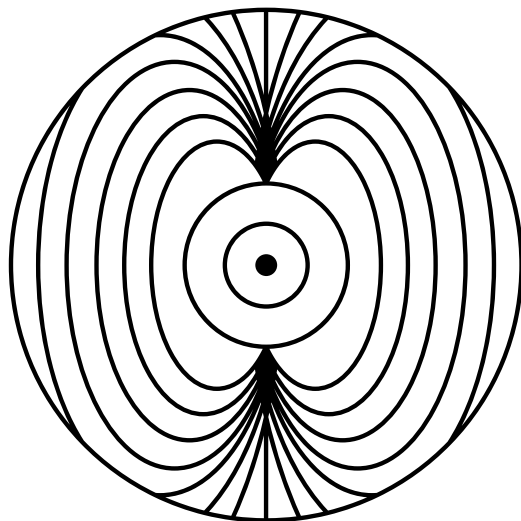


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ONIRIA

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ONIRIA

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

1. ON THE TITLE OF THE BOOK

Oniria is my fourth book and centers of building an understanding of the cognitive and cosmological aspects of dreams; it is the first one in a trilogy of short story compilations that have a 7 stories/2 essays structure. Here I posit that despite being a strong biological component in dreams, there is also an aspect of it that extends to the Universe: Several authors have spoken about a dream world, and many others about astral projections and prophetic dreams; if dreams were confined to brain processes, these phenomenon would not be conceived and instances of them (whether one believes in them) would not have been documented.

All of this resonates with what I have written in my three prior books about time, matter and memory, for I understand the Universe and living systems to be in a cycle of interaction and mutual construction. In this case, I try to connect aspects of biology and cosmology with the theory that I have that the human brain (as well as that of other animals) has both classical and quantum computing.

This means, for instance, that a “dream world” is an abstract plane (a zero point plane) of information that entails subconscious processing by means of the quantum processes of the brain; it entails all the people that ever lived (and even animals for that matter) and is not incompatible with my notion of reincarnation, as in *Mnemone* I had a story that dealt with a person dreaming and meeting prior selves. Dreams of the future are then the processing of probable scenarios by means of such unconscious processing of information and astral projections be a connection between consciousness and spiritual energy, which I might explore in the final book of this trilogy.

This will be explained by means of essays by Del Toro, a character in one of the stories, who is a philosopher and experiences the dreamworld in person and trying to understand what he does, he makes a theory of it. He starts relating to a group of scholars that I have been weaving into my Universe: Emily Lockhart appeared in my story *Breakfast at the Moon Palace* in *Materia* and is revered centuries later by the Spiritnauts of Paris Earth as a misunderstood visionary. There is a group of scholars represented by Ravichandran and Passeron-Lavac, the latter being a time traveler named Trent, who wrote a book called *The Flow of Time*, of which, some extracts were included in *Chrona*, my first book.

Del Toro is actually mentioned in *Mnemone* by León Armienta, a second generation Spiritnaut that builds a framework that explains my book. This group of scholars, of which Del Toro and Emily are part of its second generation, are based on Research Committee 51 (Sociocybernetics) of the International Sociological Association, who are a group of bright interdisciplinary scholars of all ages and disciplines with whom I convene every year or so.

As I wrote *Mnemone* and *Oniria* almost back to back, the academic influences are more less the same: Maturana, Varela, Bergson, Goswami (when he is serious) and von Foerster form the main nucleus. Also important were Stapp, Grinberg-Zylberbaum, Radin, Penrose and Hameroff, Edgar Mitchell and Robert Lanza. To those I add Northrop and Pagel, who come from complexity and cognitive science respectively.

2. ON THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

As I said, this batch will have 7 stories and 2 essays. I return to having a very visual book, like it was the case in book 2, but like book 3, the amount of stories that talk about humanity being on a pilgrimage to find new inhabited planets are minimal. The visual quality of my stories is not only represented by the amount of illustrations in stories like *The Rider*, *Cassandra Inversa* or *The Heartfelt Devotion of the Lord of Astronauts*; nor in the fact that two of these stories are in graphic format, but also in the interaction of color that determines a dialog between Trent and AM.

What I do bring to this new book is the seemingly absurd element of dreams; that is, they do not have perfect sense and sometimes we dream of stupid things that may make sense sometime later as we interpret them. For instance, the dialog in *Mangekyo Blues* is seemingly abstract, but it will make sense with oncoming books where these characters will have a great importance.

This is also the case of *The Heartfelt Devotion*... where the dialog with Lupe Cavazos is at times weird and seemingly a localized joke, but I swear, it will make sense on the long run. Also, the reason why I called an abstract character Lupe Cavazos was to make fun of how names of fantastic characters in fantasy and sci-fi all seem to be one-worded and bearing some type of mystique; in this case, I called a fantastic character a name that is somewhat common in northern Mexicans and would evoke a mustached man with a hat, boots and a shirt with three buttons undone.

This story jokes around with our sense of aesthetics, giving more importance to pragmatism to looking good; this short story is an ode to the saying “If it looks stupid, but it works, it’s not stupid.” Returning to the absurdity of dreams, this all started with a parody skit I saw about the second season of *True Detective* by Auralnauts; I got a lot of the aesthetic of the dive bar, Del Toro and the open bar thingy from there and managed to weave it into a story which became *Wednesday is open mic night at Vato’s*.

Before closing this part, I want to note that I play with three types of absurdities: One is the fact that dreams might seem ridiculous at times, but they have a sense of balance and order that is seemingly more complex and thus might not make sense; the other is the fact that sometimes we find inspiration in silly or absurd things, and the last one is the fact that sometimes something that looks good is stupid, but people disregard its stupidity because of aesthetics.

3. ABOUT THE STORIES

Mangekyo Blues tells the story of AM and Trent, a couple of teenagers that communicate through time and space by means of dreams, where they have metaphysical conversations. These young starcrossed lovers will play an important role later. In *The Rider*, Jim tries to repair and refurbish an AMC Rebel Machine—an underrated muscle car—in an old cottage he has on the town where his father (a racing pilot that died when he was young) was raised. There he learns he can travel the Universe in his dreams.

The dreamworld is explored in *Wednesday is open mic night at Vato's*, which tells the story of a group of people that fights a war to defend this plane of thought from people called dreamcops that try to colonize it in behalf of every government, corporation and political that ever existed. The action takes place in a Buddhist shrine/oniric dive bar called Vato's.

Cassandra Inversa tells the story of Castalia Lundstedt, Hanni's little sister, who has vivid prophetic dreams that people pay too much attention to, as she moves to San Francisco to do an internship with her sister. *Dreamcertina* is the story of Penelope Ford, the sister of Pixie and Polly, and here we explore her vivid dreams and frustrations with the world.

The Heartfelt Devotion of the Lord of Astronauts tells you a day in the life of a Major in the Space Force of the Titan Earth nicknamed "The Lord of Astronauts." He endures staff meetings, faces great odds in an improvised mission and meets an abstract entity named Lupe Cavazos. Finally, *The Sleeping Woes of the Blood Flower* deals with Empress Zhuang Qinfeng staving off suitors that invade her dreams in their attempts to seduce her.

4. CONTINUITY

All my stories form part of a continuity, a Gustavoverse, if you will. *Oniria* touches all three books: *Mangekyo Blues* connects with the *Timetravelers* in *Chrono*; *Cassandra Inversa* continues with *The Woman who Talked with Herself* and *The Man of Memories* from *Chrono* and *Mnemone*; *Dreamcertina* is a sequel of *Courtship of Concepts* and *In Keeping Secrets of Dying Earth*, *The Heartfelt Devotion of the Lord of Astronauts* takes place during the Second Roaming War. *Wednesday is open mic night at Vato's* has Andr meda de Jes s as one of its main characters, she was the lead in *Angel at the Rim of the Outer Heaven*. *The Sleeping Woes of the Blood Flower* takes place in outer space, in a fleet of Chinese ships, while *The Rider* is self-contained.

5. INFLUENCES

Like I mentioned in my prior book, I almost wrote *Mnemone* and *Oniria* back to back on a vacation I took to Bilbao and Trieste on the summer of 2016; I wrote a lot of *Oniria* on Trieste, including two stories that didn't make the cut, so the city and the Adriatic Sea is an influence. One exception to this was *Wednesday night...*, which I wrote mostly in Berkeley, on October of 2015, when I was visiting Malcolm, my thesis advisor, for a two day homage that the Law School organized; I wrote part of it in a friend's house, but mostly I did it on a BART ride.

In Trieste I had a very lazy routine, where I woke up late, wrote as I had long walks around the city, beach and gardens and at the end of the day, passed my notes into the book and polished it. At the house, the song that I kept on repeat was *Beautiful Criminal* by Big Pink, particularly, a live version that they did for KEXP.

Now that I remember *Mangekyo Blues* was also written in Bilbao in the coffee shop of the Museum of Fine Arts. The name stems from the Japanese word for *Kaleidoscope*, which I knew because of Naruto and the Sharingan; however, the main influence of this book was the song *Little Love* by Pietro Straccia, known as EPIQUE. After listening to this song I came up with the idea of teenage lovers transcending time and space to bitch about people and to talk about the cosmic and kaleidoscopic nature of dreams. My teenage rebellion is pretty much what Trent lived.

The song *Big Rip* by Yuri Gagarin inspired *The Heartfelt Devotion...*, which I wrote at the Guggenheim, especially the part where the Lord of Astronaut converses with Lupe Cavazos, which I made at the Andy Warhol exhibition. I have been a fan of the band, but when I listened to that song, I started to make up a story of an astronaut that does seemingly silly stuff that is incredibly practical. I could see him running funnily on the hull of a spaceship, ambushing a Special Forces unit, while that song was playing.

Poetry and random images were crucial in the aesthetics of *Cassandra Inversa*. I ended up making the segments of the story being images and quotes, instead of giving it a more rational structure. This, again, is due to the intuitive and seemingly illogical nature of dreams.

Finally, *The Sleeping Woes of the Blood Flower* was written in Trieste, in a garden that among other things, has a statue of James Joyce. The idea was originally to have Francisco, a character of my story *Breakfast at the Moon Palace*, being older and more disillusioned and the object of affection of two women that use his dreams to get their way.

That switched to the character being a lonely emperor, but it felt too macho. In the end, the story was guided to safe port by my friend Michelle Zheng, who gave me great feedback (and the character's name) and we have an Empress being seduced by irresponsible Queens. An unlikely influence were the videos that promoted the videogame *Star Wars: The Old Republic: Knights of the Eternal Throne*, as that was what made me turn the character into an emperor and later empress.

SUBJECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS AS A SELF-ORGANIZING
NEURAL DYNAMIC (NOTES FOR CLASS)

by Vicente del Toro Negral

Introduction

The purpose of these notes is twofold: To give those of you who haven't had the pleasure, a brief introduction to Complexity and to complex systems, which is a burgeoning field of study that is useful for understanding a variety of phenomenon that go from social structures, city infrastructure, to living beings and their inner workings, as it is the case with the human brain.

The other is to understand in a simple way, how subjective consciousness, that is, the way in which all your sensory input relates to your thoughts and your attention in relation to other stimuli, works in human beings. I also stress on dreams, because they are a different (and very valid) entry point to the subject.

I try to do this in the least technical way possible and I will say in class what parts will come in the finals.

I. Complexity. A caveat.

Self-organization is a topic that arises within the now fashionable branch of the sciences called Complex Systems Theory, which was put on the mainstream by the Santa Fe Institute (which was founded on 1984) and which entails chaos in deterministic systems. However, complex systems were being studied since the 70's and even before that, it's just that they didn't have a catchy term.

There is not a consensus on what constitutes a complex systems; Northrop states that there is a wide arrange of metrics, which include Information, Entropy, Algorithmic Information Content, Fractal Dimension, Excess Entropy, Metric Entropy among many others, yet there is no agreement on one that can be applied to all complex phenomena (Northrop, 2010, 324). Because of this lack of definition, there are many varieties of complexity sciences with diverging criteria: those that study of complex systems are a series of decentralized tribes, many of which don't talk to each other because they agree on the same things, and a couple of them because they don't.

The lack of a unifying theory of complexity is due to the subjective nature of human knowledge; we have a sensory parameter and a way of deriving knowledge that takes our body as a reference point, we can never hope to derive universal ideas. Because of this, I believe Complexity is like the Holy Spirit: You know it's there, but you don't know exactly how it works.

To understand complexity is to acknowledge that subjectivity is inevitable; doing so, allows us to see that depending of the factors at play and the overall context of the situation, what complexity is will vary. This is understood by Northrop, who considers complexity in general terms as "subjective measure of the difficulty in describing and modeling a system (thing or process) and thus being able to predict its behavior" (Northrop, 2010, xii). Or put in really simple terms: "Complexity lies in the eye of the beholder: what is complex to one observer may not be complex to another, based on the observer's knowledge and skills."

II. The dynamics of self-organizing systems

Understanding the difficulty of understanding complexity in the first place, we will see that self is usually understood as a process of spontaneous order; that is, the way in which something we understand as order arises from what we view as a disorder. This phenomenon arises in open systems (those that take their energy from outside its own boundaries), which tend to be living beings, and for the purposes of this paper, this will be the context of our study of self-organization and indirectly of complexity.

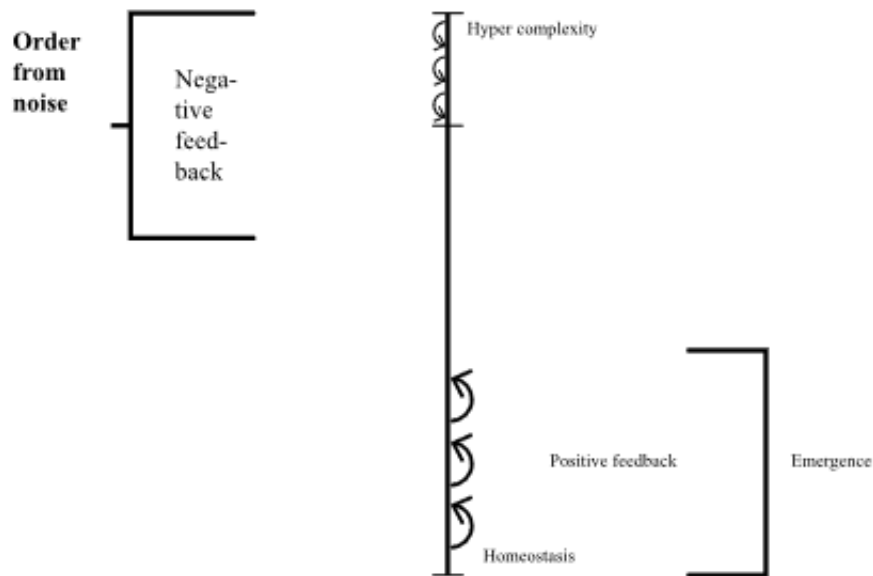
Self-organizing systems work to maintain themselves and as they degrade energy because of this, they depend on its environment to draw sustenance (by virtue of the second law of thermodynamics) (Morin). You are an open and self-organized system: You sleep, drink and eat to maintain yourself; you are a product and a producer of what keeps you alive.

A self-organizing system defines and redefines its boundaries and thus its autonomy by means of cycles; but because there are expenditures on these endeavors at the same time there is a dependence on the environment, which it uses to replenish itself and thus continue in an ongoing process (Morin; von Foerster, 2003, 3). In a self-organizing system, there is a “spontaneous emergence of collaborative behavior among elements in a system” at the same time the whole of the system interacts with its environment and as the system organizes and reorganizes its boundaries as its surroundings change, it also does the same as its own elements develop. Morin in his scholarship calls them “self-eco-re-organizing systems” (Montuori, 2008, xxxv).

You have cycles of self-organization where you define and redefine the boundaries of what keeps you alive, but you don’t feel them that much because you exist within a social system that works in many levels and that buffers the impact and which at the same time self-organizes, but that is well outside the scope of what I intend to explain.

What I really intend to do is to make you understand that this whole cycle of organizing and reorganizing of the system and its boundaries in an ongoing interaction. That is, my idea is to posit a model not of what is a self-organized system, but rather how that takes place. To do that, I will describe three states of organization: one of a stable, unmoving equilibrium (homeostasis), one of untelligible information and complete disarray (chaos or hypercomplexity) and one that mediates between both (criticality or complex state).

The transition from one state to the other can be described by means of two principles: one—that of order from noise—describes the rise of self-organization as a stabilization from states of chaos, the other—the emergence principle—describes the advent of new forms from stable behavior. And at the same time, this movement between the three states, takes place by means of positive and negative feedbacks.



i. Principles of self-organization

This process is triggered by internal variation processes referred as “noise,” and the way it generates an ordered configuration of elements is known as the *order from noise principle*. This was formulated by Heinz von Foerster, and in technical terms, it states that random perturbations will help a self-organizing system to find more stable states in its fitness landscape (Principia Cybernetica Web, Order from noise principle).

Now, the way in which noise is determined is not objective but rather is made by means of a subjective criteria by the observer; when a criteria for relevant information is issued, then one can know what counts as noise. So what counts as noise is relative to the observer (Ashby, 1968, 186). This principle then can be understood as a chain of negative feedback that institutes a spiral causal process in which random configurations of information or chaotic organization stabilizes.

Or, to put it simply: there are a set of states which you consider disorderly, and if out those random perturbations, what you deem as stable states are obtained, we are before this principle.

On the other hand, the emergence principle deals with the rise of unpredictable states or features from seemingly stable states. This type of self-organization is the field of study of dynamical systems theory, chaos mathematics and it is the notion that is most used when studying complex adaptive systems (Gros, 2008, 35, 40).

Emergent self-organization can arise in systems with many or few variables, but that are sensible to initial conditions; this means that any small change on the initial conditions can make the system grow exponentially or change unpredictably on a short time, which also makes long term prediction of their output impossible (Gros, 2008, 40).

The example par excellence of this is found in weather prediction: You can make relatively accurate predictions in a short span, but when you try to do it in a longer period, there might be exponential spurs of growth that will make that a friendly sunny morning turn into a ruthless rainy afternoon.

Despite this unpredictability, there are certain behaviors common to emergent phenomena, as they are subject to a series of positive feedbacks which develop in a spiral causal process that ends up in exponential growth or organization that renders the output unpredictable on any time scale (short or long).

ii. States of organization

The idea of homeostasis was crafted by American Physiologist Walter Cannon in 1932; this word is derived from the Greek words *homoios*, like, and *stasis*, to stand, to mean “to remain the same” or resistance to change (Principia Cybernetica Web; Homeostasis); it refers to a state of stability that maintains existing internal balances (Principia Cybernetica Web; Self-Organization).

A system of this nature functions on a distinction between itself and the environment, that is, this type of system has to define its internal organization in relation to everything else that surrounds and interacts with it; once this is so, the system will deal with the environment in terms of the possible states that the environment can take and it will seek to maintain its identity by means of cyclical causal relations that will augment or diminish its variety and that of its surrounding, in order to achieve stability (Principia Cybernetica Web; Homeostasis).

An example of this is an air conditioner, which has a stable state (the temperature you set for a room) and which can be perturbed by the outside temperature of the environment, and which will activate the system in order to return to the ideal state.

A state of criticality or complexity is also known as the “edge of chaos” by those that study complex, chaotic and dynamic systems. It refers to a type of organization that is not chaotic so as to perish by virtue of its instability, but that is neither in a completely stable so as to be unchanging and unable to adapt to the environment on the long term. For instance, my room as a teenager, which was a disaster to my mother, but which was something that I understood, knowing (most times, not always) where my things were.

To Gros, a “Self-organized criticality then signifies that the system effectively adapts to changes in the external parameters, e.g. to changes in the given time and length scales, in such a way that the stationary state becomes independent of those changes” (Gros, 2008, 98, 113). It could be understood colloquially as a stable instability: The system is not completely unstable so as to tear itself apart, but it is neither stable enough to be rigid; it has just the right amount of dynamicity to change and adapt and the right equilibria to maintain its coherence and structure in the process. This sort of behavior will be shown in systems of all sorts: physical, biological and social (Gros, 2008, 98, 105).

Now, regarding hypercomplexity or chaos (in the colloquial sense, not the mathematical), it must be noted that there is no objective criteria for determining it, rather, an observer has a criteria of it in relation to the activity that carries out or regarding the activities of an open system that adapts to its environment. This being said, chaos could be understood as a state where the organization of a system is untenable; it can also comprise randomness. A clear example of this is to imagine oneself in outer space without the proper equipment; it is an environment so hostile that we die within minutes of being immersed in it.

III. A quick model of the human brain

My beloved Andromeda asked me the other day “Why is this useful, seriously?” and to her I answer: Because if you can understand this type of dynamics, you can use them to understand a complex system without having to understand completely that parts that constitute it. The example that I will use here is that of the human brain and this will lead me to my model of dreams.

The brain has 86 billion neurons and it consists of in three different sections—cerebrum, brainstem and cerebellum—and it is divided into two hemispheres. The cerebrum has three lobes; frontal, parietal and occipital and the brainstem is composed of midbrain, pons and medulla oblongata. The human brain is a self-organizing system because somehow, in the development of a child’s brain, a bunch of neurons start to bundle and fire together and from that, all of this development takes place. That is, the brain can develop into what it is through emergent behavior.

On the other hand, the brain can also survive traumatic phenomenon and malfunctioning that send it into disarray; that resilience stems from the order from noise principle. However, at the same time the brain functions in a chain of firings (and misfirings) and can compensate unforeseen circumstances to a point, which all lead into a stable dynamic.

I then, do not need to know specifically all the mechanisms that comprise the brain, nor the chemistry that takes place in the firing of neurons and the interaction of different parts of the brain, to have an idea of how the brain behaves or may react in a specific context. This can be extrapolated to many other systems, making the right adjustments here and there, which emphasizes the importance of understanding self-organization and complexity. It is a valuable tool for understanding the reality in which we are immersed.

IV. Biological aspects of sleeping and dreaming

The human brain is a self-organizing mass of neurons that form specialized mechanisms that interact one another and that react in different ways to the stimuli that the body in which it is encased, receives. Bergson always had this very interesting take on how our brain worked; to him, it is a coping mechanism that allows ourselves to adapt to circumstances by discriminating the things to which we pay attention and that we perceive, in order to make action more effective. For instance (Bergson, 2013, 13):

...Your life in a waking state is a life of labor, even when you think you are doing nothing, for at every minute you have to choose and every minute exclude. You choose among your sensations, since you reject from your consciousness a thousand subjective sensations which come back in the night when you sleep...

This means that dreams are a state that arises out of all the stimuli that the brain received during its activity in the day and that come back when the body sleeps, for sleep is a state of disinterestedness (Bergson, 2013, 13). Now, what kind of stimuli are we talking about? Dreams arise out of a hodgepodge of memories, which include visual images, but there is more (Bergson, 2013, 6, 7):

I have spoken of visual sensations. They are the principal ones. But the auditory sensations nevertheless play a role. First, the ear has also its internal sensations, sensations of buzzing, of tinkling, of whistling, difficult to isolate and to perceive while awake, but which are clearly distinguished in sleep. Besides that we continue, when once asleep, to hear external sounds... There is, then, immanent in the tactile sensations during sleep, a tendency to visualize themselves and enter in this form into the dream... More important still than the tactile sensations, properly speaking, are the sensations which pertain to what is sometimes called internal touch, deep-seated sensations emanating from all points of the organism and, more particularly, from the viscera.

But what is exactly this state of disinterestedness? Well, it is one where we let go, no longer paying attention to things (Bergson, 2013, 13):

“You ask me what it is that I do when I dream? I will tell you what you do when you are awake. You take me, the me of dreams, me the totality of your past, and you force me, by making me smaller and smaller, to fit into the little circle that you trace around your present action. That what it is to be awake. That is what it is to live the normal psychical life. It is to battle. It is to will. As for the dream, have you really any need that I should explain it? It is the state into which you naturally fall when you let yourself go, when you no longer have the power to concentrate yourself upon a single point, when you have ceased to will...

Now, a state of disinterest does not mean that the rest of the human body has stopped to perceive stimuli. On the contrary (Bergson, 2013, 7):

...When we are sleeping naturally, it is not necessary to believe, as has often been supposed, that our senses are closed to external sensations. Our senses continue to be active. They act, it is true, with less precision, but in compensation they embrace a host of “subjective” impressions which pass unperceived when we are awake for then we live in a world of perceptions common to all men and which reappear in sleep, when we live only for ourselves. Thus our faculty of sense perception, far from being narrowed during sleep at all points, is on the contrary extended, at least in certain directions, in its field of operations. It is true that it often loses in energy, in tension, what it gains in extension. It brings to us only confused impressions. These impressions are the materials of our dreams. But they are only the materials, they do not suffice to produce them.

Even though, there are few aspects of this exposition that science has dispelled, this is a great starting point for a discussion about dreams that is based on the current advances of cognitive science. An interesting fact is that Bergson made this whole theory in 1912, and in many respects, what he said still holds true and at moments came decades before mainstream science, which is something that I find intriguing.

To further perfect what was said so far, I will use J.F. Pagel's *Dream Science*, a book that just came out and that makes interesting points on how to understand dreams from the viewpoint of cognitive science, all

while evading the pitfall of equating Rapid Eye Movement Sleep (REMS) to dreaming, that many in the field of dream science do.

The book begins with this beautiful analysis of cave paintings in which he concludes that reflexive consciousness, “the ability to self-consider the working of our brains and our bodies” (Pagel, 2014, 3) is necessary to dream, as the images we see in them require us to possess and put into use many of the skills necessary for creating art. That is, the primitive men that created cave painting were already capable of dreaming and conscious of themselves to a point where the rest of the animal kingdom was not.

Here I digress with him, as to the fact that the rest of animals are unable to dream. I think that they do dream, they just do it in a different way. The animals that sleep, are in the same disinterested state that we are and their brains guide their action in the same way that ours, discriminating perceptions and stimuli and many of them have REMS. The difference then, is that human beings dream in a reflexive way. Bergson coincides with Pagel on the fact that dreams are cognitive processes built upon perceptions and memories; curiously, Pagel tell us that dreams have a strong overlap with memories, as the former use the same type of memory processing as waking perceptual memory, with different types of memory being activated at different stages of sleep (Pagel, 2014, 54, 58).

Another component of dreams that is not explicitly mentioned by Bergson, although slightly implied, is emotional content. Pagel says that “Emotions, agitations, or disturbances of the mind consist of two components: emotional expressions and their associated conscious sensations (feelings)... These mental experiences form the “bedrock of our minds” affecting and coloring all of our actions and thought...” (Pagel, 2014, 125, 126).

Returning to dreams and memories, it is important to see that the relation between both is what gives way to the form in which dreams are expressed. The way we recall and express our memories is by means of a narrative where we are the reference point of what happens, despite the fact that we may not express it in a linear way. That is, dreams and memories are rarely if ever expressed in a linear and orderly fashion, it is us that make sense of their structure as we recall them. What is common in both is that we are the main character of memories and dreams. Pagel expresses this very nicely in this paragraph (Pagel, 2014, 142):

Dreams have literary form. Dreaming and literature utilize the same patterns of story organization... The mind organizes the thoughts and memories of the dream into narrative structures using thoughts and memories of the dream into narrative structures using some of the same approaches that we use in waking to describe perceptual experience.

This being said, it is time to ascertain a basic understanding of dreams from the perspective of cognitive science. They are (in human beings) a self-reflective cognitive process, where perceptions, memories and emotions act as the base material, and out of which there is a narrative form (Pagel, 2014, 208, 209):

A dream can be viewed as constituent memories, images, and emotions from sleep that we structure into a narrative story... Dreaming is part of a reflexive feedback system most active during sleep. It is composed of our visual, emotional, and memory content that has continuity

with our waking experience. In our dreams, this content exists and morphs in forms of consciousness that are outside our volitional control.

What I will also show in further paragraphs is that in addition of having a cognitive base material and a narrative forms, the way in which dreams unravel is self-organizing, much in the way I expressed it in the prior section.

V. Biological aspects of subjective consciousness

Like Complexity, Consciousness is impossible to define and explain, for every theory of it that will create of it will be right and wrong: It will understand an aspect of it, but it will never understand the totality. In this section I do not intend to explain what is Consciousness—like I did not try to explain Complexity—rather, I care to say how it behaves, which in turn will give us a better understanding dreams and a solid base from which to make a theory of what dreams are and how they behave.

Having said this, in studying consciousness, I will stick to the subjective experience of human beings. Bergson made the mistake—and well, knowing the state of the science of his time, I think he did alright—of understanding that being awake and being asleep were a binary relation, which had clearly defined opposites. Science has revealed us that there are different states of waking and of sleep and even some others lying in between and that they all qualify as states of consciousness (Pagel, 2014, 74).

Another common mistake is to think that attention and consciousness is the same thing; my elementary teachers made such mistake, and as I often proved to them, you don't need to pay attention to be there. It is also important to see that to be awake does not mean that you are attentive, this is also important to see, as sometimes my most distracted student had a better understanding of the class as the one that always paid attention. All states of consciousness have different parameters that adjust for different circumstances (Pagel, 2014, 75):

Behaviorally, each state has basic differences in the degree of perceptual isolation, type of thought processing, level of attention, memory access, teachability, and level of conscious control...

This being said, I will explain the difference between waking and sleeping as states of consciousness and from there I will go one by one as Pagel lists them without making a distinction whether they are waking or sleep, because as I said, I reject the dichotomy.

One thing that grandpappy Bergson got right was to understand waking as the reaction to stimuli; to be awake is to take all the information that your senses give you, put it all together as a single stream and then react to it. We are thinking in both waking and sleep, this is why they are states of consciousness, the difference is that our reaction to sensory stimuli varies from one state to the other. That is, there are different proportions of thought content and thought processing (Pagel, 2014, 79, 80).

Off to the races, then. First we have the *attentive state*, where all the stimuli we perceive, like the

sensation of being seated in a rough chair, the smell of coffee, the noise of people, sunlight, etc. is being processed by the perceptual systems, but then what could be called attentive processing systems, process parallelly that information and bring it under central cognitive control (Pagel, 2014, 82). That is, all that input comes under my conscious control and I notice an old man that stumbles and I get off my uncomfortable chair to grab him and thus avoid his fall. That is attentive (and also courteous).

However, that is not how we function all the time, and that is why we have *mind wandering*, “tasks such as autobiographical memory retrieval, envisioning possible futures, and conceiving the perspectives of others... a global process that is most active during the periods of relative rest that take place after times of intense focused waking” (Pagel, 2014, 82, 83). And thus, my teachers didn’t get the memo that paying attention all the time was unnatural to human learning.

A similar state to mind wandering is called “*creative waking*” by Pagel, which is a non-attentive waking state in which creative insights occur; daydreaming and waking fantasies are examples of it (Pagel, 2014, 86). Then we have *hypnosis*, which is a “...waking state that co-opts our system of attentional focus in an unusual way”; Pagel says (Pagel, 2014, 87):

...The primary characteristics of the hypnotic state is the loss of self-conscious source monitoring, sometimes called “reality testing”... Hypnosis, like sleep, is characterized by a suspension of peripheral awareness. Unlike sleep, hypnosis is a state of highly focused attention... Hypnosis has also been used to assist in the induction of lucid dreaming.

Meditation is another tricky conscious state that goes in between attentive and non-attentive; empirical studies have said that “...experienced meditators have activation in brain regions also involved with attention and introspection-some of the same areas activated in hypnosis” (Pagel, 2014, 89). *Sleep-onset dreaming* is different from other states of sleep (Pagel, 2014, 106):

They are short in duration. They often include intense visual imagery and only limited content or story. They are often reality based, and are sometimes associated with intense distress and anxiety. They can be exceedingly bizarre.

Rapid Eye Movement Sleep is the most studied type of dream, for a variety of reasons: It is easy to predict, as they last no longer than 90 minutes and are easily distinguishable from other states of sleeping. The dreams that take place in this state are longer, complex and usually narrateable. *Deep sleep* is the state that is usually considered dreamless; it is so because in this state of consciousness, perception are closed and no volition or self-awareness is detected. *Stage 2 sleep* is fondly called by Pagel as “junkyard of sleep,” because it is defined by excluding all the other states of sleep. The dreams that occur here are fragmented in their narrative structure and usually structured as a series of static images (Pagel, 2014, 110, 112, 118).

Lucid dreaming is probably one of the most known aspects of dreaming, as it has been dealt with over and over in fictions and movies, but we must say that if you recall any aspect of a dream, you are having a moment of lucidity. Therefore, lucid dreaming is not as easy to define, but it is known empirically that it

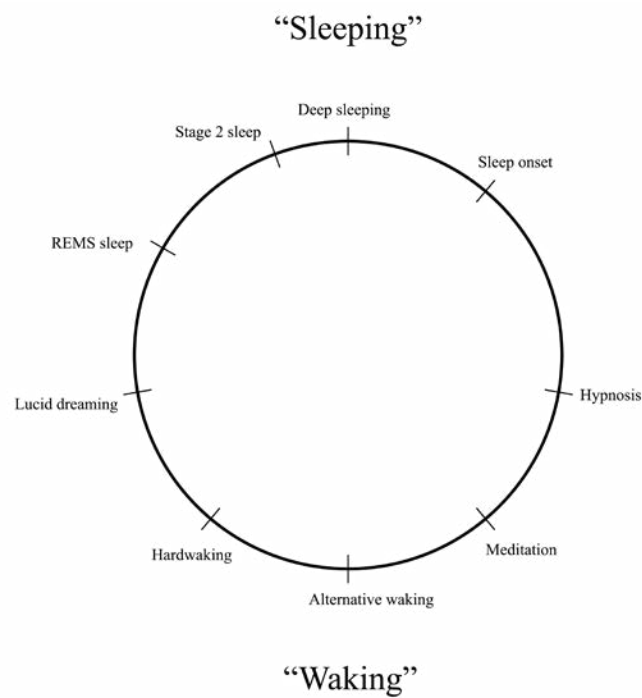
involves “...memory and visual systems that are not part of any other form of dreaming or sleep” (Pagel, 2014, 103). Pagel defines three primary characteristics (Pagel, 2014, 101-103):

- *Sleep state association*: The individual must be asleep.
- *Conscious control*: He or she can consciously control the action and content of the dream.
- *Capacity for volitional motor activity*: He can have volitional motor activity (eye movement, for instance) during sleep and use that to signal an external observer.

VI. Consciousness as a self-organizing dynamic

And well, my darling asked me when I gave her a draft of these notes: “how do all these states of consciousness relate to one another and to the self-organizing dynamic of the first section that gave me a headache?” For starters, our whole life is a series of balances made by reacting to stimuli and in which we transition from a state of balance to another; that is, a dynamic equilibrium. This is what I mean by consciousness as a self-organizing dynamic: Human consciousness, understood as a subjective cognitive system that reacts to stimuli.

At the same time, during the unfolding of our consciousness in our life, there is rarely a sharp distinction between one state and the other; rather, we transition from one to the other without noticing and also, we can be in states that are not clearly defined. Of all the states of waking and dreaming, I think we can describe their relation with the following picture:



i. Emergent self-organization

Let me put three examples of how this works on waking states, but before I do, I will take mind wandering as the baseline state of waking consciousness, as it is the most common and it is a state from which, if taken out, we may happily return (as I have seen you all do in my class at this point).

Example 1. There is a student in class and she is in her baseline state. Ideally, I mention the topic of dreams and she starts putting attention because that is of her interest; it is not a state that lasts forever, because when I touch a topic that might not pique her, she might revert to her original state. On this same vein, this student might have heard something about dreams that reminded her of something else, and she started processing an idea for a short story that she can present as homework in her Creative Writing Class; she was in a state of creative waking. In both cases, there is a positive feedback in her brain that leads different areas of the brain to be activated and to achieve for a brief time a state of dynamic equilibrium.

Example 2. I am in one of the mindfulness classes that the University offers and as I try breathing exercises, I am in a baseline state. Meditation takes time and practice to get right, but yields its fruit as I find myself in a moment where my thoughts are clear and I am relaxed but aware. This too is a state of dynamic equilibrium.

Example 3. I am at the psychologist's office talking about myself and we end up having an hypnosis session; when I leave my state of semi interestedness and reach one of complex semi-consciousness, I am again in a state of dynamic equilibrium.

This examples are somewhat reductive, because I make them too definite. For instance, I can be meditating and have a second of the desired state or a minute and then get back to my troubled mind; my student could also be going back and forth on her attention or her creative waking. It is also important to know that we are rarely if ever in a stable state: The way our mind behaves is context dependent and we are in a continuous flow between one state and the other.

During our sleep, we have the same dynamic as during our waking state, but in this case, we might take deep sleep as the baseline state. Through the night we might register these peaks in our sleep that might sometimes be registered or recall only if we wake up at that moment. For instance, sleep-onset dreams occurs 80% of the time at the moment of waking up, but if we let that moment pass, we may have had it, but forgotten it. REMS and stage 2 sleep dreams might occur as a break from periods of deep sleep and for a brief period of time (remember that REMS lasts no longer than 90 minutes). Lucid dreaming might happen by accident for a moment or might also be induced by means of meditation; there are meditative practices like dream yoga that delve on this.

ii. Stabilized self-organization

One thing that I did not mention much, because I did not want to complicate the topic is that of how we self-organize coming from a state of chaos; that is, when the baseline is a state of sensory or cognitive

overwhelming that does not allow me to react. We too face those all the time during our day to day. A clear example of this has been the moment of clarity and attentiveness that some professionals have experience at their height of their stress; soldiers, surgeons, extreme athletes and others have reported on this.

Conclusions

- Subjective consciousness is not a static phenomenon, where there is a single state; rather is a mish mash of mental states from which we drift in our daily lives
- Similarly, there is no binary between waking and sleeping.
- Dreams are complex phenomenon that emerge from perceptions, memories and emotions and which are bound to the person that has them. They are personal.
- The subjectivity of human beings limits the scope of the knowledge they create: Concepts like Complexity and Consciousness are absolute metaphors: “Something known to exist which cannot be otherwise described” (Pagel, 2014, 64).
- On that front, knowing the dynamics of subjective consciousness is one of the best things we can hope for to understand.

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MANGEKYO BLUES



It was a sunny relaxed Sunday and instead of enjoying myself in a park, or just wandering about in Paris, I was content with watching paint dry. Well, not in the literal sense, but I was content with lying on my bed, listening to my blues records. I had fallen asleep with the sound of rain. It had gone on the whole morning and my ambition for getting out of the house was thwarted for a second consecutive day. I was bored of drawing, listening to music, reading; goddammit, I had even organized all my clothes.

Hello.

Hey there, dude.

I found it somewhat strange that I was not scared or surprised by a girl lying on a hammock that was upside down my bed, on my roof. As a matter of fact, I knew this girl, I think. He's always indoors, I know that for a fact. Although it was definitely weird that I seem to know this boy quite well, despite seeing him (at least I think) for the first time.

Lovely day, isn't it?

Not to me, it isn't. What's your excuse this time for not getting out of the house?

What's keeping you from getting out of yours? Robot apocalypse? A totalitarian technocratic world order?

Rain. A lot of it, as well as some random hail.

For me it's lack of will.

I know now, I have written stories about him.

I know now, I have written stories about her.

You are such an indoorsman, Trent.

And you an outdoorswoman, Anne Marie.

Most people call me AM.

I know, because your parents agreed on the initials, but not quite on the name.

Yes. Mom says Anne Marie, and Dad says Ana María.

Well, I am picking a side.

And you, could it be that your parents named you after Trent Reznor?

Who knows?

We seem to know almost everything about each other.

I guess that we are dreaming each other, as we are apparently unaffected by the absurdity of all this.

You mean dreaming about each other or creating each other through dreams?

I had meant “about,” but it might be the second case. It could be like that Borges’ story.

Which one?

Circular ruins.

Maybe it’s like that Paul Dano movie, where the guy wishes a Manic Pixie Girlfriend into life, but in any case I dreamed up a Lazy Pixie Boyfriend?

Am I your boyfriend?

No idea. Do you want to be?

Sure, why not?

That’s the spirit.

Maybe you and I are being dreamed up by someone else, who is making us dream up each other.

Whoa dude, that is so meta.

Like, the fifth dimension?

Who knows?

In any case, I enjoy the company.

Why, thank you, dreamed-up boyfriend.

It had to be a dream. I mean, why else would a girl in a hammock lie upside down in a blatant disregard to the laws of gravity? Also, I realized that even in my dreams I am a lazy bastard that refuses to go outside. It was a dream. Dreams (or what little we remember of them) make sense in a way that reality doesn’t; to me there is no Order or Chaos, just context-dependent organizational schemes.

So how is Seattle?

Too rainy. How is Paris?

Too sunny. Besides, we moved here because my mother wanted to attend Foucault’s lectures.

My mother is a big fan too. What is it about the man? Is it the sexy bald head? It’s got to be.

Visually, he is the funniest thinker since Marx.

I know, too memeable.

We would talk and talk, and because it was a dream, I wouldn’t necessarily keep track of the whole conversation. We had a lot of things in common, and in many respects we were like day and night. It is still the same Earth, though.

Say, I have this theory about dreams.

Lay it on me.

Dreams are kaleidoscopic.

That is more reality to me, I mean, it is so broad that everyone sees a different aspect to it.

Okay, it is like a kaleidoscope when you don't watch it.

You mean like a state of pure probability? What about people and the sense they make of things, the way they make probability into an actual thing?

...

Keep up, lazy boy.

Are you sure you are 15?

Yeah, just like you.

I think that dreams are both the probability state and the possible mental states and representations that subjects can create of it.

Like a parallel dimension of sorts?

Made of all possibilities and understanding and perception of possibilities.

An infinite information loop cycle...

Maybe.

Okay, you are still my boyfriend.

So, in this space, we are the possibility of meeting one another...

And so, we create one another.

Quantum Borges.

Who is going to understand this?

Does it matter?

Nah.

For one, it feels good to be understood by someone my age. I suspect my little sister can, but she's busy being normal and loved by everyone.

My older brother and sister don't live with me anymore, and they are way older, so yeah, ditto.

I hate school, teachers say they are “stern,” but in reality are mean to me and they give me boring stuff to read. I hate people my age, who are worried about menial things and can get outside their head for a second.

I take it that you are not the captain of the cheerleading team?

I take it that goofing off is your brand of teenage rebellion.

Better than booze and cigarettes.

In what way?

It is easier to justify punishment, when it is for smoking, than for not doing your homework, but reading the Name of the Rose (and finish it) during class.

You still get punished.

Yes, but it is not on grounds that I am harming myself; it is for something as stupid as non-homogeneity.

You still get punished.

And you, you surely get punished for being mean to one-dimensional people.

Very (very) guilty.

Because they are boring.

Very (very).

So being mean to boring people is in a way doing the same as them: You are not getting outside your own head, you just justify it better.

Okay, you're fired.

No, I'm not.

Okay, fine.

AM starts eating a green apple as she swings back and forth on her hammock. Dreams are not necessarily rational... :), I just thought it would look cool.

BACK TO REALITY

As both of them wake up, each grabbed a piece of paper and starting scribbling the other's face; fresh off sleeping, their memory of it would not be contaminated by further perception.

Trent looks more like his mother than his father; he has her nose, her eyes and partly, her hair. However, in attitude and in his walk, he is very much like him. He has this short straight brown dark (hers is lighter) hair, blue eyes, straight nose and white skin; oddly for a guy, his lips are a bit full and his eyebrow is so well defined that I don't doubt some girl would envy him. He likes to dress with jacket and tie, but with jeans and Chuck Taylors.

AM was named after his two grandmothers, one Anne Marie, and the other Ana María; however, a framework arrangement was struck on the initials. She looks neither like her parents, rather like her paternal grandmother: long chocolate hair, expressive green eyes, full lips, fair skin, thick eyebrows that are painstakingly delineated, and a straight nose that is not too big or small for her face. She has this little scar, half an inch above her forehead.

THE RIDER

Ever since summer started, my days were more or less a copy of one another: Wake up, make breakfast, do laundry and/or clean the house a bit, then cook something for later and clean the kitchen up; then go to the garage and work on what really matters: Work. Work. Eat. Work. Work. Workout. Shower. Dinner. Beer(s). Sleep. Repeat.

For two years I had saved some money so I could do this: Restore a 1970 AMC Rebel Machine, an underrated muscle car that I saw on a junkyard while apprenticing for a mechanic. Despite having a single (and great) year of existence, the Machine was barely remembered; it came from a company that when remembered, it is disdainfully.

American Motors is a footnote brand that came to be when two independent car companies (Hudson and Nash) merged and who were always on the shadow of Ford, GM and Chrysler. Because they had scarce resources in a big boy's world, their cars were not usually the greatest thing ever, however, the Rebel Machine is a charming little thing that should be noticed. The Rebel "Machine" was a response against the GTO, and they put a 390 cubic inch v8, 6.4 liter engine under the mid-sized Rebel; yielding 340HP (SAE gross, not net) and with a ridiculous torque of 430 pound-feet at 3600RPM, this sweet baby could go from 0 to 60 in 6.4 seconds, which is quite baller on this day and age.



Engines were on my blood as my dad had been a mechanic and a racer, and I remember him when I was a kid, on this very garage, tinkering with a similar car. He died when I was seven or eight, as a consequence of a car crash during a race, he managed to make it to the hospital and died on the next morning of his injuries. He had left me this house, where he and uncle Marc grew up, tinkering with motorcycles, on this small town by the sea. I remember we would visit the house sometimes on the summer.

My mother later remarried and I always clashed with my stepdad and his “my house my rules” attitude. When I turned 18, I apprenticed for a mechanic for a year and found my darling Rebelle, buried in snow, scorned and neglected; as I had saved money, I came to live here on the summer with my uncle Marc, who had been keeping the house for me, giving it maintenance and renting it; he also gave me the revenues now that I was 18, which I added to my savings. I ended up buying the car, towing it to the garage of the beach house and setting up shop, starting the repairs and getting the necessary parts.



As a peace offering, I came back to the city to attend engineering school, but I lived on an apartment of my own. However, nothing could stop me from coming back to this old sleepy town by the sea and work on my car on the summer, like I had done last year. I was lucky that my uncle Marc had managed to get a writer to rent the house after I had left, and who was willing to have me over the summer in exchange for me doing the cleaning of the house.

I understood the charm of getting away to the sea and work on your passion, although mine was not a sea town where you could find golden sand and swim or dive; sure, you could do that if you had a neoprene suit, which Richie, the writer did. He was some 40 years old; he had written this really strong debut novel when he was just 25, followed by a string of successful books, endless touring and work without rest that had left him completely burned out. Having been thrashed and defeated by his own success, he wandered around looking for a place to recover and found it in rocky shores, beautiful cliffs, perennially cold water and wary locals that eventually warm up.

I would leave him some coffee ready at 8, as I was up by 6, whereas he would be by 10 or 11. Sometimes we would lunch together: I would explain him my progress with the car and he would tell me about a short story or an essay or he would ask me to bounce around an idea, especially if it involved cars.

“So you’re restoring a 1970 AMC Rebel Machine?”

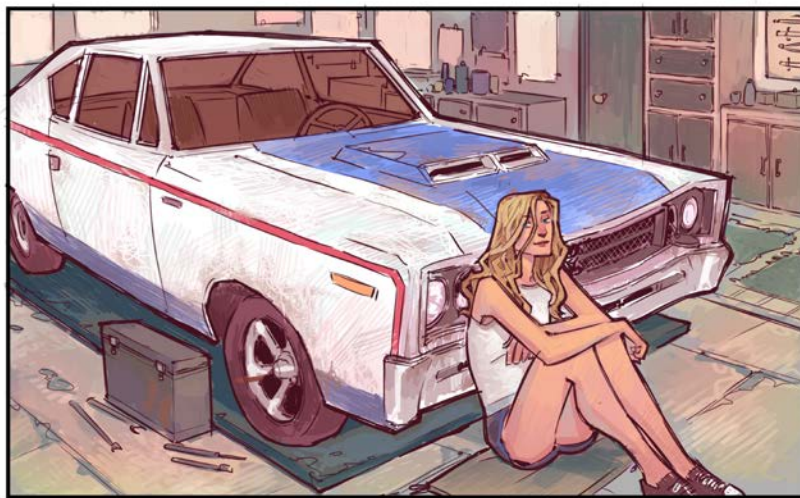
“A really good car,” I said, “although not common among muscle car lovers.”

“Why that car?”

“I saw that car in a junkyard while doing some errands. It spoke to me and it became sort of an obsession, I later found an old picture where my Dad had owned one; I remember him vaguely working on a muscle car, but up till that moment I did not remember what was the car. It turns out that my mother sold the car so I wouldn’t turn out a racer and a mechanic like him, which as you can see, was a miserable failure.”

“You are a rider, man,” he said once after taking a sip from his beer.

Richie was this skinny fellow with short light brown hair and always a bit unshaven; during this summer we became good friends and he sometimes he acted as an older brother and some others as a father/uncle figure. He had hit it off with Lydia, one of the locals that had a diner downtown; she also had a daughter two years my junior named Lily: a beautiful dyed blonde with slightly tan skin, dark blue eyes and endless legs. We would act as a very coordinated team, for when I would take Lily out somewhere, he would sneak into Lydia’s house and viceversa.



Lily was your typical small town rebel: She wanted to go live in Los Angeles and make it as an actress; she liked to smoke, drink, was popular at school and thought the world owed something to her because she grew up in an uninteresting place. Sometimes she would bemoan my car obsession, but I knew she was itching for me to fix it enough to give her a ride.

Now, my nights were mostly different from my days, which could be counted as average. With or without Lily on my bed I would have these weird dreams: in them I could move freely around the world, like remote viewing or the astral projection you see on TV or the movies. Now that I remember, it all started when I came here last summer.

At some point I decided to travel the solar system and then feeling cocky, I managed to push for the nearest star (and actually get there). Initially, I would do a Superman and just fly around, but then I came up with the idea of imagining a completed AMC Rebel Machine and ride the Universe in it. I started seeing more and more each night: Stars and nebulae of beautiful colors and inverosimile shapes, which I later found out actually existed, by looking at images of outer space on Google.

I realized this was not a hallucination or a trick one day in which I took a nap before a date with Lily and I made it over her house and saw her in her room prancing around in her underwear, deciding what dress she would wear later in the night. I later verified the make and color of said undergarments (Sorry but not sorry).

Somehow I became obsessed of seeing the edge of the Universe by travelling in my dreams, I don't know why. I would try and try, each time getting closer but still being too far away. My daytime obsession was too giving me trouble, as despite being mostly fixed, the engine wouldn't start and on the rare occasion it did, the engine sounded like it was being tortured in hell. I worked at it for a week straight and I could just not find out what was broken. To get things off my mind, I told Richie about my dreams:

"Damn dude," he said, "you truly are a rider in every sense."

"Yeah, but, what does the whole edge of the Universe thingy mean?"

"I don't know, but it reminds me of this passage of the Monkey King."

As you know, that guy is a very powerful demon prone to all sorts of mischief, and overall a legendary warrior. He gets promoted by the Gods to heaven, hoping that getting him involved in the hierarchy gets him to comply and chill the fuck out. But these proud bastards get him to tend to the stables, which doesn't suit him, so he starts to wreck things; they make him responsible of the Heavenly Gardens, but he doesn't get invited to the feasts, so he rebels.

Long story short, Heaven being overwhelmed, asks for the Buddha to intervene; he bets the Monkey King that he cannot escape from his palm and MK is all like "easy peasy." So he flies to the end of the world and encounters five pillars, believing that he is on the end of Heaven and proceeds to mark the pillars by pissing on them and declares him a great sage equal to heaven. When he flies back he realizes that he never left the hand of the Buddha and that the pillars were his fingers.

"Buddha must've been like, gross dude."

So pissed hand aside, the Buddha turns his hand into a mountain and seals him there with a paper talisman with the mantra Om Mani Padme Hum in golden letters, and MK remained jailed for five centuries.

"So there is no edge or what?"

"You figure it out."

I was puzzled and not sure what to make of this story. It's not like the Buddha was to seal me away

in a mountain for being a nuisance; my stepdad would have been down with that, tho. I would also tell Lily stories about my friends, whom I met in boarding school and who were the people I would ride for; I should tell Richie about them, as they could provide suitable book material. Lily's dad had been an oil rig worker who died when she was 12 and despite loving her Mom dearly, sometimes they could not get along. Through her I have come to realize that sometimes my step dad wasn't such a big asshole, I was.

My friends had missed me, but liked the prospect of me bringing an awesome car back to town and riding it with them. I would Skype with them pretty often and they would send pics of their vacationing. After 2 summers of hard work, the car was almost functional, but the engine was still the source of great woes. Of course, much work was still ahead: I needed to find someone who could rework the seats and the dash, and a new paintjob was in order. One night after enduring seemingly endless frustration, I just made a rash move and took a wild lunge at getting to the end of the Universe.



Riding hard, I passed entire galaxies like they were nothing, I saw black holes and collapsing stars but I kept going. I got past my previous endeavors with ease, but I insisted on more and more without relenting. I started to feel really heavy, like someone had put weights all over my body, but I kept going.

One more step, one more star...one galaxy and then the other... Until I finally felt like I broke through a barrier or a membrane of sorts. I was before this massive red nebula I had not seen in pictures of outer space before. I had failed, I was not in the edge, although I was in a place I had never seen before.



As I was getting close to it, I saw another Rebel Machine parked, but instead of the white-blue-red color scheme, his was an inverted color scheme: black, cyan and orange; next to it was this guy in his late 20's, early 30's with black hair just like me, as well as my eyes and my nose.



“Hello Jim,” he said, very relaxed.

“Hi Dad,” I said on instinct.

“You’ve made quite the trip, eh?” he said.

“You could say that,” I joked, but I still failed.

“Why?”

“I didn’t get to the edge,” I said.

“Is there such a thing? I mean, people thought the Earth was flat...”

“If there is no edge,” I said, “what is out there?”

“You.”

“Me?”

“Yes. No matter how hard you try, you will always be at the center of the Universe, as it starts with your (and every living being’s) observation.”

“Then what do I do?”

“Acknowledge that.”

“You can’t get away from being you, and what comes with that. And you can’t be someone else (nor you should be), no matter how hard you try.”

“I guess.”

“You are a Rider, just like me,” Dad said, “but still you are your own man.”

“I am, I guess that having lost you so early, I just wanted to have a heartfelt connection with you.”

“You are having it right now.”

“Are you a ghost?”

“Not yet,” he said, “I am very much alive. As I got dragged out of the wreck and sent to the hospital, I just left my bed for a last ride, one where I could find you and as dreams are not necessarily bound by time and space, here we are.”

“Indeed.”

“Don’t overthink things,” he said, “sometimes you have the solution staring at your face. Relax. You have grown into quite the young man. I promise that I will be with you, somehow, every step of the way.”

I woke up and immediately got out of bed, skipped the daily routine and went straight for the car, opened the hood and there it was, staring me at my face. I once I fixed what was wrong, I turned the engine and gave this magnificent roar that was so loud that I could hear Richie’s scream from upstairs as he woke up. That roar was just poetry.

Thanks Dad.

The Rider

*A boy told me
if he roller-skated fast enough
his loneliness couldn't catch up to him,
the best reason I ever heard
for trying to be a champion.*

*What I wonder tonight
pedaling hard down King William Street
is if it translates to bicycles.*

*A victory! To leave your loneliness
panting behind you on some street corner
while you float free into a cloud of sudden azaleas,
pink petals that have never felt loneliness,
no matter how slowly they fell.*

—Naomi Shihab Nye

WEDNESDAY IS OPEN MIC NIGHT AT VATO'S











THESE SHITS ARE DREAM COPS.

WHEN GOVERNMENTS AND CORPORATIONS FOUND OUT THAT THE DREAM WORLD COULD BE USED AS AN INFORMATIONAL HIGHWAY THAT WAS ALMOST LIMITLESS, THEY SET OUT TO "COLONIZE" IT. THEY USE MACHINES AND DRUGS TO STABILIZE THEIR CONSCIOUSNESS, NOT TALENT.

LUCKILY, THIS ALSO MAKES THEM REALLY BAD AT FIGHTS.

HOWEVER, WHAT THEY LACK IN MIGHT, THEY MAKE UP IN NUMBERS...

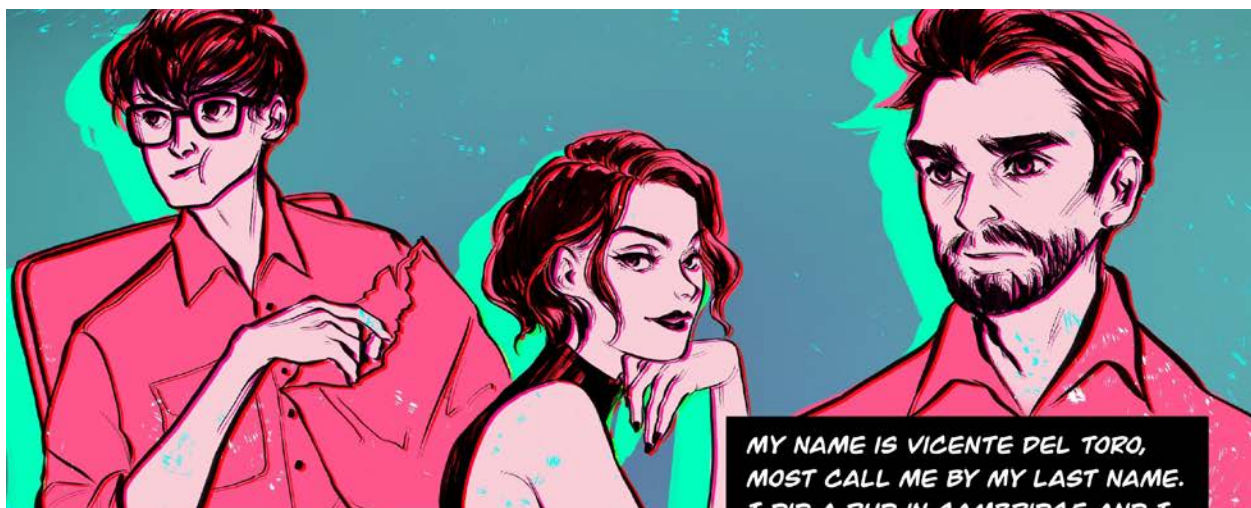
AFTER ALL, THEY EMBODY AN AGREEMENT BETWEEN ALMOST ALL THE POWER-SEEKING GROUPS THAT HAVE EVER EXISTED.



VATO'S IS AN ONIRIC DIVE BAR. IT WAS FOUNDED AS A BUDDHIST SHRINE DEDICATED TO BATOU KANNON, A BODDHITSAVA THAT EMBODIES COMPASSION.

SOMEONE MISUNDERSTOOD "BATOU KANNON" AS "VATO CAÑÓN" AND THE NAME VATO'S STUCK; IT BECAME A POPULAR SPOT FOR DREAMERS THAT HAVE TREATED IT AS A BAR.

THIS PLACE WAS FOUNDED BY FRANKU, A 17TH CENTURY MONK WHO ACHIEVED ENLIGHTENMENT.



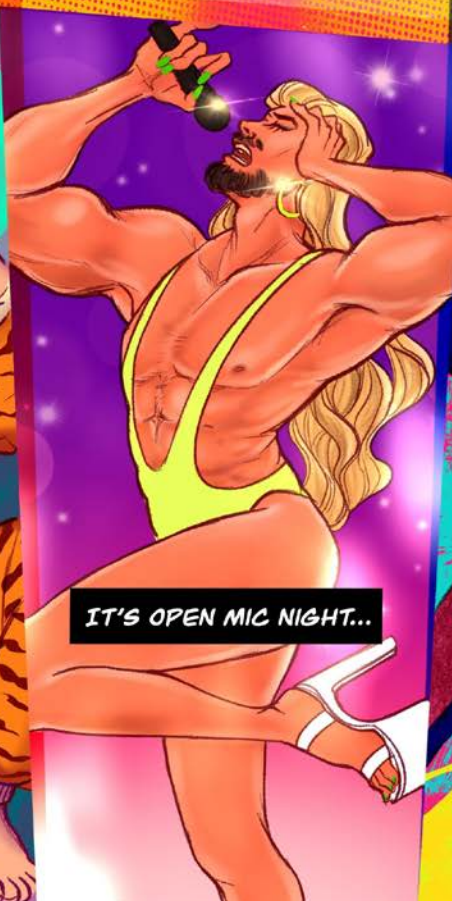
THIS IS CRACKER JACK.
HE TEACHES MATH AT BERKELEY.
HE IS AN UNPARALLELED FIGHTER.
HE IS ALSO MY ROOMMATE.

MY NAME IS VICENTE DEL TORO,
MOST CALL ME BY MY LAST NAME.
I DID A PHD IN CAMBRIDGE AND I
TEACH AT THE PHILOSOPHY
DEPARTMENT AT UC BERKELEY.

I WRITE SOME OF THIS STUFF
IN PAPERS, BUT MOST OF IT GOES
INTO NOVELS THAT I PUBLISH
UNDER A PSEUDONYM.

ANDROMEDA DE JESUS IS A
PHOTOGRAPHER AND FILM STUDENT.
SHE IS ALSO A FORMER STRIPPER
AND HAS PUBLISHED PHOTO BOOKS
ABOUT THE LIFE.

TONIGHT IS A FUN NIGHT.



IT'S OPEN MIC NIGHT...



... HERE AT VATO'S.



















DREAMS AS COSMOLOGICAL INFORMATION PROCESSING.
A BRIEF IDEA.

by Vicente del Toro Negral

Introduction

Dreams are known to us all as a set of images, feelings, thoughts and sensorial input that take place during sleep; through the course of human history, they have been understood as mystical phenomena, they have been used to tap into the creative aspects of the human mind, and to understand the latter within the context of scientific study. They are usually studied by psychologists of all orientations, while philosophers have centered on dreams as part of an epistemological problem that began with Descartes.

However, I have yet to see (and there is probably an attempt out there) a serious effort to create a philosophy (and metaphysic) of dreams that can be able to encompass and unify the biological, psychological and spiritual/mystical facets of this phenomenon. This is a necessary thing, because there seems to be no effort in reconciling the sciences with spiritual and philosophical traditions, despite them not being necessarily opposing forces (this is in part one of the main pillars of first and second generation quantum cybernetics).

That being said, this article offers a metaphysical elaboration of dreams that is based on biology. My approach to consciousness will be panpsychistic in nature and I will follow the approaches pioneered by G. Ravichandran and by Emily Eckhart, who has made several empirical proof of ideas and experiments of Jacobo *Grinberg* Zylberbaum. This is also useful because it opens the possibility of a different way of understanding dreams that could lead to possible empirical corroborations; that is, more work for Emily.

I will first state the point of departure: understanding dreams as a self-organized neural dynamic and then to see the viewpoints of Ravichandran and Eckhart to note where we could add dreams as a variable. I will then state what I consider are the cosmological aspects of sleeping and dreaming and will intertwine all of this with the neural aspect of dreams in order to present a brief model to the reader, which I hope will foster conversations and debates on this topic.

I. Point of departure

In a prior two-part article, I made a model of subjective consciousness as a self-organizing dynamic (Del Toro 2014, 2015). From it you can understand that the human brain is a mass of neurons that organized themselves into distinct neural mechanisms within the body they are encased in and that serve to make it react. This translates into the transition between several states of consciousness, some of which are within what is defined as wakefulness and others as sleeping, and many others as being oddly in between.

This more less ended up being a refurbishing version of what Bergson thought the brain was: an adaptive mechanism that helped us cope with what surrounds us by discriminating the things to which we pay attention and that we perceive, in order to make action more effective. In my paper, I also made a model of dreams as a self-organizing dynamic, which I also based on him; he was my point of departure, which I later perfected with a series of cognitive science authors.

I concluded that all living beings have a form of dreaming, although what made that of human beings

so different from others is that it is self-reflexive by nature. Dreaming in human beings is a self-reflective cognitive process, where perceptions, memories and emotions act as the base material, and out of which there is a narrative form and which unravels in a self-organized dynamic. Now, dreaming is not a homogeneous process, rather, there are different states of sleeping, which may happen in succession or one of them may be prevalent during sleep. These are (Pagel, 2014, 101-3, 110, 112, 118):

- *Rapid Eye Movement Sleep* is the most studied type of dream. The dreams that take place in this state are longer, complex and usually narrateable.
- *Deep sleep* is the state that is usually considered dreamless; it is so because in this state of consciousness, perception are closed and no volition or self-awareness is detected.
- *Stage 2 sleep* is defined by excluding all the other states of sleep. The dreams that occur here are fragmented in their narrative structure and usually structured as a series of static images.
- *Lucid dreaming* is probably one of the most known aspects of dreaming, although it is not as easy to define as it is commonly thought. It has three primary characteristics: a) Sleep state association; b) conscious control; c) capacity for volitional motor activity.

Dream states develop in an emergent dynamic where we progress from a baseline state (homeostasis in my framework) to a state of dynamic equilibrium (not in complete order, but not entirely random) by means of positive feedback. Taking deep sleep as the baseline state, we can see that through the night we might register these peaks in our sleep that might sometimes be registered or recall only if we wake up at that moment.

For instance, sleep-onset dreams occurs 80% of the time at the moment of waking up, but if we let that moment pass, we may have had it, but forgotten it. REMS and stage 2 sleep dreams might occur as a break from periods of deep sleep and for a brief period of time (remember that REMS lasts no longer than 90 minutes). Lucid dreaming might happen by accident for a moment or might also be induced by means of meditation; there are meditative practices like dream yoga that delve on this.

II. Quantum cybernetics and dreams

At the instance of Ravichandran, Nash and Eckhart I have delved over the years on the scholarship of Henri Bergson and I have always been impressed by the fact that someone born came up with a framework so sophisticated that he preempted many insights developed in quantum physics by 40 years. When he comes to cognitive aspects, he was also very ahead of his time, as he stated in *Dreams* and in *Mind Energy* things that are held as true by cognitive science and second order cybernetics.

However, it troubled me a bit that with all the fireworks that he did on *durée* and memory, he never extended that cosmology to dreams, even when lucid dreaming, C.G. Jung and *milam* have provided fertile ground for such an exploration. Maybe he didn't have the time, maybe he didn't make much of it, but hey, his ideas on dreams were postulated on 1912 and as more than a century has passed, they still hold water and

much better than some theories made in later years. So maybe this paper is a bit of a philosophical hissyfit.

However, what I do think that is missing from the cosmologic and philosophical framework that has been developed by quantum cybernetics is precisely, a theory of dreams. I do think that there is a cosmological aspect of dreaming that is yet to be explored and hence, here I was writing this paper. On this section, I will make a brief analysis of Ravichandran (not that I don't like Passeron Lavac) and of Eckhart's general ideas and signal where is a gap that can be filled with the study of dreams.

a) Ravichandran

Even though the old man was a very prolific writer, the backbone of this work was "The Universe as a transcendental information processing system," of which I will make an exegesis of the fourth edition (Ravichandran 2005). In the first edition, which was published in 1992, he crystallized around of fifteen years of articles and deliberations that had taken place in this intellectual circle of quantum cybernetician. This version was actually edited by Passeron-Lavac before his mysterious retirement (or some say disappearance).

The point of departure is the wave-particle duality and conscious observation being what collapses wave into particle; that is, what transforms matter from being a set of probable states of a thing to being an actual thing. This has massive implications: if the choices in observation influence the outcome, consciousness and not matter is the fundamental material of reality. This pervades at all levels of the Universe: from the Newtonian physics, to Relativistic to subatomic physics by means of the observer, but each has their set of rules that reinterpret such principle.

Awareness is what makes for an observation that collapses wave into particle, and this is so, because the subject is making a self-referential distinction. It is important to clarify that living beings make this distinction automatically, but when the mind of the observing subject is conscious that it is distinct from what surrounds it, that is when we are before the quality that Goswami talks about. Awareness also implies a choice, this is why he always paraphrased Descartes by saying: "*Opto, ergo sum*: I choose, therefore I am."

Awareness brings forth a double ended loop that has upward and downward causation: The former comes to be when elemental particles interact in a way that determines all possibilities and probabilities, given a dynamical situation which is measurable and subject of scientific study; the latter takes place when there is consciousness in the act of collapsing wave into particle.

Now, Ravichandran was also one of the first to make a correlation between classical and quantum computing; to him, the brain was a computer that had classical components that allowed the mind to act situated in time and space and in reaction to stimuli provided by an environment (as a guide to action, Bergson would say); however, it was also a quantum computer that had access to a global consciousness that had a registry of all that was. He picked up on Bergson and made a theory of memory where it was outside of time, space and the human brain.

Curiously enough, this is where the cosmology of dreams could nicely fit, within the confines of the interaction between the quantum brain and the universal consciousness. It is also here where C.G. Jung can also make his nest. Ravichandran's collective consciousness speaks of us not only of a universal memory, but also a repertoire of abstract actions and thought which all livings use in a concrete way; you could even re-make Plato's *Theory of Form* on this framework. In this context, what Jung called archetypes, Ravichandran calls pure mental states.

So with Ravichandran, the aware observer brings forth a probable reality into actuality and does it by dividing itself into a subject and object of his own observations. The Universe is created and maintained by the subject but at the same time created it by fostering the conditions necessary for it to arrive. At the same time, the Universe is connected to the subject by means of quantum computing, which also attempts to justify in physics the idea of Maya: the illusion that the phenomenal world is real. There are other planes (forms, archetypes, memories) that exist outside time and space, which are the rules of the phenomenal world that we perceive and in which we act.

To Ravichandran, the separatedness from the whole of consciousness (and the Universe) is an illusion generated by the classical aspect of the brain-mind and the Universe is made so it can observe itself; it is a system that experiences itself by means of subjective consciousness and with the general consciousness it creates a universal hologram that holds all the information that was and ever will.

b) Eckhart

On her now classic "Biology of archetypes" (Eckhart, 2012) published here some years back, Emily Eckhart breathed new life into Ravichandran by proving experimentally that quantum computing exists on a biological level and its quite common: you have it in birds, bacteria and plants. She also interpreted Hameroff and Penrose's OR-ORCH theory of consciousness in order to explain empirically the quantum aspects of the brain by means of the decentralized operation of microtubulae in the brain.

She also built on Ravichandran's idea that we relate to the Universe as an information processing system and to a collective consciousness by means of quantum computing; she also took Jung's idea of archetype and related completely to this cosmological framework, that when you combine it with how Bergson and later Ravichandran treated memory, makes it an interesting set of theories.

Now, what she made differently that is worth noting is that she viewed archetypes not only from an abstract perspective, which is more less what Ravichandran does with memory, but also viewed it from a subjective perspective and intertwined it into a dynamic, which furthered strengthened his position. This is something that was missing with the classic framework: despite studying consciousness and awareness extensively, the cognitive aspects of memory and how they related to the nonlocal model were never explained. This she uses not only to write a love letter to C.G. Jung, but also to make bridges between individual and collective unconscious, subjects and archetypes and the nature of archetypes and the human ego.

However, what I find missing is that dreams as a way in which the unconscious unravels in all its iterations to give way into a “collective mind” is never considered. This is where I will make my stand in the following topics and I will take into consideration the subjective-objective approach that she took on archetypes in order to do that with dreams, relating the cosmological model that I am about to offer to the reader with the starting point I made of the dreams as a self-organizing dynamic.

III. Cosmological aspects of sleeping and dreaming

Having said where dreams could be included in the body of work of Ravichandran and Eckhart in hopes of improving the existing cosmo-cognitive framework, I will start by saying that in this process, sleep is a vital component. If the Universe is a massive computer, sleep is how many animals (and human beings) sync with it and update it; the animals that do not sleep, quantum compute in other forms, but update the consciousness periodically nonetheless.

Now, when I say synching and updating, I mean of two different processes: The first process is one where a living system—which has a temporal rhythm—coordinates with the Universe—which has another rhythm; when we do sleep enough, our rhythms are not entirely consonant and this puts a stress on the body. What I mean by the second is when we connect with the general consciousness, which exist in a nonlocal plane.

This is very important to note, because it makes more feasible the idea that we connect with the Universe by means of our brain processes. If the human brain is a mixture of classical computing elements (neurons) and quantum (microtubulae)¹, which are correlated; that is, for every computation that the classical component makes, there is a quantum correlate and viceversa, it is not farfetched to think that in the different states of sleep, like stage 2, deep sleep, sleep onset and REMS, these updating and synching processes are carried out. Even meditation could contribute to that process for all I know.

Ravichandran states that memory exists in a nonlocal plane, while Eckhart states that Forms (archetypes) exist in there too; whatever those interactions take shape with the individual human being (and other living systems), happens during sleep. Memories exist so the Universe can compute self-observation, forms can exist so that beings have a reference of action and thus can perform self-observation and dreams how do dreams fit exactly into this?

I believe that dreams exist so that all living beings across the Universe can coordinate in the self-observation that they are supposed to do as part of the Universe. That is, dreaming is the result of a coordination process and the nonlocal plane where such process takes place is an informational highway.

Dreams in a macro sense (let us call it cosmic dreaming) are self-organizing dynamic between the *tubulae* of the brain, which parallel compute with the Universe. There is, and I should make a model of this soon,

¹ See Penrose and Hammeroff in the sources of this article.

a baseline state from which we can reach dynamic equilibrium; and there is also a state of (apparent) chaos, from which dynamically stable forms of information processing can arise. This is parallel with the neural dynamic I have talked about in other articles (Del Toro 2014, 2015).

This means that memory, form usage and dreams are three processes of the self-observance of the Universe that are connected to one another, as dreams help organize the other two, memories cannot function without forms as a reference point and dreams as an organization mechanism and dreams cannot function without memories and forms because they are the way in which the coordinated beings function. That is, the coordination between dreams, forms and memories is recursive, and it all takes place with sleep as the biological process (although there may be others) that makes it all happen.

IV. Relationship with the model of dreams as a self-organizing neural dynamic

Sleep is then the bridge between the cognition of living systems and the Universe and dreams are a process that coordinates the way we relate to its massive consciousness. How does this connect with the model I have made of subjective consciousness as a self-organizing neural dynamic?

First. Dreaming as a series of mentations that are created by the firing of neurons using memories, perceptions and emotions as reference points, are the way we interpret and understand the dreaming that takes place at a grand level. You could even say that prophetic dreams happen because memories and dreams exist in an informational plane outside time and space and that seeps into the biological process. Biological dreaming is thus the anchor of cosmic dreaming.

Second. Cosmic dreaming as a coordination process, helps the living system to synch and update with the Universe and takes off the physical stress of being dissonant. If we cannot sleep, and if in the different sleep states, we do not dream (or process information, as there are people that do not dream), then we cannot function cognitively. Cosmic dreaming thus helps sustain the processes that give way to biological dreaming.

Third. Biological and cosmic dreaming follow a self-organizing dynamic and thus can be understood both as a series of emergent states arising from a baseline as a stabilized dynamic state that originates from a hypercomplex state. That is, they are different processes, with different goals, but they work the same way.

Fourth. Despite of being different processes with different goals, they connect into a single purpose: helping the Universe self-observe, and as they follow the same type of dynamic, when they relate to one another, they will do it in a self-organizing way. Of this I can surmise that two non-exclusive possibilities arise: a) biological dreaming could be a baseline state and cosmic dreaming the dynamic state, and/or b) certain types of cosmic dreaming are hypercomplex states of which we make sense by biological dreaming.

Fifth. If dreaming (in all its senses) is self-organizing, and it is related in a recursive way to memories and forms, then we can say that these processes (in the biological and cosmic sense) follow this dynamic and that all of them relate to one another in this very way.

V. A unified model

If I could put what I have said about dreams in a metaphor, I would say that if the Universe is a giant computer, dreams are the operating system. But how does a “unified model” of dreaming look like? What are the spiritual/mystical elements that I mentioned in the introduction to this brief paper and why haven’t I talked about them yet?

One step at the time.

Biological and cosmic dreaming as one are what the Universe uses to organize the cognition of the living systems that in their day to day interact with it; both as separate components and as a whole are self-organizing dynamics that a) either have dynamic states from the transition of a baseline where the sensitivity in the initial conditions allowed emergence, or b) stabilized a hypercomplex state to yield one of dynamic equilibrium. This process is what we mentioned already in “Fourth” of the prior topic.

This means that the individual cognitive system can communicate with the Universe and viceversa through dreams; on the individual level, the latter present themselves as a mirror image of the dreamer, as the materials that comprise them are memories, emotions and perceptions. When we dream and connect with the Universe, what we often derive from it, will impact in how we understand ourselves and our surroundings.

However, there are mystical elements in dreams can take many forms. One of them is prophetic dreaming, which may be a byproduct of connecting with memory (which is nonlocal). That is, imagine I sync and update with the Universe in my sleep and in accessing the memories of the Universe, which are outside time and space, I see that my favorite football team will reach the final. This happened as an accident or byproduct. But, it is also important to note that by dreaming that, I may affect the outcome and it might not come true.

Another mystical aspect is when we dream other beings, like those that have dreamed Gods, be them in a monotheistic or polytheistic system of belief. This could be the byproduct of a person having a lucid dream of sorts in which their beliefs and perceptions color the way they communicate with the Universe.

This leads us to the idea of lucid dreams. If dreaming in general is the way we communicate with the Universe, lucid dreams are the way that this happens consciously. This has led to a series of meditative systems that if practice correctly, purport to be the tools by means of which one person can commune with the Universe.

Chief among these practices is *milam*, known also as Dream Yoga, which departs from the idea that the reality we perceive is an illusion—a dream—on which awake and sleeping states (and for that matter, all conscious states) are different iterations of it, where the living may become dream and the dream living. The idea then is to attain control in a dream by the realization that you are within one and from there, many things can unravel (Cardozo, 2016).

From this one can reach the conclusion that bearing the right framework, there is not that much distance between science and spirituality and that mysticism is not so mystical, rather, we use those terms because we do not (want to) understand it as real knowledge; that is, it is a colonial term by means of which Western science discriminates against other philosophical frameworks and viewpoints.

Conclusions

Of this we can conclude that the study of dreams from a cosmological viewpoint are a fertile ground for experimentation and philosophical debate. However, the idea itself will be made into a larger and more robust theory, but as it stands, I think it yields a sound frame for connecting sleep and dreams to what Ravichandran, Eckhart and many others have said about consciousness.

On the other hand, a discussion that unites the scientific, philosophical and spiritual/mystical studies of dreams is also something that needs to happen. Neither viewpoint is isolated, and neither is completely “right,” rather, they are all specialized aspects of the same thing, and as such, each has its own truth.

The biological study of dreams can also impact on cosmology and philosophy as a whole, and studies of the possible physical implications of dreams, would be important. For this, however, we should not hold our breath, as the study of consciousness performed like Grinberg-Zylberbaum did, has not been seen in a long time in an institutional setting.

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CASSANDRA INVERSA



I. ELEFANT-MISFIT (SUNLIGHT MAKES ME PARANOID, 2002)

“Hanni, what’s wrong?” I said as we were snuggling comfortably in bed one cool rainy day.

“My kid sister is coming to town,” she said looking stressed as she took a long puff from her cigarette.

“How is this a bad thing? Is she a shit person?”

“Not at all, she is probably the sweetest person I know.”

“Then why is this a problem?”

“Well, she is some 12 years younger, as my Dad divorced my Mom and remarried. He is terribly happy, this kid has never had a problem in her life, while I had a life full of angst and a shitty-ass Mom.”

“So you envy her?”

“Not quite. It’s more like she makes me feel bad, because I wish I had it a little bit better. It’s like wandering a desert, dying of thirst and seeing someone having a lemonade in an oasis under an umbrella, without being able to reach them.”

I gave her a long hug and she loosened up a bit.

“She’s your sister, it will do both of you good to connect and know one another.”

“She is going to stay here for a fucking year. Dago took her as an intern in the record company.”

“Ah,” I said, so it was her. He told me about this Swedish college business grad that wanted to intern and it all looked pretty nice.

“You did not check the name, you moron.”

“Castalia something.”

“Castalia Lundstedt!!”

Well, shit.

“Well, you should have voiced this concern.”

“I was about to, and then Dad asked me for the fucking favor.”

“So it was an unavoidable thing.”

“Somewhat, yes.”

“So why do you yell at me?”

“I don’t know. I can’t deal with it. And then your brother is on another workaholic binge. He has me all over with the paperwork and concepts for his stuff; he has released 3 solo album and we are starting May, and he actually has 10 more recorded already, but shelved.”

“Well, you did foster a lot of tensions with his last ex-girlfriend,” I said.

“That neo-marxist, Frida loving, radical feminist that thinks she is so deep and intellectual? She was only fucking him for fame. Why didn’t you ever said a word?”

“I know my brother, he needed to fuck; otherwise we are stuck with him on a rampage. We, Hanni. Not only you. We.”

“Get the fuck out of my bed.”

“Well, my love, it is my bed.”

“Get the fuck out of the bed in which I’m lying.”

“Fine,” I said.

I went down the stairs to the studio. Dagoberto was doing this incredibly difficult guitar solo and was not paying attention to anything else. Reed, our engineer was looking dead tired.

“How long?”

“Twelve hours with some occasional breaks,” he said.

“I’ll take over, man.”

“Thanks.”

Dago was hard at it, not noticing the change at all (or not caring). This is going to be an interesting year.



I was received at the airport by Oscar, the brother of Rodrigo and Dagoberto Clemente Ascencio, badass musicians and writers who were co-owners and the leading act of this indie music label called House of Falling Petals; they had this band with my sister called Rinri Kitei that was so cool. She also had these awesome solo albums that are so good and she has this cult following as long as I remember; she was the soundtrack of my adolescent years and one of my idols.

She did not pick me up at the airport because she was finishing preparing my lodgings, which were in the top floor of the Carmen building, which has six stories and which it turns out has living quarters in the top two, where Dagoberto, Rodrigo and Hanni live. She had the kindness of lodging me there instead of having me pay rent in the Bay Area, which they tell me is ridiculously high; this also had the makings of a dream, I mean I get to intern at this awesome record company, but I also pay no rent and get to be roommates with one of my favorite bands.

On the way to Carmen, I made small chat with the guys and told them a bit more about myself: So Hanni and I are half-sisters, my father is Swedish and fell in love and lived in Finland with Hanni's mom, but then moved back to the country where he met my Mom and married her and had me. This is why my sister is 12 years older than me and also why we speak English with different accents.

I just obtained a business degree at Stockholm and had experience being a grunt in Stockholm Records, which is a subsidiary of Universal Music Group. One day I would like to partake in an independent record company or a publishing house. House of Falling Petals had no internship program, but I decided to ask if they would take me after I had a dream in which I saw myself packaging autographed vinyl records with Hanni.

² Dark side of the Oz. Picture taken from: <http://thetexas theatre.com/movies-events/dark-side-of-the-rainbow>

Now here is something I am not telling them: I have prophetic dreams which almost always come true, though the devil is in the details, as I never see the way in which my predictions come true and neither do I see to what degree they become reality. Let me put you an example: Let us imagine that I had a dream where Sweden won the Eurocup, as I saw myself celebrating in a bar and I would see said news in a TV screen. I would not know which teams they faced on the quarter finals and the semifinals, and I would not know the score of the final and even maybe what team they defeated, but I would know that they won and it would come true.

The reason I would rarely tell people about this is that for some reason, they would become obsessed with this, trying to know every detail and then just losing it over the inevitability of my predictions. I was like a reverse Cassandra: instead of people ignoring my warnings, they pay too much attention to them and make me uncomfortable (at best).

Also, my dreams were very overwhelming, so I would wake up dizzy (once I even vomited) or most of the time with massive headsplitting headaches. It is for this reason I am in a perpetual state of caffeination, where sleeping 4 or 5 hours was okay, as long as I didn't have to deal with these annoying things.

As we got home, Hanni received me with an awkward hug: We have never spent much time together, be it for the age difference, because we have different personalities and lived in different countries, so this was expected. She also tried to smile, and I mean a full smile, which is something I have never seen and to be honest was a bit scary: she always has this slight smile, which gives her an air of mystery, but a full smile is... an acquired taste, perhaps?

We had a welcome pizza dinner: there is this vegetarian pizza that Hanni is very fond of, not because she is vegetarian, but rather because it is a glorious tasting pizza. They also brought chocolate chip cookies and brownies and red wine.

Dago and Rodrigo were talking about music while Hanni and I called Papa to let him know we were doing okay; forgetting that we were calling Sweden at four in the morning, but hearing his groggy voice overflowing with happiness knowing that his two girls are together. When he hung up, I told Hanni more about my life in Stockholm before coming here. Oscar had to excuse himself, as he had to drive back home to his family.

As we were moving to dessert, there was a plate of chocolate chip cookies and some brownies that were wrapped up in plastic; not wanting to take too much, I took the smallest brownie and started nibbling on it. It was really tasty but it had this very unusual aftertaste that I could not figure out.

"Rodrigo, have you seen my brown... Oh my God."

I looked terrified, as it was not the end of the first day and I have already pissed my sister off.

"I'M SORRY," I said, "I didn't know it was yours. It was wrapped in plastic like the others."

"It's not that," she said, "it was a really heavy pot brownie. I am having really bad menstrual cramps and that usually helps me."

“It’s fine... I don’t think it hit me har...” I said as I was slobbering my speech and then I felt hit by a sledge hammer and I think I fell asleep.

“Okay, we are off to a good start,” said Hanni sarcastically.

“I take it that your sister doesn’t smoke.”

“Most probably not.”

“At least she won’t have troubles with jetlag,” Rodrigo said, “let’s carry her to her room.”

III. ZOÉ- SOÑÉ (ROCANLOVER, 2001)

To say that the brownie knocked me out was an understatement: I slept for a day and half and by the time I woke up I had had all these unreal dreams: one of the things that I dreamt was making a latte with Zappa's face at 4:35 in the morning, I saw the cover of the band's second album and heard me asking Hanni something about it; I also saw myself looking after a couple of grumpy looking one year olds, with raven black hair and *café au lait* skin and I saw... something else I can't quite remember, a song. Too much. And unlike other occasions, my dreams were more vivid and specific.

The work that I had to do for the label was not too difficult for what I was used to do, and Oscar, who is my immediate boss was stern, but also thoughtful. The band was currently relaxing, as they had finished their tour promoting their second album; however, Dagoberto was still creating music at full force, which was something impressive to watch, as he went about all the instruments to flesh out song structures and if it was worth it, he would bring friends over to help him out.

As I carried my duties diligently, I started to win them over with coffee: At the beginning, when there was a recording, they would ask me if I could to a coffee run to this fancy coffee shop at the end of 16th street. One day, after I had brought ground coffee from there, I decided to do the espressos, lattes and ristrettos myself, although I had to do them with a stovetop espresso maker they had lying around; for many years I had worked as a barista at one of those gourmand coffee shops, so it wasn't a big problem for me. In any case, everyone was really, really happy with that.

On my spare time, as I lived in a privileged location, I liked to explore the center of San Francisco, I sometimes would eat cupcakes in Union Square, watching the tourists come and go; some others, I would walk to the Yerbabuena Center of the Arts and lie on the grass while I read a book, and some other times I would just walk to Chinatown and get some noodles at a place Rodrigo recommended me.

Things with Hanni were going slowly, as she is not one to open up and I didn't expect to be besties with her on my first day, but I am happy to be around my family and getting to know her. Rodrigo, her boyfriend and an awesome writer, has been taking me to lunch and imparts informal courses on the psychology of Hanni Lundstedt, little pearls of wisdom, like: "if you screw up, don't touch her, just pick the right words and she will forgive, although not forget." He has also been teaching me the basics of audio engineering and many times, we will just go to the studio and see how Reed handles himself against hurricane Dagoberto.

"He is an incredibly talented musician, and probably more prolific than Corin Tellado, Rodrigo told me once."

"Who?" I said.

"Nevermind."

"He's always been the one with the head on the clouds, always restless always thinking about stuff. Always enamored of concepts and ideas."

“He seems very intense.”

“Well, he is, but that doesn’t define it completely.”

Everyone here seemed to have such a rich taste in music, and me being the one that pride herself among her friends of having awesome taste, I feel like a caveman when I compare myself to everyone here. Before coming here, I had not listened to either Dago’s solo project or the Techne Jupiter that they keep comparing the new band with; to solve this problem Rodrigo gave me this playlist. I might have listened to the Techne Jupiter when I was a teenager, but it was so complex it really didn’t appeal to me, so I listened to Hanni instead. I think that now that I am an adult and that I have grown accustomed to complex music in the workplace, I should make a deeper exploration.

On night time, sometime after 12, there were a small vibrations that I would sometimes feel at the back of my head if I was lying down on my bed. Mostly at that time, I would be working on finishing the remaining workload or just listen to music in my headphones; Dago’s music would transport me to outer space as I lie on my bed and feel the slight vibrations on the back of my head. One of those times, while I was floating around I don’t know where, I got out of bed and had the compulsion to make a latte on the kitchen. I looked at a clock we have there and saw that it was 4AM.

I started building the latte with Zappa’s face as I remember it in the dream and pride myself at my artistic skill, however, I did not think that it was a coffee for me. The memory of Rodrigo and Hanni happily telling me about a version they did of Muffin Man, which ended as a B-side on their second album, tells me exactly who this coffee is for. As I make my way downstairs, I see him working on his guitar, slowing down a bit, visibly tired; he looks up to me and I give him the cup.

“It seems to me that you needed some back-up,” I said with a smile.

“Oh my God...” he says surprised.

From there on, instead of staying on my room till late, I would act as an audio Oompa Loompa for Dagoberto, and talking with him in between ideas and providing adequate caffeination as well. Surprisingly, he would talk almost about everything, except music: Literature, art—a lot of art, actually—cinema... Kurosawa and Ingmar Bergman were his favorites. We would have these lively conversations, where I would tell him about my childhood and he would tell me about his days on tour and other funny anecdotes about my sister that I don’t think she would ever tell me.

She is so beautiful that I can’t help but feel like a daisy next to a rose. I mean, I don’t consider myself ugly, but I feel like I am regular: My mom is a beautiful natural blonde, but I have brown eyes and hair, I’ve been called cute many times and I never had a shortage of suitors and then my half-sister is this dark haired musical goddess with this aura of mystery surrounding her. I am just a cute girl that makes awesome coffee.

One day at the studio Rodrigo was having a lot of fun with a Polaroid camera: He was taking pictures of anything with a pulse: he took pictures of Hanni singing, the took pictures of Reed working the console

and he even took pictures of me serving up some coffee. Dago started playing, and he suddenly started playing something that was all too familiar: It was the exact same tune that I heard in my dream, this intense and intricate song that flooded the air. As he was going about the guitar and Rodrigo playing with the camera like a child, I couldn't help but be in awe.

IV. "SIEMPRE FUISTE MI ESPEJO, QUIERO DECIR QUE PARA VERME TENÍA QUE MIRARTE."³

One month in, Castalia was doing great in her internship (like she always does in everything): Oscar, Rodrigo and Dago's brother loved her efficiency; Rodrigo was teaching her a lot about sound engineering and somehow, she even managed to soften the blow of Dagoberto's musical rampage. Despite all these merits, our interactions were awkward at best; it's just that she had the idea childhood that I had wanted. She had an awesome full time father that I had every once in a long while, and she had a gentle understanding mother, not the monster that screwed me up to such degree that I make Maria Mena's lyrics look like those of a well-adjusted kid.

I should be happy to have my sister around and the chance to get to know her, but I don't know how to approach her, as for all practical purposes I grew up an only child. After our initial interactions ended up being an unmitigated disaster and I looked like an ice cold bitch without meaning to be, I talked the whole matter with Rodrigo, like I always do when I really need him: Smoking in bed.

"I'm fucked up, man, I said, I mean... poor girl, why does she insist on getting to know me? I am a curse, I don't befriend people, I am inflicted upon them."

"Well, it is not a bad curse, he said while kissing my neck, I like it..."

"..."

"Look, he said, you and I both are weird: You can talk to yourself through time and I can insert myself into the memories of people and things..."

"Yeah, what about it?"

"She is weird too," he said, "I'm pretty sure of that."

"How come?" I said.

"Well, I can't enter your thoughts and you can't know about me by talking to your older selves. We short circuit one another. But have you realized that you can't use your ability around her as well?"

Fuck. He is right.

"I..."

"Holy shit," he exclaimed, "you have been overthinking this so much that you didn't notice."

"Well..."

"Remember that you and I didn't really get along before we found about each other. Maybe something like that happens between you and Castalia."

³ Julio Cortázar (You were always my mirror, I mean to say that to see me I had to look at you).

“Connect over being weird?”

“Yes! Exactly that.”

“But, what is exactly that she does?” I said.

“That I don’t know.”

“In any case, I ended up with a similar or worse problem: I don’t really know how to approach her about her weirdness or mine.”

“You’ll find a way,” Rodrigo said.

My God, she is so sugary that she is turning my sarcastic boyfriend into an optimist.

“No, Hanni, I am not being poisoned by your sister’s happy demeanor and undying optimism,” he said reading my mind.

“Cool trick, bro,” I said, mind reading and shit.

“No such magick,” he said, “I just have a masters degree in Hannology.”

“Fine, I will give it a try,” I said.

V. "POETRY IS WHEN AN EMOTION HAS FOUND ITS THOUGHT
AND THE THOUGHT HAS FOUND WORDS"⁴

I suspect that Rodrigo has been interceding on my behalf with Hanni, as she has been keener on talking to me and going out. She took me to her favorite bookstores in Berkeley: Moe's, Pegasus, and Half-Priced Books; as I have had a mountain of records to listen, suggested by everyone at work, I've gotten quite fond of book shopping. I got a pair of used business books I found interesting, but Hanni also gifted me a couple of small books by a man named Borges, who turns out is a visionary Latin American fiction author that Rodrigo gave her to read.

We settled for an Indonesian restaurant that was nearby Half-Priced; I was having these awesome peanut sauce noodles with lots of stuff in them and a beer, while Hanni was enjoying some coconut milk beef that looked quite tasty and a type of smoothie that had avocado and chocolate in it.

"Do you want some?" She said as I had eyed her plate.

"Only if you take a bit of my noodles."

"Sure, hostage exchange," she said as she moved a spoonful of beef to my plate.

"So," she said, "you have the hots for Dago."

I almost choked on my noodles.

"Excuse me?" I said surprised.

"Yes, Rodrigo took this on a recording session, and here we see you, giving him a gaze of deep love and longing. I don't think that I have seen such an intense gaze from his last girlfriend, whom I really hated."

"I... I..."

"Well, you've been hanging out with him for months on the night-time, when both of you are wide awake."

"Yes, I make him a coffee or two."

"Which is the same as giving a handgun to a child."

"Well..."

"Look, he is 12 years older than you and a grade A workaholic and believe it or not, I love you dearly and don't want to see you hurt..."

"Thank you for your optimism," I said with sarcasm.

"...but," she interjected, "he deserves to have a nice, intelligent and cultured young woman like you, and he should be so lucky if he did."

⁴ Robert Frost.

I smiled.

“I don’t think he likes me like that, though,” I said, “I mean, I am just a kid and I’ve seen a couple of the girls he’s dated, they are all very pretty and accomplished.”

The cover of the second album came to my mind and decided to follow my gut and my dream.

“By the way, why did you guys name you second album *Mnemonic Paperclip Man*?”

“Well, the story is about a guy that can insert himself into the memories of people and object, much in the way that you can put a paperclip in the page of a book to save it; the concept behind *Self-referential Infinite Lotus Blossom* is someone who can talk to their younger and older selves.”

“That sounds cool. How did you come up with those ideas?”

“Biographical stuff, mostly.”

“What?”

“Rodri is the paperclip man and I am the lotus blossom. What’s *your* trick?”

“My trick?”

“Well, when Rodrigo and I met, we could not use our abilities on one another because they kinda short-circuited. The same happens when we try to do it on you, thus, you’re different, like us.”

“I have prophetic dreams that are perfectly accurate on the form, but hazy on the details; the downside is that as they happen no matter what, people get obsessed about them or trying to avoid them, they incur in the prophesy.”

“So you are a Cassandra Inversa... instead of ignoring you, people pay too much attention to what you say.”

“Exactly,” I said.

“You and I are not that different. We are both weird. Also, I am not a supernatural entity which should make you feel lesser. I am older than you and have had more time to make my mark in the world. You will shine by yourself, believe it.”

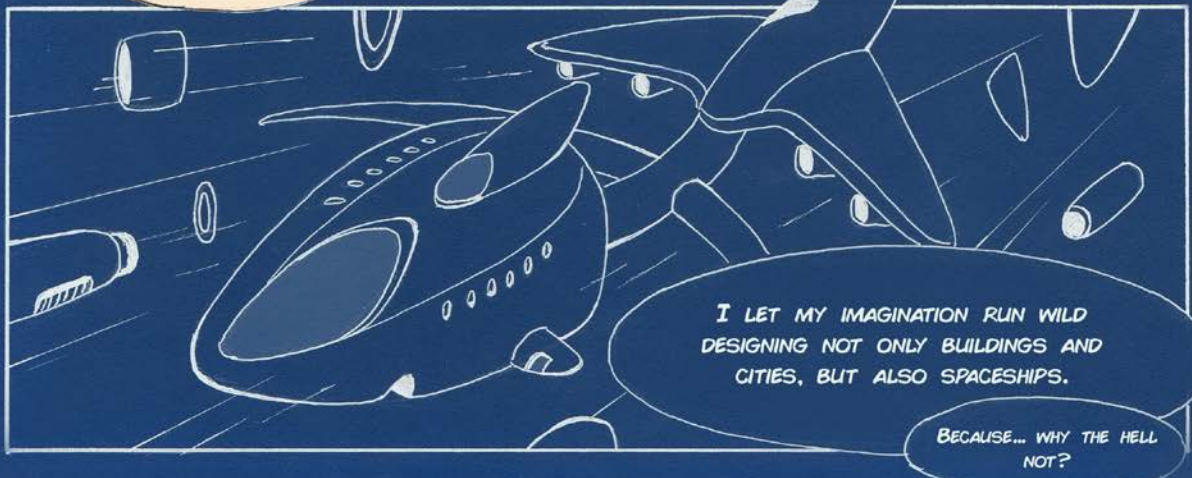
We took the BART back home and overall had a pleasant day; our conversation was diverted in a series of shallow topics: the weather, music, a pinky promise to read Borges as soon as possible, the possibility of staying at my house of Christmas. As I got to my room to take a small nap or something, Hanni gave me a pat on the head and put a Polaroid in my hand: It was a picture of me serving coffee and on the background Dagoberto was looking at me much in the same way that I looked at him in the other picture.

DREAMCERTINA

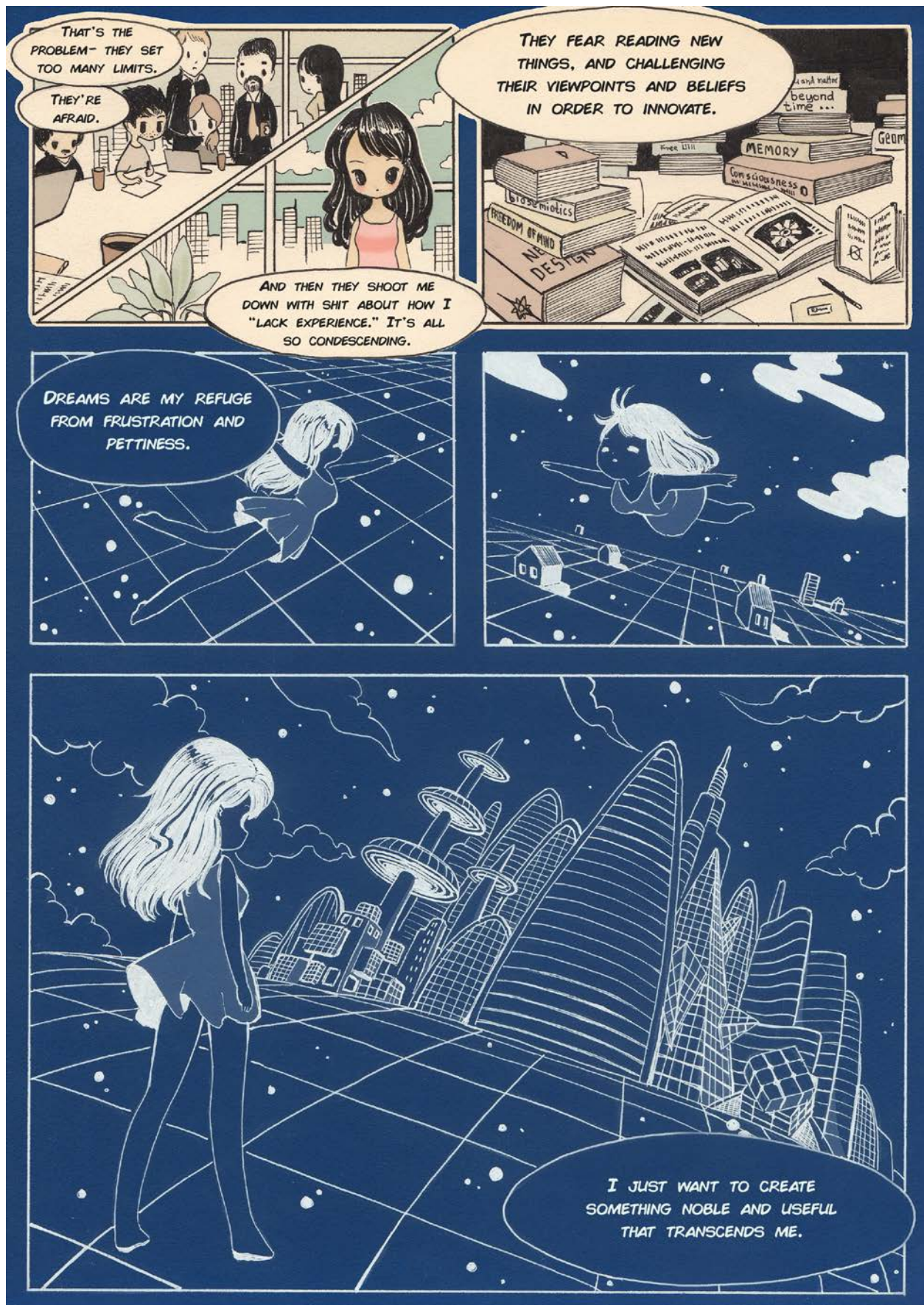




... MY HAVEN, MY EDEN,
MY CANYAS.



BECAUSE... WHY THE HELL
NOT?





I JUST WANT TO HELP BRING
FORTH THE FUTURE.

MY FEAR IS THAT I'M GETTING OLD
AND THE WORLD ISN'T PICKING UP
THE PACE...

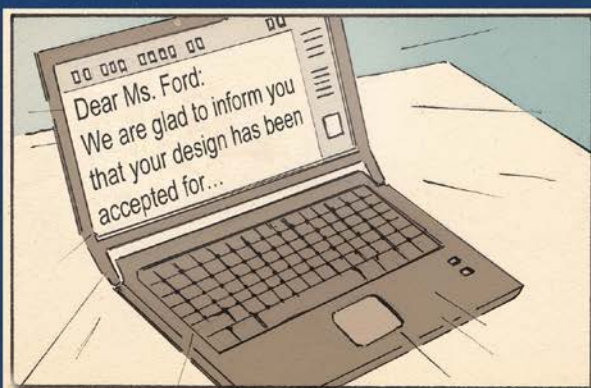
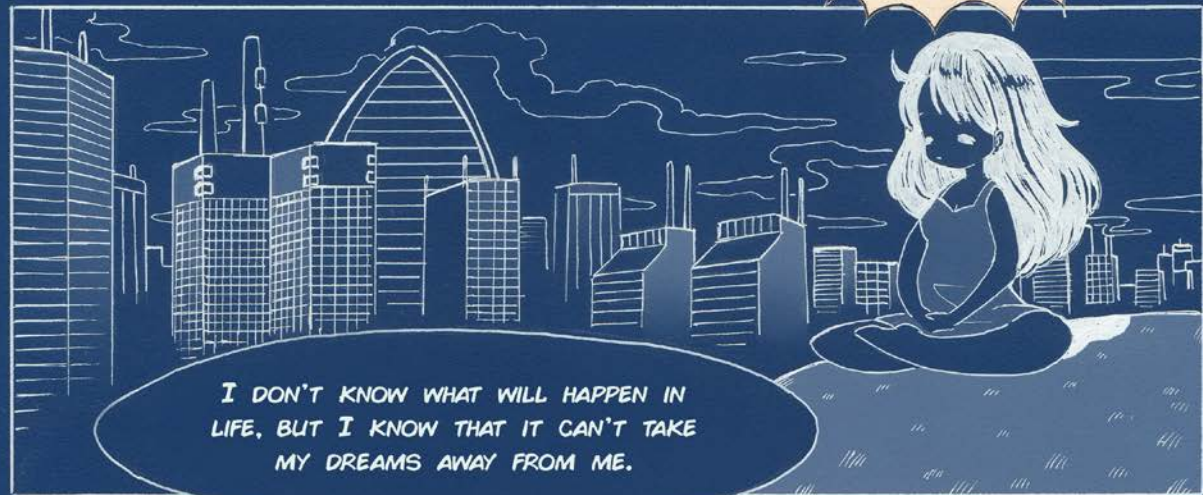
I FEAR THAT I'LL GET OLDER...

...AND PEOPLE WILL RAVE AT THE THINGS
I CREATED AT 27, BUT BY THE TIME I
HIT 40...

...AND EVENTUALLY
I'LL DIE WITHOUT
FULFILLING MY
VISION...

NOT DUE TO A
LACK OF
TALENT OR
DISCIPLINE, BUT
BECAUSE OF
OTHER
PEOPLE.

Penelope Ford
RIP
She tried



THE HEARTFELT DEVOTION OF THE LORD OF ASTRONAUTS





SOUNDTRACK: THE COSMIC DEAD, "THE SPACEMAN"

4AM knew my secrets. It was the time I woke and started my devotion to the rest of the day. Though, sometimes I felt that measured time is but a fiction, especially if you've lived on a spaceship, and you don't quite remember what a sunset looks like. My first endeavor was to meditate, to clear my head and open myself to the possibilities that the new day might bring. I elevated my thoughts to Yuri Gagarin, the first of my kind, and whom I believed found illumination when he looked upon the vast infinite. This was why I had a shrine of both him and the Buddha, whom I looked upon as guides.

After I finished my meditation, I went to the o-g chamber that was near my quarters and took in an hour of zero-gravity yoga, to harmonize my body with itself and with my mind, which was embodied. Immediately after, I gathered all my lieutenants for physical conditioning, which they did in turn with those under their command.

Once I was in tune with my people, I quickly showered and headed to the mess to have the first meal of the day. Today, I overheard a private complain, to one of the cooks that served us, that we were having *pastel de choclo* and ham for the fifth time in a row. I approached him and said gently:

"Private."

"Sir!"

"Do you know who *has* eaten *pastel de choclo* for the fifth time in a row and has *not* complained?"

"No, sir."

"The admiral, private. He eats breakfast at staff meetings and whenever else he gets the chance, because the man is all over the place. Are you above the admiral?"

"No, sir."

"Then I don't want you complaining about the food."

"Yes, sir."

"As you were, then."



As I had my *pastel de choclo* and ham with some soy milk for the fifth consecutive time, Benavides appeared. She was my most trusted lieutenant, and usually joined me at breakfast, her arrivals often announced by some kind of loud noise, as she stumbled into a table, chair or just tripped and then fell flat on her face.

“No coffee, sir?” she asked, by way of a good morning.

“Not today. I have a staff meeting and good coffee is the only luxury that the admiral partakes in. Being the great man he is, he shares it with the staff. What do I have scheduled after?”

“Well, Engineering’s been pestering me about some glitch they found in the ventilation system. A couple of maintenance drones disappeared yesterday. Also, Gunnery Sergeant Perez wants five minutes. Plus, the pilots and artillery are in the middle of a big fight and they want you to mediate this before it reaches the rear admiral, or worse.”

“Alright.”

“Schedule Engineering right after the staff meeting. Gunnie Perez at 12. And ask the feuding parties for possible hours for a reunion tomorrow morning.”

“On it.”

“Thanks, Diamond Eyes.”

She laughed. Her nickname stemmed from a combat injury that left her blind in both eyes, and required prosthetics, which had these curious, shiny irises and resembled diamonds. I heard another loud clunk as she accidentally kicked a chair. She was known for her good looks and blonde hair all over the ship, but the woman had no notion of grace, and walked like a goddamn dude. However, in outer space, she was another person entirely, flying like an angel and moving with indescribable grace.

It was not uncommon for space corps body infantry to have field injuries, as we were trained in a wide array of skills, and doubled as soldiers and maintenance personnel for the ship. I myself lost both legs in the taking of Spaceship 209 and have made use of prosthetics ever since. As for my nickname, that was a completely different matter.

As I headed for the staff meeting, I kept hearing this odd clanking noise that seemed out of place. A big spaceship like the *Leviathan* wasn’t without noise, but I had pretty much memorized every damn noise in this ship, and that slight clanker just didn’t make sense.

Rustle, rustle...clang, clank, clang...

I arrived right on time, as the six main officials of this ship took their place, with their aides in the background. They could very well be captains of their own vessels of lesser rank, but here, represented the main areas of the ship: Engineering, Communications, Logistics, Life Support (the medical bay, nutrition, etc.), Weapons and Special Services, and Personnel. I was the odd man out, as I was a major, and not a rear admiral, on the flagship of the Western Third Fleet of the Titan-Earth Space Forces.

I was served a coffee, a really good one. The admiral had the right to incorporate lower servicemen into his staff, and to have them attend these meetings, but that was rarely the case as it generated issues with hierarchy. As I was in charge of the bulk of body infantry, which was a mixture of Weapons, Personnel, Logistics and Engineering, despite being under the command of Weapons, I had a reason to be in these meetings.

On the one hand, I loved that I got to have a damn good coffee, but the downside of this was that I had to deal with my rear admiral being a jackass, because I was there as an equal and he couldn't jerk me around like he did in his staff meetings. He always antagonized, trying to reach my boiling point and have me talk back or do something that could get me out of the admiral's service, despite the fact that I had served under the last two admirals. He also loved to refer to me by my nickname.

"Good morning, my lord."

There it was.

"Good morning, sir."

The others were making small talk amongst themselves, quite lively for a ship that was a week and a half into yet ongoing skirmish missions behind enemy lines—

There went that noise again.

Rustle, rustle...clang, clank, clang...

Even here, in the staff room? There was something wrong here, and I couldn't say what exactly, but my instincts were screaming to me.

"Tell me, major, why do they call you the 'Lord of Astronauts'?"

"Sorry, sir?"

"Why do they call you by that funny nickname?"

"Well, it is not so funny when you know the reason," the admiral interjected. "Have you seen this man's service sheet? He's under your command, after all. It's fucking crazy!"

"Attention!"

We all got up. The admiral had stopped the roll call to interject.

"At ease," he said. "Now, Elizondo, you cut that passive aggressive shit or I'll have him relay your orders for a month. He's been a part of staff meetings long before my father retired from serving on this ship."

"Yes, sir," the rear admiral said, somewhat nervously.

"And we've all been treated to *pastel de choclo* for the fifth time in a row, so this goddamn day isn't getting any better."

The meeting went as usual, but I kept hearing that noise, and despite being really soft almost to the point of being inaudible, it was there. I didn't know what it was. My whole attention focused on that noise and suddenly I heard Benavides' voice.

"...a couple of maintenance drones disappeared yesterday."

"disappeared, disappeared, disappeared..."

I knew what it was. Fuck.

After the meeting finished, I ran back to the ship's main hangar, and started to bark orders on my com unit to Benavides.

"Get my spacesuit ready, along with my rifle and Arturo. Also, get me la Chofi in a suit and rifle."

"Isn't it her day off?"

Sofía Rendón was my best sniper. She's been courted by all the big guns: *The Crimson*, *Amaterasu*, and other flagships, as well as the Special Forces Corps, but for some reason (for which I was grateful) she remained with us. The problem right now was that her hobby was fucking and when she was free she went on marathonic sex sessions, and it was mayhem if she ever got interrupted.

"I don't care if she's having an orgy. Get me Sofía on a fucking rifle."

If the maintenance drones had had an accident, like getting crushed on a pipe cleaning operation, they would have turned, and the chances of them disappearing were almost none. These drones had cameras and they recorded what went on into their hard drive. If they bumped into infiltration drones, it wouldn't be enough to wreck them and then take out the hard drive, as it would look suspicious. It was more practical to make them disappear. Although one drone might be somewhat understandable—but still unlikely—two drones were a fuckup on their part.

We, then, had a sabotage unit to deal with. Probably enemy special forces, and they were looking either for the reactor or for life support. Hell, it would be a great feat to capture the T.E. flagship of the Western Third. As I was close to the docking bay, I started to speculate as to how well they knew the ship... a bit, but not too well, as they had been rustling about for at least a day, and man, it was a humongous and intricate ship, even with specs.

"Boss, Arturo's ready."

"Good, Benavides. I'll be there in two minutes."

Arturo was my space helper. I named him after the robot of this ancient film called *Estar Guars* whose name was *Arturito*. He was a cubic robot that looked like a Rubik's puzzle, made of and filled with carbon nanotubes, which he could shape into anything, from spare parts to weapons. He responded to and answered my voice commands with a *chilango* accent, in honor of a long slain friend, Paquito Rodriguez.

I got to the space dock of the main hangar and started to undress as fast I could, in order to get into my suit, which I customized in many respects and which I probably would never stop tinkering with. Starting, if you will, with the leg prosthetics, which could, in addition to magnetizing and sticking to surfaces, propel for some brief minutes (as they were jet boots), but also, the joint that connected them with my foot had its own propulsion and I could use them as projectiles.

Rocket feet, I called them, and all of my staff has mocked me, as it was a thing that seemed to be taken from a cartoon (*Astroboy*, they dubbed me). These rockets had a cable that allowed me to retrieve them quickly and at the moment of launching it, the boot could sprout spikes, which could easily bust a helmet open.

Remember, children, if it looked stupid, but it worked, it wasn't stupid.

"Diamond Eyes, how're we doing with the Sofia thing?"

"Actually, she wants to speak with you."

"Okay, put her through."

"*Que pasó, Chofi?*"

"You tell me. I know you don't make stupid requests."

"All you need to know for now is that I need you in a spacesuit and with a rifle in your hands, so you can work your magic."

If I told her or Benavides my suspicions, this could escalate and would cause more problems than it would solve, if it turned out to be a false alarm.

"Fine. I'm almost there."

I was given the OK and I exited to space. I needed to tread lightly and thus, I was thinking about the third quadrant of the ship, which was somewhat close to the reactor and life support, but didn't call on too many suspicions. As I headed there, I thought about the soft rustle during the meeting. The part of the hull that lied above the meeting area would be great for a sabotage beat. I would probably find them there.

As there was massive uncertainty as to what could happen, I decided to shorten the distance by means of a propulsion jump with Arturo strapped on my back. However, I decided against it, as I could be easily spotted by them. Onwards to Plan B: Sometime ago, Fukasaku developed individualized gravity generator, which were deemed too costly for mass usage, but some of them were handed out. The kooky old man gave one to me and I have made good use of it for going quickly and undetected across vast distances on o-g.

"Okay, boss, I'm on a suit and rifle. What's my position?"

"I still don't know."

"If this is just a drill, I will be very pissed."

“This isn’t a drill, Sofía. I repeat, this is not a drill. By the way, how’s your new man working for you?”

“Well, I think he’s a temporary measure, for starters. Good on technique, ridiculously low on stamina. Do me a kindness and take him to your o-g yoga class. That thing did wonders for my physical resistance. After all, who better than you, since you invented the thing?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said. “I don’t guarantee his survival, though.”

“Fine by me.”

“By the way, how come you’re moving so fast? And running so funny?”

“Fukasaku gave me a gravity generator, so what I do is adjust gravity to match my weight. As for the funny running, it’s the best way to run with the equipment. And when my enemies don’t see me coming, it’s not so funny anymore.”

“Arturo...”

“*Qué pasó mano?*”

“Run a scan for magnetic signatures on the following coordinates. Also look for heat signatures and correlate them.”

“*Si, jefe.*”



The scan that Arturo showed me confirmed my suspicions: there were six magnetic signatures, with an almost imperceptible heat signature.

“Okay, so there’s a six-man sabotage team on the bridge, in Quadrant 3. Arturo, relay this to Sofía and calculate possible places for her to make her nest.”

SOUNDTRACK: YURI GAGARIN, “THE BIG RIP”

“*Chofas*, we’re in business.”

“*Mierda*,” she said when she got the scans, “how did you know about this?”

“Intuition. Arturo, call Benavides, tell her to relay all the information we have straight to the admiral as urgent. Authorization code: LOA679-922-8999.”

“Do we call for backup?”

“No time. Besides, there’s someone inside that might alert them. The less people who know, the better.”

“It’s crazy for one to take on six. Who are probably Special Forces.”

“One, and the best sniper on the Western Third.”

“Gee, boss, you’re making me blush. If I didn’t know you better, I’d say you were trying to get into my pants.”

“I’m fine, thank you. I don’t wanna have my hip broken and replaced. Look sharp, *Chofi*. Surprise will only get me so far, and I need you to take out at least two of them. Go for the ones maneuvering equipment.”

“Copy that.”

I had as an advantage the fact that my gravity generator made me way faster and mobile, as their boots had to be magnetized to stick to the hull of the ship.

“Arturo, when Sofia takes out the guys maneuvering the sabotage equipment, take over the latter and disarm it.”

“*Aguevo, papa*.”

I was running on the dark side of the ship so they wouldn’t see me coming. I was some 100 meters away and Arturo had given me my take on the standard spiritual pulse rifle. Everything was ready. I jumped on them, blasting one square in the face. Being a gracious host, I gave them the customary greeting:

“*Ohayougozaimazu, bola de pendejos!*”

As Arturo said, there were six of them: two manning the sabotage equipment, one in front of me, another

some 5 meters straight from my position, a guy 45 degrees to my right at 3 meters; another 20 degrees right, 4 meters away. They were all wearing these slick sets of armor made of some silica nanomaterial that gave the appearance of being plastic. They were very compact as well and they seemed designed for high mobility, and because of this, I corroborated the idea that they were Special Forces of the Heiankyo-Columbia Federation.

I lunged at the other guy that was closed, while shooting covering fire with my left hand; Sofía had diligently killed the first op. I had a superheated tactical knife that could go through the most resistant plating like butter, like some of the *sables de luz* in *Estar Guars*. All of the other guys pulled out superheated katanas, which by the way, Fukasaku's people could never get right. That is, they could never make a superheated blade that was longer than a tactical knife. I should get the gear from these guys back to R&D after I kill them all.

I plunged my knife into several vital points of my intended victim, and as a third one came forth, I sent my right rocket foot to him and broke his left leg.

"Oh my God," said Sofi, "that thing actually works?"

"Arturo, get going."

"*Orale.*"

"Behind you," said Sofía as she shot the guy who I had blasted on the face.

That armor was really something. I needed to get this back to Fukasaku.

"Boss, I'm switching to x-Axis."



x-Axis guns allowed you to shoot a beam of concentrated spiritual energy that could go through pretty much anything. The bad thing about these type of guns was that they required the utmost precision, especially in open spaces, and they ran out of charge and overheated really quick. She beheaded the guy with the broken leg as he was about to pull a gun; it was an impossibly clean and brief hit that took less than a second. As the bastard whom we both shot lunged towards me, sword in hand, she cut his right arm off at the shoulder and his suit breached, so he was surely dead. Again, in less than a second for a gun that overheated in just three or four.

“Double-check on those who you shot first.”

“Done,” she said as she beheaded one and lasered a circle into the chest of another.

There remained one, who was lunging at me with elegant cuts, while I tried to evade them. Sofia cut his sword in half.

“Boss, I’m overheating!”

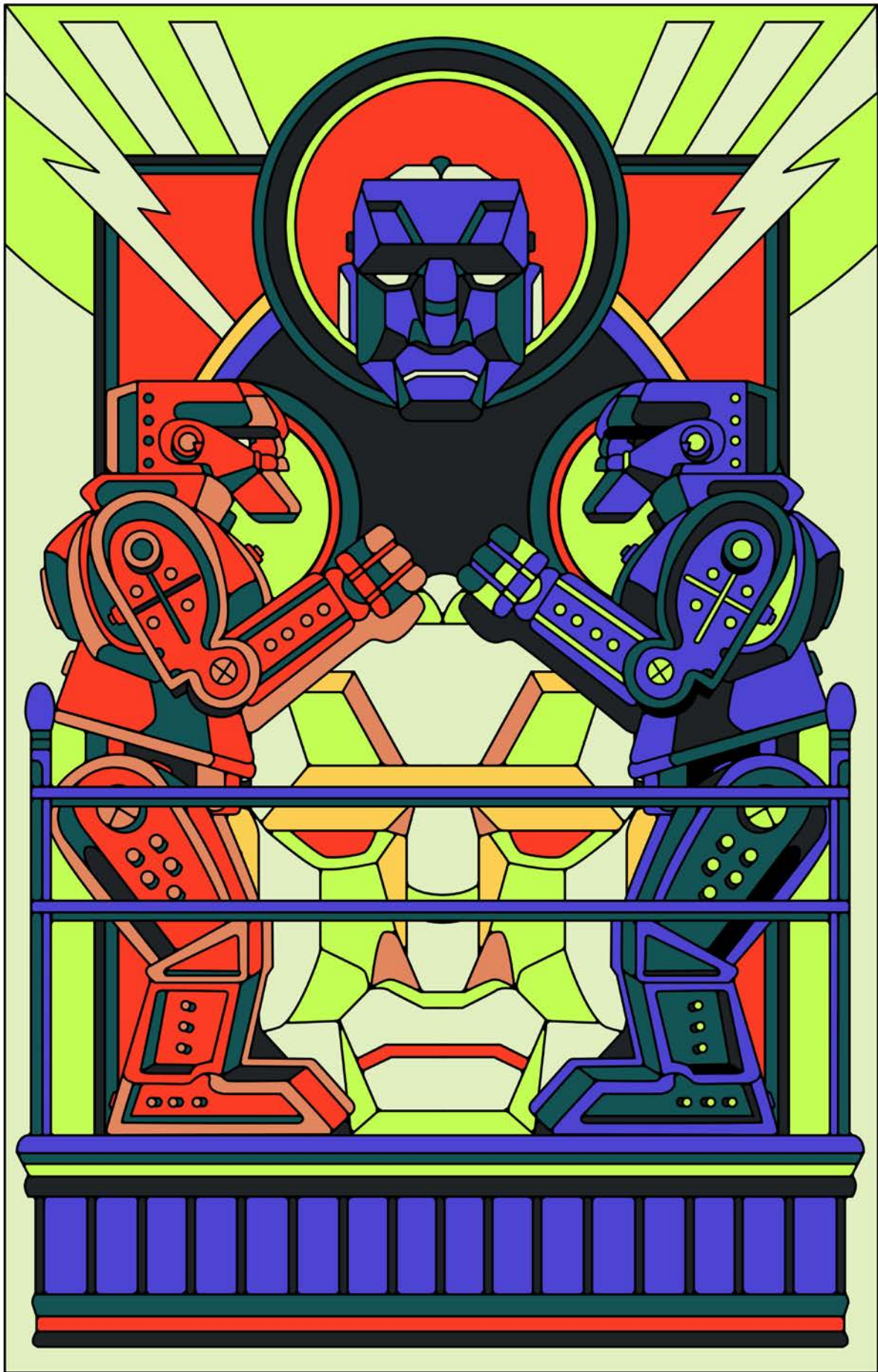
“Don’t worry, *Chofas*, I got this.”

I signaled the guy for a fistfight and he agreed. He did these heavy elliptical swings that were easy to counter—some time ago, I came to the idea that o gravity required a different fighting style, so I invented a type of space boxing based on this old toy called *Roque Soque*. You know, the one with the robots hitting each other in a ring. I delivered these short but more effective punches (with a body trained specifically for that purpose) that kept my enemy off balance, given also his magnetized boots.

People always mocked me for doing what to them were “silly” things, like my o-G running, my rocket foot or my boxeo espacial, but that proved vastly effective in the context of zero gravity. I’ve seen people die because they did “stylish” things in environments that forbid them, like buster here, who couldn’t counter my attacks and who would soon die.

“Boss, I can shoot again.”

“Okay,” I said, “*quíébratelo*, Sofia.”



I grabbed the guy by the waist and lifted him above my face. Sofía made a perfect smiley face on the face of the helmet—but that was wrong. You don’t do that to anyone.

“*Que vergas, Sofía?* You don’t play with your food like that. It’s not honorable.”

“*Patrón,*” interrupted Arturo, “I got the infiltration drones out of the ship. They had three Level C explosive charges almost at the reactor and life support, set to explode in eight minutes.”

“Fuck,” I said.

“The bad thing is that the bombs are encrypted and trying to disarm them will trigger them.”

“*Chingadamadre.*”

“Boss,” said Benavides, “*the admiral just sounded the general alarm. All hands are on deck. I’m patching him through.*”

“Okay.”

“Major, status report.”

“Sir! A group of six special forces elements tried to send drones with explosives to key areas of the ship, mainly reactor and life support, in order to cripple the ship and slowly kill the crew. The threat is neutralized. I repeat, the threat is neutralized. I am in the process of disposing of the explosives.”

“Good. The ship is ready for any enemy incur—”

At that moment, two Yamato-sized ships exited probability space and were greeted by turret fire, which they were not expecting. There were less than five minutes remaining in the explosives and I knew where to send them, from what little I knew of the enemy ships and their design. I strapped all of the explosives into my right and left legs, detached the cable and sent them flying. Arturo made some provisional prosthetics, and I saw mine fly, connect with one ship and rattle it with a big blast.

“*Madre Santa,*” said Sofia, “those things are really, really practical.”

Turret fire concentrated and nearly tore that ship in half. Two more arrived and we entered into evasive maneuvers, with a possible space jump. In that moment, I knew I wouldn’t make it to any secondary dock.

“Major,” said the admiral, “we have to jump. Are there any secondary docking points that you could use to get back into the ship?”

“No, sir.”

“We have to jump back into our lines immediately.”

“I know sir, do it. I’ll strap myself to the ship.”

“No one’s made a jump while on the hull of a ship.”

“Today looks like a good day to try, sir.”

I had Arturo restrain my suit to the hull, as well as many of the enemies as possible, so their hardware could be sent to R&D. As I secured myself to the hull, I could hear Sofía—who managed to make it to secondary—and Benavides rave at me without caring for rank.

“It’s okay, it’s fi—!”

I couldn’t quite finish the sentence as we made the jump. I had never considered a scenario like this in my years of service, so honestly, I didn’t know what to expect. In space jumps, the ship and crew become probability and then materialize at some point in space. The ships are designed to minimize the stress laid upon the crew, but as I was outside the ship’s containment, provided that my suit’s integrity held, my DMT levels would skyro—

A swirl of neon colors and flashes of light came before me and dazzled. There you go. DMT. Before me appeared a Chinese head of a lion in a style that I had seen on Huichol decorations of jaguar heads, with multiple shining colors that kept moving.

“Hey, man. I’m...”

“It is widely known who you are: a subjective condensation of consciousness.”

“Okay, but who are you?”



“I am a cluster of consciousness that is not subjectivized, but at the same time not part of the great whole. ‘I’ am yoked by memories of physical objects. I have no name, but the last person I conferred with called me... Lupe.”

“Lupe, like Lupe Esparza? The guy from *Bronco* that my old Nan loved?”

“No.”

“Lupe, like Lupe Tijerina? The guy from *Cadetes de Linares*? If that’s so, where’s Homero?”

“No, *Lupe Cavazos*.”

“Who is Lupe Cavazos?”

“Me.”

“Okay. May I inquire as to what I’m doing here?”

“There is no teleology as to why you ‘are’ here, but rather, it is the teleonomy of traveling in probability.”

“So I basically stumbled in here?”

“Yes.”

“Sorry to barge in,” I said. “You have a nicely decorated place.”

“Worry not, this is an intangible realm.”

“Say, Lupe, if I’m here by chance, why haven’t I returned to the material realm?”

“Maybe there is something you need to find out.”

“So, despite me being here as a reaction of an unfolding of events, me staying here has a teleological reason?”

“That is correct.”

“Veeeerrrga, this is so trippy.”

“It seems so surreal to me,” said Lupe, “the way in which you all seem to function as a subjective consciousness with all those bodily processes taking place.”

“Well, most of those processes are suppressed by the perceptive system, and we only deal with a handful of stimuli to which we react in programmed ways.”

“I see. Today I have learned something new. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, *güey*. What is it that I must learn?”

“That is answerable only by yourself.”

“I’m not that much of a profound thinker, you know. I’ve pretty much roboted my way through life.”

“Do robots invent martial arts for outer space combat?”

“Well... no.”

“Then you lie to yourself.”

“I don’t know what I can learn.”

“You subjective beings look so funny from this plane... going about in your silly wars, claiming territories, destroying one another. One thing that I do respect is that you have the capacity to learn and to teach. You also have the invaluable capacity to create and to feel.”

“To feel... sometimes I wish that I couldn’t, so that I could go about my work, without feeling grief for all the people that I’ve lost during the course of this war. But when I’m in space, I feel whole, the smell of it, like cooking a steak, the lightness of my body... I don’t like to be in gravity—I feel heavy, clumsy, and stupid. In chains. I’m not a robot, nor should I strive to be, otherwise I wouldn’t feel the joy of being in outer space. If I’m truly to open myself to the possibilities of the day, I need to open my feelings to the Universe that surrounds me and receive what might be sent my way, good or bad.

“...I think that I have learned something.”

“What is it?”

“That it is okay to feel, I guess.”

“A valuable thought indeed,” said Lupe. “You shall return to your body now. Though I wouldn’t have minded your company- you don’t get to experience otherness so easily in this plane of thought.”

“Well, if it is any consolation, I’ll send you some thoughts your way and talk about what it feels like to be a subjective cognitive system.”

“That is a kind gesture.”

“I guess, since this is an abstract plane of thought, equations work better as a language.”

“They do—in any case start with calculus for self-reference.”

“I will.”

“You will now return to your plane.”

“Bye, Lupe.”

“Goodbye.”

I didn’t immediately return to my body, but rather there was an awkward silence and then I felt this

strong pull, and all the swirling colors became black. I was shaking a bit, but looking around I realized I was in a hospital bed. Benavides was in the bed next to me, in a work outfit with her hands behind her head.

“You’re finally awake, sir,” she said in a casual tone. “You’ve been asleep for the last couple of days. Very unlike you.”

“I gather that we managed to escape.”

“We did, in fact. Snuck back into our lines, and are currently going to resupply. R&D send their love too. I haven’t seen Fukasaku that giddy since that time you sent him those three bricks of Cydonian weed for Christmas. They wish you hadn’t wrecked the helmets so much, but I told them Sofía was mostly to blame.”

“Fucking *Chofi*,” I said, laughing, “carving a perfect smiley face in a second flat.”

“The admiral came here and stayed for a couple of hours. He told me that you both served on this ship since your late teenage years and early 20’s, back when he was a pilot. I think this explains why you have this seemingly supernatural relationship with it. Bless his heart, the admiral fell asleep—doctor gave him some tonic and vitamins while he was at it. Poor thing.”

“That man will one day lead the fight in the Western Third.”

“Sofia came too, and she apologized for being a lusty, bloodthirsty brute with surgical rifle skills. The admiral found her weakness: he gave her a box of fresh cherries and the week off. I haven’t seen her so happy since you got her that gift certificate for that high-end sex shop.”

“What did the admiral give you?”

“The week off and the promise of no *pastel de choclo* for six whole months,” she said with a childish smile. “Now everybody loves me.”

“More than usual, you mean.”

“We’re all getting decorated. Also, I’ve been making sure that everything’s running smoothly so you can get back to work. The admiral gave you a week off as well, but it’s probable that you won’t take it.”

“I will, in fact.”

“Yeah, I knew you would. Sir, you need to relax, and you know, *feel*... wait, you what—?”

“I think I’m putting out the brakes for once.”

“What happened to you? I mean, your DMT levels were off the charts and your REM cycle was all cuckoo.”

“I’ll tell you once I get out of medical bay. I’m also thinking of going sand dune surfing in Cydonia when we get leave. The admiral told me that his hometown is the best place for that in the whole system.”



THE SLEEPING WOES OF THE BLOOD FLOWER

I had just finished my early morning routine and I was writing some poetry and having some fresh fruit below my favorite tree in the Imperial garden before I went on and tended the business of the day; I had a strange night and felt unfocused through my morning physical regime and my meditation sessions. I had my fill with the fruit and I had a spare apricot and a fistful of cashews, two Imperial guards were nearby, standing.

“Guards.”

One of them turned around and got closer to me.

“Yes, Empress,” he said saluting.

“Have you had breakfast? You look quite peckish, girl... trembling a bit while standing guard. Not good.”

“I think we are fine your Highness,” said Ju, one of my favorite guards, who also served with me in the War.

“Here, have the apricot and you!” I said to the other one, which is a new recruit.

“Empress.”

“Have my cashews, I don’t like to waste food.”

...

They were obviously reticent for this was a breach of discipline, as they must be ready for any eventuality at any moment.

“Nothing will happen to me if you eat an apricot and you some cashews,” I said, “the last time we had an assassination attempt I killed my assailant and personally hung him like a flag on the main city square of the capital.”

They had the slightest of shudders on the thought and proceeded to take me on my offer. I got up in order to go to my quarters to clean myself to then don my armor in order to attend meetings with my counsel and then give audience on the throne room. As I was making my way, I was greeted by my Chief of Protocol, whom usually ushered me when I was behind schedule; my guards were trailing behind me, finishing their food, my Chief looked at them scornfully.

“Good morning, master,” he said with the usual reverence.

“Yes, yes... breach of discipline. I know.”

“I have sadly grown quite accustomed to such things,” he said.

“Well, I ordered them to, so if you even think about whipping them...”

“I am too used to such rampant display of power.”

“Completely inebriated by power,” I said.

All of us continued walking.

“What are the matters of the day beyond your obvious concern about me lacking an heir and possible marriage offers with the neighboring Queens...”

“You are on your third decade now, master...”

“I’ve had it with you,” I said, if this is so urgent, I will undress this one, and get on with it. Right here and now. He seems handsome and well built, surely he is fine stock for an heir of the Empire. Be quick!

The guard got really nervous and dropped his final cashew, while Ju was trying really hard to repress laughter and my Chief of Protocol sighed. In addition to defend me and potentially give their life for my well-being, my poor Imperial Guards had to bear with my sense of humor and some of them had to deal with me as a sparring partner. A very sad job indeed.

“We have yet to receive a formal offer,” I said, “and I am not making one. Each Queen wants to marry me in order to dethrone the other, and I am not willing to go to another war; it’s been 14 years, both of them were too young to know its horrors, as both are in their early part of their second decade.”

What my Chief did not know is that both Queens had been seeing me in my dreams, each of them trying to seduce me and weaken my resolve, inviting and tempting... young, beautiful and intelligent young women. Dreamwalking is a very obscure spiritual technique that only a few can master and I found it very impressive that both of them had such dominion of it... perhaps it is how they get their way. I know of it very well, as during the Crimson Wars, two of brothers were assassinated this way, and there was an attempt on my life in this way.

It is sanctioned as a possible breach when it is used offensively, but no one thought about using it for seduction. At the beginning it was quite pleasant... lying in a dream representation of the Imperial Gardens, being serenaded by Queen Ingeborg, whose angelic voice is known all over the galaxy. Or just being in the lap of Queen Chau Thom, while she caressed her hair, being on the reputed Gardens of the Viken-Vestmar Kingdom. To be honest, I longed the company, as all the men and women surrounding me did not felt like my equal and were scared of me, and the courtiers bored me, for they were sheltered and had no true consideration for the people I rule over.

I care deeply for my people. They bled with me and loss in the same way I had. All that I have done on my ten years of reign have been for them. I have trained my body and mind in order to be in the best form, in order to attain knowledge in harmony with the Universe and Nature that will help me make the best decisions and that befits them.

Back in the Bygone Earth, there was a philosopher-king named Marcus Aurelius. He more than anyone has shaped my way of thinking and ruling; he has made me think and rethink my perspectives, and despite not being the most brilliant philosopher, the fact that he was a ruler resonates greatly with me. He made me think about the Universe in the first place:

You have the power to strip away many superfluous troubles located wholly in your judgement, and to possess a large room for yourself embracing in thought the whole cosmos, to consider everlasting time, to think of the rapid change in the parts of each thing, of how short it is from birth until dissolution, and how the void before birth and that after dissolution are equally infinite.

There were things in which I differed from him. For instance, we knew that there was no void, but the aether: This flow of energy that circulated through anything and from which we derived qi, by means of biological energy, which we used to bind this cosmic force to us, and in part to our will. The aether preceded me and it will go on without me. My will is to leave things in a better state to when I found them by the time I return to Nature.

I reached my quarters and proceeded to clean myself, although my thoughts were an altogether different matter... As I said, the dreams were getting more “aggressive,” as both sides escalated in their efforts to procure my attentions. There was this one where there was no interaction, just Queen Ingeborg I, bathing in a beautiful garden of white lotus, with a fragrant smell of jasmines and citrus, surrounded by mirrors.

Her beauty is widely known: Long red hair, which she sometimes uses in a long braid and in others in a chignon, which I remember her in a recent State dinner; she has this slender figure, small breasts, no pubic hair. She reminds me of these old pictures of water nymphs of the painters of the Earth-that-Was; my teachers used to give me art, philosophy and history lessons, which later ceased and change to full-time fighting lessons and military strategy. I wish I had time to take more of them.

As I cleaned and put on the first layers of clothes, I reached the antechamber of my lodgings, where servants put on my more layers of clothing and the ceremonial armor of the Empress of Xian. Armor... my people were bellicose by nature and they understood order and might above all things. I tried wearing a dress during the first months of my ruling, but that did not go well, as noblemen and generals did not seem to respect me, despite knowing that I had an active participation in the war, and that I bled for my planet.

There was an upstart general that had the gall to attempt an uprising and challenged me to combat in an effort to crown himself Emperor; all the generals, loyal and rebellious served as witnesses. I defeated this man in combat, and did unspeakable things to him for hours, making many of the witnesses—hardened men of war—cry and vomit in disgust. I then proceeded to chain my enemy’s ruin to my armor and dragged him along as I retook all the insurgent parts of the capital, obtaining unilateral surrender.

I was never challenged again.

They called me the Blood Chain. I hate that name, and I hate the things that I have done to preserve peace; being the last member of the Imperial Family, my fall could foster a civil war of untold casualties. I have sacrificed so much, and I feel old and heavy sometimes... I have a gentle nature, but I don’t think that I will ever have the innocence I had when I was younger. I don’t think I will ever be whole again.

I took my two swords, one made of grey jade and a short blade of obsidian, as they put my cape on me.

I headed to the State room, where I held meetings with my counsel, I was accompanied by 6 guards.

“Empress,” said everyone in reverence as I entered the room.

“Sit.”

My counsel and I started to attend to the Viable System Model visualization of the Empire. Then, each of my ministers stated the business they deemed was most urgent, I fostered a dialogue between them, gave my opinion and together reach a consensuated opinion on pressing matters. As this process took place, I perceived the complex smell of agarwood, such a rare oil, that it was almost of the exclusive use of Queen Chaum Thom; I had dreamed of her last night. We were sitting on the edge of a fountain in her royal garden.

She had me in her lap, she had braided my hair like she has done some other times and she took me in her arms and closed my face into her bussom. This startled me somewhat but I did not mind much; in my defense, these were some fine breasts.

“I know you like this...”

I was just enjoying the contact, the intimacy... I knew both Royal Gardens and this was the reason why I could remember the smells in my dreams; I had also bumped into Queen Chaum Thom (or she into me) sometime, so I do have a vague memory of her breasts... I think. I am just starving, thirsty and misunderstood. All feared me, and all my time was spent on work, spreading myself thin, sleeping 4 hours at best, and enduring grueling physical discipline. Attending problems at odd hours in the night. Sometimes having stress induced nightmares. This was starting to become addicting. I could not have it.

“You can have me... all of me.”

“Pardon?”

“I’ve peered into you... you are gentle and kind, but you have these unsatisfied needs. I can see to them.

“You really haven’t.”

“I have... you want to discipline me, give me boundaries... set me straight.”

I saw her naked as well, really buxom, dark tanned skin, curvy hips inviting desire; inky hair and eyes, small nose, full lips; she didn’t have pubic hair either... am I supposed to shave there? Suddenly, she was bound in silken strings and had this silken collar, which had a string that led to my hand. Temptation.

“I have had those thoughts sometimes, but I live in a world of unforgiving power in which I can lose myself at the slightest mistake. I can’t have that.

“I can be yours, Empress Zhuang Qinfeng...” she said.

“...Look, I just want someone with whom I can belong to one another. This is getting ridiculous,” I said as I pushed her unceremoniously over the edge of the fountain to the floor, ending the dream.

I am befuddled as to when these women have time to rule if they are so busy messing with me in my dreams. I mean, it is clear their intentions are not honorable; they want more power, as if they didn't have massive structures at their disposal. And if I didn't have enough problems coping with their lust for power (or overall lust) and their childish whims.

I muddled through the meeting as best as I could, but I was just not focused... not there. I then proceeded to the throne room to deal with court and then to a small, private dining room where I can have a proper lunch. As I was exhausted, I instructed my Chief of Protocol to clear my agenda for an hour or so, while I had a brief nap.

Bad idea.

Ingeborg was here in the Palace, looking like a doll, we were sitting on some elaborate chairs we have for guests. I was in full ceremonial armor and she looked me a bit puzzled.

"Ah, yes, sorry," I said, "I slept with my armor on. Bad habit. Here."

I changed into a formal black plaid dress that I have used out of my planet for formal events, where they do not require me to dress like I am about to lead an invasion. Ingeborg held my arm and rested on my shoulders.

"You keep hiding your beauty under your armor."

Ah yes. I keep forgetting that some people have told me that my features conform to the standards of beauty of the realm. When they get tired of calling me the "Blood Chain," they call me...

"They call you the Blood Flower, Empress Zhuang Qinfeng."

"Blood Chain."

"That too."

"Well, I am not that bad once you get to know me."

"I want to."

"Do you really?"

"Yes."

"I want to have you... all of you..."

This feels like a *déjà vu*...

She leaned in and kissed me. In all the dreams I have had, they never had dared to kiss me. I haven't kissed anyone since I was a teenager, before the War. It was one of my few memories of an unburdened life and she had the gall to blemish it with this shallow scum-like behavior, improper of a true Queen. That's it.

“Both of you really don’t get it.”

“What do you mean ‘both’?”

Instead of answering I pushed her off the chair and ended the dream. I woke up, more tired than when I went to sleep; I kept on to the latter part of the day. It was all about requests, petty infighting among influential people, political schemes, bad intentions... selfishness. It was all about selfishness... Self-centered men and women.

After suffering such distasteful afternoon, I proceeded to release my pent up anger and frustration in physical combat practice. Combat changed a lot since the days of the Old Earth, before the thousands of ship-arcs scattered through the Universe. The people of this system, which had three inhabitable planets: Yinglong, a world of constant rain, colonized by the Xian Empire; Yggdrasil, named because it holds the largest tree ever registered in human history, inhabited by the Viken-Vestmar Kingdom, and Hué, taken by the Kingdom of Annam.

Ammunition became obsolete as people learned to concentrate and harden their qi against high velocity projectiles; this made hand to hand an option, as only qi could penetrate a similar field. Swords made of metals and stone conductive of spiritual energy proliferated; jade and obsidian, some of the finer materials, became a commodity. As I projected my energy through my swords and armor, delivering strong hits and evading and receiving an occasional graze, I managed to defeat 3 Imperial Guards in a sparring match, but I did not feel my turmoil receding. There was only one way to address this.

I concluded my sparring session unexpectedly and retreated to my quarters. There I summoned my Butler and gave her a list of things that I needed in order to do the same dream incursions I had been receiving. I had them within the hour. I made breathing exercises and summoned both Queens to my thoughts.

Soon enough both were before me, looking rather surprised: 1. For being summoned into a dream, rather than being on the offensive (so to speak) and 2. For finding their political (and romantic, I guess) rival in the same dream.

“Your graces.”

“Empress...” Chau Thom said.

“Listen, both of you have been trying really hard to get me on your side (if we can call it that) by not so honest means. I have been playing along, because, for one, I miss human contact and for the other, I like having that kind of attention for a change. But this can’t continue.”

“What can’t?” said Ingeborg.

Both were trying to defend themselves in the dream. However, I was fully in control, as I had a lot of practice defending against dream incursion.

“You both, trying to get me on your side in order to screw the other. I tried to be patient, but you are so full of yourselves.

“You lie,” said both.

“Don’t test me,” I said.

Their bickering died down.

“What do you remember about the war?”

Both were silent.

“I became an adult in the war. I fought in it and I survived it. Most of my family died, and my oldest brother was killed three years into his reign. You want to conquer one another, without knowing what it entails and what other people will likely sacrifice for it and for you.”

They started bickering again. I ran out of patience.

“Both of you are selfish little girls, who have yet to realize the burden and responsibility of ruling. What it means to be a decent Queen.”

“My people go first,” said Ingeborg in protest.

“Mine as well.”

“Both of you say you know me or want to. Allow me to show you.”

I showed them scenes of the War, of my family, of battle, of the reason they call me the Blood Flower; I showed them how I have made my life an intricate painting using only red, and how that will never happen as long as I draw breath. I show them what is like to sleep little and act a lot, I show them what responsibility really looks like.

I hear their screams and their cries. That intense, pain-riddled, hair-rising scream that I have heard before and to which I am somewhat numb. They look at me horrified, like I was some kind of monster (a part of me is, I guess); they whimper and fall to their knees, trembling. I put their heads on my lap and comfort them, I caress their heads full of silken hair. I show them the heartfelt tenderness I feel towards my people, the one I want to share with someone in the future, man or woman. The whimpering and crying stops eventually.

