

of her own articulation. The insight we are seeking is unthought and unspoken. Self-willed. Wild. It will step forward like a deer into a forest clearing, emerging only if we wait patiently, quietly, reverently.

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At last, from somewhere very far away, Ella says ‘I feel... shredded.’ The word rips through the space between us in one long, tearing sound of abrasive consonants, ‘shhhhhhhrrrrrrreded’. Her jaw clenched tight, Ella drags the sound across the space between us like a harrow carving into sods of earth. In the extended ‘shr’ I hear something tearing apart.

Language like this arrives naked, vital and raw. It delivers ‘thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing.’⁹³

Shred (v): to tear into shreds something that was once whole

The word Ella has found to describe her feeling state is not a static noun. It comes from a verb that carries the vital energy of ‘losing’. It shows us that her loss is not a past event, a consequence, it is a happening which is still taking place. Her heart is a mangle of conflicted feelings.

Ella’s utterance is simple, commonplace, unadorned. Yet in its humble arc it conjures up images that allow us to see into the marrow of her experience. The person she loves has been torn away, leaving her with a rent in the living tissue of her being. This is not a clean cut. She has not been axed with a single honest blow. For months she has fought tooth and nail to save her marriage. The experience has torn her apart. Ella feels dismembered. She is in bits. These bits are not the neatly cut pieces of a jigsaw which

can be reassembled, they have been torn across the very grain of her life. Beholding these shreds, she feels irreparably damaged. Ella believes she will never be whole again. It's as though what has been shredded is not only her past life, but also her future self.

Ella needs a new vision. Aware that this new life will seed itself first in the hallowed ground of her imagination, I suggest that she keeps a record of her dreams. For several weeks there is a deafening silence. Ella's sleep is empty. Harrowed and sorrowed, her imaginal ground remains hard, cold and barren. Dumbfounded, she waits. There is nothing she can do but 'stand there, balked and dumb, stuttering and stammering'. The pain of this mute desolation is hard to bear.

Then, one rain-torn morning, Ella arrives at her session with a dream recorded in muffled and sleepy tones onto her phone. 'It's probably nothing,' she says.

I am leaving home. Moving house. Going somewhere new. I'm surrounded by boxes, each one carefully packed with my belongings. My books, music, clothes. I am gathering my things, packing them ready for the move, but each time I look around, the boxes have been turned upside down, their contents strewn all over the floor. Books are scattered about with pages ripped from them. Clothes lie torn and tattered. It's as though there's an invisible presence lurking behind me, which keeps shredding everything. I feel helpless, useless, stupid. I just can't seem to get it together.

The language of the unconscious is wonderfully precise. It needs a faithful transcription. In Ella's account of her dream, two words in particular leap out. There is the repetition of shredding of course, but there is also the idea of gathering. Beyond its physical meaning of collecting together, 'gathering' means to understand, to comprehend, to see clearly. Something seems to be getting in the way of Ella seeing herself clearly. Without a coherent image,

she remains blind. Her life continues to tear apart and she cannot move on.

Exploring the dream, we begin to wonder about the invisible presence that seems intent on disorder and incoherence. I sense the presence of an internal 'shredder'. Shady dream characters often express disavowed parts of ourselves, so I ask Ella, 'Could there be a hidden part in you which prevents you from gathering your things, from getting it together?' Ella bows her head. Her anguish is palpable. 'I couldn't hold the marriage together,' she tells me, 'no matter how hard I tried.' After a pause she adds, 'I just wasn't enough for him.'

This last statement stops me in my tracks. Ella locates the cause of the marriage break-up in her own deficiency. This ravaging self-belief shreds all possibility of an imagined future in which she can 'get it together' – with anyone.

Returning to the precise language of the dream I remark that the shredding presence lurks 'behind' her. To confront it Ella will need to turn around. The dream demands nothing less than a complete metanoia. I suggest that she re-enter the dream and turn to face the invisible presence. I will stay right by her side as she does this. Ella closes her eyes tightly, as though she wants to prevent the dream from spilling out of her inner realm. 'What do you see?' I ask. 'His face,' she says in a voice which strains under the weight of what stands in front of her. 'My husband. He is laughing. His eyes are cold and unfeeling. They tell me I am pathetic.'

Turning around in a dream often helps us to see the obscured aspect, the missing piece, which lies in the blind spot of our feelings (see chapter four). Ella's dream offers up a mirror not only to her loss, but also (critically) to her sense of herself as 'a loser'. Hidden in the marrow of her distress, we have stumbled on the lair of the internal and ever-present 'shredder'. Shame. Shame is the invisible presence that stops her gathering her things, which prevents her from seeing a wholesome future for herself. And this is where