

Jessica Lynne

**SEVEN
NOTES FOR
A DREAM**

2 of 3

I.

Dreams come to us in sleep.

They find us while we slumber, and dreams—elusive, fleeting at times, vivid and frenetic at others—have carried our mythologies for millennia.

When the body enters into its deepest sleep, rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, humans experience accelerated neuron transmissions that mirror patterns displayed during wakefulness. In REM, we humans maintain an occult moment of extreme psychological activity, and dreams are their most present, persistent, forceful. When dreams visit us as hauntings, is this how we learn to name our nightmares? Sleep then, might also be considered a pathway for that which is unwelcome.

II.

You will walk into Morehshin Allahyari's installation, *She Who Sees The Unknown: Kabous, The Left Witness and The Right Witness* (2019) and you will lie down on a bed. The setting will be a recreation of the artist's childhood bedroom,

a room in which some of her earliest memories were formed in conversation with her *maadi jaan*, her grandmother. It was Allahyari's grandmother who recounted to the young artist her own memories of encounters with *jinn*. As you settle, you will look to your left and to your right and see two small statues that have been 3-D printed and painted gold and blue. These are



Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees the Unknown: Kabous, The Left Witness and The Right Witness*, 2019, in *Manual Override* at The Shed, New York, November 13, 2019 – January 12, 2020. Photo: Dan Bradica. Courtesy The Shed.

Kabous's witnesses. They enter as she does. The left witness possesses the head of an avian figure, and a serpent hangs around its neck. The right extends a hand towards you, almost; their eyes are aglow with red, and horns spiral from their temples.

You will put on the Oculus Rift headset and enter into a film scene that is a fictional rendition of an Iranian bathhouse, the place Allahyari's grandmother once saw a jinn as a young girl. You will hear a voice that demands your attention: She is the "monstrous other,"

**... Dark goddess, the possessive jinn
The dividing persona
She restores myths and histories,
the untold and the forgotten, the mis-
read and uneven
Those of and from the Near East.**

Kabous lives here.



Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees the Unknown: Kabous, The Left Witness and The Right Witness*, 2019. VR video. Courtesy the artist.

As the film continues, you will remain still, moving instead through the Rift, across time and back again, as the interior thoughts of three women are revealed to you. Their concerns of lineage are laid bare as they navigate an Iran during wartime and sanctions, in which they remember “death, blood, and darkness everywhere.”

III.

What is the shape of your trauma? That is, in what ways does it manifest itself in or on your body? Sleep can be, I imagine, a repository for the latent, lurking griefs we carry. In sleep, as our brains navigate a series of complex story plots, as scientists Baland Jalal and Vilayanur S. Ramachandran note, the body performs an act of self-preservation so that we humans do not destroy ourselves in response to the waves of emotional sensations that arise.¹ This is postural anonia, a form of paralysis that is a mechanism which guards against what might be the intuitive reactions of wakefulness until, in some cases, it doesn't. Trauma can become the ghostly intruder.

IV.

During REM sleep, it is possible to mentally awaken while the body holds fast to immobility. This is sleep paralysis; when it descends, your body remains in its momentary condition of postural anonia while the mind is alert. It is overwhelming. It is frightening. It is haunting. We have learned that the state of sleep paralysis can be the result of internal somatic disturbance or stress. Science, then, argues that this is the body's way of naming illness or disorder.

Science is tasked with revealing the logics that organize the seeming mysteries of our known world—from geographic wonders to celestial occurrences to bodily ailments. Myth(s), to me, allow us, humans, to unveil those same mysteries with knowledges that defy science. Informed by specific and local cultural histories, myths are knowledges that live beyond the intellectual rationales that govern our interactions and patterns.

In Iranian mythology, it is Kabous, al-Jathoom, who brings on this paralysis as she sits on your chest. She has been termed many things—evil, horror, monster.

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Seven Notes for a Dream

Kabous is the jinn, the non-human shapeshifter, who visits the nightmare(s) upon us.

V.

Allahyari preoccupies herself with the restoration of mythologies. In particular, she excavates those myths that live outside of “the normal,” a codification of white, Western cis-maleness that has come to define the parameters and study of “classic” mythology.

***Kabous* is the fifth and final installment of the artist’s ongoing research project, *She Who Sees the Unknown*, which takes up the efforts of excavation as part of the process of re-figuring. Re-figuring is a term named by Allahyari to describe acts of recovery that re-imagine misremembered, distorted, or forgotten pasts in order to then re-imagine presents and futures that resist and challenge the material consequences of oppressions.**

In her re-figuring, technology is not only critiqued for how it has been used to further and shape structural forces of harm (e.g. colonialism, US imperialism, climate catastrophe, and patriarchy), it is also employed as part of

a feminist-activist methodology against those same forces. The process tasks our unstable technologies with the charge of facilitating a different type of looking. *She Who Sees the Unknown* embodies this ethos. The jinn Allahyari has gathered—Huma, Ya’jooj Maj’jooj, Aisha Qandisha, the Laughing Snake, and now, Kabous—have, over time, become the “monstrous others,” their mythic origin and power obfuscated and diminished. Even within a contemporary Iranian cultural lexicon, Allahyari argues, these beings, at times, have been misremembered largely by the guardians of patriarchy. Allahyari re-situates and re-contextualizes the mythic origins and potency of these female figures. In doing so, she offers a new utterance, that speaks back to the legacies of harm that impact the lives of millions, especially women and femme-identified people, in the Middle East.

VI.

Allahyari’s tool of re-figuring implicates Elvia Wilk’s feminist proposition of the New Weird.² And, as Wilk writes, a designation of “new” implies the existence of an “old.”

Using the genre of fiction to undergird this premise, the “old” weird, as Wilk argues, takes up writer Mark Fisher’s early definition of the concept as “an element or zone that is not completely explainable according to our current structures for categorizing the world.”³ Alongside Fisher’s naming of “eerie” as that which scrambles readings of cause and effect within a story, the weird supposes an awareness of an outside space and the “[...] perceptual flip that happens upon said awareness, when you see back at the inside from the outside position.”⁴

Wilk, however, is careful to identify the limitations of this weird by pointing to the work of early-20th-century horror and weird fiction novelist H.P. Lovecraft. For Wilk, Lovecraft’s 1926 story “The Call of Cthulhu” “is emblematic of the Weird, because it deals with the wonder and horror at the fringes of human consciousness.”⁵ Yet, as an exemplary trope in Lovecraft’s oeuvre, the outside space is typically a realm that threatens the supremacy of Lovecraft’s white male protagonists. Wilk uses this author’s writing to illustrate this archetype’s primary relationship to the dark, looming other in classically “weird” stories.

The New Weird, on the other hand, could pose an intervention into this conception of the other. As Wilk demonstrates, there are those of us who have always been the “other,” the subaltern. The New Weird could “map on the same strangeness certain subjects have historically been afforded onto other subjects in order to reveal the inherent strangeness of all such constructs.”⁶ The New Weird could also imagine the possibility of the dissolution of the very category of the human itself and makes space for the knowledges of non-human agents as central to necessary liberatory re-configurations of a world on the brink of collapse.

As enacted by Allahyari, re-figuration claims the jinn in her care as source of new epistemological frameworks—an act against understanding the world solely through the lens of the human subject experience. In the context of the New Weird, Kabous is not a figuration of danger. Instead, her visits open up new portals for thinking through terms of survival. Her presence engenders a new way of seeing (and reconciling with) the decisions made in the world before Allahyari—the worlds of her grandmother and mother—as it equally illuminates Allahyari’s own decisions that gesture towards a radical futurity

in which the agency, pleasure, and autonomy of women and femme-identified people are centered. It is a future that is anti-colonial and anti-imperialist.

VII.

So, as you lie in bed, with the Rift covering your eyes, you will move across time and back again. You will hear the voice that represents Allahyari's mother say that the act of birthing new human life was an act of hope in the midst of war. You will understand that this birth was both recovery and resistance.

And as you hear the voice that represents Allahyari herself say that she will become part of a generation to give birth only to the monstrous, you will understand that this birth is both restoration and resistance. For she is not afraid of that which is not human bone, or blood, or skin, or flesh. This is a birth that will yield "the other," that which, as Allahyari writes, heals:

**my mother
our mother's mother
our mother's mother's mothers
our mother's mother's mother's mothers⁷**

This is a birth that will:

**[...] alter our daughters
our daughter's daughters
our daughter's daughter's daughters
our daughter's daughter's daughter's
daughters⁸**

Perhaps, then, what Kabous has offered in this work is a way of addressing two questions: How long do we carry the inheritances of trauma? What possibilities of hope live on the other side?

Allahyari responds through the maternal as four generations grapple with the fragility of motherhood—the intangible inheritances they will leave (have left) and the offerings they will make.

1 Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees The Unknown: Kabous, The Left Witness and The Right Witness*, 2019. Text cited from script within VR film by the artist.

2 Baland Jalal and Vilayanur S. Ramachandran, "Sleep Paralysis, 'The Ghostly Bedroom Intruder' and Out-of-Body Experiences: The Role of Mirror Neurons." *Frontiers of Human Neuroscience*. 28 February 2017. Accessed 16 January 2017. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fnhum.2017.00092/full>

3 Wilk puts forward this concept in her essay "Toward a Theory of the New Weird: Elvia Wilk on a Feminist Understanding of Eerie Fiction." *Lit Hub*. 5 August 2019. Accessed 17 October 2019. <https://lithub.com/toward-a-theory-of-the-new-weird/>

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees The Unknown: Kabous, The Left Witness and The Right Witness*, 2019. Text cited from script within VR film by the artist.

9 Ibid.

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