

Prologue (excerpt from a novel)

by Marc Lowe

You have a dream...

In this dream you are seated in an exceedingly narrow alleyway, one that resembles the many narrow alleyways in and around your neighborhood. You are seated in this alleyway because you are waiting, although you aren't yet aware for whom or for what. The pavement beneath you is cold and damp; it feels as real to you in the dream as the futon had felt to you when you lay yourself upon it some hours earlier. The concrete walls of the alley surrounding you are barely visible in the darkness; nonetheless, you are able to make out a nebulous stain upon one of the walls—the wall to your left, to be precise—like an abstract Rorschach blot. Further on you see the blurred outline of a human figure and hear the barking of a dog. A sense of *unheimlich*—of the uncanny—takes hold of you as you realize that you have dreamed this very same dream so many times before, each re/iteration of the dream concluding in your suddenly waking up without any clue as to what made you waken: that is, you cannot remember the dream's contents until the next time you dream it, and by the end of that dream you always wake up without any memory of the last time you dreamt it, and so on *ad infinitum*....

The *clip-clopping* of footsteps now echoes from the opposite end of the alleyway, and as you turn to face the figure who appears behind you, the figure wearing a fierce Noh-drama mask, you determine that this time you will enlist its aid in decoding this recurring dream, this dream in which you both play an equally important role, for you have gathered—from your readings of popular and classic psychology—that all of the characters in all of your dreams are none other than different aspects of yourself, of *yourself*; all are stand-ins for issues you must resolve, issues that refuse to be placated through logic and/or reasoning, issues

resistant to analysis in the waking world that have, left with no other choice, retreated into the labyrinth of your subconscious mind. This masked figure that now hovers above you, casting its shadow upon your increasingly diminishing form; this dark shape—decidedly male—that brandishes a wooden rice-pounding mallet similar to the one you recall, albeit vaguely, from your childhood; this enigmatic character too is, in fact, merely a symbol of some aspect of your own mind and need not be feared.

Or so you tell yourself in the dream.

...And then you see an object wrapped in an orange-red colored *furoshiki* cloth sitting by its foot (it's that in-between color they use to paint Shinto shrines, to be precise), but as you are about to open your mouth to ask *What is it?* the masked figure strikes you with the rice-pounding mallet. Again and again you are stricken, but you refuse to give in to the pain—which is as real as any you have ever experienced in waking life—for you know that this is simply a test of willpower, one through which you must pass if you are ever to vanquish your internal demons. The blows continue to fall upon you one after the next, relentless, and your painful wails intermingle with the harsh crack of wood against flesh and bone that now echoes through the narrow alleyway. And then it is over as suddenly as it began: the figure has already retreated into the darkness without your having had time to ask it any questions, has left you face down on the pavement in a puddle of sticky body fluids. You hear the buzzing of flies hovering somewhere nearby and see directly in front of you, through bleary eyes, the object, still swathed in its orange-red *furoshiki* cloth; it is shaped like a melon—ovular, though somewhat lopsided, as if partially crushed. Is it a piece of fruit, or something non-vegetal? You must once again ask yourself whether you are still dreaming: the question, however, has already been rendered irrelevant by the extent of your psychophysical suffering. Tears and mucous and blood cover the side of your bruised face, the pain somehow reminds you of *snow*, cold and wet...And so again, as before, you will have to wait for someone, or perhaps for some *thing*, to arrive and give you an indication, a clue,

as to what to do next. If this is a dream, the way you figure it, you will soon wake up in your familiar futon, and all will be forgotten once again.

Until the next time.

