

Telling the Dream: Intimacy and Impermanence in Richard Siken's "Scheherazade"

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"Tell me," the speaker says. "Tell me about the dream." Caught beneath its title, Richard Siken's "Scheherazade" is bound to the inextricable relationship between storytelling and survival. The poem's opening line evokes the need to tell a story and the desire to hear a story, sentiments central to *One Thousand and One Nights*. In a sharp twist, however, the speaker becomes both the storyteller and listener — both the one who awaits death and the one who beheads. Yes, they tell "the dream," experiencing love as they sink into "the dream," but they must also end the poem. They must, in other words, erase their and their lover's existence with the conclusion of the poem. "Scheherazade" is thus a piece of potent refutation in which the act of telling becomes an act of defiance against an inevitable end: a desperate grasp for intimacy in the face of mortality. As the opening poem to the collection *Crush*, "Scheherazade" moves quickly to swirl together motifs of love, connection, and death. The poem's fluid structure, with its shifting tenses and enjambment, ultimately works with its tender images to produce a fleeting moment of intimacy, where the speaker is aware of yet unwilling to yield to the transience of "the dream."

Siken produces an atmosphere of death in the first sentence, but he breathes life into the poem through the evocation of touch. The speaker calls forth their addressee:

Tell me about the dream where we pull the bodies out of the lake

and dress them in warm clothes again. (1-2)

As established, the imperative "tell me" manifests an addressee into existence. It is a direct and intimate request — one dependent upon a shared knowledge of "the dream," "the bodies," "the lake." The definite articles inform familiarity between the speaker and addressee, and the quiet landscape strengthens their relationship. Dreams and lakes feel vast, surreal, and often lonely, but

the speaker's voice breaks through this remoteness to ring loud and near. *Tell me our story, dear*, they seem to whisper. With or without taking Siken's biography into account, this intimacy and the subsequent images of affection confirm the addressee as the speaker's lover. The image of pulling "bodies out of the lake" consequently gains significance because it invokes a keen awareness of death: one cannot overlook how as the speaker sculpts "bodies" from a fluid terrain, pulling them "out of the lake," they also produce their lover as a proximate listener. Siken indicates that the speaker revives their lover from death to listen to "the dream." This proximity to death places significance on tactile imagery; touch is the antithesis of loss. To "pull" and to "dress" require physical contact, and the speaker and addressee perform them in tandem — another avenue of intimacy. It is notable, too, that Siken writes "we pull the bodies," not "I pull a body" because it suggests that the speaker and addressee materialize *together* through this poem. These acts of domestic affinity, such as dressing another, fill the addressee and the speaker with warmth and vivacity. By telling "the dream," the speaker and addressee connect both outside and inside narrative as listeners and characters of "the dream."

Critically, however, Siken specifies that the poem is about a "dream" and not a story to erect temporal boundaries to the speaker and addressee's existence. The ambiguity of the word "dream" complicates the poem's relationship with time: dreams that arise from sleep are relegated to the past, but a dream for the future has yet to occur. Regardless, in both cases dreams connote intangibility. It is this backdrop of immateriality that forces such gravity upon when they "pull the bodies" and "dress them." Indeed, the amalgamating considerations of the past, future, and intangibility collapse into the physical reality of the present moment: it is during this *telling* of "the dream" that its images exist here and now. The emphasis on the immediate moment aligns with the ephemeral nature of dreams that originate from sleep. Unlike Scheherazade's

tales that can linger in essence throughout the day until completed the next night, a dream ends with certainty upon one's awakening. There is no continuing a dream into the next night; no, this "dream" — this poem — will end. The speaker knows this too, as they are the one who calls it "the dream." This awareness of an impending conclusion evokes anxiety. Siken constructs the poem with mostly monosyllabic words to induce a rapid pace, and the sense of urgency that begins with the initial imperative carries through with the imagery of movement. Heavy and fluid, the "dream" slips from one image into another as if avoiding doom at every turn. The speaker and addressee's inevitable death marks a major diversion between poem and storytale, where Scheherazade is able to live another night. The word "dream" ultimately produces suspense in how the speaker and addressee can only experience one another's presence within this telling of the ephemeral "dream."

Consequently, the poem moves quickly with the irrational logic of a dream, shifting scenes without explanation. The speaker continues to speak of "the dream":

How it was late, and no one could sleep, the horses running
until they forget that they are horses. (3-4)

To make sense of the poem, one assumes that "it" refers to "the dream." The word "how" thus establishes line 3 as a descriptor that will expand upon "the dream." The syntax, however, elicits fragmentation. Siken enwraps an independent clause with two dependent clauses in line 3, so the images jump rapidly before they feel complete. The changing tenses exacerbate these sudden shifts: within one sentence Siken includes the past simple, present participle, and present simple tenses, and the switch from the past tense "was" to the present participle "running" catapults the poem into present motion. It happens quickly and without explanation; the lack of a conjunction between the second and third clauses makes it feel as though "the horses running" should be a

causal clause to explain why “no one could sleep,” but that is not the case. There is no logical progression to Siken’s list of details. The poem derives power not through a coherent plot but through the immediate feelings that each image evokes. Through this motion, Siken forces one to take in the images as they are presented, much like how the horses run without thinking.

Indeed, the rapid movement forces one to concentrate upon the current moment. The act of “running / until” one forgets who or what they are embodies the speaker’s desire to be present in “the dream.” The speaker is enraptured by an animalistic way of living, where one exists in their body without thought. They seem to follow the horses off the page; Siken enjambs line 3 to produce an abyss into which the horses may keep “running.” Yes, the opening phrase “tell me” had established the poem as a frame story, and here the speaker seems to become absorbed by the inner story. The alliteration of the voiceless fricative “h” evokes the quick and passing sound of wind, and the short clauses make the speaker seem out of breath, as if they are “running.” Even the indented lines demand visual movement from left to right, right to left. Movement dominates what the horses “are”; by running, they are no longer restrained or characterized by their bodies. In the same way, by throwing themselves into the language and flowing nature of “the dream,” the speaker almost forgets about the body — and the oncoming conclusion — of the poem.

Still, the speaker’s choice of words imposes an underlying awareness of an impending cessation. While the modal verb “could” may merely mean that people struggled to fall asleep, it also opens the interpretation that “no one” was allowed to fall asleep. If the speaker were to fall asleep, there would be no one to *tell* the dream, and if the addressee were to fall asleep, the moment of contact between speaker and lover would just as well dissipate. To remain in this moment, “no one could sleep.” It is a paradoxical notion, since the speaker appears to be in a dreamlike state but must also not fall asleep: sleep is the void from which “the dream” is derived,

but it will also be the place it empties into. The detail that “it was late” compounds a need to stay awake because it reminds of Scheherazade telling a story through the night. In her case, sleeping and thus not telling her tale would truly signify death. Although confusing, the negative phrase “no one could sleep” indicates a set of restraints that the speaker and addressee must follow to remain in “the dream.”

As the poem continues, the speaker seems to speak into existence their desire for “the dream” to persist. Siken writes another two lines of descriptors:

It’s not like a tree where the roots have to end somewhere,
it’s more like a song on a policeman’s radio. (5-6)

Siken contrasts the constrained nature of a tangible, living object with the mutable, enduring quality of sound. “A tree” must die, and its “roots” physically cannot ramify forever. On the contrary, “a song on a policeman’s radio” can linger in the air and more or less transform from one song into the next. Full of sibilance, “the dream” feels as fluid as a song in these lines. The change from “it was” to “it’s” also indicates that the speaker has been pulled into the inner story. They describe the scene as if they are there; as the indentation of the lines shift further right, the speaker appears increasingly absorbed by “the dream.” The repetition of “it’s” reads as though the speaker hopes to manifest their description of endurance into reality: to truly make the poem last like “a song.”

However, Siken is careful to write that “it’s more like a song,” not that it is a song. There remains the persistent atmosphere of dread. The “policeman’s radio” draws attention to “the bodies out of the lake” and reminds of death. Furthermore, the instability in tenses indicates that the speaker is untrustworthy and that their narrative is unstable. Siken even undermines the speaker’s descriptions because the poem’s indented lines make it look much like “the roots” of a

tree — and as the speaker says themselves, “the roots have to end somewhere.” The poem’s structure therefore contradicts the speaker’s claim of endurance and points out that “the dream” is contained within these lines that cannot ramify forever.

The speaker has yet to face that conclusion, though, and they continue to plunge into the passion of the lovers’ connection. They become caught up in the intimacies of their produced reality:

how we rolled up the carpet so we could dance, and the days
were bright red, and every time we kissed there was another apple
to slice into pieces. (7-9)

The speaker appears most immersed in “the dream” here because of the images’ completeness. The anaphora illustrates the increasing immersion: whereas in line 3 Siken paired the word “how” with an ambiguous “it,” he now provides a clear subject with “how we rolled up the carpet.” The three clauses are in subject-verb-object word order and the same tense, so it is easy to envision exactly what happens, where, and with whom where. One does not have to scramble to piece the images together; the poem here is digestible like a “song.” Siken also makes lines 5-9 one long sentence, which pulls one into the setting and allows them to remain there for a moment. Importantly, the increasing reality of “the dream” is rooted in the increasing proximity between the speaker and addressee. Siken repeats “we” three times within two lines to cement the fact that they are together. In being with their lover, the speaker feels relaxed, not needing to jump from one memory to the next. They grow closer as the poem slides right, and at line 9 they reach the deepest point of submersion into “the dream.”

The possibility of forever almost feels feasible as the speaker and addressee dance and kiss. They enter a time of “could,” not of could not. They, together, “could dance,” and their

bodies could touch with great intimacy “every time they kissed.” The sibilance is sensual, and these lines feel the most intense because there is the most contact between the lovers. Siken then places the dependent clause “and the days” at the end of line 7 so that the moment hangs onto the eternity of the enjambment’s pause. There also exists a parallel between “days” and “running,” which is the last word placed at the end of an enjambed line, so the “days” feel like they will keep moving forward the way the horses keep “running.” Furthermore, the speaker recalls *multiple* “days.” This detail illustrates that the inner story temporally breaks away from the frame story: the speaker and addressee survive for more than one day in “the dream.” Each moment opens up into the next; every contact ramifies into infinity. Their physical acts of love in particular appear to create abundance. Breaking away from biblical allegories, the lovers produce an apple through their kiss rather than consume an apple in lust. Siken takes it a step further to say they “slice” the “apple into pieces”; instead of biting the fruit ravenously, the speaker and addressee slow down the process of eating it, savoring each “slice.” Siken overwhelms the sentence with tactile imagery. Beyond their contact with another, the speaker and addressee also grow closer to touching the physical world of “the dream” as they “rolled up the carpet.” They take away what impedes their bodies from touching the earth to be more like “the horses running” on the ground. In this way, they are physically rooted in “the dream.”

It is the reminder of day and night that snaps the speaker back to reality. With another imperative, the speaker declares:

Look at the light through the windowpane. That means it’s noon, that means
we’re inconsolable.

Tell me how all this, and love too, will ruin us.

These, our bodies, possessed by light.

Tell me we'll never get used to it. (10-14)

Siken returns the poem to the left column to jolt the speaker and addressee out of the inner story. The imperative “look back” reminds one of the first request, “tell me”: it reminds one that “all this” was only a dream. In contrast to lines 5-9 being one long sentence, lines 10-14 are five lines of five short sentences. In effect, one feels pulled out of the long-winding “dream.” Siken separates each line visually, again eliciting fragmentation. “The dream” no longer flows smoothly; the expanse of blank space makes it feel like the speaker wheezes out each phrase in a ragged breath, and the repetition of “tell me” induces a sense of a finale.

Indeed, like in *One Thousand and One Nights*, daybreak signals the end of a story. There is “light” now: the speaker has told the poem through the night, and they must wake up. They seem to have succeeded in lengthening “the dream” because “it’s noon” instead of “dawn,” but that is the furthest they can take it. The poem must end, so “we’re inconsolable.” Siken lifts the imagery from the ground where they “could dance” upward to the “windowpane” — a shift from looking at the past to the future. Light illuminates the “bodies,” bringing them into visual awareness. Unable to hide in the surreality of “the dream,” the body’s imminent mortality approaches. The “bodies” are “possessed by light.” They are subordinate to nature. Assuredly, Siken said in a 2011 interview with *Bomb Magazine*, “without pity, the natural world and its physical laws restrict the human form and its capacities. All of us are trapped in our skins and drowning in gravity.” The final three sentences are certainly “trapped,” separated by white space. Each word takes on great importance in breaking out of the blankness. Notably, however, the speaker regards the fact that “it’s noon” objectively. Despite saying “we’re inconsolable,” the language is unemotional, as if the speaker can acknowledge their “ruin” without dwelling on it. They gain power rather than slipping out of control as they repeat “tell me.” The anaphora builds

suspense for the last sentence, “tell me we’ll never get used to it.” It is an ambiguous sentence, but it also derives power from its ambiguity. Siken does not elaborate what they’ll “never get used to,” but it does not matter. What is significant is the act of not getting used to something: of being present and absorbing the current moment. Whether the dream will end or not end, it is only by never getting used to the conclusion that one remains in the dream. Yes, if one gets “used to it,” they take the present for granted — but the speaker rejects that up until their final breath. As such, although the poem will end, the final sentence contains a certain perpetuity in how the speaker and addressee will live in the moment right until “the dream” ends.

“Scheherazade” draws power from the pressures present in *One Thousand and One Nights*, but it is its alterations from the storytale that make it so potent. The speaker tells “a dream,” not a story, so “Scheherazade” is marked by a definite end. Despite that, the speaker continues to tell and experience the inner story as it comes, allowing themselves to become immersed in “the dream.” The suggestive diction continually reminds that the “dream” is grounded in its own impermanence, but the rapid, fragmented movement attempts to hold onto life — to a body, a kiss, a shared moment. By focusing on the tactile and immediate, Siken makes the act of telling feel like a desperate attempt to preserve intimacy before it dissolves. Ultimately, though, “Scheherazade” is not about escaping death but about fully inhabiting the fragile, ephemeral now. The poem demands one to “never get used to it”: to live in the moment before it inevitably slips away.

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