

ECHOES *of the* Suicide Girls

*A teacher's waking
nightmare brings a
reflection: high school is
a Hades*

By Jennifer Selig

I sit in the bathtub, with the water running, rocking my naked body, screaming and crying over and over again, "NO! NO! NO!"

Eventually, when my voice tires, I turn to a low moan, repeating, "Too much sadness. Too much. Too much." Finally, my voice dries up, and I get out of the now cold waters of the tub.

I lie in my bed, still wet, curled up in the fetal position, my body racked with deep sobs that shake the mattress like an earthquake. Tears drop onto the pillow, adding eye wetness to hair wetness. My eyes are squeezed shut as tight as possible, and it is dark in there, and it is the underworld, and I ride even deeper into that tunnel on the wave of each sob. I want to go deep. I want to be swallowed up. I want to understand the lure of the darkness.



Rachel Pitkin

This is not my pain alone; that much is clear. The crying started somewhere else, and I am simply reverberating the chorus. The echoes of the suicide girls sound in me.

In the midst of rereading James Hillman's *The Dream and the Underworld*, I had a nightmarish dream. When I woke, I knew I was to follow that mare as she galloped off into the underworld. No, that makes it sound like I had a choice in the matter. Rather, when I woke up, I knew I was already *in* the underworld, drop-kicked there without any say in the matter.

You may think the opening scene of this piece is the dream, but it's not. Rather, that's what happened the day after the dream, when life itself became a nightmare. Hillman, founder of archetypal psychology, would have us blur the boundaries between night and day, between asleep and awake, between underworld and upperworld, but I don't need his help on that one. Trust me, I knew then that I was awake during a nightmare.

Notice, too, the blur between tenses as this story unfolds. It's purposeful as well. I'm very present to some things in this story, and I'm a bit more distant from others.

Isn't that how it happens in a dream, as well? You live the past as if it were present: dead people come back, and they're young again; historical figures talk to you about your future; you live through events you are too young to have witnessed.

But I digress. Back to today.

It was Heather yesterday, but she's only one in a chain. It was Katie last spring, Christina last fall, Kim and Maria the year before, Jackie and Debbie and Rebecca before them.

I hate that the list is endless.

Each semester a new suicide girl. The one who slices her wrists with her father's razor blade. The one who stares down the barrel of a gun and dares herself to pull the trigger. The one who lines up every pill in her parents' medicine cabinet and swallows. The one who ties the rope around her neck and considers the fall. The one who drives her car into a wall. The one who kills herself slowly with drugs; the one who drinks herself into oblivion. The one who simply lies in bed in a darkened room for hours on end and sleeps the deep sleep that wishes it were death, that wishes it would never wake up.

Can any girl survive high school without her share of scars?

I hate that the list is endless.

Each suicide girl sings her own song, but there is a harmony, nonetheless. "I don't know why, but I just want to die." "I feel so sad." "I feel so lost." "Nothing changes." "Nothing helps." "No one helps." "I feel like nobody really loves me." "I don't love myself. Sometimes I don't even like myself." "I can't stop lying." "I can't stop crying." "I can't stop dying."

I hate that the list is endless.

I saw her sadness, the sadness of the latest suicide girl. She sat in my classroom on Wednesday and cried through most of it, making no attempt to hide her tears. I made feeble efforts from my lectern to send support long-distance. I smiled comfortingly. I blew her a kiss. I stuck a mental yellow post-it note to my brain, reminding me to ask her what was wrong at the end of class. It wasn't until the bell rang and the next class began that I realized I had let her walk out the door without a word.

The yellow post-it note fell silently to the floor.

She came to class early on Thursday but didn't look at me, didn't give me her usual greeting. I walked by her, saying, "Good morning," too quietly to penetrate her protective shell. I could tell she was in a bad space and allowed it, thinking I was respecting her life. Instead, I was allowing her death, for in that space, she wrote a goodbye note saying she wanted to crawl into the darkness and die. She left it on the desk when she packed her bag violently and strode out in the middle of class. I had no space to chase after her as sixty-four other eyes kept theirs on mine.

I called her at home that afternoon, but it was too late. The ambulance had delivered her to the institution an hour earlier. She paid Charon her obol of choice: four bottles of pills to row her to the underworld.

On Friday, her desk was empty except for the ghost of the suicide note that I couldn't stop myself from seeing.

That note is for me. "Dear Teacher," it says. "Save me. Love, your latest Suicide Girl."

On Thursday night, while Heather rested in her institution and dreamed of Hades, I too had a dream. There

was a horrible accident. A school bus, an enormous, dark school bus carrying way too many girls crashed then rolled over on its back like a cockroach. Only one girl died; the rest were marked with blood from so many cuts and wounds. A co-worker walked carefully through the wreckage with a clipboard, taking notes, taking names. One bloody girl showed me her arm. Her cuts were perfectly straight, more like razor marks than jagged glass cuts. Another bloody girl offered up her marks for my witnessing gaze. There were lines on her body, too, so many lines, and the lines started to take shape, and a picture began to unfold, a picture so intricate that it was more like a delicate etching. I was amazed at the detail that pain can paint on a body. Bloody girls kept rising, phoenix-like, from the wreckage, coming to me, showing me their wounds. I think all the girls in the school were there. But only one died, and she was a student of mine.

Sitting in the bathtub the next night, I see the teacher with the clipboard coming to me, telling me that the one who died was a student of mine, and I cry "No!" The girl from the bus with blood running down her face turns into Heather, with tears running down her face, and I moan, "Too much pain!" Lying in my bed, I see her leave the classroom again and again, leaving that note on the desk, that note she didn't even bother to fold, and now I don't know if it was part of the dream or if it really happened. With every cry, I try to follow her into the underworld, but I keep coming up for air.

Tears blur my eyes, time blurs the moment, and I lose myself in the fall into myth. Now I am Demeter, and Heather is Persephone. My beautiful daughter has been abducted by Hades, has been violently pulled down into the underworld while she was innocently picking flowers. I am screaming, raving, searching the world over for my lost girl. I am in despair, I feel responsible, and I can hear her crying, "Dear Mother! Save me!" from the depths of her new home. Yet I can't find the place in the earth where I lost her, the place where she was pulled so mercilessly down. I am helpless, I am frustrated, and I am frantic. Like Demeter, I am also a little bit mad.

I am not only Demeter but Hercules as well. I am the heroic ego, certain that I can go down into the underworld, steal the guard-dog Cerberus, and return. Just as Freud wanted to rescue and reclaim the dream from its underworld madness, I want to rescue and reclaim these girls

Hades bides his time and eventually abducts the innocent in all of us.

taken too soon into the underworld madness, to bring them back into the upperworld.

But even rescuers have their shadows; the limitation of the heroic ego is the inability to accept limitations. I cannot escape judging myself, making myself wrong for not being able to save them from their experience. I'm haunted by my own shade, *Should Have*. I *should have* gone after Heather. I *should have* remembered to talk to her after class. I *should have* called her that night at home. I *should have* seen it coming.

The images return. Upperworld and underworld are spinning, and both are dark, and all I can hear are the echoes of the suicide girls sounding in me. A collage of day-world and nightworld images dance before me: Sara's bloody face; track marks on Karen's arms; Band-Aids on Rebecca's wrists; Charon driving a dark school bus; Kim in a turtleneck to cover the rope marks on her neck; Sandi with the names of the dead on a clipboard; bloody bodies writhing in the wreckage; Maria on the stretcher, calling my name; a stack of notes that say, "Dear Teacher. Save me. Love, your latest Suicide Girl." They play deadly games at the edge of the River Styx. They cry enough to fill their own river. Is it bath-water I sit in, or is it a tub of tears? If I cry enough tears myself, can I start the flood that will wash over them until they see that they are already clean? The school bus drives them to their deaths. Can any girl survive high school without her share of scars?

Scars. Can any girl survive high school without her share of scars? The question echoes, and I wonder who I am really talking about. Suddenly, I know—these girls are me. Swept back into the current of the dream, now I stand on the banks and recognize myself in the water. I am the suicide girl, swimming upstream, wearing only my pathology. The River Styx rushes towards me, bringing memories I am forever wanting to forget: my own desires to kill myself when I was in high school. Weighing out the different ways and means to death. Imagining the funeral scene time and time again, wondering how each person would respond to the tragic loss of me. Thinking of the note I would write, wondering whose desk I would leave it on. Praying for an end to the pain and feeling as if I were sinking, deadweight, in the river of time.

Yes, I remember it all clearly now. I thought then that things would never change, would never improve. There was no light, no way out. I knew then, though I didn't have the mytho-poetic language for it, that the trip into the underworld was a one-way ticket—you passed Cerberus on the way in, and he would never let you back out again.

And now a new mythological dimension is added. Now I am Narcissus, staring at my own image in the water of the River Styx. I understand how Narcissus felt. I feel if I stare into my own reflection in these dream waters for long enough, I will fall in and drown. Oh, how I want to fight this memory. The suicide girls are not me. Don't tell me that bloody girl with picture-perfect scars is me. Don't tell me I'm still bleeding. Don't tell me I'm still a passive passenger on that damned bus. I have changed. I have grown. I have risen above that time.

But the dream does not afford me the luxury of escape. There is no hope in this dream. I scan the images again, but Narcissus's spurned lover, Echo, repeats the line: There is no hope in this dream. Nobody is growing. Everybody is dying. The only things that rise in the dream are the butchered bodies of beautiful, bloody young girls. Check the clipboard again, Sandi. Did anyone survive unscathed? Did I?

This is a nightmare, I think. I am awake and they are awake and we are living in a nightmare. Better to go back to sleep, better to swallow some pills and enter the darkness and leave behind this even darker day's reality. I can't help but stay with the images. I am haunted by the images. I want to drink, I want to cry, I want to die with them, but I don't, and they don't, because every one of them is still alive, even Heather lives institutionalized, because they all picked up the phone and left the message, or picked up the pen and wrote the note that said, "Dear Teacher. Save me. Love, your latest Suicide Girl."

But one day, we all won't be so lucky. One day, Hades' abduction will be successful: one suicide girl will slip through, and she will die, and no Herculean effort on my part will save her or bring her back in time.

Who will I cry for then?

Who do I cry for now?

I check my e-mail. Another note. They find me everywhere. This one reads, "Dear Teacher. You saved me. Love, your former Suicide Girl."

Or I wish that's what it reads. This one is full of the kind of details that haunt.

"I don't know if you'll want to hear this," she begins, "but last year in the spring, when I was in your class, I was totally suicidal. Everyday I went home from school and thought about killing myself, and I tried unsuccessfully several times, mostly with pills."

She's right. I don't want to hear this. Not again. Not another echo. I place my hands over my ears, but my eyes remain wide open.

"One day it was really bad. I didn't even go to school that day. I just stayed home and laid on my floor and thought about killing myself. Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. I took a chair into my closet, got a rope, tied it around my neck, and got ready to hang myself. I stood on that chair for a long time, trying to figure out if there was any reason not to kick it out from underneath me. And then, and I know this sounds really stupid, but I heard 'You've got mail' on my laptop. I guess I couldn't die curious, you know? So, I untied the rope and checked my mail, and it was from you. Remember, it was the first e-mail you sent me, just to give me the Web site for those song lyrics we had talked about. It's stupid, but the fact that you cared enough to remember about me, and you bothered to even notice I was absent in class and wanted to know why . . . well, I just decided that was something, you know? And after that things got better, and I never talked to you about it or told you about it, but I really think if it wasn't for you and for that e-mail, I would be dead today."

She ended the note, "Thought maybe you might want to know that you do make a difference, even though you don't always hear about it."

I know that e-mail should bring me comfort, bring me hope, uncurl me at least from the fetal position, unfurl me from the futile position where I crouch and watch the latest run of suicides. But I can't seem to make a move that's not shadowed by Hades. At least this week, there's no running away. And then I remember that Hades is also Pluto, the wealth and riches of the underworld. Pondering this Pluto, I wonder what riches does he offer me, does he offer us. What is his wealth? What fruits lie in his basket? What purpose did my own visit to the underworld serve?

Certainly, this: that I am a more compassionate, caring, understanding person as a result of my own pain, my own suffering. "You can really relate to us," my students say. Touché. This is not the way I'd wish for us to relate, understanding each other's suicide longings and death wishes, but it is true. And in this way, maybe I can offer them hope, the hope that comes from seeing someone who has been to the underworld and now walks the halls with laughter and inhabits the room with joy. These are the riches I've reaped from my picnic with Pluto. These are the fruits I bear my students. I am a veritable cornucopia, and my wine cup overfloweth with my own converted blood.

So, I raise my cup and toast the gods, and maybe I'm even a little bit thankful for my suffering and for the reliv-

ing of my suffering through this dream. Because I am scarred, I can recognize their scars. Because I cried, I can hear their cries. Because I tied the rope, I can help untie their ropes. I can be their witness; it's bearable, at times barely bearable, but bearable, nonetheless. And sometimes, when their wounds are so fresh and open and still bleeding, like Heather's, mine will reopen, the sympathetic stigmata of another suicide girl, one who lived to tell how she lived through hell.

It doesn't take a recent slate of school shootings to convince us that for many students, high school is an underworld experience. While the boys play shoot-'em-up and gun down others, the girls turn their weapons on themselves. No one can survive high school without his or her share of scars. Hades bides his time and eventually abducts the innocent in all of us.

If it is true that our dream figures represent pieces of ourselves, then I must admit it: I am Hades, too. Every student who enters my room is dying a little, and like Hades, I bear witness to the dying. If high school is hell, then I am the ruler of hell, standing behind my lectern/throne and issuing out commandments: "Thou shalt do thy homework. Thou shalt not leave this room without my permission. Thou shalt raise thy hand before thou speakest." No one gets through this class without paying homage to me. I am part of the system that often oppresses and kills. I am part of what those students need to be rescued from. I am Pluto, Persephone, Demeter, Narcissus, Cerberus, Charon, Hercules, Hades, and I am Echo. I am dying, I am trying to save souls from death, and I am crying out for someone to save my soul. I am teacher and student, mortal and immortal, wounded and the one who wounds. I am pathology and that which cures pathology.

And I am tired. Still spinning, I suffer the vertigo that occurs when dayworld and nightworld collide, when dreams are real and reality is a nightmare and the price of the journey is nothing less than your soul. My heroic ego feels defeated, deflated, exposed; these were not easy things to see in this journey, as you can imagine, and I'm still naked, even as I write these final lines.

Especially as I write these final lines. ☹

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