

Albert Somma

Night Terrors and the Dharma

Lately, I've been experiencing night terrors, visits of unwanted company—ghosts. I wake abruptly to their incarnations, breathing bodies near enough to touch. Early this morning, it was an old woman dressed in a faded, floral print, her blond hair gone gray. In her left hand she held a glass of water, in her right, a smooth, white oval of medication half as thick as a bar of soap. My revulsion to this unsought for nursing was immediate—what you imagine you'd say to anyone appearing bedside where you live alone, "GO!" I spit at her, nearly leaping into her face, the eyes dying the instant *it* disappeared. Well done, I think, fight or flight, and this zombie had to go.

Other ghouls came. Two men, twins dressed like old-fashioned milkmen in white shirts and black bow ties peer over my shoulder, watching me watch the TV screen I'd fallen asleep to. "OUT!" I bark, bone-frightened but firm. Then there was the old man—breaching the foot of the bed—hovering in front of me. His age-blانched color, noble nose and thinning hair all too real—eyes dancing above a smirk, the puckish grin of a prankster here for the thrill of my undoing. "NO!" I scream, long and trilling, standing on the line between terror and control—and again, as if this. . . *thing* were an inflated balloon—air rushes out from the bottom up and he's gone.

But who are these visitors? All at once I see it! They are archetypes, and I've invented them: Old age, sickness and death—the Buddhist dharma and the way of all flesh. The young Siddhartha Gautama's disturbing vision as he ventures beyond the insular walls of his palace. Though of my "twin milkmen," who are they? One need not be a Freudian to discern the meaning of *those* two, peering "over [a] shoulder." And so we have it: First, the uninvited old hag pointing out my anxiety—my sickness. Then, the milkman twins, symbols of mammarys, their bow-ties the very nipples of that first attachment to life—suspended in the glacial light of hypnotic contentment. The First Noble Truth of suffering, revealed by its cause: thirst, craving, desire, passionate greed and attachment, the Second Noble Truth as well as its perversion, the thirst for non-existence, annihilation.

Now, on to our Third Man, who in psychology's phenomenal world is the survivor's tale of a vision. Again, a "noble" presence, an incarnate angel of encouragement to press on *through* a last moment of despair *toward* life and living. Yet, the *Third* Noble Truth, is the Truth of the *end* of life's craving. So, like the two-faced Janus's beginning and ending, he pretends life and portends the other. He's a prankster. A "blانched and thinning" apparition of death itself, teasing not toward life but into its inevitable abyss and mystery beyond which no one ever returns. "*Old age, sickness and death,*" the Eastern sages whisper in my sleep. And so, what of our Fourth Noble Truth, the path that leads to the end of suffering, the cessation of anxiety and dis-ease? That's for the awakened, I stubbornly decide. Those who use the daylight for pursuing virtue.

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Somewhere in the Western wind, the echo of a proud Native American warrior intones before a great battle, "*It's a good day to die,*" Just so, I muse, pleased and assertive, perhaps even smugly, "I'm glad that it was them, this time," I say aloud to no one.