

# DREAMING AFTER TRUMP

Gail Turley Houston

On November 9, 2016, I remained in bed all day. The previous evening—what F. Scott Fitzgerald might have referred to as the “real dark night of the soul”—I had broken all the speed limits barreling home from Las Vegas, Nevada, madly thinking I would find safety in my home in Los Angeles if I could just get there soon enough. Having driven to Nevada to work for Hillary Clinton’s campaign on election day, I knew by the time the polls closed that it was over. A great wound opened up, and I could not nurse, let alone cure, it. Over the following weeks, the only answer seemed to be to block the festering thing out.

Then came December 3, 2016. I woke from a twelve-hour sleep in which I dreamt of Brigham Young University again. Fired from the Mormon flagship university in 1996 after six years as a professor in the English department, I have been haunted for twenty years by my BYU dreams. As with any form of syncope, time was disrupted. Thus, in this particular dream, I am trying to complete three classes at BYU so I can finally obtain my PhD, and then I can leave and start my life. In the dream mode, I have been sick for months and am far behind in my classes. I worry that I won’t be able to finish the courses or my degree. Knowing my future is on the line, I go to campus to talk to my professors so I can find out how best to finish my courses.

But on the way, I get caught up in a new museum at the edge of campus that I hadn’t noticed before. It is dedicated to women and people of color and their arts. And it is full to bursting with the most amazing sculptures and paintings. I am mesmerized by the enormity of what I’m seeing, and I fall in love with each artwork and how each is precisely arranged to lead to the next work of art, as though they aren’t only separate, discrete, and

individual but part of a larger concept together. Even more compelling, all the artists are at the museum and are freely talking about their works with the audience in a communal, almost sacramental, act.

Suddenly, I start conversing with the artists and the discussion gradually turns into a glorious opera, with everyone, artists and visitors, talking and singing about what the works mean and how beautiful they are. Yes, we are singing our love for art and for each detail of the artworks, weaving a mellifluous harmonic appreciation for the parts and the whole with our many different voices. I lose all sense of self and am totally engaged with what the artists desire to impart and with how stunned I am by so much beauty. I am almost in a trance state, vatic voices surrounding me and visions of this beauty coming forth from my own mouth.

Then I become aware of my own individuality in the midst of the humming multitude. I notice that I have a bronze lamé leather sheath on with no sleeves or collar, leaving my décolletage showing—certainly defying BYU dress standards. But I feel beautiful like the artworks around me, and I realize that I am now an artwork too, singing and talking to the artists in a performative, even decorative, way, and it is one of the most exquisite things that has ever happened to me. I cannot let go of this sublime encounter. My husband, an artist, comes to the museum to pick me up, but he also sees how beautiful the works of art are and starts conversing and singing with the artists too, becoming consumed by the presentation in the same way I am.

Then we finally leave, but we have to walk by the BYU football stadium to get to our car. The football players are practicing for the big game, which the LDS Church has told them they must win to demonstrate to the world how wonderful the LDS Church is. The players are furious and practicing in a hellhole *under* the stadium where it is all concrete and low ceilings. Bent over at the waist because the ceilings are so low, the players swear and curse and intermittently drone the scriptures by rote. It makes for a chorus of darkness and hate competing with the glorious sounds coming from the museum nearby. The reason they are

cursing is that the coach requires them to recite scriptures while they are practicing, and they revile this imposition. They need to focus on football and not be hampered with this other deadly task. They love the scriptures, but now is the time to prepare to play football.

A female football player tries to cheer the group up. She says to me, “Let’s go for a helicopter ride.” So ten or so BYU football players, students, and I climb into the helicopter. Two female football players navigate our ascension, scaling the hovering concrete and rising to a pinnacle where it is a grand thing to look down at the amazing world, and I feel so free, free, free. In my body-hugging bronze lamé leather dress I am soaring in God’s skies.

It is over in the twinkling of an eye. The two female football players set the helicopter down and drop off all the passengers but me. Then they abruptly lunge into the air and I am thrust out of the gyrating machine, hanging from the helicopter’s landing skids by one arm. I am alone in the upper firmament, with the whole world in my sights, terrified—but amazed, ecstatic. I have been gifted with freedom, exquisite freedom. I am almost to the point of bursting.

The football players finally swoop down from the sky and drop me off at the art museum. The BYU press surrounds me like bees hectoring for a quote: “It was liberating—it was terrifying.” The newspaper article instantly comes out and half of the BYU community only cares that I said “give it to me” when recalling how I felt during the helicopter ride. They are furious that I have used such a foul double entendre. The other half are thrilled by my experience and believe I must have had some kind of vision because of how luminous I looked when I alighted from the helicopter. When a reporter asks me about the supposedly vulgar comment, I say I don’t know what I said and don’t care. I add that “All I can say is it was an incredibly freeing experience, so joyful, and truly close to God, and you can’t take that away from me, and I won’t be drawn into this conversation about why I said one thing I don’t even remember saying.”



Why did I receive this dream at this particular time, after Trump? For twenty years I have had nightmares about being fired from BYU—one showed me on my knees mopping the floor in the BYU English department and begging for a job there as a janitor. In another, BYU was forcing me to eat excrement. In another, I was told that if I wanted to stay at BYU, I would have to live at the top of an elevator, where, when the door opened, I was in danger of falling ten stories down the elevator shaft, so I always had to be aware of that huge hole in my “apartment.” Dream after dream after dream of being fired from BYU.

I had been fired for my views about—of—Mother in Heaven. In 1990, the president of Brigham Young University, Rex E. Lee (who was also my mother’s first cousin), announced a glasnost of sorts: BYU privately assured me that it would now be open to hiring feminists and other progressives. With some trepidation about establishing my career at such a conservative institution, I accepted a job there as a Victorian scholar. I felt some comfort that the General Authority who interviewed me for the position allowed me to ask him about Mother in Heaven.

By 1993, the glasnost was over. BYU went on the hunt for feminists, “pseudo-intellectuals,” and homosexuals, whom Boyd K. Packer had vilified. Going up for our probationary review in 1993, feminist colleague Cecilia Farr and I were targeted; she was ultimately fired and I was severely admonished for my feminist activities. Junior professor David Knowlton was also fired from the Sociology department for his progressive views about gays. The atmosphere had become ugly—like concrete ceilings so low one had to stoop or crawl just to do one’s job. In short order, a metaphorical abbatoir occurred with the excommunication of six prominent Mormon intellectuals.

For three more years I bent over and shuffled, muttering scriptures under my breath to anyone who would listen, hoping my beautiful spiritual life would survive. In 1996, though I had published a scholarly

book, which was more than most tenured professors in the department had accomplished, I was fired for “enervating the very moral fiber of the university” with my “heretical” beliefs. BYU ultimately fired me for publically discussing praying to Mother in Heaven. Of course, believing in Mother in Heaven is not considered a sin in the LDS Church. Indeed, the BYU administration explained to me that I could believe in Mother in Heaven all I wanted—I just could not talk about praying to her in a public setting.

That interdiction had its effect on my own scholarly and spiritual path long after. I only finally felt free enough to write about Victorian women writers and Mother in Heaven after I quit attending the LDS Church. I longed for Mother. I wanted to write about her. And by 2005, after having published three scholarly books, I felt I had paid my dues and could, perhaps, write something that was a bit more personal while retaining a scholarly trajectory.

But when I completed the research phase and began writing, I still felt blocked and cramped as a writer. Interdictions and bad dreams subjugated me internally. I felt the need to be honest about my own search for a female god, but had been maimed the last time I had tried. The new book didn’t feel right to me until, in the last weeks before handing in the proofs, I spontaneously wrote out my personal belief trajectory as part of a brief afterword concerning my BYU experience—like Venus on a half-shell or Athena out of the brain of a god, the afterword came fully born, with the final version virtually unchanged from the original draft.

I had finally given myself the freedom to write about Her, and now I found, with scholar Charles Taylor, that I was always “drawn back toward the religious by inchoate inner promptings” but that my sublime creed had reformulated after I was fired from BYU. I knew I could no longer live with the dogma of the LDS Church, and yet I knew that I would always need to imagine and inhabit God in multiverse ways, which, for me, began in the LDS Church. I was born in the Church, and my own great-great-grandparents, on all sides, had been a part of the Church

since its very inception. I needed to sing with their voices about the exquisite God I knew and in thanks for the gift of so much beauty in the world. I also needed to sing with the voices of new friends and loved ones who had other dreams to prophesy.



Who could have foretold the apocalypse at hand? The nightmare of Trump that brought back the old patriarchies slouching their way to Bethlehem and the City on the Hill—our own Washington, DC? In 2017 with Hillary, I thought I would see the glass ceiling finally break and experience a kind of vindication in being a woman. But the concrete ceiling has returned. Bosch's Hell descends upon us. The tired, the poor, and the lame are rejected, the divergent, molested. I am wounded again, and it seems the only thing to do is hide and sleep the sleep with no dreams. To consort again with depression, confusion, and rage. To lose my voice—knowing I have known this nightmare before.

But a dream was given me. Or, rather, the bronze-lamé-wrapped body my God gave me generated my dreams, my soul, my visions. The lithe leather sheath fit my sinews so well, taking me on flights above the glass ceiling. And I now know that I have sung with angels and artists and shall hear their voices again.

Dreams allow reality. The gift requires my own benefactions. So that I must now awake from dreams and nightmares. It is not time for despair or sumptuous flight. Hope may be formulated, resistances created—for the God-given power to make a difference flows in my veins. Generations before me knew this. If the Apocalypse be at hand and World War III broods upon the waters, I must join the resistance. I could stay there in my vision and shield myself from the terrors of the real world. But that is not why the dream was given to me. It is time, again, to have courage.