

Equinox Society Radio 008

My Dear Strangers,

I often wake up sadder than when I fell asleep. Sometimes I haven't slept enough, but even when I have and my body's physically rested, something's gone wrong. I hit my phone's snooze, resist getting out of bed, and resent the good habits—drink a cup of water, play music, go for a morning walk—that I eagerly committed to when I was conscious only seven hours earlier. The day seems awful contrasted to another ten minutes of sleep.

When I got into bed last night, I was cozy and hopeful with a warm, snuggled dog in his blanketed nest on the floor, and a warm, naked woman snuggled up beside me. The house was quiet. The room was dark. My thoughts moved to colorful, imaginative places. Then it was 8 A.M. and I didn't want to wake. Getting dressed to go for a walk felt like a military procedure. Starting a day of work—work I love, work that gives me a sense of accomplishment and purpose when I do it—felt like a miserable slog for no discernable reason. I was just sad, as if something vital had evaporated overnight.

What the hell happens while I'm sleeping? How much of what happens affects my waking life?

This is Equinox Society Radio, and I'm a stranger. Like you.

Society member William Rook has been having dreams that are smearing into his days. Here's an email he sent:

Dear Dennis,

My brownstone's doorbell rang at 9:09 A.M. last Friday. I was reading in my study when I heard the bell and went downstairs with unexplainable dread. The ring itself was unusual in a number of ways. First, I rarely get deliveries or visitors that early. Second, my doorbell had fritzed out when that ball lightning flew around the house last March, and I had never gotten around to fixing it. Third, even when the doorbell *had* worked, it rang with a classic ding-dong tone. This morning's ring was an entirely different three-note chime.

I was so preoccupied with all of this, I don't remember going downstairs or opening the door. I only remember suddenly talking to a young girl who was standing on my stoop.

She was about ten years old. She wore a plaid uniform skirt and sweater, like that of a Catholic-school student, but she was barefoot and had a black fire tattoo on the side of her neck. Her

hair was so perfectly black, it had to have been dyed. It was tied back in a ponytail but still unruly, and she was remarkably hairy overall, with thick eyebrows, sideburns, a hint of a mustache, and wrist hair that escaped the cuffs of her sweater.

“Mr. Rook?” she said.

I glanced around the street, saw no accompanying grownup, and instinctively slouched to seem shorter and less threatening.

“I’m William Rook,” I said. “Can I help you?”

She introduced herself with bright self-assurance, but I immediately forgot her name. When I said it was good to meet her, I decided not to offer a handshake, because a child should never feel obligated to touch a stranger, and also because she scared me a little.

“I lost my cat,” she said.

I looked around the street again, scanning the gutters and trees as if I might actually spot the thing, all the while thinking I’d never heard of a lost city cat who was found unless it was dead in the road or came home on its own.

“My parents won’t help,” the girl said. “They don’t think my cat’s real.” She handed me a black envelope and said, “You have to find it.”

I opened the envelope and unfolded a piece of notebook paper that was inside. It was a pencil sketch she’d made of the cat. Even if I could describe it to you now, I wouldn’t. I can only compare it to other indescribable things. A gorgeous nightmare blooming in the mind of a fetus. A shape God abandoned when He made living creatures. An unknown color, hiding in the cosmos, that’s part of some forbidden, terrifying spectrum.

I wasn’t traumatized so much as awestruck—full of fear, and wonder, and amazement not only that such a cat had been conceived, but that a ten-year-old girl had drawn it with a pencil. I refolded the paper, handed back the envelope, and assured her I wouldn’t need the drawing to remember.

“Where did you lose your cat?” I asked.

“In a dream last Wednesday,” she said.

“What happened in your dream?”

“I went to an inverted forest where the pines were underground. The roots twisted up. The sky was way below me and I worried it was getting way too dry. The cat ran away. I tried to follow its prints but the prints kept moving.”

“Your parents might be right,” I said. “You must have made it up.”

“That doesn’t explain the mice,” she said.

I didn’t ask about the mice. It seemed like a perfectly logical answer at the time. I looked around again and noticed an odd lack of people on the street, and then somehow our conversation ended and the girl had already jogged away barefoot, and I was sitting back in my study, remembering the cat and thinking about the inverted forest.

I thought I must have nodded off and dreamt the whole thing, from the doorbell to the girl. But even then, it seemed incredible that my mind had imagined a cat that was both incomprehensible *and* vividly unforgettable. Amanda’s always encouraging me to write down the details of my significant dreams, and so I did that morning, and then I went about my work and put the girl’s visit out of my head.

But the whole day, whenever my thoughts wandered, and sometimes even when I was focused on something else, my memory of the cat was like a strobe-light in reverse, appearing in sudden dark flashes that startled me and blotted my vision. I found myself daydreaming about roots and mud, and more than once I noticed a pine-tree fragrance that nothing in my house or neighborhood could have produced.

I tried drawing the inverted forest I imagined with childish results. When I tried drawing the cat, I remembered the *feeling* it instilled more than any details, and my chaotic pencil sketches looked more like Rorschach inkblots than any cat, though I should say they were the kind of inkblot that makes a patient pause, and stare, and spiral.

When I went to bed that night, and the quiet dark gave my imagination more room to unfold, I fell asleep replaying the girl’s entire visit in my head. No surprise, my dreams were powerfully affected.

I stood in a field of rye. The rye was green and rose to my chin. The field spread endlessly in every direction, and the rye undulated in long, hypnotic waves that were caused by moving bands of darkness, as if the shadows of racing clouds were pushing the plants like wind. But there weren’t any clouds, and the sun was missing, too. The sky was empty and half-lit, a kind of non-sky that made my body and the rye seem to be the only things that existed.

The greens and yellows were oddly tinted, like the offset colors of a vintage TV. I thought it would take months, maybe years, to reach the border of the field. I was alone in the rye and knew my waking life had been the dream, and although the rustling plants were soft and soothing, my solitude led to a deep feeling of dread, like a rumbling in the air I could feel without hearing.

I walked for hours and hours. I moved as if the shadow breeze was rippling me along, and I started to feel that I was blending with the field. My hair was long and grassy. My fingernails turned yellow and started falling off like grain. I rustled when I moved, and I knew the entire field—every stem, leaf, and root—was made of other people who had also turned to rye.

I tipped forward at the waist, unable to move my feet and swaying in place a while, and then I fell to my stomach. The rye closed around me. The sky disappeared. It slowly dawned on me that, with all my attention on the field, I hadn't thought about the ground underneath the plants. I pressed my face against the dirt, and the dirt was warm and damp, with a rich, nutritious smell that saturated my head. I wormed my fingers into the ground, followed by my forearms and elbows. When I tried to pull them back out, the dirt pulled back.

I turned my face to keep my mouth aboveground, but I sank until my head and body were totally under. I panicked in the suffocating dark, and from the feeling of sinking deeper and deeper, away from the air and light. I couldn't go up and so I had to claw forward, down and down, headfirst and vertical in the wet, black dirt. I couldn't see or breathe, and I worried I would survive and simply keep sinking, aware of what was happening and lost there forever.

But then my head popped out of the dirt like a mushroom into the air. I dragged myself free of the ground, wiped my face, and took a body-wide breath.

I'd made it all the way through to the other side of the dirt, and even though I felt upright, I knew I was standing upside-down. I smelled pine sap and rain, and there was fog so thick I couldn't see anything around me, and then my dream ended and I was lying in bed, staring at my bedroom ceiling.

Dennis here. I'd like to pause William's email for a minute, dear strangers. Hearing about someone else's dream can be mentally exhausting, because they usually make more sense emotionally than logically, and it's hard for the dreamer to accurately describe subconscious emotions. So let's cleanse the brain palate a little.

Most of us don't sleep enough. But let's say we're getting six hours a night, which is probably generous. That's one-fourth of our time. Which is like yeah-yeah, basic math, it's so obvious it isn't worth considering. But think about that. If you live to eighty, you'll spend twenty of those years unconscious. Two decades. I'll give us some dead air to really feel it.

We tend to think of our lives in terms of our conscious hours. The people we interact with, the places we go, the work we do, the challenges or fun we have. We think of the conversations and emotions. We think of how our bodies move around. We think of the choices we make, because we like to believe in free will—that our lives are fundamentally under our control. We

take credit for accomplishments, and we beat ourselves up for shortcomings and mistakes, because we're conscious. We're in charge.

But what about that other one-fourth of life?

Someone'll ask, "How was your day yesterday?" and I'll say, "It was pretty good. I took a walk, read about Tarot cards, ate burrata and tomato with my wife Titania, and worked on an episode of the podcast. At night we sipped gin and spent time with a couple of friends."

What I don't say is, "According to my sleep monitor, I fell into deep sleep between 2:11 and 2:45 A.M. My heartrate and breathing slowed, and if there'd been an emergency, like a house fire, I would have been difficult to rouse. At 3 A.M., I entered REM sleep for seventy-five minutes. My brain waves increased, my arms and legs were paralyzed, and Titania and I were having sex in a resort town. The moonlight was green, which meant we were underwater, and Titania's hair was floating around her face until I knew her face had changed, and I was having sex with someone else, whom I'd rather not identify, and I felt this indescribable mix of love, guilt, pleasure, and fear. The fear was about something on the horizon of the underwater town. I don't know what it was, but it was coming, there was no stopping it, and something very, very bad was going to happen if I didn't give Titania a picture she wanted."

See that dream was part of my life, but I wouldn't usually consider it a real enough part of my life to talk about, even if the experience felt genuine and important, and affected my emotional state after I woke up. This kind of experience happens every night, to me and to you. Dismissing it as nonsense is strange and even dangerous. When we say, "It's only dreams," we're refusing to seriously acknowledge one-fourth of our existence.

Let's get back to William's email.

My entire next day had a subtle unreality about it. Memories of the rye, the dirt, and my arrival in the forest occurred to me often, and I kept experiencing physical remnants of my dream. I unthinkingly picked at my fingernails because of a nagging feeling that dirt was underneath them. I heard unexplained rustling—not unusual in my unusual house, and yet this particular rustling had the quality of windswept rye. My eyesight sometimes blurred as if fog had entered the room, and I kept smelling pine in different spots around the house.

I stopped drinking coffee midday and stayed active, eager to wear myself out and sleep as early as possible that night. When it was time for bed, I was so excited to dream my way into the forest again, I couldn't fall asleep. I resorted to reading the journal of an 18th-century mystic who spent fifty-seven years contemplating a small stone he repeatedly swallowed and excreted, and before I knew it, I was standing in the middle of the rye.

The plants sounded different this time, as if another force was rustling them at the bases of their stems. When I got down on my hands and knees, I didn't see anything unusual, so I reached into the ground and started my passage through the dirt again. The suffocating dark wasn't as scary as before, and I enjoyed the sensation of moving through the dirt, remembering times in my childhood when I played in fresh garden soil. My nostalgia distracted me from the descent, and in seemingly no time at all, I made it through and was standing in the forest.

I could see it this time, but it was much more than seeing. It was as if I kept losing several of my senses, leaving the remaining senses stronger, and so instead of seeing the trees, I smelled their colors and positions, and instead of feeling the fog, I heard it how it moved. I experienced my surroundings with an extrasensory richness that sounds ordinary in the re-telling but was, at the time and in my memory, astonishingly vivid.

Inverted pines were driven into the ground like gargantuan spikes, and their huge, twisted roots grew up and sucked moisture from the air. It was as if the ground was the sky, and the sky was the ground. Birds were in the mud, out of sight and darkly chirping. I stood in rolling fog that was thick enough to hold burrowing worms. The pine smell gave an evergreen color to the light, and there was a feeling of cozy dimness in the fog's grays and whites. I had the simultaneous sense of expansiveness and privacy I always feel in forests.

I explored a long time, climbing and weaving through the upgrown tree roots, sometimes supported only by the fog. I didn't find any sign of the indescribable cat that night, but I revisited the forest during the next two nights of sleep. Each of my subsequent visits were essentially the same, but there were significant differences.

First, the rye field yellowed and dried, and there was a sickly smell to the dirt—an ammonia sting of urine. The unusual rustling was more pronounced, too, and I knew there was something scurrying and gnawing at the stems. It gave me a bad, tickling feeling up the backs of my legs. I reached the inverted forest again through the dirt, and after exploring a little while, I started noticing sets of identical impressions scattered around the fog. They were paw prints. I tried to follow the trail, but the fog was always shifting, and so whatever path the cat had taken was impossible to trace.

The night after that, the rye was dead, and so brittle I could sway my arms and snap the plants as if they were fragile stalks of glass. The blowing shadows didn't move them anymore, and the petrified field was unnaturally still except for a maddening, scratching noise, like that of hundreds of skittering creatures moving on the ground. The sound increased from all sides, coming closer to where I stood, and I began to see mice darting between the rye. Some of them stared and twitched at me, and when their numbers increased and they were everywhere I looked, I knew the reason they were staring. In a world of dead rye, I was fresh, moist food.

I knew I had to get away, but when I tried to dig in the ground, the surface was hard and dry, and I had to punch and claw my way deeper to reach the damp soil. Some of the mice were on

me then, scurrying over my back and legs, and when I had pulled myself almost fully underground, one mouse burrowed into my right calf. I felt it under my skin, wriggling and bulging just below the back of my knee. I couldn't pull it out, but once I moved farther underground and left the rye field behind, the mouse stopped wriggling and the pressure went away. By the time I reached the inverted forest again, I forgot the mouse was hidden in my leg.

The forest hadn't changed, and my previous visits had helped me understand the place more. I had the same synesthetic perception as before, too—seeing the underground pines by smell, feeling the light by sound—but my senses harmonized better now, and I knew the logic and dynamic of the forest. I knew the way the fog would swirl, and when I found more of the cat's floating paw prints, I could tell which direction that particular set had come from and was able to trace it back to other prints, in other billows of fog.

I knew I was finally on the cat's trail when I found some of its fur. Like the cat itself, the fur was indescribable—astonishing and awful and colorlessly dark, like a small, fuzzy tuft of absolute void. It hung in the fog as if would always be there... as if nothing in existence could ever occupy that exact spot again. I kept following the paw prints. The fog swirled away from the direction I was headed. The trees' roots twisted away, too. I was the only thing in the forest moving toward the cat.

Then I heard it growl. The cat itself felt immeasurably distant, but the sound vibrated everything, including my thoughts, as immediate as something coming from my own head. I heard it with all my senses. The growl was like the first thunder from an approaching storm, ominous but also electrifying and thrilling. But it terrified the mouse that had burrowed into my calf. The mouse jolted in panic, trying to scratch and gnaw its way out. I grabbed my leg two-handed, but the mouse was too crazed to stifle. It chewed my calf muscle and clawed its toes out of my skin, desperate to escape and flee to the ground, back to its companions swarming in the rye.

I woke up, clutching my leg, with a spasm in my calf so severe it took minutes to convince myself the mouse wasn't actually there. I took four Advil, stood in a warm shower, and gently stretched the muscle, but I limped throughout the day, and the sensation of a mouse burrowed into my leg was impossible to shake. So was the cat's growl. I heard its echoes in everything from passing trucks on the street outside to the rumble of my stomach when I couldn't bring myself to eat.

So much of the dream has followed me out. Psychosomatic or not, I feel a terrible dryness in the air, like miles and miles of dead, brittle rye. Everything seems to rustle and scratch. The light in my rooms is oddly stark, and even a piece of wheat toast reminded me so strongly of the rye, I had to throw it out and Lysol the kitchen to cover the smell. I keep catching movements out of the corner of my eye. I haven't seen a mouse in my home all day, but what if they're in the walls or under the floorboards? Am I a short nap away from being swarmed and devoured?

The dreams are getting worse. What will I find the next time I'm standing in the rye? What if the ground is so hard, I can't even reach the forest? I don't want to sleep or even meditate now. I'm drinking coffee nonstop to keep myself alert, but the caffeine is giving a high, frantic edge to my anxiety. I'm twitching, and the twitches remind me of the mice.

Eventually I'll have to sleep. I'm trying to prepare myself and strengthen my resolve. The little girl was right. I need to find the cat.

Sincerely,
William Rook

What should I make of the fact that in the nights after William emailed me, I've dreamt of pines and rye, and have seen cats in Google images of inkblots, and have heard—I'm positive—an intermittent scratching and scurrying in my bedroom ceiling after dark? Did he put it all into my head? Or is any of it real? Or if I accept that dreams affect my life—that the dreams themselves are part of my life—are the cat, pines, mice, and rye things I need to face like any other experience?

I'm staying in close contact with William, checking in every night and every morning. We'll have a follow-up episode in a week or two.

But for now, a closing thought. I started recording this episode after midnight, once the neighborhood quieted down. It's 1:13 A.M. now. The temperature's nice. My room has a cozy glow from a neon light. I have a last sip of gin waiting in a glass. I had conversations with people I love today, and I got to spend the night talking to you, dear strangers. I feel satisfied and safe. I hope you do, too. Because we're all going to sleep and dream pretty soon, and who knows what'll happen then, in that spectral part of our lives, or how we're going to feel when we're on the other side again.

Equinox Society Radio is produced by Dennis Mahoney. New episodes appear sporadically.

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Our three-note theme is played by Jack Mahoney.

Imagine our closing song is "A Forest" by The Cure

Until next time, dear strangers... take care and look beyond.

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