

Elizabeth Dodd

an excerpt from

Disorder

I was sitting in light that seemed equal portions of late afternoon sun through my office window and the fluorescent tubes overhead. Focusing on the computer screen maybe twenty inches from my face, I came slowly to realize that something was happening in the left field of my vision. It wasn't the unattractive light fixture above, quavering and stuttering. It wasn't movement in the periphery of my attention—someone in the hallway, somehow appearing as an abstraction of kinetic light. Rather, it was a curious phenomenon: a curved, jagged form like a tear in my own perception, pulsing slightly—as if with its own importance, or with the significance of whatever lay beyond this little rip, just over there, where I couldn't look directly. I blinked, turned my head from side to side, kept typing.

A few minutes later, when I stepped outside into the fading sun of late February in Kansas, heading home, the distraction seemed to grow—still on the left side of all that I perceived, but commanding most of what lay within that portion of my vision. It was nothing like the little floaters, bits of my own self sloughed off within the vitreous humor, that occasionally swim into view like tiny brine shrimp or some speck of scum drifting in the still pond of my eye. I wondered a little, trying to remember whatever I've learned about the eyeball's structure: could this be something amiss in the cornea? But that's not what the experience felt like—not what I sensed, intuitively, it might mean. Even while I was focusing on myself, the world beyond my body seemed to be pulsing with this weirdly lit fissure, and maybe billowing a little, too; I felt I was glimpsing something that might come undone in the order of being, some hint of metamorphosis.

In a little while I thought, "Oh, a migraine, maybe"—though I've never had one before. Is that what it's like? But even when I had a possible self-

diagnosis, I couldn't shake the sense that this is what revelation must feel like; this is what we try to name with *portent*, *omen*, and other nouns to classify the inner affect of the physical experience. It's certainly not for nothing that we think of the eyes as portals between interior and exterior realms, or that we use their figuration in the apertures we've built into our shelters: windows, wind's eyes. . . . I blinked a few times.

Once home, I closed the blinds against the light outside. I don't think I wanted to pinch my psychological curtains shut against the world, or to slam shutters against whatever ill wind might be stirring, but still . . . it had been *quite* a day.

I have a student I don't know well, a woman from Iraq I'll call Yanar, who's here on special fellowship, and when we had sat down to talk about her poems this afternoon, our conversation traveled pretty far and fast. Of all places for her to come to study English, with her husband and young child—our campus is only a short drive from a major American fort. And who knows what will be left for her to go back to, as the destruction goes on in what she still calls home? She and her family came out of a war—soldiers in their orchard, bombs leveling their neighbors' homes—to live at the edge of a military training ground.

We talked a bit about the imagery in her poems: the terrible scream she imagines for the suicide bomber whose passion is a grotesque, ironic scatterfield of debris; the feeling of throwing her body across her infant son's, afraid that if she doesn't risk his suffocation, shrapnel or a bullet will surely find his unprotected skin. She told me of cousins, neighbors, and friends who have been shot—"seventeen times" she said, twice, of one boy—in the raw violence the press calls "sectarian."

"And now," she told me about this dead boy in her memory, "I can't remember his face. I should be able to . . . he went to school with my brother."

Her family is, Yanar said, directly descended from the prophet Mohammed. And she has dreams, remarkable dreams that frighten her, because in the world of troubled sleep she's seen things that have, afterward, unfolded and *become*. Relating the most recent dream drove her to weeping as she sat in the stark metal and Naugahyde chair the university provides for my student conferences: She has descended a narrow, dark staircase to some basement room, where a drapery is stretched in front of her. "I'm not permitted to touch it,"

she said, “and I can’t look behind it, but I try to peek. I know,” she continued, shredding a tissue in her hands, “that God is behind the curtain. You know, not the Trinity. . . .” I nodded, negotiating the language that we share, that she speaks so gracefully in her musical voice. Allah. God.

“And I do manage to see,” she said. “I see that there is nothing there.”

I thought fleetingly of Jung and his archetypal dream of the great house, through which he descended, floor by floor, to the level of cellar or cave—that earliest room left standing in the brain’s collective unconscious. I thought of Emily Dickinson, my occasional aesthetic companion, writing from within her own mind’s domestic architecture, where under extremity a plank in reason breaks and sends us both plunging down—together across the span of a century and a half, yet each of us utterly alone.

Yanar’s dream, for all its archetypal power, is her own; for a while I tried to keep myself from saying anything since all she needed from me, just then, was my listening. *She needs to be heard*, I kept telling myself. So I sat with her for more than two hours, and when she exited my office for the clean white hallway of the building—ironically, the structure formerly housed the campus health center, and the counseling services are still upstairs—I turned to closing down the day’s communicative tasks, some final e-mails and memos. And then there was that odd visual event.

Only later, back home on the couch waiting for whatever-it-was to subside (which fortunately it did within half an hour or so), did I think of what happened as a moment of neurological empathy. The curtain, the light, the as-yet-unarticulated but insistent ontological terror—I took these into myself while listening to Yanar, and they reemerged as a physiological symptom, a disturbance in my power of perception.

Hysteria, I suppose it could be called, but that seems connotatively shrill and a bit extreme. *Is this empathy?* There’s a shadow of imperialism in the word: *em-pathy*, projecting the self into the object of contemplation, the little armada of one’s personality pushing forth, all sails hoisted to collect the wind. Yet the end result, the lexicographers insist, is full comprehension. The definition seems, to the postmodern ear, oxymoronic—and so perhaps the perspective itself is ultimately impossible to achieve, as might be that imaginative idealism from the Romantic age, Keats’s negative capability.

Still, I wonder. This could be, indeed, an instance of bringing depths of the self to bear on the problem of sympathy . . . could be, spontaneously, the

neurological answer to sitting together with a woman whose world is, as we say lamely, coming apart.