

The background of the cover is a composite image. The top half shows a dark blue night sky filled with stars and a faint Milky Way galaxy. A single bird is in flight in the upper right. The bottom half shows a bright, hazy sky with soft clouds. In the lower left, a young boy in a white shirt and dark shorts is running on a field of tall, golden grass, holding a red biplane aloft with his right hand. The overall mood is one of hope and wonder.

THE BOY WHO DIED *and* CAME BACK

Adventures of a Dream
Archaeologist in the Multiverse

ROBERT
MOSS

author of *Dreaming the Soul Back Home*

“Robert Moss’ extraordinary life story, told with beauty and passion, confirms that there is life after life and will inspire all who read it to transcend the fear of death and live richer and deeper lives.”

— RAYMOND MOODY, MD, author of *Life After Life*

Praise for *The Boy Who Died and Came Back*

“This remarkable book traces the links between near-death experience, shamanism, and dreams. In a uniquely personal yet profoundly universal way, it takes readers into worlds that demonstrate the limitations of customary concepts of time and space.”

— Stanley Krippner, coauthor of *The Voice of Rolling Thunder* and *Extraordinary Dreams and How to Work with Them*

“In this fascinating tribute to the depths of the psyche, Robert Moss reminds us in the words of Shakespeare, ‘We are such stuff / As dreams are made on, / and our little life / Is rounded with sleep.’ By unearthing these personal stories, we readers participate in an archaeology of the Self across time, space, and dimensions, in which treasures abound.”

— Robert Waggoner, author of *Lucid Dreaming: Gateway to the Inner Self*

“In Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates asks an old man named Kefalos for his perspective on life. Kefalos replies that after spending most of his life engaged in making money as a businessman, he now sees death approaching, and questions of life and death have taken on a new urgency: What is this all about? What comes after death? As an unprecedented number of people around the world reach their own ‘Kefalos moments,’ Robert Moss’ brilliant book can help. Here he shows clearly how a person’s experiences of ‘dying and coming back’ can shape not just one person’s life but those of many others around them. I’ve seen this to be true over and over in my own work as a psychiatrist, and, knowing Robert Moss’ work, I am sure the valuable tools he offers for exploring and understanding these experiences — as well as the many mysteries of dreams and synchronicity — will do a lot of good for many people. Robert Moss is truly a man who died and came back, bringing gifts from another world. His extraordinary life story, told with beauty and passion, confirms that there is life after life and will inspire all who read it to transcend the fear of death and live richer and deeper lives.”

— Raymond Moody, MD, author of *Life After Life*

“The indigenous peoples understand from direct experience of their dreaming that the world presents itself in two modalities — ‘the world of things seen’ and ‘the world of things hidden.’ In this extraordinary personal narrative, Robert Moss reveals himself as a master dreamer, as one of those modern mystics who can see into ‘the world of things hidden.’ He is also a gifted storyteller, and in reading his words, we discover (through direct experience) that ‘truth comes with goose bumps.’ I loved this book!”

— Hank Wesselman, PhD, anthropologist, author of *The Bowl of Light* and the Spiritwalker trilogy, and coauthor (with Sandra Ingerman) of the award-winning *Awakening to the Spirit World*

THE BOY WHO
DIED *and*
CAME BACK

ALSO BY ROBERT MOSS

Active Dreaming

Conscious Dreaming

The Dreamer's Book of the Dead

Dreamgates: Exploring the Worlds of Soul, Imagination, and Life Beyond Death

Dream Gates: A Journey into Active Dreaming (audio)

Dreaming the Soul Back Home

Dreaming True

Dreamways of the Iroquois

The Secret History of Dreaming

The Three "Only" Things:

Tapping the Power of Dreams, Coincidence & Imagination

The Way of the Dreamer (video)

THE CYCLE OF THE IROQUOIS (Fiction)

Fire along the Sky

The Firekeeper

The Interpreter

POETRY

Here, Everything Is Dreaming: Poems and Stories

THE BOY WHO DIED *and* CAME BACK

Adventures of a Dream
Archaeologist in the Multiverse

ROBERT
MOSS

with drawings by the author



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Offering

Sing in me, creative spirit
of the boy who died and came back
and the man who flew through the black sun
and returned to walk the roads of this world
as the envoy of a deeper world;
and of how (being human)
he falls down and gets up, over and over,
forgets and remembers,
remembers and forgets.

Let me explain through his story
how the world is a playground, not a prison
when we awaken to the game behind the games.
Let this story help those who read it
to find their bigger and braver stories
and live them, and tell them well enough
to entertain the spirits,
win the indulgence of the gods
and bring through effortless healing.

Gore Mountain, April 27, 2013

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INTRODUCTION

Kiss of Death

It is not more surprising to be born twice than once.

— Voltaire, *The Princess of Babylon*



I died for the first time in my present body when I was three years old. My mother's aunt, the opera singer, saw my death in the tea leaves a few months before it happened. She would not talk about this until much later, because although she was a gifted psychic, she missed something. I died and came back.

I died again when I was nine. This time, I slipped through the window of a Melbourne hospital where my body was lying in an operating room. I thought I was going to have some fun at a theme park along the beach but ended up spending a whole lifetime in another world. It was very hard to have to come back to the body of a young boy, carrying all those memories.

During my boyhood, it was almost impossible to talk about these experiences. It was a conservative era in Australia, and I was in a military family. The first person who was able to confirm and validate my experiences of leaving my body dead in a hospital room while I entered other worlds was an Aboriginal boy from a traditional dreaming culture. "Oh yeah," he said to me matter-of-factly. "We do that. When we get real sick, we go and live with the spirits. When we get well, we come back. Not always as the same person."

We did not have terms like "near-death experience" (NDE) in Australia in that era, more than twenty years before Raymond Moody, MD, expanded our general understanding of how widespread that phenomenon is, in his bestseller *Life After Life*. I am glad to have that term, and use it as shorthand to describe what happened to me as a boy and often made me feel like a stranger in a strange land. I have read and heard hundreds of accounts of near-death experiences since I read Moody, and feel great sympathy for those who have been through them. But NDE is not my preferred term for my boyhood experiences, and still less for what happened to me in midlife, in a profound and protracted crisis of spiritual emergence that led me to transform my life. I like the phrase a doctor used when, aged three, I lost vital signs after succumbing to pneumonia in a bitter Tasmanian winter. When I returned to that child's body, against all expectations, he told my parents, "Your boy died and came back."

I think of myself that way, as a boy who died and came back. There are terms for someone like this in some cultures. In Tibet, the term is *delog* (pronounced "day-loak"), and it refers to someone who leaves the body seemingly dead, travels in other worlds, and comes back with firsthand knowledge of the geography and current conditions in those realms. I have had such knowledge since I was very young, but lacking elders and mentors and a context of understanding in my own society, I was required to be discreet about what I knew.

Nonetheless, I was able to use the gifts that come with what Western psychiatry may call dissociation but ancient and indigenous cultures respect as an engagement with the Otherworld and possibly a shamanic initiation. I could step in and out of time, visit the future, and receive visitors from other times and other dimensions. I did ridiculously well in my final school examinations — my photo was on the front pages of the newspapers — in part because I was able to preview the questions in lucid dreams, before they were given to me in the exam rooms. My intimate connection, with nonordinary reality, with figures from the ancient world helped propel me into my first job, as

lecturer in ancient history at the Australian National University, at the ripe age of twenty-two. My ability to see what was going on behind the curtain walls of consensual reality served me well when I left academia and became a journalist, covering and often predicting major events in thirty-five countries from my base as a staff writer and editor for the *Economist* in London.

I used my dreams, as well as my adventures as a foreign correspondent, as materials for a series of thrillers published in the 1980s. Four of them made the *New York Times* bestseller list, and this gave me the freedom to say good-bye to employment and live as a full-time writer. I assigned some of my dreams to my fictional characters, especially Nikolsky, the boozy KGB philosopher in *Moscow Rules*, a novel that predicted the collapse of the Soviet Union, an event that followed six years after its publication. I followed my dreams and “far memories” of the 1930s in a historical spy novel, *Carnival of Spies*, set in Germany and Brazil in that era.

I started dating an American woman who had worked as a publicist on my first novel, after she told me she had dreamed the result of the Kentucky Derby the previous year. I promptly reached into my pocket, pulled out all the cash — sixty dollars — and asked her to put it on the winning horse in the next Kentucky Derby, which was being held the following Saturday. She did not dream the result that time, but after studying the form, she decided to put my money on a horse named Genuine Risk, the only filly in the field. At the last minute, she nearly turned back on her way to the betting shop, reflecting that wagering an author’s money on a horse named Genuine Risk might indeed be a risky proposition, especially since a little chemistry was already developing. Nonetheless, she put my money on Genuine Risk and her own on a horse called Withholding. Genuine Risk came in at 13:00, Withholding nowhere. I insisted on splitting the winnings with her, and we married three years later.

Now resident in the United States, I bought a big old house in Sag Harbor and walked my big black dogs on the beach. We vacationed at the Copacabana Palace Hotel in Rio de Janeiro and at the Palácio de Seteais, the Palace of Seven Sighs, in Sintra, the old royal capital of Portugal. When I got on the plane, I sometimes found half a dozen people reading my current novel. Not only able to live as a writer but able to live very well, I may have seemed to others to be living a dream. But this dream quickly palled. Something in my soul was clawing me to a greater purpose.

One year after my first novel reached the top of the bestseller lists, I was sitting on a mat on the floor of a house in the Caribbean while a *babalawo* (a high divination priest) of Ifa, the oracle of the Yoruba, made a reading for me. The reading was complex. “You were born with a box of mysteries,” he told me. “Your dreams will always guide you.” To his surprise, he found that the orishas — the deities of West Africa — required no offering from me except my love. “Your path is the same as mine,” he concluded.

“What does that mean?” I demanded.

“It means that if you are ready, I will arrange for you to go to a holy city in Nigeria to be trained and initiated as a *babalawo* of Ifa.”

I protested that I was a white man from Australia. “You want me to become an African witch doctor?”

He laughed. “You know this is a universal tradition, Robert. And you know that you are linked to it in many lifetimes. The choice is yours. There will be signs.”

There were indeed signs. One of them burned its way to my soul. He cast his *opele* — the chain of bronze medallions used by a high priest of Ifa to reveal the patterns of the oracle — again. He announced, “There is a fire growing close to you. You have not yet seen it, but soon you will feel the heat of its flames.” As I flew back from the Caribbean to New York, I asked myself what new drama might be about to erupt in my life with the emotional force of fire. But oracles, like dreams, can be

very literal and specific. I had barely closed the front door to my apartment in Yorkville, on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, and set down my suitcase when I heard a *whoosh* from the side of the apartment where the windows overlooked a courtyard. I rushed to the window and saw a horizontal sheet of flame coming from an apartment in a building across the courtyard. Flames were licking the glass, and I could feel their heat.

Nonetheless, I decided not to accept the invitation to go to Africa to become a priest of Ifa. I called the man who had played go-between and told him, "I know that I have a deep soul connection with Africa and especially with the Yoruba tradition. I also know that I do not have to follow this tradition with its ritual obligations, in this lifetime."

He accepted this calmly. Then he offered this counsel: "The choice is yours, Robert. But there is something you must know. The spirits are like people. They fall in love. And because the spirits are in love with you, they will go on putting on different masks until you accept your full relationship with them."

He was exactly right. A few years later, I decided to get off the commercial fast track and put down roots in my adopted country by moving to a farm in upstate New York. Here, on the edge of traditional Mohawk land, the spirits came after me in a different guise, and the shadow of other lives fell across me in ways I could not ignore. I came to accept (not without resistance, confusion, and backsliding) that I was required to do nothing less than transform my life. Eventually, I embarked on a path for which there is no career track in Western culture: the path of a dream teacher and dream archaeologist. Once again, I died and came back.

This is not an autobiography, but it is a book of memory. I borrow the phrase from Dante, who used it to describe his early work *La vita nuova* (*The New Life*). I was guided by a dream to reread his spiritual memoir as I was writing this one. Dante's book of memory is woven from his dream visions, and poems with just a little connective narrative. He meets central characters in dream worlds where he seems to be leading a parallel and continuous life. They include the guide who appears as a beautiful young man dressed in white but calls Dante "my son." When the poet struggles to understand the nature of their relationship, the man in white tells him, "I am as the center of a circle, to which all points on the circumference bear an equal relation. *With you, it is not so.*" You will find similar figures in this book, and an account of my own efforts to understand our relationship with other personalities and intelligences within the multidimensional self.

To produce this book of memory, I have gone down again and again into a treasure cave. It is filled with my journals from many decades, which I have been required to sift and study and transcribe. There are fantastic dramas here, mythic trouble (and delight), times of terror and beauty and possible madness, and tremendous transtemporal adventures in which sometimes I enter the situation of my counterparts in other times, and sometimes they join me in mine. We bring each other gifts and challenges, allies and adversaries from other times and other worlds.

In the cave, reading over all these pages, I feel sympathy and compassion as I monitor how younger Roberts tried to make sense of all this while lacking any really helpful mentor in ordinary reality, and how they struggled to keep body and soul together on the roads of this world. I wonder, and I consider how "past" and "future" aspects of myself looked in on each other and sent each other mental texts, whether my present acts of observation are changing things in, say, 1987–1988. These journals are not really old; they confirm the idea that the only time is always Now and that all our pasts and futures and probable realities are accessible in the moment of Now, and can be re-visited and revised for the better.

I have made many visits to my treasure cave. As in the Indiana Jones type of adventure, where the floor gives way and the roof starts to fall when you touch a precious object, there were rather strict limits to how long I could safely remain in the cave, and how much I could bring out, on each visit. I learned to move softly and slowly, tiptoeing around the floor in a kind of hopscotch rather than plodding up and down, taking a little from the chest over there, then something from the one on the other side. A hawk feather, a cylinder of light, a Celtic cloak pin, a flying carpet.

People keep journals for many reasons: as a record of dreams or passing thoughts, as a safe way to purge pent-up emotions, as a way to dialogue with the soul, as a creative playpen or a daily workout for writing. I have done all these things with my journals. But my main purpose in journaling, since the great watershed in my adult life in the late 1980s, has been to keep a record of my experiences in the multidimensional universe and to grow the practice of traveling to other realms and bringing back gifts. This is real magic, which is the art of bringing gifts from a deeper reality into ordinary life.

The book before you has five parts, like a pentacle or the five seeds at the core of an apple.

“Through the Moon Gate” is the story of the boy who died and came back from another world to a sunburned country Down Under.

“The Years of Writing Dangerously” is the story of what happened after I moved to a farm 130 miles north of New York City, thanks to a hawk and a white oak. I found myself drawn into transtemporal dramas and the spirit world of a Native American people. I became deeply engaged with the issues and dramas from the life of an eighteenth-century Irishman, a major historical figure who knew the Mohawk very well. My engagement with him opened a link to a woman of his time, an extraordinary dream shaman, the Mother of the Wolf Clan of her people, who tried to influence him and most certainly succeeded in influencing me. She reminded me why dreaming is central to healing and to living our bigger and braver stories, and I cherish our continuing relationship across time and dimensions. Here I describe what it means to be so deeply involved with a personality from another time that your lives turn together. I was eventually required to undergo death and rebirth in the mode of a shaman. Borrowing from Jung, I sometimes describe this period in my life as a protracted “confrontation with the unconscious.” I see now that, as with the years Jung recorded in his Red Book, all the important work of my subsequent life has flowed from this stormy period of spiritual emergency and emergence.

There are few subjects more important than how we navigate the big transitions in life. A transition is more than a change; it is literally a “crossing over” from one state into another. With or without the extremity of a near-death experience or a crisis of shamanic initiation, a major transition can amount to dying and coming back. You may have been in what Stanislov and Christina Grof gently call “unusual states of mind,” as I most certainly was. You’ve felt the lights go on at the top of your head and found yourself able to see through walls and mountains. You have felt that great serpent energy stream up your spine and fill you with throbbing power, and you’ve learned to master it instead of being blown apart. You’ve met your ancient kin and the priestess-scientist of the future who are part of your multidimensional self. And the wolf, the crocodile, and the cormorant, and the copper beech. And now you have to find your way in the ordinary world and reconcile your experiences with the beliefs and values of a society that does not have a generally accepted model of understanding for these things. Those who were closest to you before the shift may be the most reluctant to let you go through with it, because they want you to remain the person they have known.

In part 3 of this book, “The Return Journey,” I write about my experience of coming back into the ordinary world and trying to feed my family, in early midlife, while afire with the knowledge of other worlds.

This was a very bumpy transition. I fell down and needed to haul myself up again, over and over. ~~At every turning, my dreams helped restore my inner compass. Time in nature helped me find my grounding.~~ Time among children confirmed and renewed my understanding that dreams are for real and that there is magic in making things up, and that we change the world when we tell a better story about it. I started teaching what I had learned, and learned through teaching. I found, as Emerson counseled, that “there is one direction in which space is open” to us. When I followed my calling, doors opened in astonishing ways. When I slipped back and away from my path, doors stayed resolutely closed. I am grateful for that.

I was now able to give people who were willing to share dreams and other experiences of the larger reality the confirmation and validation I had desperately needed as a lonely boy. As I developed my practice, I found I was able to offer more: safe ways to travel into the deeper reality, have adventures, and return with gifts of guidance and healing. I developed an original synthesis of contemporary dreamwork and primal shamanic methods for shifting consciousness and operating in the spirit worlds, and called this Active Dreaming. I found people everywhere were hungry for this. The more I gave them, the more happy and fulfilled I felt. I knew joy every time I saw more of spirit shining in someone’s eyes in one of my workshops. Knowing the power of story, I was delighted when I saw people starting to remember the bigger stories of their own lives in the company of circles of active dreamers, and finding the ways to live those stories and tell them so well that the stories wanted to take root in the world.

I now felt at home in the multiverse. The best question I have ever been asked in a broadcast interview was posed in the period I was writing this book. “What is it like to live consciously at the center of the multidimensional universe?” In part 4, I give an extended answer to this question. I offer what for me are the nine keys to living consciously in the multiverse, and I explain how I have used each of them as everyday practice:

The only time is Now. All other times — past, present, and parallel — can be accessed in this moment of Now and may be changed for the better.

We dream to wake up. Dreaming is not fundamentally about what happens during sleep. It is about waking up to a deeper order of reality. Dreaming is a discipline; to get really good at it requires practice, practice, practice.

Treasures are waiting for us in the Place between Sleep and Awake. The easiest way to become lucid, or conscious, dreamer is to spend more time in the twilight zone between waking and sleep, between sleep and waking. This liminal state is a place of encounter with inner guides and transpersonal visitors. It is also a place of heightened psychic perception and creative breakthroughs where it is easy to make connections that escape the daily mind.

We live in the Speaking Land, as the First Peoples of my native Australia say. Everything in the world around us is alive and conscious and will speak to us if we are paying attention. Navigating by synchronicity becomes very simple, even irresistible, when we stream into this mode of understanding.

To live well, we must practice death. We bring courage and clarity to life choices when we are aware that death is always with us, and that we should be ready to meet it any day.

We must feed and honor our animal spirits. A working connection with them gives us immense resources for self-healing.

We have a guide for our lives who is no stranger. He is always with us and does not judge us. This is the Self on a higher level. When we rise to the perspective of the Greater Self, we are able to make peace between different personality aspects, including our counterparts in other times and parallel realities.

We are at the center of all times. The dramas of lives being lived in other times and in parallel realities may be intensely relevant to understanding and navigating our current relationships and life issues. We can learn to reach into those other lives to share gifts and lessons. We can dialogue with our own older and younger selves within our present lifetimes.

We must entertain the spirits, starting with our very own — the child self, the inner artist, the passionate teen, the animal spirits, the creative daimon.

In part 5, I share some of my adventures traveling the roads of this world as a dream archaeologist. What is a dream archaeologist? He or she combines the skills of the scholar, the detective, and the shamanic dreamer to enter other times and other cultures, and boldly go where others have not reached in order to enter the *living* experience of the ancestors and then test and verify the discoveries. The expeditions can facilitate ancestral healing, releasing those living today from multigenerational stories of abuse, addiction, and hatred. They can help release ancestors who are trapped in narrow and hateful mind-sets in their own time.

You will find me, again and again, following clues from dreams into other times and places: a mysterious word in medieval French, a night vision of the return of the ancient deer, a glimpse of a Baltic Merlin who is a wolf and an eagle as well as a man. You'll find me serving the Goddess in many forms, in many lands. You'll read about what happened when I was called by a poet-magician practicing "mutual visioning" in a flat in London in 1900 and how a dream of a Persian carpet led me to fly with the Simurgh, the great heaven bird of Persian tradition. You'll read about journeying to ancient Egypt to open a portal to the intelligences of the Sirius star system. Siriusly. You'll learn about group adventures in which whole flights of active dreamers have crossed time and space together, especially at gatherings on a magic mountain in the Adirondacks where the Deer energy is strong and dragons are sometimes seen.

I embarked on this narrative near the end of 2012, hoping that it would speak to people where they lived. I was encouraged by Julia Assante's assertion in *The Last Frontier* that we live in a time when "voices of personal experience are being heard more loudly than the official ones of religion and science" and shared her conviction that we need, as a society, to "normalize communication between this world and the next." I thought that by sharing more of my personal story than I have chosen to publish in previous books, I might contribute to this cause.

There is no better confirmation that you are on the right track than a secret handshake from the universe, one of those meaningful coincidences you simply cannot dismiss. I got better than that. I got a *bisou*, or kiss, from the universe in a delightful and entirely unexpected way, on the day I told my editor I was going to write this book. My last action that morning, before rushing to the airport to catch the first of a series of planes to France, was to send her a couple of sample pages about my boyhood experiences of dying and coming back.

I was traveling to southern France that day because I had a date with Death. I was going to lead one of my favorite workshops, titled "Making Death Your Ally," at the Hameau de l'Étoile, a restored seventeenth-century village near Montpellier that is now a retreat center. On my last short flight from

Paris–Charles de Gaulle Airport to Montpellier, I took out my in-flight reading, a book in French titled *Les portes du rêve*. A flight attendant immediately asked me if she could see the book. Leafing through it with mounting excitement, she saw that one of the driving themes is using dreams of the departed and conscious dream journeys to the Other Side to gain firsthand knowledge of what happens after death.

“This is my favorite theme,” she told me. “I am passionate about it. I am going to get this book!”

I now confessed that I was the author. I explained that I was reading myself in hopes of brushing up on my French prior to opening my workshop. *Les portes du rêve* is the French version of my book *Dreamgates*.

Cabin service at my end of the cabin was now suspended while the flight attendant proceeded to fire a volley of questions. “To write about these things, you must have had a near-death experience, yes?”

Yes, indeed.

People around us did not seem to mind that the coffee and juice were not being poured. An old couple next to me wanted in on the conversation. Violette, the wife, said, “We are all so hungry for firsthand information about what happens after death. I want to know what I can expect in the afterlife, and I don’t want to hear it from priests or psychologists. I want to hear it from people who have been there! And I want to know how I can find out these things for myself.”

I quoted Montaigne. *Puisque nous ne savons pas où la mort nous attend, attendons-la partout*. I had forgotten that I don’t speak good French as I quoted this wonderful counsel in the original version. “Since we do not know where Death will meet us, let us be ready to meet it everywhere.”

There was a stir of agreement from folks around us. I realized I now had an audience of at least a dozen people.

“I can’t think of any subject as important as what you are discussing,” a man across the aisle contributed, writing down my name and the title of my book. A male flight attendant joined us wanting the same information.

I observed that we have two main ways of gaining direct knowledge of *l’au-delà*, the Other Side. We can communicate with people who are at home there, and we can make the crossing before death to see for ourselves.

This led to an urgent series of fresh questions, again centering on my personal experiences.

“I don’t think I had a near-death experience. I think I died and came back.”

More questions, more and more urgent.

“Do you have no fear of death?”

“Do you talk to many people who have died?”

“Are there many different places where people go when they die?”

The short answer to those three, of course, is yes, yes, and yes. I gave the highest marks to the question: “Were you happier in the life when you died or the life you are living now?”

That was a tough one. I confessed that I was so in love with the people of the other world who raised me as their own when I went away from this world at age nine that I had a hard time living in the body of a nine-year-old boy when I came back. “I suppose I was in love with Death. I have learned to make Death an ally rather than a lover. I want to be ready to meet him anywhere, every day. I also want to use him as a counselor who can help me make my life choices with the courage and clarity that only Death can bring.”

The flight attendant had returned to her regular tasks but kept coming back to rejoin the conversation. When we landed, she was waiting outside the baggage claim with some of her

colleagues. They were all very interested and wanted my website and book information.

~~“You see, we are making you some good publicity, so you will have to keep teaching us about *l’au-delà*, here in France.”~~

Her lips grazed my cheek. I felt a *bisou* from the universe, a little kiss from Death.

PART I

Through the Moon Gate

I am in many forms before I am bound.
I am the starwalker who won't come down.
I am the pond dweller who won't come up.

I am a shard from a mirror
that was broken in transit from a blue star.
To release me, you must tie me down.

— Robert Moss, "Proteus"



1. DEATH *in a* TEACUP

I was conceived in a suite at the Ritz Hotel in Perth, not long after the surrender of Japan ended World War II in the Pacific. My father, Jack, had returned from New Guinea, where he led Australian commando forces. One of his last actions had been to carry out orders to capture a certain hill from the Japanese. His instincts told him this was a wrong decision, and a suicide mission, so he called for volunteers to lead the attack. When all his subalterns volunteered, he chose a lieutenant with no family, who was killed taking the hill. The following day, the news reached my father's command post that the war was over; it was already over when he reluctantly followed orders and sent men to pointless death.

He came home, like so many who have been in battle, needing to put the war behind him. He took the suite at the Ritz, without regard for the cost, to enjoy a delayed honeymoon with the beautiful and vivacious natural blonde he had married while on leave. The governor-general of Australia, a British noble lord, was staying on the same floor of the same grand hotel, in the largest suite, with his wife. So there were policemen down the hall, and often a Rolls-Royce at the porte cochere of the hotel. Jack and Betty drank champagne and took no precautions when they made love. Not because they were in a hurry to have a baby, but because the doctors had told Jack that he would be sterile for a year or so. This was the common condition of Australian troops who had been given an antimalarial drug in New Guinea. A side effect of the drug was that it caused temporary sterility, on average for one year. Another side effect was that it caused an exorbitant skin rash, producing huge purple blotches all over the body. When Jack took off his clothes, he looked like a purple leopard.

Betty's discovery that she was pregnant, probably after the first night, was a big surprise. There were other oddities about my birth. Because my mother was a small woman and I was growing very big in the womb and showing no signs of being in any hurry to come out, the doctors started planning a cesarean toward the end of the regulation nine months. In the Australia of 1946, this procedure (now yet referred to as a C-section) was quite rare, and it was considered highly dangerous. I was in a hurry to come into the world this time, but those dangers were unacceptable. I kicked hard, broke the bag of waters, and entered the world of Jack and Betty in St. Andrew's Hospital in Melbourne, two weeks early. These details were confirmed many years later, when my mother told me, "I don't know who your spiritual mother is, but it's not me. I am your birth mother. You came out of my body. But when you were coming out, I wasn't in this body. I was floating up under the ceiling." I am the child of a purple leopard who was not supposed to be able to make babies and of a woman who was not in her body when I came out of it.

When I was able to form words, it was discovered that I had a speech defect. I sounded like a bloody Pom, as many Australians called the British. My parents did not talk like Crocodile Dundee but they spoke with typical Australian accents, nasalizing vowels. I spoke old-style BBC English. It took me huge efforts to pretend that I had not just stepped off a boat from the old country. Strange people asked my mother when the "little chap" had arrived from England, and was it just a family visit or would he be staying. Even in those days, when fashionable Melbourne ladies still went to garden parties in hats and long gloves, and monocles weren't rare among their men, it was not social

acceptable among the kids around me to talk the way I did, and I was constantly being marked as an outsider when I couldn't manage to keep up an impersonation of Strine, the nasal Australian accent.

As time went by, and my accent stayed "posh," my parents joked that my delivery had been botched. The governor-general was down the hall, with his lady, while they were making love in the suite. The stork (people did not talk about the Zygote Fairy back then) got the addresses muddled. "The governor-general was supposed to get this one. We got this little English lord instead."

I might have been able to contribute to this discussion if my parents had been able to hear my memories of where I had recently come from. They were the memories of a man who was not at home in his new landscape. He looked through my child eyes at things that were foreign and hard to understand, at trees that put on a strip show or sighed like hungry ghosts in the wind, at bats the size of foxes, at tiny redback spiders that could kill you before you could get to a doctor, at impossible animals that seemed to have been cut and pasted together from pictures of different species. He could not understand — *I* could not understand — what I was doing here, on the other side of the world from home.

I was homesick. My mother was homesick, too, for people and places that seemed almost as distant as England, in those first years after the war. She came from a merry, close-knit Irish family in Western Australia. Her father was a shopkeeper in Kalgoorlie, a rough gold-mining town. The women of the family were given to singing, painting, and reading novels; two of them had run off with French actors. Living in Melbourne, on the East Coast, where Jack was now stationed as an army officer, my mother missed the laughter, indulgence, and improvisation of her people on the other side of the continent. In recent generations, my father's family had been stern Presbyterians, wedded to the Calvinist notion that you are damned unless you are born one of the elect, and may still be damned if you fail to work, work, work. My parents were both indifferent to organized religions, but still the shadow fell across Melbourne, from the comfortable villa of my paternal grandparents to our modest home in the suburbs, the best Dad could afford on his pay as an army captain. With it came the snobbery of his mother, a snob of the kind that Barry Humphries later personified in his grand camp act as Dame Edna Everage; she thought that the Irish were riffraff and that Dad had married below him, and that Betty, with her giddy laugh and luxuriant hair and figure, was too "forward" and "free." Betty was also bored, having given up her job as a schoolteacher when she married, as middle-class girls of her generation were expected to do.

So my mother decided to put the two of us on board a train so I could get to know her side of the family before we followed Dad on his new army posting to Hobart, Tasmania. Crossing Australia was no small undertaking in those first years after World War II. Melbourne and Perth were 1,700 miles apart, and the aching distance was made more painful by the need to get on and off trains because the states could not agree on whether to have narrow-gauge or broad-gauge rails. The ride would take us across the Nullarbor Plain, the remotest, most inhospitable area on earth, so empty that a few years after our journey, the British government did not think twice about using it for nuclear tests. *Nullarbor* may sound Aboriginal, but the word was coined by a classicist, from the Latin for "no tree." The plain is an enormous shelf of limestone, once a seabed, presenting a flat and brutally arid desert landscape relieved only by spindly stalks of spinifex grass and scorpions. The first explorer to cross the Nullarbor described it as "a hideous anomaly, a blot on the face of nature, the sort of place one gets into in bad dreams."

I was a pleasant-looking little boy, or so I am told. Not so little, since I was generally the tallest in my age group, with a shock of light-brown hair and a round, freckled face that easily burst into smiles. In this guise, I diverted myself during the long ride by walking up and down the compartment

smiling at people until they loaded me up with snacks and candies.

Then I was at the window of our car, nose pressed to the glass, because out there, in that cruel desert, there were people. They were tall and spindly, and they were the color of charred wood turning to ash. They were naked except for scraps of skin or fabric over their groins. Were they ghosts?

“Abos,” someone said.

I found a window that was part open, and started throwing the candies and snacks I had collected to the people who lived where no people were supposed to live. It was the first time, in this lifetime that I had noticed people of a different color. In memory, they stand in that barren landscape like tall, spindly, Giacometti sculptures. I learned much later that the name given to this desert people is Spinifex Wangai, the Speakers of the Spinifex, and that they cross the trackless desert on songlines. I hope they enjoyed the Violet Crumble and peanuts.

“You’ll love Aunty Dick,” my mother promised me on the way to the big house in Subiaco, a suburb of Perth. Aunty Dick was my great-aunt Violet Concanen. The source of her nickname remains a mystery to me. She was an opera singer, the student and protégé of the great diva Nellie Melba. She had been onstage with Melba many times. She played Siebel to Melba’s Marguerite in a performance of Gounod’s *Faust*.

I pause in my narrative to look through an album my mother left me. Here is Aunty Dick in a medieval drag, as Siebel, the honest soldier who fights Mephistopheles’ dark arts with love and holy water. A note in my mother’s handwriting on the back of the sepia photograph says that Aunty Dick was so popular in this role, she got more curtain calls than Melba. That notation may merely reflect family pride. But wait, here is a cutting from a 1918 edition of the *West Australian* newspaper describing Miss Violet Concanen as “the brilliant Goldfields coloratura soprano.” A coloratura soprano, as opposed to the mezzo sopranos usually cast as Siebel, could overshadow a diva if she hit her high notes perfectly.

In her heyday, Aunty Dick was in high demand to entertain visiting dignitaries. I open the program for a state dinner at Government House in Perth in 1920, where she sang for the Prince of Wales. The man who would briefly become Edward VIII asked her to dance, and she found him “drunk as a lord.” Here is an advertisement for the “operatic divertissement” she offered at the premiere in Perth of *Blood and Sand* with Rudolph Valentino.

When she retired from the stage, she gave singing lessons, using a testimonial from Melba in her genteel classified advertisements in the local papers.

TESTIMONIAL FROM DAME MELBA

I have great pleasure in recommending Violet Concanen as a teacher of singing. She studied for three years at the Melba Conservatorium and teaches my method to my satisfaction. She also sings beautifully and is a clever actress.

NELLIE MELBA

My great-aunt received us in the big house in Perth. She had me tone and speak and sing, and allowed that I had a good voice and would make a singer if I remembered to “breathe from the diaphragm.” She produced a pot of tea, served with jam tarts and oatmeal fingers and little white bread sandwiches with the crusts cut off. Then she did her other thing.

She picked up Betty’s cup, when she had drunk her tea, and inspected the loose leaves at the bottom. Aunty Dick did not advertise her psychic gifts, but she was well known as a “reader” in sele

circles, including her friends from the stage. I don't remember what she said to my mother. My strongest memory from my first three years as Robert is what happened when she looked in my cup. As she turned it slowly round and round, all the color drained from her face. She turned the cup upside down, so hard it clashed with the saucer. She said she was sorry, she wasn't feeling well, she couldn't do my reading. And she rushed from the room.

She had seen my death in the tea leaves. She was absolutely correct.

In the brutal winter that followed, in Tasmania, an island with a singularly brutal history as a penal colony, I was rushed to the hospital with a severe case of pneumonia. My heart stopped, my breathing stopped, my body temperature plummeted. Medical teams were not able to scan brain waves back then, but the doctor was satisfied I was dead. When I returned to the little body in the emergency room, a startled doctor told my parents, "Your boy died and came back."

I don't remember what happened during the time I was out of the body, seemingly dead, at the age of three. What I do remember, vividly, is how very hard it was for me to stay in that body in the year that followed. It was as hard for me to operate my body as it would have been for me to drive my father's blocky Holden automobile. I seemed to be allergic to almost everything in the world around me, and all the drugs the doctors pumped into me did not change that. I was constantly ill and would lie in the middle of the night coughing into my pillow, trying not to scare my mother. I got pneumonia again, and again, twelve times in all over eight years. Half my time was spent in the twilight sickrooms. In sunlight, I felt alien, as if I had fallen to Earth from a distant star. On warm nights when I wasn't too sick, I would lie on my back in the grass, trying to make out maps in the night sky. The names of the constellations that adults gave me did not seem right.

After I came back from the dead, the doctors told my parents that they had to take me to a warmer climate if they wanted me to live. My father applied for a transfer to Queensland, and soon we were living in part of a house in Fortitude Valley, an inner suburb of Brisbane. The three years we were in Queensland were the happiest in my early life. I picked fresh limes off a tree and ate them with sugar. I ate raw onions with a Greek boy who lived nearby, competing to see who would give up first, and we rode an old steamer trunk in the backyard, playing scenes from a film about Hannibal. When I started school, I walked along a path under sighing she-oaks (casuarinas) that spoke to me in many voices and delighted in sun showers and the smell of wattle in sunlight. I watched sea eagles and imagined myself flying on their wings. And I made my first friend from outside the dominant white culture.

He was an Aboriginal boy named Jacko. My family did not approve of me hanging out with "Abos," but we would slope off together and hunt for yabbies — a kind of crayfish — which I wanted to throw back but he took home. His uncle was an artist who turned out colorful daubs for tourists, but also secret and sacred things. Jacko told me that in order to produce his real art, his uncle went to places of the Dreaming, or into the Dreamtime. This sounded very familiar to me. I tried to talk about how I had gone *away* when I died. "Oh yeah," Jacko said, as we walked through a sun shower. "We do that. When we get real sick, our spirit goes away. We go and live with the spirit people. When we get well, we come back."

2. THE OTHER SIDE *of the* MOON GATE

At nine, I died again. This time I came back remembering not only the whole journey but a whole other life, lived among people other than human in a world that seemed like home.

I will try to reenter this journey, through the gates of memory and desire:

In a suburb of Melbourne, in front of our modest bungalow, I am in shorts and thongs under the hot sun. I am doing what normal boys do, poking an anthill with a stick. The anthill is the size of a tumulus, and its tenants are not meek little leaf-carrying ants, but large and heavily armored bull ants whose bite is agonizing. For nine-year-old Robert, stirring the bull ants to a war frenzy feels less like bullying than like an act of bravado, especially with the crazy boy from across the street egging me on.

I jab harder, and the ants of the garrison rush out furiously over my feet, nipping and punishing. I jump back, using the stick to brush them off. Next I am doubled over in pain. Could bull ants pack that much poison? Strangely, the pain that crumples me is coming not from my feet but from my lower right abdomen.

I hobble across the burned lawn to the house. My father comes out the front door and looks at me and my dog at his heels.

Before he can ask, I say, "Dad, I feel a bit crook."

Griff, our corgi, whimpers and licks my feet. Dad asks no questions. He runs back in the house and phones for an ambulance. He knows I don't mention pain unless I am close to breaking. I was in hospital the previous week with pneumonia in both lungs but never complained.

At St. Andrew's Hospital, the doctors in the emergency ward find that my appendix is about to explode.

"How did it get to this stage?" they want to know. "Robert must have told you he was in pain."

Dad says, "He doesn't talk about pain."

Next, the operating room. They want to take my appendix out right away. They will put me under first, if they can. "Can't put the little bugger down," I hear someone say as they double the dose of anesthetics.

I'm still in my body when the knives come out and the blood flows. I have a mild interest as I watch layers of skin and flesh peeled back from somewhere outside this boy's body. I'm struck by how pale this body is, in a sunburned country. Some of the people in scrubs are gossiping and giggling. Don't they know I can hear?

I don't want to see any more. I drift out into the corridor. I see my mother in a waiting room, drawn and deathly white. I don't want to be present to her grief, knowing that I am the cause. My father sits strong and straight beside her, always the soldier on duty.

I slip by them. Now I am up on a window ledge, looking out through the glass. I see a great bird gliding on straight wings above the rooftops, and envy its freedom.

My face is pressed to the window. The glass yields under my pressure. I push a little, and its texture changes. It becomes a soft bubble, containing my head and shoulders. I butt, and the bubble

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