

THE DREAM AS A PORTAL: A CREATIVE  
POETRY PROJECT

by

JENNA COMSTOCK

A THESIS

Presented to the Department of English  
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts

June 2022

## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

Jenna Comstock for the degree of Bachelor of Arts  
in the Department of English to be taken June 2022

Title: The Dream as a Portal: A Creative Poetry Project

Approved: Corbett Upton, Ph.D.  
Primary Thesis Advisor

Dreaming, which is described by psychologist Sigmund Freud as “visual thinking,” is something we do with our minds alone, while our bodies are asleep. Writing with a dream as subject material demands an acute precision when transferring details from the mind to the page, because the images and ideas dreams hold are by nature fleeting. In Dante Alighieri’s *The Divine Comedy*, the dreamer is also the speaker in the second book, *The Purgatory*. He receives the dream as if it were a direct message from God. Contemporary poet Jorge Luis Borges has written work which is a meditation on Dante Alighieri’s notion of the dream and has also written work which interrogates his own dream landscape intensively. Poets Reginald Shepherd and Maxine Scates also interrogate what Borges calls “the territory of dream” or the landscape of a dream (Borges 109). The dream territory for these poets holds common threads: doors, the notion of hiding and being seen, and accessing dream by a body of water, and for each of them the dream state acts as a portal or a vehicle to question ideas and images present in the speaker’s reality. My own poetry seeks to examine how the dream state, specifically its elements of movement and time, can serve as a catalyst to describe the fleeting. Much of my work explores a dream landscape where the dead are present with the speaker; these poems, as do Shepherd’s and Scates’ navigate death in the dream as if it were a tangible landscape—a place with doors.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Corbett Upton for asking me momentum-inciting questions throughout this process. These questions taught me how to step back and re-examine work which has become so important to me, particularly work by Reginald Sheperd and Maxine Scates. I would also like to thank Dr. Upton for teaching the work of Allen Ginsberg and Joan Didion with such attention to their style and their role in the world—when I return to their work it is because of their powerful voices, but also because of the way I first learned to hear them.

I would like to thank Professor Geri Doran for teaching me what it means to have a lexicon-- a fluid, changing lexicon, that is-- to talk about poems. Professor Doran's classroom quietly demands the same acute specificity that a poem does, and it is a true joy to listen and speak in. I would also like to thank Professor Doran for teaching Shepherd, whose work inhabits a space that is both coordinate-less and profoundly locatable.

I would also like to thank Dr. Barbara Mossberg. Dr. B's Thesis Orientation class at the start of in-person classes this fall, truly oriented us by asking us what we want to know more about, and why it matters that we do learn and then share what we learn. Thank you, Dr. B, for always reminding me and your many other students why it is important to forge a path when we don't yet know the destination.

Thank you to my junior year roommate, Ryleigh Wechsler, for telling me that I should write down my dreams, and for always listening to the ideas I woke up with, sometimes before you'd had coffee. Thank you to Maxine Scates for giving such thoughtful, honest answers to the many questions I asked about your new book, *My*

*Wilderness* in October. Thank you to Bob Keefer, for giving me the opportunity to interview many wonderful local poets. And thank you to Brian McWhorter, for teaching, moving, and listening with the kind of creativity that allows a classroom to breathe.

I would also like to thank my parents, Ross and Cindy Comstock, for attending my defense and joining the room's discussion with such attention to the material and to the ideas brewing in the room. Thank you to Ross, Cindy, and my sister Shannon for always being wonderful and patient listeners during the onset stage of ideas.

Finally, I would like to thank the Robert D. Clark Honors College for giving myself and each of its students the opportunity to pursue and design a study of what interests them, and for providing resources to do so along the way.

## Table of Contents

|                                   |    |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| Introduction                      | 1  |
| Early Uses of the Dream in Poetry | 6  |
| Contemporary Poets                | 8  |
| Maxine Scates                     | 8  |
| Jorge Luis Borges                 | 12 |
| Reginald Shepherd                 | 15 |
| My Poetry                         | 19 |
| Intent                            | 19 |
| Poems                             | 21 |
| Works Cited and Consulted         | 37 |

## Introduction

In her introduction to *The Best American Poetry*, Louise Glück writes, “what keeps [the poem] alive is not fixed discovery but the means to discovery.” In poetry that uses the dream as subject matter, the dream functions as a catalyst toward discovery. In many early works of dream poetry, such as in Dante Alighieri’s *The Purgatory*, and Caedmon’s *The Dream of the Rood*, the primary mode of discovery is of the self—of the speaker’s identity. Here the dream state serves as a vehicle to discovery of self because it is the ground which allows for direct communication with the divine. In contemporary work which employs the dream state, the poet’s mode of discovery is again often the speaker’s identity. However, in contemporary poems by Jorge Luis Borges, Maxine Scates, and Reginald Shepherd, the dream serves as a vehicle to discovery not as a result of divine intervention, but as a result of the dreamer-narrators own relationship with the dream. The speaker’s relationship to the ideas and images brought into existence by the dream state is what I have found to be most heavily explored by contemporary poets who write about the dream state. My own poetry seeks to examine how the dream state can serve as a catalyst for the kind of discovery described by Glück, and how the speaker’s exploration of the dream state in a poem can bring the images and ideas from a dream into conversation with the speaker’s notion of and experiences in reality.

Dante Alighieri’s *The Purgatory* illustrates the narrator-dreamer as a mortal who receives higher knowledge of his identity through divine intervention. This idea of direct communication with the divine is illustrated as a paradox in *The Purgatory*, as the knowledge the dreamer-narrator receives from God is both profound yet utterly fleeting

and unattainable while living in the human body. This idea of communicating with the divine is examined in the work of Argentine poet Jorge Luis Borges in his book *Dreamtigers* and his collection of poems titled *Poems of the Night*. In a meditation on Dante's *Inferno* and in multiple other poems in these two books, Borges interrogates God's role in the dream state, which is a state he deems profoundly revealing of our identity as temporary and fleeting. The poem "Mirrors," in *Dreamtigers* contains a final stanza which brings into focus the speaker's lens, and their concept of God and of the dream state. "God has created nighttime, which he arms/ With dreams, and mirrors, to make clear/ To man he is a reflection and a mere/ Vanity. Therefore these alarms," (60). This delineation of the function of dreams, as a weapon brought into existence by God, exemplifies how Borges is able to meditate on Dante's *Inferno* in his poetry. Borges explores the dream state not only in terms of his own dream territory, as he does in "The Dream," but also in pursuit of interrogating the function of the dream as metaphor for God's communication with man. Borges' poetry gets at both the profundity of the dream, as well as the reason for examining the dream in poetry: the constant pursuit of uncovering "a revelation which is never fulfilled" (Alifano).

While much of the poetry before the twentieth century that draws from or alludes to dreams is centered on the notion of divine communication and contact with the divine, much contemporary poetry that uses dreams as subject matter does not refer to the divine but is still characterized by a similar interrogation of identity, particularly of the speaker's reality as it relates to the dream landscape described. Eugene poet Maxine Scates often includes dreams in her poems where the speaker communicates with the dead, or dreams of seeing the dead and then moves into memories of this

person while they were alive. In these works the dream serves as the catalyst for a reflection on the poet's relationship with, or memory of, this person who has died. In Scates' poem "Storm," the speaker begins with an image of arriving by boat in a storm and seeing someone who has passed away. The dream in this poem, like the dream in Dante's *The Purgatory* and in much of Borges' work, serves as the vehicle for receiving a kind of message, though the subject is not centered on religion or a quest for meaning as many early dream poems were. Scates work moves through the images brought about by the dream state while bringing in discussion of memory and of real landscapes and ideas. But the dream state in Scates' work does not act merely as the entrance point to the poem. The dream state images are returned to by the speaker. They are further complicated and questioned by the speaker after the poem has inhabited other registers, such as memory. Reginald Shepherd's work also leaves the dream state images in a poem to inhabit another register and then harkens back to them—to contradict or further complicate their meaning—later in the poem. Contemporary dream poems by Borges, Scates and Shepherd, while they vary widely in subject matter, are all concerned with the relationship the speaker has with the subject of the dream, and of the power and agency of the dream itself.

When writing a poem the author has agency over all structural elements-- syntax, stanza and line breaks, spacing on the page-- allowing the writer to convey detail with the utmost specificity and accuracy. Writing about dreams allows the writer to tell the truth about something which did not happen in reality. Though of course the description of dream is not transcription-- poetry is not ever merely transcription (Glück 1993). The dream opens a door to ideas or spaces in a way that is unique to the



dreamer-speaker's own "territory of dream," to use Borges' term from "The Dream." A particular color is death's door, or a person's face is a measure of the time we have left with them. These truths which exist only in the dream state incite connections with the speaker's sense of reality, often leading the poem into a new register, away from the dream, and then harkening back to it later in the work. It is these spontaneous connections that are so welcome in the form of poetry. The poem allows the writer to choose what detail they give away or build on, and when they will move—and how they will move—from one register to another.

In his 1983 interview with Roberto Alifano, Jorge Luis Borges's description of the function of the poem both agrees with and further complicates what Louise Glück writes about how vitality surges through the poem. Borges describes poetry as "a continual experience... not just something that is, but something that happens, both when the writer writes and when the reader reads [the poem]." As for what happens when the reader reads, according to Glück, "an idea is being attacked, and the attack exhilarates... So the actively felt rushes to replace the passively unexamined, unsettling everything built on that ground, and the air turns giddy with possibility, as though a whole new territory in the mind has suddenly opened." And as for the poetic voice in a poem, Glück says, "mere doubting of received ideas is never enough: the poem must, on whatever scale, dislodge assumption, not by simply opposing it, but by dismantling the systemic proof on which it inevitably depends." For Borges this process of doubting and dislodging assumption is never ending, and it is never fulfilled. It is a constant revelation, a constant pursuit of describing what is utterly fleeting. This is perhaps why the dream functions as a portal and a vehicle for many poets: the surreal imagery which

makes up a dream incites the exploration of memories, landscapes, and ideas-- perhaps *because* it is ultimately fleeting. In other words, ideas which exist only in the dream territory call upon the poet to write because the pursuit of describing and building upon these ideas allows them to develop into something other than dream images. Bringing the dream onto the page incites the sort of discovery Glück describes. The dream territory is a fleeting space which dismantles our notions of reality. Writing from this territory of dream images and ideas prompts the writer to continue the vein of discovery that is first incited by that dream.

I began this project with the notion of the dream as something which incites imagery in a poem, as it has in my own writing. In exploring the work of poets Borges, Scates and Shepherd, I became most compelled by the dream state's ability to shape and *re-shape* the speaker's concepts of ideas and images in a poem. I have found that the dream state functions as a portal to ideas and images which are beyond comprehension, and which the poet then builds upon and navigates. This is where the work is-- in the means to discovery. The dream state drives discovery, in part because it is by nature fleeting. It will always inhabit the incomprehensible, and so navigating its territory prompts the kind of doing away with pre-existing ideas which is what keeps poetry alive, in the words of Glück.

## Early Uses of the Dream in Poetry

In his journal article, “Dante’s Poetry of Dreams,” Dino Cervigni examines the way nightly dreams characterize the narrator-dreamer’s ascent of Mount Purgatory in his *Purgatory*, the second book of *The Divine Comedy* following *Inferno*. Cervigni identifies how the narrator-dreamer’s transition from one realm to the next is marked by a nightly dream (Antepurgatory to Purgatory, lower to upper terraces, and from Purgatory to Earthly paradise). Transition periods are the times when dreams take hold of the narrator-dreamer, and these transitional periods represent when he is free from connections to the physical world, including his own body, and is therefore predisposed in these moments to divine intervention.

This concept relates to the quieting of all other voices discussed by Andrew Galloway in his analysis of the *Dream of the Rood*, wherein the dreamer-narrator’s proximity to this tree, recognized as a symbol of knowledge, is vital in receiving divine intervention. The article, titled “Dream-Theory in The Dream of the Rood and The Wanderer,” points to the quieting of all other voices as an essential parameter on the way to receiving knowledge, through the dream, from the divine. In both *The Purgatory* and *The Dream of the Rood*, the dream state is the vehicle to receiving knowledge from the divine, and in both poems, the fleeting, unattainable nature of the dream is highlighted as a defining feature of communicating with the divine.

Cervigni identifies that according to Dante, the imagination (in this case referring to the origin of dreams) can be set in motion in three ways, the latter of which is divine intervention. This article also defines the *spiritus*, a concept which clarifies both the origin and purpose of dreams in Dante’s *Purgatory*. Cervigni ultimately

examines how a mortal's dreams serve as a vehicle for communication with higher knowledge (God) which is ultimately employed in waking life and therefore reinforces mortal identity—which is fleeting. The temporary nature of dreams symbolizes the fleeting existence which is life on earth in both of these early works of dream state poetry. The way the temporary is highlighted in *The Purgatory* is a theme which Borges builds upon and complicates in his interrogation of the function of dreams in poetry and in waking life.

## Contemporary Poets

### Maxine Scates

In her poem “Lament,” Maxine Scates employs the dream state as a kind of framework—a set of ideas which act as anchors—to which the speaker returns to and interrogates throughout the poem. Scates works in multiple registers in this poem, one of which is an image from a dream. This register is introduced in the first stanza, which is one sentence, and throughout the body of the poem the speaker comes back to this image introduced by the dream from a myriad of angles.

The dream first comes in by way of sensory description, where the speaker is able to detail a kind of knowledge which is present only in the dream state—yet we come to understand that this dream state knowledge carries weight and significance for the speaker as they harken back to the detail of the dream throughout the poem. Scates writes, “before I see that in the dream/ all the lights were turned out and so far/ my father did not know behind which door we hid,” (11). Because of the way Scates enters into the description of the dream, with the word ‘before’ as her transition from real to dream state, we understand that the movement described at the start of the stanza leads into what is seen in the dream. This immediately establishes a bridge between the real and the dream state, as well as a sense of time and sequence.

In this first description of the dream image, Scates says that “so far” her father did not know where they hid. This language further complicates the notion of time and sequencing in the poem, as it suggests that the dream is ongoing. Because it is a description of an image from a dream, “so far” does not imply the same thing that it would if Scates were describing an image from reality. This could be a recurring dream,

where each time her father does not know behind which door they hid. It could also be one dream that Scates is describing, but what is known is that there is a sense of time within the dream, and that this sense of time is important to the speaker.

The dream image in the first stanza introduces the idea of hiding, specifically of the speaker and other(s) hiding behind a door. This notion of hiding comes back in in the third stanza and is weaved into the speaker's meditation on the word "lament" and what a lament is and how it functions. The stanza begins with "it's more like the wild child/... who knows/ nothing about a lament and everything about hiding/ and listening," (11). This reintroduction of hiding carries both significance and an acute specificity because it was first introduced by the dream image in the first stanza.

The reintroduction of a child character functions in a similar way. Though the speaker does not directly state that the "we" hiding behind the door are children, it feels implied because of the relationship to the father in the poem. It is not that the speaker equates the "we" to this "wild child" -- in fact later in the poem the speaker states "I don't mean I'm the wild child," (12)-- but that the idea of the wild child carries a weight in the poem because the dream description sets up an image of children hiding at the start of the poem. To be told that this wild child knows "everything about hiding" is intriguing on its own, but the weight and significance of this image lies in its connection to the "we" who are hiding, not yet found, behind a door in the dream.

In the final stanza of the poem, the speaker shifts into an acute directness which demands a clarity of what is meant by their own descriptions and ideas. In this stanza, the speaker returns to the door image from the dream and to the notion of a lament with profound clarity. The notion of time first introduced within the dream image carries

weight through the poem, most significantly in the final lines. The speaker uses “by now” in the final stanza to establish a sense of time passed both within the poem and in a larger sense: “it’s clear by now what I want/ is not a lament, unless,” (12). The passage of time in the larger sense, outside the poem, is made clear in the final couplet: “it’s for the time wasted thinking/ something is still on the other side of that door,” (12). It is in these final lines of the poem that the speaker hones in on and interrogates the significance of the door from the dream. The dream is what first sets up the notion of time in the poem, and it is this dream image of a door which brings the speaker to the notion of “time wasted” at the end of the poem. In this way it seems that dream’s images are what allow the speaker to come to a point of clarity on the subject of hiding and of wasted time.

The dream image of a “we” hiding behind a door is present at both the start of and the end of the poem. This creates a cyclical quality in the poem, but the image functions quite differently at the end of the poem than it does at the start. The image of hiding is complicated and returned to in the body of the poem, as is the notion of time. And when the speaker comes to this final stanza, they locate what it is they want: which “is not a lament, unless...” This unless bridges the idea of a lament, which the speaker turned over throughout the poem, and the dream image of the door. The speaker only wants a lament if it is for the time wasted thinking something is on the other side of that door. We know what to do with this final statement, this conclusion, because of how the speaker came to this door image by way of the dream: the father is what was on the other side of that door.

The speaker is ultimately able to come to a profound clarity in this poem by connecting their idea of a lament to an image from a dream. In “Lament,” the dream functions as both an entrance point and a source of clarity for the speaker in navigating what they mean, and what they want. The dream allows the speaker to describe an image as it is revealed to them, and returning to this image and the ideas it provokes allows the speaker to find meaning and glean clarity from the dream.



## Jorge Luis Borges

In his poem “The Dream,” Jorge Luis Borges explores the spatial features and unique qualities of the landscape which makes up his own “territory of dream.” Borges essentially details six different features of the speaker’s dream state, but it is the reason for saving these particular “fragments” which bonds them together, and which gives them significance and weight in the poem. These fragments are described as being saved from the dream state because they are all “inexhaustible to [the speaker’s] understanding.” Framing these fragments in such a way prompts the reader of the poem to behold them with bewilderment, but also with a sense of certainty, that they are present *because they bewilder* the speaker of the poem.

Jorge Luis Borges refers to his “two selves” in much of his poetry and prose, often to talk about his waking, writing self and his dream self, or his public self and his writing (private) self. He does this in his poem titled “The Dream,” in the book *Poems of the Night*, and in this poem his two selves take the form of a waking self and dream state self. This choice by the poet allows the speaker to comment on the interchangeability and fluidity of these two selves, and therein to meditate on the function of both waking life and the dream state.

But before bringing in this notion of two selves, the poet first details how the speaker of the poem reaches this territory of dream, which he describes as being “beyond the reach/ of human memory” and as an “underwater world.” With an allusion to Ulysses and his shipmates, the poet implies that he reaches this dream state territory by way of the sea (Borges continues and complicates this metaphor with the image of an “underwater world”). This is the place the speaker inhabits in the rest of the poem, so

Borges' generous description of how the speaker reaches it allows the reader to understand what the dream state is like for the speaker. In turn, this prompts the reader to imagine not only the images which follow, but the landscape from which they arise, the poet's description of the dream state is both spatial and visual, and works to characterize the speaker in the poem and their experience of the territory of the dream.

From the first few lines of the poem we understand that for the speaker, the dream state is a place beyond the scope of waking life and even beyond the scope of memory. Understanding the place that dreams live in for the speaker is vital, as this space is where the series of images described live. The speaker does not simply list things he has seen in the dream state, but instead says "I save some fragments" from this underwater world-- specifically those "inexhaustible to my understanding." The speaker's language here implies that they have agency over what they keep from the territory of dream, and that what they choose to save is not arbitrary, but saved because it is not yet comprehensible to them. This lead into the poem gives the reader clarity as to the speaker's relationship with the dream images that follow. As a reader we know what the common thread is between the images in the poem: they are the speaker's saved fragments from the territory of dream, particularly those he does not yet understand.

The speaker's list includes nature and animals, as well as interactions with people, and with the dead. The list culminates with a description of the horrors seen by the speaker in the dream state: "and at times, horror, unlike anything/ the day can offer us." The images described have a wide range, but they are all linked by the speaker's point of view: the dream state. Each image is described in terms of its oddity or

altercation in the dream state. The grasses described are from some “primitive botany,” the human faces are “all the time are masks,” and conversations “with the dead.” We know from the speaker’s beginning lines that they hold these images and save them because they cannot understand them. They exist in the dream state, but the speaker takes them with them into waking life as fragments to save and look at.

In the final few lines of the poem, the speaker describes a melding, or rather an interchangeability between the dream state and the waking state, which illuminates a sense of spatial ambiguity of the speaker and of the places which the speaker calls dream territory and waking state. The speaker expresses the fluidity and interchangeability of their waking self and dreaming self in the following lines: “I shall be the other/ I am without knowing it, he who has looked on/ that other dream, my waking state. He weighs it up,/ resigned and smiling.” Not only does the speaker allude to these two selves and their relationship to each other, he also reveals that he can be in one state without knowing it. This serves to further characterize the speaker in the poem as a being that transcends the constraints of time and space which define the waking state. The speaker is instead a being who is of both dream territory and waking state. This both further complicates and offers a kind of answer to the speaker’s dilemma with the dream state images presented earlier in the poem: who is experiencing these images? The other in the dream, or the speaker in his waking state? The questions that the poem leaves us with reflect the complexity and indecipherability that the speaker in the poem grapples with in his own territory of dream.

## **Reginald Shepherd**

In Reginald Shepherd's poem, "Until She Returns," the speaker describes a recurring dream of a mother figure, after her death, with a lexicon that carries into the body of the poem (outside the dream state) and ultimately reveals how the dream state weaves in and out of the speaker's memories and conceptions of the mother figure. The poem is oriented on the page such that line breaks at the end and beginning of stanzas would fit together if connected; each stanza is indented further than the previous until the final stanza, which begins on the left edge of the page again. These structural choices make the poem feel as though the speaker has made their way back around to where the poem began, at the subject of the mother's death, but now with a kind of resolve that seems to have been arrived at by way of navigating the dream state, and navigating the speaker's memories of the mother figure.

The dream state is brought into the poem with explicit language which marks a tonal shift for the speaker, and serves to illustrate the dream state as its own kind of reality. The dream comes in with the third stanza, beginning with the following lines: "(For a year after she died/ I dreamed of her; she came to say she was just hiding. Death was just/ a place to stay, a drift of cloud smeared halfway into snow. I watched it fall.)" This stanza, where the dream is brought in, is the only stanza that lives in parentheses from the start (although Shepherd begins a new set of parentheses to hold the three sentences immediately following the description of the recurring dream.) The dream description is written with explicit language that holds an acute sureness of what it states; this quality of language differs from that of the rest of the poem just in its explicitness-- the entire poem holds this acute sureness. The explicit language allows

the speaker to express a truth which exists not in reality but only in the dream state, and this truth of the dream then functions as a bridge to memories of the mother when she was alive.

The speaker's description of the dream does not reveal extensive visual detail, but instead hones in on how the figure exists and functions in the dream state, giving the reader the sense that the dream state plays a significant role in revealing detail about the mother figure not only in the dream, but in waking life. The speaker tells us "she came to say," implying that she came to the speaker in the dream, rather than the speaker simply reaching her by way of the dream. This language gives the dream figure agency; the image would have a different meaning were the speaker to just say "she *was there* to say." Shepherd later in the poem gives death itself the same kind of movement agency that he lends the dream figure here. This use of spatial and movement-driven language to describe death and the dead allows the poem to meditate on a mother's death as if it were a place with doors-- a place that can be entered and inhabited as if it were a real place in the world.

Immediately following the parentheses which hold the dream description are a new set of parentheses which hold three sentences wherein the speaker seems to be responding to the imagery they saw in the dream state. "(It never snowed there,/ pine needles on red clay and heat-reek of the paper mill/ for months. Mere decor, you might say, caves of kudzu/ and no sidewalks. I missed sidewalks/ most of all.)" In the dream they watched death, "a drift of cloud smeared halfway into snow," fall. And then the first thing the speaker responds with is an observation of the real world, presumably of where the speaker and mother lived: "it never snowed there." The dream image prompts

the speaker to examine and meditate on reality, specifically on memories from when the mother figure was alive.

Shepherd uses language from the dream description to talk about death at the end of this stanza, which works to reveal how the dream state functions as a vehicle to access and meditate on the mother's death in reality. He writes "Some Thursday's drift of cloud stole forty years/ in passing, and an extra for good luck. Some other spring/ I'll give them back." Because Shepherd describes death as being "a drift of cloud," in the recurring dream, these lines at the end of the stanza say that some Thursday's death stole time. The image used to describe death is personified and given the ability to steal time. The speaker then reveals they will give this time back, in some other spring. Death's description in the dream state is carried into reality in these lines, but maintains its agency and transcendence of real world constraints (we cannot really give time or years back, and death does not really steal them.)

Death is again personified in the poem's final stanza, and the notion of hiding is returned in Shepherd's final lines, echoing the significance of the dream state to this speaker's concept of death as a place. The speaker says "When death comes he'll be a fine young man/ and I will kiss his rotten lips and find her there." The speaker describes death as something quite different than a "drift of cloud" here, instead it is "a fine young man' with "rotten lips." But it is still where the speaker will find her. These lines carry weight and are clear because of the image brought in by the dream state in the third stanza. We know that death is where the mother is hiding-- "just a place to stay." And in this stanza, Shepherd writes "When death comes," to talk about when death comes for him. Again death has this agency of movement-- it is a person here, "a fine

young man” who “comes,”-- and who the speaker will kiss and then find his mother, where we know she has been hiding. Shepherd’s changing imagery for death works to highlight what is constant: death is where the mother is hiding, and so it is where he will find her. In “Until She Returns,” the dream state brings about the idea of death as a place which can be entered into and found—an idea which is meditated on and complicated by the speaker throughout the poem.

## **My Poetry**

### **Intent**

My work explores the dream in poetry as a vehicle: for conversations with the dead-- as both Borges and Scates do in their work, for an exploration of landscape which exists within the dream state-- as Borges, Shepherd, and Scates do, and for navigating landscape as morphed and molded by time-- as I have found to be the most present thread in my work exploring the dream state.

While Scates', Shepherd's and Borges' poems which detail conversations with the dead often describe spatial transitions, bodies of water, and images of doors, my work explores themes of spatial transitions, the notion of holding vs. releasing, bodies of water, and gates, windows or doorways. The idea of hiding, and of finding or being found, is present in both Scates' and Shepherd's poems where the speaker navigates a dream state with a parent figure who has passed away. This was a pivotal moment in my reading and research of their work, as hiding, finding, and being found are central elements of my own poetry involving a dream state where those who have passed away are present.

I also employ the dream as a kind of setting from which the poem builds, as Shepherd does in his 1992 poem, "Until She Returns." As Shepherd does in this particular work centered around the death of the speaker's mother, the landscape in the poem is detailed from a recurring dream—the speaker describes dreaming of the mother figure for a year after she died. This dream landscape is then brought into conversation with places that exist in the speaker's reality. This acknowledgment of the recurring dream in the poem was initially striking to me because in my work which details



encounters in the dream with those who have passed away, the landscape of the dream often has a defining make-up. It is this recurring landscape, as well as the recurring conversations with the dead in the dream state which call upon me to write from the images and ideas present. “Until She Returns,” explores landscape of a dream state as it relates to landscape in the speaker’s reality, and also explores the way a dream state’s landscape can navigate, erode, or build upon the speaker’s sense of time. Many of my poems, for example “March 16” seek to look at landscape and space described from a dream through a similar lens to that of Shepherd, most often by navigating a dream state’s landscape in terms of an altered sense of time-- a sense of time which in itself has the power to shape and morph the territory of dream and the speaker’s exploration of reality.

Time and motion are interwoven in my poetry exploring the dream state. My work examines time, often through a spatial lens which complicates or answers whether or not there is enough of it. Motion is a central theme in my work but takes many forms: landscape in motion or in complete stillness, the dead transcending their reality of stillness in dreams, speakers who move with or without having to hold onto something, and the passage through spaces both vertical and horizontal. I also explore sight heavily in these poems, for example in “I’d like to go straight for a while,” both through the lens of what the speaker can and cannot see, both inside and outside of the dream state.

The dream state’s role in my poetry is as a catalyst: towards discovery of and navigation of landscape within the dream state, towards the shaping and re-shaping of ideas brought into the poem by the dream state, and towards the exploration of memories of and relationships with people who have passed away.

## Poems

### *Concrete curves*

Mobile scales measure the pockets  
that hold no sound.  
The time between: the only time  
you think about your feet becoming  
weight on the ground is when they can't touch.  
You can't touch the buttons, flat against the curving gray  
that keeps them in its heavy folds.  
Concrete shouldn't curve like that.

Where is the space between where I began and where  
I am, has there been enough time—

Passing walkers float  
because you don't look at their feet, only searching faces  
whose expressions read 'heard,' though you haven't asked yet.  
They are going, only in the direction opposite of you,  
but when you go their way you're still here, standing in the open and staring,  
flat against the buttons, wondering what keeps you here—  
there is no door.

*Instead of holding*

When I get there I wouldn't know where I'd been.  
My body would hold that now, instead,  
in crooked hips and tilted chin

It's an end even though it's the first thing I'll remember.  
It folds me into its trunk, I let go, and already  
I'm looking down;

ropes change places weaving nets between  
where I'm held and where I could be;

And without reaching for them I know they begin far below;  
not looking for the ground,  
I know the bottom is one place, not many.

Not a bottom, but a beginning: nothing falls there  
and nothing pulls on my lower hip  
to remind that the beginning is even--  
this one might not be.

When I look up I start going,  
I don't have to hold on  
to stay. And there is nothing  
still to climb to. Instead  
it's the window of heat above a wick;  
there is no piece to follow  
to know the pane moves alone,  
bending what's behind,  
holding it here now instead,  
unattached to the frame, if there is one.

*Between*

And she let you come from her arms  
silently into mine.

Hands let you go  
from your stiffness,  
released you from your own weight

And I held you together now,  
but it wasn't my arms you needed, but my eyes,  
not to be with you, not holding, but to let them go past you,  
to reach faces on the other side

of your body. I held you up from behind  
but couldn't reach past with my eyes,  
instead they went slack  
like heavy bait on the end of the line.

And together we're still like this  
until someone lifts my eyes  
from their place underwater,  
holds them with their own,

and in the middle of it I wait for them to find you in front of me.  
Their eyes shouldn't hold mine if you're still here,  
between us.

But they do hold mine and they hold me, too,  
still and stuck without your weight

to hold me up and down at once-- between where you're gone and where you're still  
here I'll stay.

*Another word for funeral*

After I found you in the bathroom melting behind a closed door  
you answered me  
with the eye that you weren't leaking out of,  
and told me it had been happening for a while now.  
You led us out my door,  
down the steps from where we slept.

Outside was orange, burnt, and there were things moving  
only in the direction opposite of us:  
a short long round-backed animal passed  
and you had a name for it.  
I had never seen one,  
but you knew of it well.

You were even  
because I wasn't looking at you.  
The clouds grew thick enough in the quiet pockets  
which should have held the sound of your steps that I knew  
we were walking to a place where you were gone. When I think of it now  
I know I said nothing,  
but in the orange dirt I was loud next to your silence.

You had another word for funeral.  
You said it the way you say anything that you know won't be met with my eyes.

*I'd like to go straight for a while*

We return to our abandoned frame together  
where we'll drive the same roads  
under a sky that never changes color.  
He can only see outside and I can only see in,  
to the top of the dash  
where it meets the stale sky.  
His jerk of the wheel pulls on my sorry stomach;  
I carry an apology I know I'll never get to make--  
we are going left now  
and he can't make enough turns  
to get back to my stop.  
Sometimes I think I can tell when we pass it;  
the weight in my stomach unfolds to rise:  
climbs up my throat  
and leans out to  
find only the inside of a frame  
where the light never changes.  
Passing has nothing to do with finding,  
where he can only see outside and I can only see in.

*What breaks under, over*

A dreamt attic where we fought,  
hot space between doors now a conduit,  
to rinse or swallow the weight carried past autumn:  
an apology never made. Hands break empty with nothing to hold of it  
here, bones don't bend like regret. The dream lifts, taking heat, doors. Left is a clot;  
born of waste, what sinks whole waits cold at the bottom.

Covered fault  
beneath cold wood,  
asks blind: soft steps  
long enough to break, should  
they halt  
above hollow traps?

*John*

You were rolling over in a small space that we could see into,  
not through a narrow crack. We could see all of you.  
When I think of it now your movements are made thick with the sound of pain,  
but we heard you whole for the first time since you began going

and all we heard was you, alive.  
Before you went you talked about going often,  
you took it as a gift that you were being given it slowly. Time to see what was there.

But in the end it wasn't slow.  
You could not speak and it had been November when you last bent  
to make us see you needed something;  
when it was still easier to move than it was to speak.

This was a day when you were beyond bending and speaking,  
what you had then was your eyes.  
They asked for something and we began  
guessing, pointing to a board with answers in small circles  
that held what you might need.

We weren't finding it, frantic, we didn't hold yours long enough to see  
you hooked a line around those two words on the board  
and when we looked where you looked  
we melted with your eyes, softening into a close.

Her arms around you closed your eyes  
and I bent to put mine around your daughter,  
staying open, where they ended around her  
they met your shoulders. The three of us shook.

You, from the circles of our tears and us from the stillness of the body we bent around.



*March 16*

I am speaking until she asks a question about you  
and I can't breathe anymore,  
not enough to speak.

I can't see the question or the answer-- both mine to keep or give away--  
to look I'll need to hear them, outside

and so I start running again  
and I know when

we arrive under the golden gate in the dark,  
surrounded by water, our feet  
could immediately land on pavement anyway. Everyone  
gets through quickly but I am the only one running,

sliding under other gates and I lose who I had been  
following until I see him come out ahead  
and then I know which way to enter.

Thrown picks stuck in the ground  
and still water that I go back and forth  
between avoiding (when I stand up it's pavement again)  
and sliding through on my stomach.

And that's where it overwhelms me  
when it does:

like it would every time I thought of you for the first week after you were gone:  
it was like I could peek my head up to where you were: where you were laid:  
where around you I would soften. Me around you,  
looking in from all sides at once  
and for once, finally,  
not holding myself away, apart,  
together,

like I did, even in dreams, when you were alive.

*A sickness nothing like an ocean*

There's a sickness that doesn't have a beginning or an end,  
never overcoming,  
it washes over without cresting

Passing is from one side to the other  
but passing is staying, too:

Never leaving my body  
like a wave would,  
    with a moment after  
    where the only pull is an undertow  
    and it's heavy even though its beneath me--  
    its weight asking me to be heavy, too--  
    to be slow,  
    calculating;  
    holding a patience that's long but not thin,  
    it reaches beneath but isn't stretched--  
    instead made new at every depth

and after the undertow is gone  
I'd only have a moment to regret  
not answering weight's question with my own

because then I'd be between crest and  
fall again, where time for anything else  
can't be spent,

and weight isn't a question to be answered but a depth to be measured  
by the time it takes to fall through to the bottom.

The water level wouldn't matter if you're both just passing, on your way to  
somewhere else, the surface a quiet promise when you've felt it's edge,  
a sharpness like the corner of a rock cut by wind  
the only sound of your passage from out to in.

But here that edge grows dull against skin,  
where neither you nor the surface moves alone:

rising and falling together,  
it traces you

in a single motion that never  
started but never stops.

When did the sharpness have the time to become dull--  
would you slip your fingers under stacks  
and know that you moving without it,  
or it without you,  
would be enough to find  
a beginning or an end--  
underneath layers of stillness?

Because stillness shouldn't look like thousands of circles  
spinning in time with your eyes,

only when you look directly at them,  
other times spinning in their own time:

no circle moves without moving another  
but somehow there are no collisions,

each staying  
just far away enough from the rest

that no weight  
falls on anything

outside itself,  
each circumscribing all it will ever hold  
and all it will never give away.

*Listening is more like watching*

when your arms start to jerk and pull us  
away from where we might've been going  
I know the car will be dark  
by the time you tell me where we are.

When your foot is quiet on the gas pedal  
I feel the length of where we've been  
pushing back against the rear window, begging  
to be forgotten

so getting there after the light  
won't taste so much like regret.

When your eyes are on the road  
I can see what you'll say before I hear it.

Listening was looking then,  
when your words had nothing to do with where you were going  
and everything to do with why we didn't get there.

Now when you speak to me  
you hold me still,  
and I don't think about looking behind you  
and know when I turn around we'll both have to look

ahead of you,  
to where you're going,  
and you'll tell me a different way every time  
that you aren't ready yet,

and I'm holding my breath this time  
not because I know what you'll say but because  
we are held together in this pocket  
between where you already are  
and knowing that you'll go--  
where really there's no time between--

in time but without it,  
knowing when I let my breath out  
it will come back to take you and leave me.

*Air beneath*

A gush of air seemed to turn  
the corner with me, picking up

beneath hesitant steps  
and pulling them long,

and then pausing, having found lungs to fill  
just above the sidewalk:

a loose end, unattached,  
taken up from under

but not high, just enough  
for tail to become nose

in one turn; a soundless slither  
sharp enough to change direction,

still hovering like held breath,  
enough to catch eyes

and not concrete's corners anymore,  
enough to hold mine

steady but not still, long enough  
to settle with it

as it clings around corners far  
apart enough to stretch its pale shine,

thin enough to see through,  
to see all of it and what it clung to

at once,  
quivering like a footstep

that would lift off if carried  
far enough

by a wind with breath ahead  
and behind

to let it change course in a single turn,

a soundless slither,  
sharp enough to cut nothing and everything  
else away.

*Becoming long*

I moved for you the way I move into the sun  
in the last hour of the day,  
staying in the path it makes.

Pulled long, it is stretched fabric  
unfolding, it takes up space  
that took no time

to become itself; at once pale and thick  
in the way nothing catches  
but nothing leaves

and I don't have to hold on to stay.

Not looking beyond its edge,  
never in focus, it softens:  
softens me, and when it falls I fall with it.

But I hold my breath  
in the places where it lifts:  
where trees and buildings  
draw a bridge from where it was  
to where it will come back

and still forgetting how to hold,  
or that I did,  
as soon as I am the tallest thing  
in its line again.

*To recognize an echo*

The sound of it splintering  
is the beginning

of remembering wholeness  
breaks like a tree bending

under its own weight,  
a weight it wants to bear.

And so it decides slowly  
what relief will look like;

whether it will come to know its length in a cradle of rock,

or settle into a bend  
that holds what lays to rest on its slanted decay,

or splinter into skyward roots  
that catch, for a moment,  
the rain as it falls to quench unshaded ground.

Or will relief not come to be,  
not settle into stump or splinter into hooks  
meant to suspend rest  
when it's only a pause--

but instead be found under layers  
that peel off quietly,

as if they were never part of something whole,  
but had been laid still  
to rest  
and to wait to tell  
that the sound of a tree breaking  
is really an echo  
of weight borne  
too long  
but still given back  
too soon to a ground  
that begins far below the place  
you landed when you fell,

reminding that wholeness never breaks--



and if you're looking for relief you won't find it--  
at once  
or anywhere near the beginning of remembering.

## Works Cited and Consulted

- Glück Louise, & Lehman, D. (1993). *The Best American Poetry, 1993*. Scribner's.
- Cervigni, D. S. (1982). Dante's Poetry of Dreams. *Pacific Coast Philology*, 17(1/2), 24–30. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1316391>
- Dante, A. (1955), *The Divine Comedy- 2: Purgatory*. ” Estate of Dorothy L. Sayers.
- Galloway, A. (1994). Dream-Theory in The Dream of the Rood and The Wanderer. *The Review of English Studies*, 45(180), 475–485.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/517806>
- Nikolinakos, D. D. (1992). Freud on Dreams and Kosslyn on Mental Imagery. *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, 13(4), 397–411.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43853620>
- Borges, J. L., Alifano, R., Araúz, N. S., & Barnstone, W. (1983). Poetry: A Conversation With Roberto Alifano. *The American Poetry Review*, 12(6), 19–20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27777284>
- Borges, J.L. (2010). *Poems of the Night*. “The Dream.” Penguin Group.
- Scates, M. (2021). *My Wilderness: Poems*. “Lament.” University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Shepherd, R. (1996). *Angel, Interrupted*. “Until She returns.” University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Borges, J.L. (1964). *Dreamtigers*. “The Game of Chess.” University of Texas Press.
- Borges, J. L. (1964). *Dreamtigers*. “Mirrors.” University of Texas Press.
- Borges, J. L. (). *Poems of the Night*. “Inferno, V, 29.” Penguin Group.
- Scates, M. (2021). *My Wilderness: Poems*. “Storm.” University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Scates, M. (2021). *My Wilderness: Poems*. “I Call Out.” University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Shepherd, R. (November 1992). *Poetry Magazine*. “The Friend.”