

# The Dream of Vibo

*Patrick O'Leary*

In a sad year that no one thought would ever end, Vibo, Third Ruler of The Great Empire, fell into a deep sleep from which he could not be woken. His attendants lit candles for every hour he slept, and at the end of his dream journey, he yawned, his eyelids fluttered, and he sat up in the great golden bed of his chamber to find the room swimming in light.

Vibo had a strong long triangular face, like an arrowhead pointing to the ground. And his attendants watched as he shook it, violently back and forth, as if to clear his mind of a nightmare or a wicked thought. It frightened them to watch in the candlelight for it looked to them as if Vibo, their great ruler, was becoming many men, many versions of himself. Multiple faces appeared in his shivering visage, and his wide beautiful eye sockets trembled like the wings of the legendary butterfly.

Finally, the shaking stopped and their ruler was returned to them.

"I have had a dream," said Vibo the Third in a great booming voice. "It is a big dream. I must tell it to my son."

His son stepped out of the dancing lights, a pale boy, just growing into the crown of his brow, who handed his white candle to his attendant and sat beside his father on the golden bed.

"Leave us alone," said Vibo.

And when the attendants and lessers and majors and all his wives had left the chamber, and they could hear their footsteps like giant beetles scuttling down the hall, Great Vibo took the boy into his arms and said, "I have learned a great secret, my son."

His son was a wise lad, who only spoke after he had considered several angles of thought—a skill his father had taught him. Yet being young, he was not afraid to question.

"In a dream?"

"Yes," Vibo said. "Except it didn't feel like a dream. Strange. It felt like a memory. Someone else's memory. And it happened long ago. There were cars."

"Cars?" his son said. Recalling his lesson on those ancient vehicles of transport. The lessons of the poisons people used to breathe. Poisons that sickened the world, and caused generations of mutation and strife. Their dark history.

"Yes, cars. And birds."

"Birds?" His son asked in wonder. As distant to his mind as dinosaurs: flying creatures who once roamed the skies. When skies were blue. Birds. The stuff of legend.

"And everything was dying," Vibo cried. "And nobody knew it."

His son rubbed his shoulder as the Great Ruler wept.

Finally Vibo sighed, and sniffed, and collected himself. "There was a day," Vibo began, "when all life depended on one moment. And everything before and everything since depended on that one moment. It

passed and nobody knew it.”

*On this day, a sad man woke and found his wife smiling down at him. She hadn't done that for years. And it was the nicest morning he could have imagined. The sun came through the window behind her and gave a nimbus glow to her thin gray hair. And he asked her what she was thinking that made her so happy. I was thinking of you, she answered. And why I love you. Outside their window a red cardinal swooped down past the bird feeder over the white lawn to rest on the low branch of a tree. There he smelled the boys who played in the treehouse they built that summer. And the cardinal cocked his head in question. And in the house next door the boy he smelled leaned down to pick up a golden cat. The cat purred and accepted the boy's warm arms. The boy looked deeply into the cat's eyes. And wondered why he purred. And the boy felt the cat's answer. Because somebody loved me. And the boy smiled. And his mother caught his smile as she was washing the smeared window that overlooked the white lawn, the white rag squeaking, squeaking as it absorbed the ammonia water and grime. And a flash of red went by and she thought: Is that a cardinal? Then she recalled birthing the boy, how after a long, hard labor, he erupted between her legs, folded onto her chest, took his first breaths, and transformed limb by limb, like a great spreading blush from a blue baby who loved her on the inside into a pink soft creature who loved her on the outside, too. And she recalled the smiling nurse who swabbed him gently and asked his name. And at that moment, that very important moment, that nurse's sister (who had moved into the neighborhood last summer) was dying. And she reached up to touch the chin of her husband (the only place he had to shave), who had sat in vigil at her bedside for many long and harrowing months. And she smiled a weak smile, and said Remember Ford Road? And their smiles deepened as they recalled the night they drove off the freeway, deep into the dark and found a side dirt road, then a crooked two-lane trail that led them to a hidden cove in the heart of the woods. And crawling into the back seat of their car they hungrily, desperately stripped off their clothes and made love wildly, screaming as they never could before. And they wept there in their bed, surrounded by the sacred memory. What was that? the dying sister said as a red streak flitted past their window and paused before it dipped and found a perch on an aluminum gutter where a dead brown leaf lay frozen in a posture of wide wonder. Like an open fist. The leaf had escaped its tree, the only tree it ever knew, its only home. And caught by a gust of October wind and torn from the branch, it had been swept away into the first and only flight of its life. And as it spun and twirled it knew that this, this was what it was made for, not to cast its dark shape into a fluttering patch of shade in the hot summer sun, not to bathe in the chill spring rains or even to lie frozen and splayed out in a gutter to bask in its memories, but for that one, brief dizzy moment of flight. The red bird understood and he affirmed the leaf's joy by spreading his wings wide. Then he coasted down to where a car was trying to back out of a drive. Stuck. Its rear tires spinning, spinning in two slick grooves of snow and ice, and what interesting music it makes, the bird thought. And a young man was behind the wheel, shifting back and forth from drive to reverse, and slamming the accelerator and letting it go. And cursing to the young woman beside him: It is an awful world, a fucking awful world. Why would anyone want to live in it? And the young woman told him why and for that moment he wanted to live again, if only to see in her eyes the beauty she saw in him. What was that? said the young woman. A cardinal, said the young man, and they watched it disappear over a roof in a perfect acrobatic arch. And in the next yard an old man stood looking up at the clouds gray and close and thought, have I done nothing right, have I wasted every moment, will I always wonder if it mattered? And he heard a sound and turned in his sorrow to find the red bird tasting water from the broken ice of a puddle in the shape of a shoe. I made that puddle, the old man thought, recalling the crunch and the shallow sink of his foot as he had stepped despairing out onto the white lawn to look at the sky and consider all his life had brought him and taken away. What a beautiful thing that is, he thought. Momentarily stunned by the red red stain against the white white lawn. We never know why we live, the old man thought. Maybe*

*it was to give that hobo a ride to the bus station. That was when? Twenty years ago? He could smell the liquor on his breath, feel the chill coming off his army jacket as he entered the warm Impala and slammed the door.*

Impala? the Prince wondered.

*Or maybe it was to give my coin collection to my granddaughter. Sarah. He loved to say her name. Sarah. Or maybe it was that pony I whittled for my son when he was sick.*

Pony?

*Or maybe it was the glimpse of that naked woman undressing in a hotel room in Manhattan. Watching that one window in a night city of many windows. Her beautiful white body stretching in the glow of one bedside lamp.*

The Prince did not wonder about that.

*Or maybe it was this. This lovely red bird. Oops. Where did it go? And the red cardinal dodged a swarm of chickadees and coasted over the hill and skimming the gray slate stream that ran slow and steamed until he came to the old church, painted white and hidden from the road in a circle of pines. To the high broken window that let out warm drafts from the sanctuary. His refuge when the cold got to be too much. As he perched he could hear an organ playing. He coasted down into the dark church, over the empty pews, to where the only light was from the red votive candles and saw the young woman in glasses playing the organ. Identical red flames danced in each of her lenses. He landed where he could watch her fingers. Fingers being the only thing he envied of humans. How versatile they were. How they could make food and peel fruit and rub muscles and stroke hair-it was hard for him to reach his head. And the music they made. So full of longing. So empty of flight. And he listened to her playing the complicated old song. Her favorite piece to play when she was alone. She was alone. Her boyfriend was in the war and his last letter was a week ago. And her fingers dancing on the yellowed keys were her fingers dancing on his skin, the skin she knew so well and might never know again. If I finish this one piece without a mistake, she thought, if I play it perfectly, he will return to me. Whole. He will not die in fire. His beautiful body will not be torn open by shrapnel or bullet. If I only finish this one piece. The cardinal left then, finding the high broken window, escaping into the long white hills, ribboning between the dark towering trees, each of whom greeted him as he passed, saying Red One, where are you going? Scratch my trunk! Please scratch my trunk! And he flew to the park where no one was playing on the monkeybars, or the slide, the swings or the teeter totter. He landed on its handlebar and grasped it with his claws. And he thought about the many people whose thoughts he had touched. They think they are alone, he thought. They think everything in the world is sleeping except them. Not me, said the teeter totter plank. I remember being a tree. There were no children then. Hush, thought, the bird, I am thinking. I am thinking of time a million years hence. A time of great order brought by great violence. I am thinking about the wisest, most powerful leader. He is dreaming a dream. He is dreaming my life. He has waited and lived and conquered and killed for this one moment to happen. He is ready to hear me, though I will be dead a million years when he does. What will I tell him? What is the story he needs to hear? Is it the leaf's story? The sad boy's story? The cat's story? The dying woman's story? What is required of me? The playground was silent. The snow, the trees and all the high passing clouds were silent. The cardinal shook his head. Shook it so hard that a spray of moist microscopic beads was jettisoned into the air, rained down and froze solid the moment they touched the snow. I have this to tell him, thought the red bird. Every moment is important. You do not know that yet. Everything is awake. You do not know that yet. Everything is alive. Everything matters.*

*Shake off this dream. Wake up.*

On the golden bed, in the dark day, surrounded by candles and holding his only son's hand, Vibo the Third and Last Great Ruler of Earth, shook his head again. And sighed.

"That was our past," Vibo's son said, looking out over the balcony onto the cold dark land, the steaming red sky, and the dimming red sun.

"Yes," his father said. "I dreamed a bird's life. A million years ago." He frowned. "But what good is this dream? What can we do now? It is too late."

"Maybe," his son said. "Maybe dreams do not obey the boundaries of time."

"Yes," Vibo said. "Yes!" His face opened in the candlelight and his eyes glowed. "Maybe it is possible for someone back then to dream our life."

"And they will wake up," his son said smiling.

"And they will wake up," his father said.

**For Claire 1/23/02**