



Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

46 | Spring 2006

Special issue: Raymond Carver

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/491>

ISSN: 1969-6108

Publisher

Presses universitaires d'Angers

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 March 2006

Number of pages: 63-73

ISSN: 0294-04442

Electronic reference

Randolph Paul Runyon, « Dreams and Other Connections among Carver's Recovered Stories », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 46 | Spring 2006, Online since 01 March 2006, connection on 21 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/491>

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Dreams and Other Connections among Carver's Recovered Stories

Randolph Paul Runyon

- 1 Of the three dreams recounted in detail at the beginning of "Dreams," the third of the five newfound Carver stories published in *Call If You Need Me*, only the last seems at first glance to have any relevance to the story's principal event, the disaster that befalls their next-door neighbor, whose two children perish from smoke inhalation in a fire. In real life of course one does not expect dreams to predict the future, but in a well-crafted story it is not unreasonable to expect that a story-within-the-story told at the outset will have some connection to subsequent events. Dottie is in the habit of recounting her dreams to her husband before writing them down in her notebook. In this third dream, she tells him,

"...we were on a ship, a big ship, a cruise ship, I guess. We were in bed, a bunk or something, when someone knocked at the door with a tray of cupcakes. They came in, left the cupcakes and went out. I got out of bed and went to get one of the cupcakes. I was hungry, you see, but when I touched the cupcake it burned the tips of my fingers. Then my toes began to curl up - like they do when you're scared? And then I got back in bed but I heard loud music - it was Scriabin - and then somebody began to rattle glasses, hundreds of glasses, maybe thousands of glasses, all of them rattling at once. I woke you up and told you about it, and you said you'd go to see what it was. While you were gone I remember seeing the moon go by outside, go by the porthole, and then the ship must have turned or something. Then the moon came by again and lit up the whole room. Then you came back, still in your pajamas, and got back in bed and went back to sleep without saying a word. The moon was shining right outside the window and everything in the room seemed to gleam, but still you didn't say anything. I remember feeling a little afraid of you for not saying anything, and my toes started curling again. Then I went back to sleep." (42)

- 2 The cupcakes that were so hot that they burned the dreamer's fingers anticipate the burning that will take place in Mary Rice's house next door. There are some other, less obvious, connections as well:

- 3 (1) The moon lights up the room twice. The first time, the dreamer simply notes it, but when it reappears, the moon is brighter than before, and frightens the dreamer. The moon's first appearance through the porthole corresponds to the light that comes through the next-door neighbor's window. "At night," the narrator recalls, "I could see the glare of the TV in their bedroom window." Mary Rice, the children's mother, worked at night, leaving a babysitter in charge, "and all night the lights burned over there" (43). The moon's second appearance, brighter and malevolent, corresponds to the fire. The dream and the surrounding context of the fire next door curiously parallel one of the most famous dreams recounted in Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

A father had been watching day and night beside the sick-bed of his child. After the child died, he retired to rest in an adjoining room, but left the door ajar so that he could look from his room into the next, where the child's body lay surrounded by tall candles. An old man, who had been installed as a watcher, sat beside the body, murmuring prayers. After sleeping for a few hours the father dreamed that *the child was standing by his bed, clasping his arm and crying reproachfully: "Father, don't you see that I am burning?"* The father woke up and noticed a bright light coming from the adjoining room. Rushing in, he found that the old man had fallen asleep, and the sheets and one arm of the beloved body were burnt by a fallen candle. (367)

- 4 It is tempting to imagine that Carver knew of this dream, and that he has retold it here, separating it into two interrelated stories. The first is the dream about burning (the cupcakes) and a strong light through the window (fire from next door); the second, the story of how Mary Rice's children Susan and Michael perished from the fire that ravaged her house. As Freud explains, the light from the burning boy was the somatic stimulus that triggered the dream: "The bright light shining through the open door on to the sleeper's eyes gave him the impression which he would have received had he been awake: namely, that a fire had been started near the corpse by a falling candle. It is quite possible that he had taken into his sleep his anxiety lest the aged watcher should not be equal to his task" (368). To this interpretation Freud adds that "the speech of the child must have consisted of phrases which it had uttered while still alive, and which were associated with important events for the father. Perhaps the complaint, 'I am burning,' was associated with the fever from which the child died." Freud further argues that, despite what one might think, even this dream is an instance of wish-fulfillment, as he argued that dreams generally are:

The dead child behaves as though alive; he warns his father himself; he comes to his father's bed and clasps his arm, as he probably did in the recollection from which the dream obtained the first part of the child's speech. It was for the sake of this wish-fulfillment that the father slept a moment longer. The dream was given precedence over waking reflection because it was able to show the child still living. If the father had waked first, and had then drawn the conclusion which led him into the adjoining room, he would have shortened the child's life by this one moment. (368)

- 5 "Dreams" is one of a number of stories and poems in the Carver canon in which the hostility of a father toward his children is thematic, including "The Compartment," "Elephant," "The Child," and "On an Old Photograph of My Son" ("Oh, son, in those days I wanted you dead / a hundred – no, a thousand – different times" [*All of Us*, 276]). Certainly the narrator of this story bears no enmity toward poor Michael and Susan; yet in the context of all those other texts it presents itself as a dream motivated by an unconscious desire for wish-fulfillment. Carver, one could well say, is playing with fire here. Think in particular of "Fires," the essay in which he says that "the greatest single influence on my

life, and on my writing, directly and indirectly, has been my two children" (Call, 97), and then goes on to show that he meant that with bitter irony. Because of the constant disruptions his children imposed, he was constrained to write only short stories and poems – nothing that required long periods of quiet and concentration, like novels. His children killed off what "fires" of inspiration he had. Just when he started to achieve some literary success with the acceptance of "Neighbors" and then of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, "my kids were in full cry...and they were eating me alive. My life soon took another veering, a sharp turn, and then it came to a dead stop off on a siding.... If there'd once been a fire it'd gone out" (Call, 105-6). The only other appearance in the essay of the fires to which its title alludes was in his recollection of his writing teacher John Gardner saying of his students that "as far as he could see none of us had the necessary *fire*" (Call, 103; italics in the text). The story "Dreams" looks like wish- fulfillment because the two children, a boy and a girl like Carver's Chris and Vance, are destroyed by that which his own children stole from him.

- 6 (2) In the dream, Dottie recalls hearing "loud music – it was Scriabin." By contrast to the moon's second appearance, which prophetically foreshadows the fire next door, this element of the dream could simply be the result of what Freud called a somatic stimulus on the body of the dreamer, like the bright light of the fire in the room next door that shone on the eyes of the sleeping father in the dream of the burning child. For Dottie could well have heard classical music coming from Mary Rice's phonograph while she was sleeping. In fact, the moon's first appearance through the porthole could also have been the result of a physical stimulus experienced as she slept, because light as well as classical music came into Dottie and her husband's house from the house next door. Mary Rice worked at night, returning at five in the morning, when "the lights would glow over at Mary Rice's for the rest of the night. Sometimes, if her windows were open, like now, I'd hear classical piano music, and once I even heard Alexander Scourby reading *Great Expectations*" (40). Dottie does not say whether the Scriabin she heard was for piano or orchestra, but the letters the composer's name shares with "Scourby" suggests a connection there as well; in addition, fire plays a role in that particular Dickens novel (in chapter 49, when Miss Havisham's wedding dress bursts into flames and Pip manages to put out the fire at some risk to himself). Freud maintained that the words the burning child pronounced in the dream "must have consisted of phrases which it had uttered while still alive"; the recycling of "Scourby" into "Scriabin" suggests that Carver is following Freud in his treatment of this aspect of the dream.
- 7 (3) Dottie continues: "and then somebody began to rattle glasses, hundreds of glasses, maybe thousands of glasses, all of them rattling at once" (42). This detail of the dream may foreshadow the breaking of glass in the firemen's attempt to rescue the children: "The bedroom window was broken out, and in the bedroom I could see a man moving around in the room carrying something that could have been an ax" (44).
- 8 (4) The dreamer is struck by the fact that when the moon makes its second appearance her husband remains silent: "but still you didn't say anything." That silence is repeated at the scene of the fire: "But none of the people watching were saying anything" (44).
- 9 The first of Dottie's dreams is about impending disaster:

I dreamed I was a boy going fishing with my sister and her girlfriend.... I was supposed to drive them fishing, but I couldn't find the car keys. Then, when I found the keys, the car wouldn't start. Suddenly we were at the fishing place and on the

lake in a boat. A storm was coming up, but I couldn't get the motor started. My sister and her friend just laughed and laughed. But I was afraid. (38)

- 10 This dream, too, anticipates the fire, if not as strikingly as the third dream. A policeman recounts what happened: "I guess one of those space heaters caught on fire... A couple of kids were in there. Three kids, counting the baby-sitter. She got out. The kids didn't make it, I don't guess. Smoke inhalation" (44). Rosemary Bandel, the baby-sitter, was the only one of the three who was aware of the fire; the other two had passed out from smoke inhalation. In this regard she resembles the dreamer, who of the three people in the boat is the only one aware of the danger presented by the impending storm. The dreamer's change of gender results in there being one boy and two girls on the boat, as there were one boy and two girls in the burning house.
- 11 The second of the three dreams recounted in the beginning of "Dreams" has, as far as I can tell, no connection to the fire. That may be because Dottie dreamed it before she married the narrator, and thus before she was living in the house next door to Mary Rice.
- Once Dotty told me she'd had a dream right before we were married when she thought she was barking! She woke herself up and saw her little dog, Bingo, sitting beside the bed looking at her in what she thought was a strange way. She realized she'd been barking in her sleep. What did it mean? she wondered. (38)
- 12 Carver would return to this dream in "Slippers," a poem in *Ultramarine*. Two couples are taking turns telling their dreams. A woman (not, as in the story, the narrator's wife) tells "[h]ow she woke up / *barking* this one night. And found her little dog, / Teddy, beside the bed, watching" (221; emphasis in the text). The narrator doesn't have a dream to tell, but considers telling in place of a dream the story of how his wife lost her slippers when a quilt fell off the bed and covered them while she was sleeping, looked for them everywhere the next morning, and was delighted at last to find them. It's not much of a story, which may be the reason he decides not to tell it to the company after all. "Nevertheless, / it has moment" (222), he comments to the reader.
- 13 Indeed it has moment in the sequence of poems in which it appears. For the burial of the slippers beneath the quilt repeats the burial motif begun in the immediately preceding poem "The Rest," whose narrator cleans a big silver salmon, cuts off the head, and then, "I bury what needs burying / and keep the rest" (221). In *Reading Raymond Carver* I argued that the stories in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, *What We Talk About When We Talk about Love*, and *Cathedral* (and the poems in *Ultramarine* as well) each repeat elements of their immediate predecessor as dreams, according to Freud, recycle day residue from the events of the day immediately preceding the dream, using it as raw material for the disguise with which the unconscious will clothe its suppressed wishes. Each story and each poem are like a dream, and then become the equivalent of day residue for the next. In "Slippers" this is particularly the case since the story of the buried slippers is presented as a substitute for a dream. The dog who hears its mistress barking, and is "beside the bed, *watching*" becomes day residue to become recycled in the next poem, "Asia," in the form of horses that stand on the beach and stare at sailors passing by on a freighter, "*Watching* the ship as it passes" and thinking the same thought as the sailors. "I know what they're thinking," the narrator says of the sailors; they're thinking of their destination, Asia. Likewise, "in the mind / of the horses.../ it is always Asia." It is not clear why the horses should be thinking of Asia (do they want to jump on the ship and go there?), but they do. This strange situation parallels the equally strange one of the dog

hearing its mistress bark, as if she had become a dog, or were having the same thoughts as one.

- 14 Similar connections may have eventually arisen between “Dreams” and some of the other newfound stories had Carver lived to complete them and the book their collection would have made. Yet their actual arrangement in *Call If You Need Me* is quite interesting and suggestive, whether because Tess Gallagher intuited Carver’s intentions, because she arranged them according to her own principles, or simply by chance. One thing we know is that they do not appear in the book in the order or the category of their discovery, since Gallagher found “Kindling,” “Dreams,” and “Vandals” in March 1999 in Carver’s desk in Port Angeles, Washington, and William L. and Maureen Stull found “What Would You Like to See?” and “Call If You Need Me” in midsummer 1999 at the Ohio State University Library. But the order in the book is: “Kindling,” “What Would You Like to See?,” “Dreams,” “Vandals,” and “Call If You Need Me.”
- 15 Thus in the book, the immediate predecessor to “Dreams,” a story found in Port Angeles, is “What Would You Like to See?” a story found in Columbus. In this story, the narrator, Phil, and his wife, Sarah, are preparing to leave the house they had been renting from Pete Petersen, who owns a restaurant next door. Petersen and his wife, Betty, invite the couple over for dinner the night before their departure. Pete talks about buying 150 pounds of salmon at a good price and storing it in the freezer behind the restaurant. He shows his guests slides of his and Betty’s trip to Lebanon and Syria, and then, since Sarah requested it (in response to his asking the question in the title), of a trip to Alaska. “The first slide showed a tall, trim red-haired woman standing on the deck of a ship.... ‘That’s Evelyn, Pete’s first wife,’ Betty said. ‘She’s dead now.... Evelyn was a good friend to me,’ Betty said. ‘It was like losing my sister’” (33, 34). After the Alaska slides, Phil and Sarah decide it’s time to call it a night. Fond and heartfelt goodbyes are exchanged: “I really have a hard time thanking you enough,” Sarah tells their hosts. “This has meant a good deal to us.” Pete responds, “No, it’s us who should be thanking you.... It’s been a pleasure knowing you.... You’re both good people. We like you” (34, 35). At the beginning of the story, the narrator had remarked that from their rented house at the edge of the parking lot behind the restaurant, “we lived with the hum of the big freezer fans in back of the restaurant, a sound we grew used to” (21). Now as they walk back home, he notes the humming again. But once he’s in bed and his wife has fallen asleep, “I heard something. Or, rather, something that I had been hearing I didn’t hear anymore” (36). At first, he didn’t know what it was, but finally realizes that the humming is gone: “The generator burned out” (37) and all of Pete’s salmon and other foodstuffs are ruined. The next day Phil tries to return the keys for the rented house to his landlord, but a distracted Pete curtly tells him to give them to his daughter, who “takes care of the rentals.” Sarah later asks Phil, “What’s wrong? What’s happened? It looked like Pete didn’t have the time of day for you” (37). It’s as if all those friendly farewells were never exchanged.
- 16 A similar moment occurs in “Dreams” when the narrator tries to comfort Mary Rice after the loss of her children. “She whirled on me and said, ‘I don’t know you, what do you want?’ She brought her hand back and slapped me in the face” (45; italics in the text). She did know him, for they had spoken on at least one occasion, when the narrator had been installing his storm windows (41-42). But her grief, like Pete’s in the other story, was too strong to allow her to relate to the narrator in the way she had before. Though their respective losses were by no means equivalent in real terms, Carver makes them so, not only by this parallel but also by creating certain associations between them.

- 17 In the heat of August, the narrator had left all his windows open, “and the windows next door, they were open too. I sat at the table listening to Mary Rice next door.... She was humming, and she kept it up while I listened and drank coffee.” Her children came down for breakfast, and then she told them to get dressed for school. “She began to hum as she cleaned a dish.... I have a woman next door who sings or else hums all day long. All in all, I felt quite lucky” (39). Mary Rice and her children were a constant presence in his life, as were the humming freezer fans for the narrator of “What Would You Like to See?”: “always, day and night, we lived with the hum of the big freezer fans in back of the restaurant, a sound we grew used to” (21). When that humming stopped, it signaled disaster. One could presume that, after the fire, Mary Rice’s humming stopped, too. “Dreams” concludes with the narrator and his wife reaching out to Mary Rice by inviting her to dinner three months after the fire. Thus, in a symmetrical reversal, the invitation to dinner in one story precedes the non-recognition scene (that is, when Pete seems to have forgotten, in his grief over the loss of the salmon, that he had been so friendly to Phil the night before); in the other story, it follows it.
- 18 As the humming next door wafts in through the open windows so, too, it seems, does the humming from one story find its way into the other, as if both stories had *their* windows open. In addition to the humming and its cessation, and the scenes of non-recognition, Dottie’s first dream shares several elements with the other story: (1) The failure of the car’s and the boat’s motors to start parallels the failure of the generator motor; (2) there are connections in both between keys and motors: Dottie first had to find her lost key before she could try to start the car whose motor was reluctant to start, while Phil’s disappointment (at Pete’s cold response) when he tried to return the house keys was caused by the failure of the generator motor; (3) in both there is a sister on a boat: Dottie dreamed she was going boating with her sister and another woman, while pictured “on the deck of a ship” is, to Phil and Sarah’s surprise, Pete’s first wife, whom his second wife, pictured in the previous slides, thought of as “my sister” (34); (4) the slides, collectively considered, present a man and two women (Pete Petersen and his two wives), while in Dottie’s dream there is a man and two women, too, since in the dream, she recalls, “I was a boy” (38).
- 19 Dottie’s third dream, too, has its echoes in the other story. Dottie is hungry and wants to eat the cupcakes, but they are too hot; likewise, the food in the freezer, having thawed, became inedible – too hot, in a sense. The moon through the porthole resembles the light from the slide projector. Both fill a darkened room with light. The moon appears, disappears, and returns; so does the light from the slide projector, as Petersen turns it off after the first set of slides (from his trip to the Middle East) while they enjoy dessert, then turns it on again for the Alaska set. He turns it off again after the Alaska slides, saying, “It’s heating up. I’ll have to turn off the projector for a little while to let it cool off” (34). Within this story, Carver has set up a doubling effect between the slide projector and the freezer. Both have fans for cooling: “Light beamed onto the screen, and a little fan in the projector began to run” (31); “we lived with the hum of the big freezer fans in back of the restaurant” (21). Both are in danger of overheating (“The generator burned out” [37]). The projector is to the freezer as the moon in the dream is to the fire next door, as in both stories the first event foreshadows the second. The two dreams in “Dreams” appear to predict what will happen later in the story (an idea Freud would reject were we talking about real life), at the same time they seem to look backward (if for a moment we adopt

the fiction that one story somehow precedes the other), as if recycling day residue from "What Would You Like to See?"

- 20 When Phil finally figures out that the sound he is not hearing is the hum from the fans in his host's freezer, he says, "I stood there a while longer wondering what I should do, if I should call Pete. Maybe it would take care of itself in a little while and switch back on, but for some reason I knew this wouldn't happen" (36). In the next sentence, he sees lights come on in the restaurant, which shows that Petersen has become aware of the problem. But for that moment, one can wonder if he should have done something that might have saved the salmon. It wouldn't have done any good, of course, yet the twinge of guilt is felt. In "Dreams," when the fire broke out and the children died, why didn't the narrator, who was almost constantly aware of what was going on next door, do anything? He couldn't have, because he and Dottie were at a New Year's Eve celebration (clinking glasses, one imagines, like the ones Dottie heard rattle in her dream).
- 21 But in "Vandals," once again there is a house on fire in the neighborhood, and this time the protagonists are clearly guilty of not responding in time. Robert and Carol, with their daughter Jenny, have stopped for breakfast at the home of Nick and Joanne. Jenny and a friend go out skateboarding and in a while rush back to announce that somebody's house is burning down the street. The adults refuse to believe it, saying they didn't hear any fire trucks. So the girls go out again and after some time has passed, during which the two couples tell stories and reminisce, Nick happens to look out the window and see people hurry by on the sidewalk. He remembered what the girls had said about a fire, "but for God's sake, if there were a fire there'd be sirens and engines, right? He started to get up from the table, and then he didn't" (58). More time passes and more stories are told. Joanne then notices all the people going down the street and wonders out loud where they all are coming from. Nick recalls that the kids had said something about a fire. But Joanne still refuses to believe. Nick opens the front door, looks down the street, and sees that it's true. They follow the crowd to the scene, where it is apparent that the house is far gone. The narrator does not explicitly say so, but I think one could conclude that the house might have been saved had the adults taken the girls' announcement seriously. The girls seem to have been the very first to notice that the house, whose inhabitants were out of town, was on fire. There were, it appears, no fire trucks in front of the house when the girls first saw the flames.
- 22 Had he lived to complete these stories and the collection in which they might have appeared, would Carver have kept both stories about the same event, a house on fire within sight of the protagonists? We do not know, and cannot even know if the two would have appeared in the same collection. All the same, it is of great interest to see the same motifs reappear from one story to another. Car keys, for example, play a role in Dottie's dream (where she can't at first start her car), and also play one in an anecdote told while the house down the street is burning in "Vandals." A husband and his wife were having a fight at a party, the husband accusing her of being drunk and of making eyes at another man. Then "she threw her car keys on the living-room floor and said, 'You drive, then, if you're so goddamn safe, sane, and sober'" (56). They had come in two cars. He drives both cars home, by driving hers two blocks, parking it, returning to his, driving his two blocks past hers, and so forth, taking two or three hours to get home. It is a marvelous image, almost a puzzle, above all a microcosm of the situation into which Carver keeps inviting his reader to enter, that of switching back and forth continually between one story and another, like the husband between the two cars, in order to keep track of an element

strangely present in both. It's a complicated way of advancing the narrative that seems to lie hidden between the stories.

- 23 Thus another dream Dottie has in "Dreams" – "She was in a house in the country and a white horse came up and looked in through the window at her. Then she woke up" (47) – returns, but not as a dream, in "Call If You Need Me": The narrator is in a rented house in the country. "When I looked out the window again, something moved in the fog and I saw a horse grazing in the front yard" (71). (The horses in the front yard also appear in "Blackbird Pie" and the poem "Late Night with Fog and Horses.")
- 24 And thus the protagonists of both "Kindling" and "What Would You Like to See?" are invited to dine with their landlord. Myers in "Kindling," renting a room from Sol and Bonnie, declines, though he's asked more than once, while Phil and Sarah accept. Myers and Phil and Sarah also have in common the fact that they do work for their landlord that they were not obliged to do. Myers saws and splits a truckload of firewood for Sol; Phil and Sarah clean the house so thoroughly that they "leave it in better condition even than we had found it" (24), washing the windows, cleaning the woodwork, scouring the fireplace bricks with a wire brush. In both stories this extra work is connected to the protagonists' alcoholic past. Tess Gallagher describes Myers as "a man desperately splitting a cord of wood" (actually, he split two [20]) in order "to clarify his will toward going forward after alcoholism and the breakup of a marriage" ("Foreword," xii); Phil remarks that "we had neither of us had anything to drink now for nearly a year" and that it was because "[w]e'd left too many houses in a hurry in the past and left them damaged or in a shambles" (23), back in their drinking days, that they were trying to make up for that now. Myers, whose principal action in "Kindling" is to saw up that truckload of wood, seems present in microcosm in Phil and Sarah's story in the form of "[a] little wooden lumberjack [that] was nailed to the banister that ran around the porch. When the wind blew, the little man *began sawing* his log" (27; emphasis added). The phrase "began sawing" is an echo from "Kindling": "Myers took the saw, nosed the blade into the cut Sol had started, then *began sawing*" (17; emphasis added).
- 25 All three characters in "Kindling" dream, but by contrast to the dreams Dottie recounts, these seem to be instances of *undisguised wish- fulfillment*. Myers, a recovering alcoholic, dreams that someone is offering him "a glass of Scotch, but just as he is about to take it, reluctantly, he wakes up in a sweat, his heart racing" (12). Sol, whose arm is withered from an accident with blasting caps that happened in his teenage years, "dreams that he is changing a tire on a truck and that he has the use of both of his arms." Bonnie, who is childless, "dreams that she is taking two – no, three – children to the park" (13). Unlike Dottie's dreams, these seem, as far as I can tell, to have none of the connections to the rest of the story (or to other stories) that were characteristic of those in "Dreams." But what might have happened in a later version? As Gallagher points out, "Ray would sometimes take a story through thirty rewrites. These stories had been put aside well short of that" (xi). Had he returned to "Kindling" before he died might not Carver have enriched these dreams with something like the resonance of those in "Dreams"?

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ABSTRACTS

The three dreams recounted early on in “Dreams,” one of five posthumously discovered stories by Raymond Carver collected by Tess Gallagher in *Call If You Need Me*, resonate with events to come in the story. One of them as well seems to evoke the “burning child” dream in Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* (and with it the theme, pervasive in Carver’s writing, of a father’s hostility to his child). More strangely, the events and dreams of “Dreams” also appear to resonate with events in other stories in the collection, especially the immediately preceding story “What Would You Like to See?” and the immediately following “Vandals.” In this way, the connections between dreams and events in “Dreams” parallels the connections between the stories. Such echoes are a persistent feature of Carver’s writing, particularly evident in his poetic collection *Ultramarine*.

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