



16. PAPER WEIGHT (SWEET DREAMS)



“Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.”
— Dylan Thomas, *Fern Hill*

My mother, **Kate Webb Harris**, selected that quote as the closing sentiment of her 1969 college thesis, *A Song in Chains*, which analyzed the work of Russian novelist **Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn**, who was awarded the *Nobel Prize in Literature* the following year, before being expelled from the Soviet Union in 1974, and ultimately seeking refuge here in Vermont in 1976.

My mother was fascinated by Solzhenitsyn’s theory of attaining spiritual liberation from within a situation of physical confinement, as he experienced in the “gulags” of Russia.

Writing in his 1966 novel, *Cancer Ward*, Solzhenitsyn posits:

*A man is happy, so long as he chooses to
be happy and nothing can stop him.*

Even as a young woman, the seed of this idea was planted in my mother’s imagination — little did she know how her own life would end up testing Solzhenitsyn’s hypothesis.

Beginning in 1989, my mother started seeing a psychoanalyst in New York City, to help her process frequent nightmares, a debilitating depression, ambivalence about whether to end or continue her marriage, and her long-time struggle to give up cigarette smoking.

Her therapy consisted largely of **dream analysis**, so she began a meticulous practice of recording her dreams, which she carried out for the next thirteen years in a series of spiral-bound journals. After she died, I came across her collection of journals, which I read through word by word over several long and challenging winter days.

Without going into too many details, a picture is painted of half-remembered childhood abuse that cast a long shadow on the rest of her life, tainting her view of men and sexuality, and creating deep levels of fear and anxiety that caused her to withdraw more and more from the world as she aged.

Mainly, reading her journals made me feel enormous compassion for her situation — which, like her father, she was never quite able to transcend and escape.

This ritual deals with the process of transforming her dreams, so that her spirit (and this place) can be free of their old and heavy burdens.

An old white wooden bed that belonged to my mother’s great-grandparents is placed in a maple sugarbush in the **High Acres Farm** woods.

The maple trees are tapped and the early spring sap is flowing, with blue cords criss-crossing the woods. In the bed is “**Baby Linda**,” my mother’s 1950s childhood doll.

Nearby, the snow is falling. I’ve laid out my mother’s dream journals on an old wooden table. I take the glass vessel from *Phase Change* and sprinkle cleansing water over the journals, and then into the landscape, where the snow suddenly clears.

I walk into the forest and come across the **maple sugarbush** with the white wooden bed, greeting little Baby Linda.

I take the journals from my bag, and begin removing sheets of paper, which I attach to the blue cords with wooden clothespins, airing out the dreams like dirty laundry. I repeat this process with hundreds of pages, until the woods are festooned with white sheets of paper, like strange New England “**prayer flags**,” slowly being sweetened by the **spring sap** that’s dripping from the trees.



As night falls, the haunting sound of baby frogs takes over the forest, and a freeze-frame nightmare sequence begins.

In the morning, the sound of the nightmares gives way to the sound of crows, echoing through the empty woods.

I return to the sugarbush with my sister and her kids, to gather up the sheets of paper. We carry the bundle of collected dreams to a nearby hillside, where two tables await us — one made of wood, holding a collection of my mother's beautiful glass **paperweights**; the other made of glass, propped up between two columns of bricks from the old High Acres Farm chimney that was removed in the 2017 renovation.

One by one, paperweights are placed atop the stack of paper dreams, causing the glass sheet suspended between the bricks to sag and dip precariously. As the final paperweight is placed and moved, the sheet of glass suddenly cracks, and four white doves (released by **Gary Reid**, who five years earlier performed the cremation depicted in *Space Suit*) emerge from the empty space created. There is a dove for me, a dove for my sister, and one for each of her children.

As the wind picks up, we begin a family process of kite-making, with Baby Linda watching. Little **Norah** and **Julia** decorate the paper dreams with drawings of flowers. I build a simple wooden frame (the same shape as the spine of the figure from *Scarecrow*). **Amanda** snips it to size, and we tape the sheets of paper into place. Norah rushes into the field, with her new kite flapping wildly behind her.

The dreams are swirling and soaring in the bright Easter sky, their heaviness finally made light.

Performed in 2021 — Duration 9:45

