

The Visit and the Threshold
By Anna M. Szaflarski

"The water flowed the wrong way around, instead of following the path of least resistance, it kind of pushed up against everything that put up a fight, leaving swampy stains where it stayed the longest. It wasn't a dream, but then what, and from when? "

"Ahh", he noted. Hmm", he purred. I heard him scratch something onto his pad of paper. I waited but he didn't say anything else. I tapped my fingers on the carpeted upholstery under my bottom. I was lying on the *chaise longue* in my therapist's office.

I started again, "When I think of *Déjà vu*, I mean, really about where it comes from, I immediately regurgitate of the faces of people that told me that the phenomena was just my brain-synapses crossing. After that flood in the faces of the people that said it was like a hidden message from a cosmic wavelength, pointing to some kind of inevitable fate. I definitely wanted to be with, touch, you know, the latter, but I know that the former are more my people."

"Unfortunately, time's up," he said. I sat up and looked at my Freudian arbitrator. The optical memory of the Chinese calligraphy from the opposite wall exposed a pattern into his face. His lips were lightly pursed, his head nodded slightly like he wanted to appease someone dangerously unpredictable. I sighed with resignation. In the cabinet across from us, the green arms from the one of the half dozen mini Casio clocks he hid throughout the room informed me that he had stopped me five minutes short. No doubt because he knew that I was always reluctant to get up off his couch.

"The memory of a swamp is easy to place", I clasped my hands and continued sitting upright, "I still remember curling my fingers around the chain link fences to get a whiff of it, pressing my face against it so hard that it left indents in my cheeks. Flanked by a crowd of other kids who lit their mom's cigarettes, with equally swiped lighters, we called it the swamp. But it was more of an abandoned development site, with corroding rebar jutting out of irregular concrete slabs, pools of slime trying to get through the stuffed drains, which probably didn't lead anywhere anyways. But like a well-marked exit sign, the water still wanted to go that way, down, jamming like a crowded theatre audience running from a fire, inevitably condensing, stagnating, giving off that warm smell of clay, a womb to all sorts of flies and tadpoles. The place stank hot. We wanted to cover ourselves in like dogs.

"Thinking about the other thought isn't hard either, into the future, I mean that is possible right, to subconsciously predict the future just as much as infer the past?"

"Your father...", he started, I stopped him there with less than a taut grin.

I lied back down, "I mean, water levels are rising. Cities that used to be swamps, now irrigated by pipes, canals and rivers, could revert into their former glory. Swamp people aren't hard to imagine either, constantly wringing out their rags of clothing, staving off mould or athletes' foot, gangrene. "

The doorbell rang.

"My next appointment is here," he said, "I'm afraid we must end it there."

"But the water in this particularly stubborn memory definitely flows in reverse," I protested. The bell rang again.

My anxiety awakened the inner image of the face of a poet, one of the mystic *Déjà vu* believers who had at one point said that my ascending star made me a fickle fucker. I remained with that thought and with her, the poet, for a bit or as long as I could hold on to her, but she tossed me back into my post apocalyptic thoughts on gangrene, salt, tech dry clothing, rice fields, deserts turning into shaken up snow globes, scarves and floppy disks swirling in the global swamp, and finally back into the room with my impatient therapist.

"No, I think I'll stay," I said.

The doorbell rang a third time. Surprisingly, the therapist complied. I guess he was afraid that I might make a fuss, and so decided it would be easier to hide me under the couch. I crawled under it taking one of the upholstered pillows with me.

"You must remain perfectly quiet," he strained with what remained of his authority.

"If you're not going to help me solve this I'll just lay low and figure it out myself." I said while getting comfortable, "Besides, the ramblings of another patient might lubricate my cogs."

He was a complete pushover, but I felt some affection for him as I watched him struggle with the hostage-like situation he had found himself in. He flapped the blanket down, and left me in darkness.

With my eyes open, but as if closed, my thoughts continued on time, water, movement, and questioning the difference between memory and forgetting. In both of my scenarios—the nostalgic past and predicted future—the water kept tumbling down, no matter what image arose, it was always down the backs and bottoms in showers, crawling down my baby nose in my mother's loving arms or down my gas mask in our inevitable future. Down and merging together, streaming together, down and together. Nothing seemed to explain my stubborn fixation of the exact opposite.

I heard the shuffling of a person's uncertain gait. Our counsellor stepped in behind, before closing the door. The new element sat then laid down above me. We were now stacked like shelves in a morgue. Our therapist let out a tense breath before sitting down in his usual place behind our heads.

We were silent.

"Robin," the counsellor prompted as if trying to wake his patient. It worked.

"I've been having a reoccurring dream." Robin started, "Drops of water splitting just like in one of those microscopic films that show the expedited development of a fertilized egg. Streams of water wind upwards like Boston ivy in mid air. It's not frightening, but I let myself get alarmed, it kind of turns me on," Robin shifted a bit, exuding mild discomfort. "It's the part of me that tells me that when the world finally goes off-kilter I should indulge myself. At the same time, it's also the part of me that is impressed by a fantasy where I resist to indulgences when everything goes to shit."

I laid there listening to Robin divulge. The language of the recollections were considerably more stifling but incredibly resonant with my own. Water is a common psychological association, but nevertheless, I felt it was a bit eerie that such a similar image would arise so immediately. Before my thought ended Robin continued,

"How is it that perverse fantasies enter the minds of children living simple quiet lives, and nobody knows where or when it took root. I've been coming here for months, and I still can't hold off the stuffs coming down the pipe from generations behind, that pipe is clogged and probably not leading anywhere anyways."

Blah, blah, blah, I thought. I always kept a pen in my pocket. I pulled it out along with a subway ticket and wrote the words, *ask more about H2O*, and slid it out from under the couch. Our therapist tried to push it back with his foot, so I pushed it out again accompanied with a louder rustling sound.

"Tell me more about the water, it moved in reverse, you say?" The therapist said with much reluctance.

Robin seemed shocked, and I knew why. Our therapist didn't normally ask anything that direct. He usually stuck to questions that would make you talk about your family, like, "did you spend time near water as a child?", or throw you for a loop with, "were you breastfed?" This kind of specific curiosity was unprecedented.

"Uh, yeah", the patient started again, "Like the water was being regurgitated, rejected, or running in reverse. I started to see it before I fell asleep, and then it started appearing in the mornings too, then when I'd daydream, and then the advertising on the internet. Not literally showing water but there'd be something flowing unnaturally. What does it mean?"

"Well," the therapist started. I pushed out a bubble gum wrapper with the words, "Does it smell?"

“huh, is it small, no wait, does it smell?” The therapist stuttered.

Again Robin was caught off guard, but eventually found the right words, “It smells like something kept closed up too long. Like sweaty Gor-tex”

I could smell it then too. We both smelled it. Water pooled into the fourth floor office. Lying on the ground, I felt it first. Luke-warm, like bath water, slimy stuff, a floating cotton swab nudged my hand, one of the casio clocks bumped me in the ear.

The water level kept rising as Robin kept talking, eventually swallowing my ears. The muted hum of the water was like being inside of a conch shell, somewhere down its spiralled insides a rhythm pulsed. When the water rose above my face I sealed my mouth. I clamped my fingers into the wired underside of the chair and we began to float out the window and into a murky soup that once was Berlin. Aboard our ship I was a stowaway, Robin was the captain rambling troubling confessions, as a captain should,

“I’m not a mystic, and then again why not. What is a fact anyways, why can’t water move in any direction, who says it can’t, maybe it’s all scientific propaganda. It must mean something, it can’t all mean nothing.” This was said to no one in particular as our therapist was left behind, no doubt congratulating himself that he had opened such a powerful subconscious door, while simultaneously distraught by its disastrous consequences.

The water in the city was ribboned with metallic ribbons. Oil and sewer sludge reunited like long lost families, previously separated by dry dividers. I reached around the edge of the craft, my wet slimy fingers found those of Robin’s, which like the rest of Robin’s body was dry as parchment paper. We calmly wondered if the dreams we kept for conversations behind closed doors would finally engulf us. Many faces came to mind then, but they held their breaths and had nothing to say.