, I spend long lonely weeks with only my radio, my books and my paper and pencils to distract me from the boredom and isolation of my sheltered life. Restricted from the physical play that would connect me to the outside world, I learn to reach into the dark places behind my eyes for the companions and the adventures that are denied me out in the streets. I use my imagination to give some satisfying form to the loneliness that accompanies me always, like some sad and shadowy muse. Over the several early school years during which my illness rules, that Shadow becomes my guide to colorful inner lives of my own choosing—worlds of willful princesses and warrior queens, of dark erotic forces and fierce exotic songs. Rather than fear the dark realms into which my Shadow leads me, I learn to trust its magical power to help me build the paths I need to find my way out of my sterile room, from the careful and ordinary family with whom I still feel an outsider, a changeling. As I grow older and the asthma subsides, the Shadow that has become my knowing guide continues to assert its presence through my writing and through my interest in things magical and mythic.

Years later, working with a friend/therapist/poet/shaman, I begin consciously to call upon that loyal Shadow to help me shape the chaos of feeling that brings me to his door in the first place. Through the medium of

my poetry, I begin a new and more purposeful relationship with that muse and embark on the journey that will bring me face to face with the Other—a disturbing shadow-of-a-shadow—whose unexpected appearances trigger periods of confusion, displacement and rage.

In the therapy office I begin by telling my tale of feeling at times "possessed" by some disruptive spirit, some kind of troubling and troubled part of me that surfaces whenever I find myself moving into a committed relationship with a man. My therapist suggests giving her a name, a form. "See her; call her; write her," he says. And the next time I feel her presence, I do.

TOOTH MOTHER

A sliver of moon
like a sharpened claw
slits the underside of April,
sending clouds as heavy as stones
onto the roiling rim of earth.

It is time for the Tooth Mother's coming.
She tears through my skin,
talons sharp as the moon,
eyes that slice, breasts like scythes
along my hungry tongue.

She breathes into my mouth
the bold remains of winter,
turning my blood to ice,
my thoughts to stones
that roll like clouds
across my ragged edge of mind.

With my therapist's help, I begin to seek a history and purpose for this seductive demon whose intensity I fear and want and find myself emulating in my closest relationships—with husband, children, parents, and later, after my marriage is dissolved, lovers. Frustrated and frightened by what seems to be her growing influence over me, I agree with my therapist to follow her dark trail in hopes of being able to "exorcise" her hold over me.

Using guided meditations and active imagination, my therapist becomes my shaman, sending me on "vision quests" into my inner world, where the Tooth Mother archetype waits as both a symbol and a manifestation of my painfully destructive feelings. In the same way ancient peoples set out into their external wildernesses to seek visions and messages from the gods, I embark on a journey into my inner landscape to seek my own visions and wait for messages from my own deities, my own demons.

In a meditation, a "waking dream," I enter my wilderness to call the Tooth Mother, and she appears in the image of a bird with deep-set eyes, deadly

talons and mottled feathers who swirls in the center of a luminous sphere until it bursts into a teeming froth of water. I am curious about the actual nature of this creature I have imagined; I want to examine and explore what it means to me through the medium of my writing. I begin by searching the bird hall of a local museum in order to give it a name. I find the bird: Osprey. Predator. And I write her story, fully knowing that it is mine.

PREDATOR

She sleeps only where soft sea sounds
nestle in the branches of feathery pines.
Daylight takes her wherever her whims fly,
but night calls her home.

Osprey sleeps alone above the shore's great stones,
far from the place of her own birth nest.
Near the crooning song of Mother Sea,
near the place long abandoned by her own nestlings,
she waits in a separate space between land and water,
between darkness and time.

Sometimes she dreams of another like her—
of plummeting together from a quiet place in the sky
to slash in unison through the glittering ocean cover;
of reaching, reaching toward each other
and toward the quick silver flashes
that beckon and tease just under the surface;
of pairs of eager talons clutching at flesh,
slippery and sweet and alive

and of the power of beak against beak
struggling for still another feast,
neither giving nor taking, only having it all.

And sometimes she dreams of graceful shadows,
like the squadrons of her cousin Kites
who greet each noisy sunset
with a silent glide above the seasoned beach,
dark eyes turned toward the farthest horizon,
toward some powerful point of infinity.

Osprey wakes with the first light, watches
the curtain of clouds part to reveal morning's intention,
and waits for early chatters and trills
to find harmony with the wind.

She lifts her head to the sky,
eyes still set in shadow,
and stretches her strong lengths of wing
to catch the subtle singing of the air.

She stands and steps,
thoughtlessly chipping new pits into old stones,
poises toward the sun,
embraces the wind,
and flies.

She keeps her back to the sun,
feeling her night-tightened feathers
open smoothly to its honest heat.
Below her massive wings
the sea wind rises clear and reassuring,
and she lets it carry her higher and higher
into the sacred peace of morning sky.

It is here that she can hear her own voice,
coarse and heroic, calling, calling . . .

But a quickening hunger finds its way into her wings,
wakening bone and tendon and the urge for sleek control.
With a last bold cry, she slides down the edge of morning
and sets a path toward the tempting surface of the sea.

She circles with eye toward a sudden glassy patch,
and in an instant glimpses a shape like her own—
a certain bend of wing, stretch of claw, glint of eye
a shadow, or a dream.

Suddenly, she falls, wings suspended,
claws arched and ready,
eyes gripping the spot where her talons will cut,
quick and elemental.

And it is here that she feels her call's answer—
in the salt of sea, of blood,
the fill of flesh, of heart.
Her feathers dance in flames of air and water;
her claws froth with the struggle of power and will.

The shadow dissolves, a strangled cry.

The images of the poem flow from my pen as though they are being dictated by some voice deep within me. I feel the satisfying presence of that familiar muse, that old, lonely Shadow whom I have grown to trust to lead me safely through my darkest landscapes. I recognize in my depiction of the Osprey's experience my own primal loneliness; I recognize the distortion of my own need to connect with another on some intense and elemental level. I understand that I project onto Osprey my own search for someone "like me" with whom to connect. I am disturbed that all I can see is prey.

While I am working with my vision quest meditations and my writing, I also am continuing a process begun long ago of studying feminist spiritual-

ity, which is the exploration of myths and histories associated with ancient goddesses and with the power of the feminine in the old religions. I recognize my hunger for the feelings of power expressed in the images of both the Tooth Mother and Osprey; I also recognize it as a power directed against male energy. Men have become prey for me.

It does not take much analysis to connect my need for feeling strong personal power with the events which led to the dissolution of my marriage. Even though I believed that I had dealt with and exorcised the anger and the disappointment of having to sever the intensely connected relationship that was my marriage, I cannot deny that many of the emotions projected into my poetry are those generated by my failed marriage: powerlessness, a confusion of love and hate, vengeance and lonely isolation.

In therapy I continue telling my tale with the story of my coming out of that marriage determined to play what I see as the "man's game." Determined to acquire the inner strength and power that will enable me to avoid ever having to depend on a man again, I work at generating my own kind of female energy that negates both the need for and the power of whatever is "male." Refusing any longer to accept that men are in control, that they make the rules the rest of us live by, I take these powers into myself and begin to view men as lesser creatures and, ultimately, as prey. I emerge, in my own mind, as the warrior-woman who uses men, just as men (I feel) have always used women, I feel safe and powerful. For a long while, it is enough.

I am in therapy because it no longer is enough, because I have met a man with whom I am trying to build a relationship, a man whom I am growing to love. Yet, I am slowly and uncontrollably sabotaging the relationship. I read books on making relationships work; I read books on the *animus* and *anima*. I understand in my head what the issues are, but my heart continues to beat its bloody path to his (and I realize, my own) emotional destruction.

I know that it is in the dark of my inner world of shadows that my truths exist, not in the logical analyses offered by books and lists and systems of thought. And so I look for other shadows that can help me understand my motivations, my feelings. I am not surprised by what I find. It is a name I have heard before, a myth I have read about before. Only now she has a new reality.

She is Tooth Mother. She is Osprey. And, ultimately, she is Lilith, ancient archetype, dark aspect of the goddess, seductive demon, powerful warrior—the one I unknowingly summoned in those painful and powerless days following my marital disaster. Lilith, first partner to Adam, who refuses to bow to his wishes, preferring banishment from Eden to eternal subservience—Lilith, who is reputed to be demoness, sorceress, succubus, consort of the devil; who is thought to be muse, creatrix, free and energizing spirit. (All of those years of fascination with magic and myth, with ancient symbols and feminist spirituality! Of course!)

For Lilith, and for the power of Lilith that I have called into myself, the way to feel in control is to seduce and destroy—to reach out to, reach into the male energy that seeks its own mirror image in the feminine and then when he responds to the offer, when he becomes vulnerable, to confront him with the demonic power of Lilith—the face of Medusa, Kali, Hecate—the power to destroy that is as much a part of the feminine self as the power to create. I build the connection that we both want and then I punish him for being a man, for not being the warrior-woman I am, for being human.

excerpt from LILITH RETURNS

And it came to pass in time that Lilith's hunger took her along the western borders of Eden, where one evening she saw Adam from across the long road between them. And from the safety of her shadows she watched and waited, feeling her ancient hunger finally assume shape and memory. Until one unusually bright evening, when the moon shone full on the edges of Eden, she straightened the hides that had become her armor, brushed her wilderness hair, took a deep breath, and strode up to the boundary between Eden and the Rest of the World.

"Adam," she called, and Adam felt a forgotten stirring deep within him. He barely recalled the voice, and the form was strange, indeed. "Come with me," Lilith sang. "Wander with me through these sweet and tangled vines that hold my home in the Rest of the World and I will seed you a feast for your heart's bursting."

Slowly, Lilith removed the armor from her head and her chest and her arms. She stood before him, wings and talons, mosses and honey; she smelled of wild herbs crushed on the forest floor.

"Adam," she whispered to his eyes, hidden in her shadow. "We are both tired of being alone. I have been hiding in the wild of the Rest of the World, and you are hiding in an Eden not of your creation. I have watched you watching the sun endlessly slip behind the fiery western horizon, listening to music that touches you but you cannot touch. Come with me and I will show you the other side of the mountain where the sun smolders through all the nights; I will take you to the music-maker that is your shadow, the teacher who will give you eyes to see in the dark."

"Your shadow has wings, Adam. It dances and sings and waits outside of Eden."

And Adam opened his eyes and cried.

As I explore in therapy the hold that Lilith has taken of my own feelings and motives, I find that there is still another shadow lurking at the edge of my vision—one that I have been ignoring because I see her as powerless. It is the shadow of Eve, an archetype that is one of the most powerful influences on the feminine consciousness, particularly the consciousness of women who, like me, grew up in a tradition of Christian myth and hierarchy. In trying to connect with the "I've" in me, I begin to see her not as the traditional Eve who accepts her biblical role, but rather as a more contemporary Eve, who, like Lilith, cannot accept Eden's patriarchal rules and

therefore also struggles with feelings of anger, alienation, and mistrust. Synchronicity takes me to an arts and crafts fair, where I buy a bloody and surrealistic painting, called "The Birth of Eve," that helps to give me the healing power of words.

THE REAL BIRTH OF EVE

Don't fail me now, Adam.
I did not choose this path,
this pain.

He woke you slowly.
With care he molded your form,
stroked your face to smile,
sang your ears to sound,
shaded your new wide eyes
from all but his vision of paradise.

He gave you a place, a name;
a chance to lie
with the fullness of earth
before his restless breath
stirred the question on your tongue.

But I, I had no time,
nor sure sense of shape—
no songs of promised lands
to free the reach of eager arms.

I have only had the quest,
the question,
that has grown into this pain
—your pain—
and the pain of my knowing that
my only way out is through you,
through the final rending
of heart and mind and will,
of the fabric of our common sky
that rains fire and blood
upon this sacred and willful act.

Forgive me, Adam.
I can no longer be both self and other.
I need my own breath, my own blood.
He left me no choice
but to tear from you what belongs to me—
my sex, my soul, my song.

Forgive me, Adam,
for making my word
from your flesh and bone,

for forcing you to share this eternal exile,
for taking it anyway—
my only way out.

As I struggle with the loneliness and mistrust haunting Lilith and this new Eve, I begin to confront what I feel is the lack of respect for male energy that I developed when I accepted the Lilith-warrior archetype who ensured my survival over the years. I recognize my patterns of punishing men for being the Man who forced me to "leave Eden" and also for having the animus that I lack. I look for ways to re-form the male/female balance within me. My therapist suggests bringing my animus into the picture. I go in to seek him as I sought Lilith. At first, no one is there; then suddenly the dreams begin.

ANIMUS DREAM

(I respond to the touch
of a courteous man,
who rarely snores,
showers twice daily,
and brushes, brushes. . . .)

And out of the dark they come,
homeless and persistent—
two ragged men,
hair snaking dank
from dirty caps,
empty hands, empty eyes,
reaching for my face,
closing the distance,
smileless and needful
and silent.

I am afraid of these two male figures who assert themselves in my dreams but, again, I go inward to seek what frightens me most. During a guided meditation, I see them approach Lilith (who is dressed as a primitive warrior) and explain to her that they have been trying to reach her for a long while. She sends them to a stream to bathe and gives them clean garments. As they all sit together and talk, she agrees to let them stay with her as her cohorts, despite her mistrust of them. They agree to stay and earn that trust in time.

By now, Lilith no longer is a shadow I fear. Her loneliness and anger have been lessened by the company of Eve and of the animus figures. And while I recognize that Lilith still exists in me as a reflection of my own dark side, I have come to understand and respect her history, her power and her ability to protect the wounded parts of my self.

As I continue to search out and get to know the other figures that live and work in my subconscious, I encounter in a vision quest the image of a male archangel whom I have seen before but who never has spoken to me. "Look

to the light," he tells me this time. "A little too much like Shirley MacLaine," I think to myself, but archetypes have as much right to clichés as anyone, and so I accept the innate wisdom of his advice.

I am used to the company of shadows. And now these shadows are becoming used to accompanying me as trustworthy and articulate messengers from my own unconscious, helping me to build a balance, rather than a chasm, between the complementary forces that energize my life.

THE DANCE OF THE SERPENT

What a spiral path we dance,
coming full circle, time after time,
only to find, each time,
that we are at another place.

And when the spiral divides
and we whirl apart
toward some separate destinies,
it is not surprising that
we do not perceive the double helix
that our paths have traced.

So now we stand the distance,
watching where we were
and where we are,
stopping here and now
to see, to breathe,
to know the parts we are of each other--
the strands of a spiral
that dance.

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