

Waking from and into Trauma: Joseph Heller and the Dream of the Familiar Stranger

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And—lo and behold—here I am, much to my surprise, doing the same thing with this book! I still haven't broken the pattern.

Now and Then (229)

Approaching the conclusion of his memoir *Now and Then* (1998), Joseph Heller is startled to find himself employing a familiar mechanism, a profoundly troubling death, in this instance that of his father when he was five years old. Heller's narrative "pattern"—a wrenching death and its traumatic recollection narrated in the penultimate chapter—is known now, but Heller himself did not discover it until 1979, well after he had written *Catch-22* (1961) and *Something Happened* (1974), the novels that established his reputation. In "Psychiatry," the penultimate chapter of his memoir, Heller describes his experiences with psychoanalysis through which he uncovers this characteristic narrative schema.¹ The vehicle for Heller's realization is the analysis of a recurrent nightmare of a familiar stranger, and the dream, in turn, announces the traumatic primal event that moves *Now and Then* to closure. Crucially, although unbeknownst to Heller at the time of their composition, *Catch-22* and *Something Happened* also use versions of the dream to lead into the scenes in which the protagonist confronts the death that is the source of his trauma-haunted memory.² In this essay,

¹ After undergoing analysis, Heller first discusses his pattern: "Death is always present as a climactic event that never happens to the protagonist but affects him profoundly. I think that I'm drawing unconsciously from experience for inspiration" (Flippo, 1981: 60). For an analysis of this pattern in Heller's novels, see David Craig, *Tilting at Mortality* (1998).

² Joan DeFattore (1998, 128) provides an insightful Lacanian analysis of the dark stranger dream in *Something Happened*, arguing that it brings "disparate threads of [Slocum's] seemingly chaotic narrative into a coherent pattern based on a single overwhelming psychological drive: his terror of powerlessness."

I will study the endings of these three works and the narrative dynamics by which the protagonist awakens from a traumatic dream and into the recollection of its traumatic primal event. Recalling the primal event, in turn, enables Heller's protagonists to confront their existential terror and affords Heller himself a lens on his own fear-shadowed consciousness. In each case, his narratives enact what Cathy Caruth (1996, 7) calls "a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the unbearable nature of an event and the story"—to modify Caruth—of the vexed "nature of its survival."³ In these texts, the protagonist's dream and awakening interweave the confrontations with death and life.

Although Heller introduced the topic of trauma in a *Rolling Stone* interview with Charles Flippo (1981, 57), scholarly examination of the subject did not begin until after his death. In part this lag resulted from the tendency among Heller scholars to discount the importance of autobiographical elements in his fiction. Robert Merrill (1987, 2-4) wrote for many when he argued that the autobiographical connections in *Catch-22* and *Something Happened* "are relatively minor" and that Heller was "not recapturing the intensity of his own experiences" in his representation of the bombing missions. Initial examinations of trauma in *Catch-22* have focused on its effects without exploring their autobiographical roots. Alberto Cacicedo (2005) examines how memory in response to trauma leads to Yossarian's ethical choices in the novel's conclusion, and Leah Garrett (2015, 392) argues that *Catch-22* is "packed with signs that it is about a Jewish airman confronting the Holocaust." Heller's memoir, Michael C. Scroggins's "Joseph Heller's Combat Experiences in *Catch-22*" (2003), and Tracy Daugherty's *Just One Catch*.

³ Caruth's (1996, 7) contention about the correlative crises of death and life rests upon what she calls "an urgent question: Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived?" Heller's narratives resist Caruth's emphasis on "the unbearable nature of [traumatic] survival." My analysis is indebted to Caruth's work on trauma and narrative. While Caruth's scholarship is highly influential, she has important critics, most notably Dominic LaCapra (2001, 109) and Ruth Leys (2000, 267).

A Biography of Joseph Heller (2011) enable exploration of the biographical roots of Heller's representation of trauma. Drawing upon the memoir and Scroggins, Benjamin Nathan Schachtman's dissertation, "Traumedy: Dark Comedic Negotiations of Trauma in Contemporary American Literatures" (2016), investigates traumatic representation in *Catch-22* and its sequel *Closing Time* (1994). He argues that Heller's "testimony—his dark comedy—provokes a response—our dark laughter that serves as recognition of his trauma. But dark comedy, Heller's testimonial mode—because it struggles to accommodate real exterior trauma ('what happened') and psychological interior trauma ('what it felt like')—is necessarily a compromise" (79). In contrast to Schachtman's approach, this essay investigates the interpenetration of actual and imagined trauma in *Catch-22*, *Something Happened*, and *Now and Then* to better understand them, their author, and his masterplot (the death that casts a retrospective light on all that precedes it and the crisis of life that follows).

Among Heller's novels, the traumatic primal event—the source for the harrowing nightmare—is unique to *Catch-22* and *Something Happened*. His representation of trauma in these novels depends heavily on autobiographical material, including the anxiety occasioned by the familiar stranger dream. In *Catch-22*, Heller draws heavily upon his own experience treating a wounded gunner over Avignon, France, in creating the Snowden death scene, and he lards *Something Happened* with numerous details drawn from his own life, including the dreams that set up Slocum's killing his son and the dead father who was never known.⁴ Although Heller transmutes his own experience into the representation of recollected trauma, he is unconscious of the extent to which trauma undergirds *Catch-22* and similarly unaware of the psychological

⁴ Heller has frequently addressed the question of the autobiographical nature of the Avignon mission on which Snowden dies. In *Now and Then*, he describes his account as a fusion of a mission to Ferrara in which a radio gunner was killed with his own experiences over Avignon (177).

significance of Slocum's smothering his son, that is, until Bruno Bettelheim calls his attention to the mythic pattern of fathers responsible for their sons' deaths (Ruas 1985, 163). By contrast, when Heller narrates his memories of his father and his death, the dream is more traumatic than the death that is its source, and his lived experience remains essentially unaffected by the death. Even while invoking his pattern, Heller as memoirist revises it and distances himself from the trauma that the nightmare announces.

In *Now and Then*, Heller begins the penultimate chapter underscoring his surprise at enacting his mechanism for closure once again and at the familiar dream which provides the vehicle for his awakening. "The first time I met my father face-to-face to talk with him, so to speak, was in the office of a psychoanalyst sometime in 1979, when I was already fifty-six years old. My father had been dead for more than fifty of those years" (216). The meeting was with his psychoanalyst, Dr. Robert Michels, in which he disclosed a recurring nightmare. In the dream, Heller would be asleep in the Coney Island apartment of his childhood when a man would enter the apartment and slowly approach his bedside. Within the dream, Heller would awaken and grow increasingly frightened. The intruder's face was always in the shadows, and yet his ability to make his way to Heller's room made him seem vaguely familiar. As the stranger approaches his bed, Heller's fear mounts until "[i]n unbearable dread and panic, I was compelled to cry out for help, and the words would swell in my paralyzed throat and take form as gibberish, they would jam and choke me, I strain and struggle . . . to shriek out, pleading for safety and survival." Before Heller could distinguish the intruder's features, he "would ride to [his] own rescue" by awakening from his "heart-stopping terror." Or, Heller adds an alternative that he develops much more graphically in *Something Happened*, being wakened from his "unintelligible gasps and wordless moans" by whoever else is sleeping in the room with him (217).

Aided by Dr. Michels, his analyst and “mentor” (224), Heller develops a Freudian interpretation of the stranger nightmare as signifying the effects of his absent father.⁵ As Heller describes the dream-analysis sessions, he enjoys showing off all the Freud he has read (218) and “plead[ing] guilty to such likely flaws as an Oedipus complex” (222). The sessions provide their own awakening by rendering the dream interpretable, its terrors understandable. However, as Heller relates the dream, a crucial mystery remains: why it no longer occurs? (217). When Heller asks Dr. Michels about this, his psychiatrist replies, “You don’t need that dream any more. . . . You have me here now” (217-18). Guided by Michels, Heller comes to use *Catch-22*, *Something Happened*, and *Good as Gold* (1979) to interpret his nightmare and its dynamics and to search for himself “as a fatherless Coney Island child” (222). Together, as Heller’s biographer Tracy Daugherty (2011, 362) documents, they explore the possibility that the interpretive key to the dream is a role reversal in which Heller’s father functions as the child and Heller as the father.

Before further examining Heller’s appropriation of his narrative pattern in “Psychiatry,” I want to explore the function the nightmare serves in *Catch-22* and *Something Happened*. In each novel, the nightmare prompts the protagonist’s awakening into trauma, in *Catch-22* into trauma recollected and in *Something Happened* into trauma forecast and consummated.⁶ As a result, the protagonist again hears the voice of the dying innocent and re-experiences the helplessness of his efforts to save a life. For each protagonist, the traumatizing fear of nightmare

⁵ A highly respected psychoanalyst, Dr. Michels was the Walsh McDermott University Professor of Medicine and University Professor of Psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medicine. Michels (2019, 308) describes the aftereffects of trauma quite differently from Heller: “The present is importantly influenced by the past, but the major channel for that influence is not specific traumatic memories, rather it is the mental structures that emerge in childhood and develop throughout the course of life.”

⁶ Freud ([1920] 1955, 13) writes: “Now dreams occurring traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright.” For Heller, such fright invariably accompanies the nightmare, and he portrays it as catalytic to Yossarian and Slocum’s recollection of the traumatic deaths in *Catch-22* and *Something Happened*.

gives way to the trauma of memory and a fear-shadowed consciousness, figured in the novels' darkly comic endings. As Cathy Caruth (1996, 7) would argue, the trauma of encountering death yields its inextricable counterpart, the trauma of having survived this encounter. In *Now and Then*, however, Heller relates an awakening that affirms the existence of a trauma, which he can neither remember nor recover. As he remembers his father's death—having received "dimes, an occasional quarter, [and] a whole dollar" at the funeral—it was "one of the more rewarding memories of [his] young life" (234). Significantly, unlike his protagonists, Heller cannot return to the site of the trauma itself. So, even as he invokes his narrative pattern, he redirects its pathway through his experiences with psychoanalysis. This process of recollection enables Heller, as his protagonists before him, to embrace life in the aftermath of a troubling death. Just as in the novels, Heller's masterplot with its necessary crisis supplies shape to the story and meaning to his life.

Two Wounds and Their Chill

Although I had from the start, from the second chapter on, been dutifully following a disciplined outline, I hadn't perceived till then how much material of a gory nature was embodied in its fulfillment.

Now and Then (229)

In "Snowden," *Catch-22*'s famous penultimate chapter, Yossarian remembers the airman's viscera spilling out onto the bomber floor—the "liver, lungs, kidneys, ribs, stomach and bits of the stewed tomatoes [he] had eaten that day for lunch" that embody the fulfillment of *Catch-22* (439). This conjunction of Snowden's wound and Yossarian's wounded consciousness voices the novel's thematic conclusion: "Man was matter; that was Snowden's secret" (440). As Alfred Kazin (1973, 84) long ago observed, the scene of Yossarian's ministering to the dying

Snowden is also the novel's primal event and, as biographer Tracy Daugherty demonstrates, an event rooted in a primal experience for Heller as well.⁷ Retrospectively, the preceding narrative seems to have emerged from Snowden's wound and Yossarian's trauma-haunted memories and fears. Just as in *Now and Then*, the menacing stranger plays an enabling role for the protagonist's confrontation with this trauma in which Yossarian must re-encounter the death that he has survived. In *Catch-22*, however, the stranger appears not in an actual nightmare but in a dreamscape in which Yossarian cannot be sure if he is dreaming or awake. Instead of wending his way through the apartment of Heller's childhood to the edge of his bed, the stranger materializes beside Yossarian's hospital bed, disrupting his anesthetized sleep and inducing a state of helpless terror. As a result of this unsought awakening, Yossarian again hears the plaintive voice of the dying Snowden, "I'm cold" (437), and experiences his own mortality as trauma.⁸

"Snowden" inverts the premise of the familiar stranger nightmare and focuses attention on the question of what it means to awaken—to understand a world governed by the seemingly inescapable logic of *Catch-22*. The chapter unfolds as a series of awakenings. The initial ones are part of a comic set piece in which the essential components of the Snowden death scene are reversed: Yossarian regains consciousness after the knife wound inflicted by Nately's girlfriend to hear his doctors, "two strangers" (430), debating whether to save his life; his viscera and not Snowden's are being inspected; and his seemingly nonsensical responses to questions about his

⁷ Daugherty (2011, 1) emphasizes the primal nature of Heller's experience over Avignon: "What is missing in the moment he will return to, in memory and in writing, for the rest of his life is his sense of himself." In Heller's traumatic Avignon mission, he argues that "nothing is clear, least of all a fleeting, time-dependent I."

⁸ Snowden's cry and Yossarian's trauma accords with Caruth's (2013) interpretation of the Tancred story in which a voice "cries out from the wound" and Freud's of trauma "as a wound inflicted not on the body but upon the mind" (3). Drawing upon Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, she argues this mental wound "is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivors" (4).

birth—"On a battlefield" and "In a state of innocence" (430)—convey the message that he will later unravel in Snowden's chill words and secret. The most crucial awakenings occur after his surgery when Yossarian is twice roused by the menacing stranger. For these scenes, Heller appropriates key plot features from his dark stranger dream: the threatening bedside appearance in a place of refuge, the dramatic intensification of fear, and the necessary awakening in heart-stopping terror. Just as in *Now and Then*, the key to unraveling this plot depends upon understanding the significance of the stranger's appearance:

A hand with sharp fingers shook him awake roughly. He turned and opened his eyes and saw a strange man with a mean face who curled his lip at him in a spiteful scowl and bragged,

"We've got your pal, buddy. We've got your pal."

Yossarian turned cold and faint and broke into a sweat.

"Who's my pal?" he asked when he saw the chaplain sitting where Colonel Korn had been sitting.

"Maybe I am your pal," the chaplain answered. (432)

In the post-surgery haze, Yossarian must determine whether the stranger's visit occurred in a dream or not and, more crucially, the pal's identity and the significance of this relationship. Heller underscores both problems when his pal Hungry Joe dies while Yossarian is hospitalized. In the last variation on the episodes involving Hungry Joe's nightmares about cats, he dies when a cat falls asleep on his face—Heller's dark joke about the deadly seriousness of the subconscious content of combat-inspired dreams. In conversation with the Chaplain, Yossarian intuits that the pal must be someone who has been killed in the war and catalogs the possibilities: Nately, Dobbs, Dunbar, Clevinger, Kid Sampson, and McWatt. Their deaths are

strewn throughout the novel like corpses on a battlefield, and their gore regularly erupts in the text as in the horrific beach scene in which the bloody remains of Kid Sampson rain on the survivors (338).

It will take the stranger's second visit to reorient the direction of Yossarian's search. He will need to turn inward and attend to his own wounded consciousness, a wound much more enduring than its physical counterpart. The stranger's reappearance initiates Yossarian's turn into the self. The pattern and wording are the same—the malevolent appearance, the sudden awakening, and the dramatically escalating fear—although this time Yossarian responds by lunging at the stranger's throat (436). After the stranger vanishes, Yossarian again finds himself in a cold sweat, and this time the chill occasions recollection. The physical response to fear proves catalytic to Yossarian's ability to decipher the stranger's message. "A throbbing chill oozed up his legs. He was cold, and he thought of Snowden, who had never been his pal but was only a vaguely familiar kid who was badly wounded and freezing to death in the puddle of harsh yellow sunshine" (436). The cry of the wounded Snowden—"I'm cold, I'm cold"—emerges from within Yossarian himself, a corporeal reincarnation of the trauma of treating the dying airman (437). Snowden's chill has become his own, his mortal wound the embodiment of as well as occasion for Yossarian's psychic wounding.

For Heller as author and man, the cry "I'm cold" is also simultaneously the crucial pathway to and essential component of the wounds of Avignon. According to Heller, he combines the detail of a dying airman's cries of cold, which occurred on a mission to Ferrara on which he was not a crew member, with the Avignon mission during which he treated the

wounded airman.⁹ In *Catch-22*, after the stranger's visit, Yossarian awakens into the trauma that Heller, the youthful bombardier, remembered and hoped that he would escape. He hears Snowden's cry, "I'm cold," and can only reply "There, there" (437). The two cries form a metonymic relationship. Snowden's cry of mortality and Yossarian's feeble words of comfort signify the necessity but failure to respond to the mortal wound. As if enacting his own return to Avignon, Heller punctuates the details of the Snowden death scene with six repetitions of the paired cries, the last of which concludes the chapter. The repetitions underscore the way in which the trauma has been experienced and now recollected but has eluded full comprehension. The dying moves to conclusion, the consciousness that it initiates begins.

In details almost certainly drawn from his own experience, Heller creates a visual manifestation of shared trauma. "The wound Yossarian saw was in the outside of Snowden's thigh, as large and deep as a football, it seemed. It was impossible to tell where the shreds of his saturated coveralls ended and the ragged flesh began" (436). Even in its recollection, Yossarian cannot render the sight of the wound knowable: "The yawning wound—was that a tube of slimy bone he saw running deep inside the gory scarlet flow behind the twitching, startling fibers of weird muscle?—was dripping blood in terrible trickles" (437). He recalls the way in which his perceptions of the wound change in size and shape: "The wound, he saw now, was not nearly as large as a football, but only as long as his hand, and too raw and deep to see into clearly. The raw muscles inside twitched like hamburger meat" (437-38). This account foregrounds Yossarian's traumatized consciousness as well as Snowden's mortal wound.

⁹ By repurposing accounts that he had heard from the Ferrara mission and linking them to his own experience treating the wounded airman, Heller provides his most detailed account of traumatic experience. In *Catch-22*, he expresses the trauma that he more typically alludes to in jokes (Merrill 1975, 68): "I went to the hospital the next day. He looked fine . . . and was going to be all right. But I was in terrible shape, and I had twenty-three more missions to fly."

As awakened rememberer, Yossarian sees the wound and its accompanying experience as if he were once again trapped in a nightmare from which he cannot awaken. He can inspect Snowden's wound in a way that he cannot his own knife wound, can understand Snowden's cries of cold but not his own icy sweat occasioned by the stranger and his message. As importantly, he can recall his compulsion to "caress" the leg wound, not simply bandage it, but his motivation and the trauma it signals remain opaque. "Quickly he covered the whole wound with a large cotton compress and jerked his hand away. . . The actual contact with the dead flesh had not been nearly as repulsive as he had anticipated, and he found excuse to *caress* the wound with his fingers again and again" (emphasis added, 438). The compulsive enjoyment signaled by the word "caress" is essential to Heller's imaginative conception of the traumatic experience. In an early draft of the scene, Yossarian confesses his enjoyment of touching Snowden's viscera to the chaplain and explains that he rubbed Snowden's blood all over himself to impress people.¹⁰ With this appropriation of the blood from Snowden's wound, Yossarian can communicate what he cannot fully process himself, that is, the kernel of the *Catch-22* narrative, the primal wound which is its source.

The final chapter develops the significance of Yossarian's awakening but renders more ambiguously the results of re-experiencing the trauma of Snowden's death. Yossarian rejects the deal with Colonel Korn and, following Orr's example, vows to run away to Sweden. The destination, as Heller explains in an interview with Paul Krassner (1962, 23), is a state of mind, not a geographic location or a "paradise": Sweden "was important to me as a *goal*, or an objective, a kind of Nirvana." This explanation completes the ethical and social structure of the

¹⁰ For an analysis of this draft and its linkage to Heller's Avignon short stories and *Catch-22*, see Craig (1998, 42-48). Craig argues that Heller's handling of Snowden's death "depends upon the interplay of narrative levels and the contrast of tragic and comic perspectives" (47).

novel and the awakening that Yossarian articulates without fully understanding the claim that he was born on the battlefield. He explains Sweden to Major Danby as "I'm not running *away* from my responsibilities. I am running *to* them" (451).¹¹ As an explanation for what happens in the aftermath of the trauma associated with Snowden's death, the notion of a goal or kind of Nirvana does not provide a similar clarity. There is a difference between conceptualizing Snowden's secret and controlling the horrifying memories of his death. Yossarian's compulsion to "caress" "the dead flesh" of Snowden's wound illuminates the stranger's enigmatic message, "We've got your pal." Snowden and Yossarian are inextricably linked in shared trauma, one dying and the other living in its aftermath.¹²

Heller handles the prospect of this crisis of survival obliquely, hinted at in the exchange between Major Danby and Yossarian on the novel's last page: "How do you feel, Yossarian?" "Fine. No, I'm very frightened." "That's good," said Major Danby. "It proves you're still alive. It won't be fun" (453). The fright is consciousness-raising and, as Major Danby says, a sign of life. It enables Yossarian to elude another knife thrust by Nately's girlfriend as the novel ends, Heller's darkly comic reminder about the dangers of an awakened life (453). As a continuing state of mind, fright is quite another matter. *Something Happened* takes as its subject unremitting fear, fear expressed in the many nightmares recounted in the novel, especially that of the threatening stranger. The lines, which inspired the novel, also provide its narrative DNA: "In the office in

¹¹ Not surprisingly, the Sweden ending has received a great deal of critical attention. For representative critical readings, see Howard Stark (1974), "Catch-22: The Ultimate Irony"; for more positive interpretations, James Nagel (1974) "Yossarian, the Old Man, and the Ending of *Catch-22*," and Mike Frank (1976) "Eros and Thanatos in *Catch-22*."

¹² Caruth (2013, 8) characterizes this linkage as "the inextricability of the story of one's life from the story of a death . . . that constitutes their historical witness."

which I work there are five people of whom I am afraid. Each of these people is afraid of four people" (13).

The Stranger Nightmare as Source and Destination

There is a reluctance to proceed, and it is formidable.
Now and Then (226)

In the penultimate chapter of *Something Happened*, "My boy has stopped talking to me," Heller compresses the stranger dream and the traumatic death that it prefigures much more than he did in *Catch-22*. Although the narration is truncated, the death of Slocum's son is even more wrenching than Snowden's. Responding to his son's piercing cry of "Daddy" and to his twisted limbs and spurting blood, Slocum tries to comfort him and, in a moment of chilling intimacy, asphyxiates him (558).¹³ As in *Catch-22*, although narrated retrospectively, this death scene has the feeling of an inevitable destination, but it also harkens back to a primal source, longing for an absent father that Heller and Slocum share.¹⁴ The familiar stranger nightmare contributes to this inevitability and associates the absent father with the trauma, fulfilling what Slocum calls his "well-recognized primal alarm" (167). In accounts nearly identical to the one in *Now and Then*, the dream is narrated twice in the middle of *Something Happened*. These accounts set the darkly ironic inversion that opens the chapter in which Slocum dreams—himself positioned as the stranger—that the door to his son's bedroom "is closed and I cannot get in to

¹³ In interviews, Heller addresses Slocum's culpability for his son's death variously. With C. E. Reilly and Carol Villei (1975, 20), Heller describes the son's death as an "action that has taken place. The son that he loves has gotten lost or has died, or has been killed in his own imagination." While allowing for such ambiguity about the death, Heller insists upon the intentionality behind Slocum's actions: "in my mind as an author, he does do it." See also Ruas (1985, 164) and Amis (1975, 59).

¹⁴ According to Daugherty (2011), Heller's notecards for *Something Happened* document the shaping effects of his father's death and resulting sense of trauma. The notecards confirm Heller's sense that "[s]omething happened before Joe was born. Something else happened when he was little. In both cases, he missed the crucial facts: he was living a life he was not really living" (322).

see him" (545). Slocum's words set the narrative line for a chapter of nightmarish visions and dreams from which he cannot escape. It is as if nightmare has become Slocum's only reality, albeit a nightmarish sleep that is preferable to the inevitable awakening. To awaken is again to hear the cry, "Something happened," to see "streams of blood spurting," and to "squeeze" (558).

The two occurrences of the dark stranger dream are critical to his pattern for narrative resolution in which the protagonist re-encounters a death that he has survived. They foreshadow the dream in which Slocum becomes the stranger, harbinger and incarnation of its mortal threat. The nightmare unfolds as in *Now and Then*: the threatening stranger who enters by a door, the approach to the dreamer's bed, the increasing terror, and the futility of the dreamer's attempts to cry out for help. *Something Happened* represents the dream in kaleidoscopic fashion such that the threat comes from recognizable figures, most crucially from Slocum's deceased father, as well as from dark strangers. Heller adds a knife, which resonates given the knife wound that moves Yossarian to recall Snowden's death and the knife thrust that he avoids as the novel ends. As in *Catch-22*, the awakening is the most significant element. Slocum's identity, his experience of himself, depends upon awakening. In *Something Happened*, the awakening itself becomes the site of trauma and returns him to the "*crisis of life*"—surviving the son's death that he has caused and burdened by the ache for a father that he never knew.¹⁵

In the chapter, "My daughter is unhappy," Heller embeds the first instance of the nightmare in a series of dreams within an extended parenthesis and creates a narrative rhythm that mirrors the relationship between nightmare and awakened consciousness. Outside the

¹⁵ Caruth (2013, 100) describes the significance of awakening in ways that illuminate Heller's fictional appropriation of the familiar stranger dream: "*Awakening . . . is itself the site of the trauma*, the trauma of the necessity and impossibility of responding to another's death."

parenthesis, Slocum thinks about his daughter's moodiness and the ordinary stuff of a teenager's life.¹⁶ Inside the parenthesis, the dreams erupt, seemingly breaching the parentheses containing them, rendering him as helpless as a "tiny, armless, legless baby still imprisoned motionless in a cradle or womb" (167). Slocum cannot escape the terrors of his dark stranger dream and sometimes, even, must be awakened by his wife.

When I sleep away from home with my wife, I will have a nightmare the first or second night, usually the same one: a strange man is entering illegally through the door, which I have locked, and drawing near, a burglar, rapist, kidnapper, or assassin; he seems to be Black but changes; I think he is carrying a knife; I try to scream but can make no sound. I have this same bad dream at home often, even though I carefully lock all my doors before going to sleep. I have had it dozens and dozens of times. (168-69)¹⁷

The trauma's threat is both identifiable and particularized, and generic and vague. As figured by Lester Black, Slocum's fears have roots in the office and harken back to the line that gave Heller inspiration for the novel about the omnipresent fear in the office in which he works.¹⁸ Corporate life fuels Slocum's anxiety-ridden imagination. As the figure of Black changes into the series of dark criminals, the nightmare suggests a racialized threat, one from which locked doors offer no protection. The dread-inspired dream becomes a state of mind. Slocum wonders if he will

¹⁶ Heller's daughter, Erica Heller (2011, 131), describes ways in which the novel closely mirrors life in the Heller family.

¹⁷ Mack (1993) develops a psychoanalytic theory for nightmares that can describe Heller's handling of Slocum's nightmares. Defining a nightmare as "a *traumatic response* in as much as the ego is overwhelmed with anxiety" (352), Mack argues it "can produce a further traumatic effect through the persistence during waking hours" (351). In the case of repeated nightmares, the traumatic response associated with a nightmare is "regressively linked with earlier traumatic situations, dating back to early childhood" (355).

¹⁸ Heller illuminates correspondences between his concerns and those of the novel: "In 1962 I was sitting on the deck of a house on Fire Island. I was frightened. I was worried because I had lost interest in my job. . . . Immediately, the lines presented a whole explosion of possibilities and choices—characters (working in a corporation), a tone, a mood of anxiety, or insecurity" (Plimpton 1974, 128-29).

survive if there is no one to wake him. Then, worrying himself into “tumultuous insomnia,” he finds himself buffeted by “cataracts of fantasy, fury, reminiscence, and speculation” (169-70).

Heller embeds the second occurrence of the nightmare in a section that compresses the something happened motif. It begins with Slocum dreaming of his mother and awakening feeling as if a forsaken child, which is also one of Heller’s dreams (Daugherty [2011], 227-28); includes his identification of his father as the dream’s threatening figure; and ends with his childhood fear of homosexual rape. The dark stranger dream itself is condensed into a single subordinate clause. Its critical components are all there; however, the stranger appears as one of a series of intrusive figures from his life. The figures confirm the way in which anxiety has penetrated all aspects of Slocum’s consciousness. The transformation of the stranger’s threat into one of homosexual rape intertwines three crucial elements that come to fruition in the penultimate chapter: the forsaken child, the deceased father, and death. The forsaken child motif provides a crucial prelude to the stranger nightmare as does its corporate counterpart—Slocum’s worries about what Horace White thinks about him. Conceiving himself as a forsaken child directs Slocum’s thoughts toward missing, murdered, and sexually abused children, although not yet toward his son’s accident or death. Instead, he obsesses over Horace White and dreams:

Horace White strolls into my dreams often with his nearly featureless face, hangs around awhile, and turns into a florid, fleshier Green, who fumes and glares scathingly at me as he starts to make a cutting remark and then clears out as rapidly as I would like to as soon as the menacing dark stranger enters and draws near with his knife I never see, either waking me up moaning in primordial fright or quitting the scene gracefully to

make way for someone like my wife's mother or sister, Forgione, or Mrs. Yerger. Or my daughter, boy, and/or Derek. (398)

While the menacing stranger plot forms the heart of the dream, Slocum emphasizes the transformations of its characters and, thus, the nature of the threat. The invisible knife highlights the role Slocum's imagination plays in experiencing and processing the dream. The progression from office threats, the stranger who causes his "primordial fright," and the succession of family members provide a context and a cast of mind absent in *Now and Then*. Combining the associational logic of memory and the transformational capacity of the subconscious, Slocum's thoughts have a deadly inevitability: "Carcasses. I have my wife, mother, children, sister, dead brother, and even my dead father to bother about in my dreams" (399).

"No wonder," Slocum says, "I don't know *why* my father comes into these dreams of mine in which I cannot speak or move but only stay and hear, since I hardly knew the man, except to turn into someone fearsome as a nigger or Horace White, who, in my dreams, uncovers a scarlet underside of erotic cruelty to the insipid outface I know" (401-02). As Slocum acknowledges, the father is the seminal figure to the terror of the nightmare, the catalyst for more quotidian anxieties, Slocum's corporate insecurities and racist fears. As interpreted by Slocum, White's presence in the dream reveals another kind of threat as well, an erotic cruelty, one that occasions Slocum's speculations about whether his father spanked him. As if to remedy his lack of memories of his father, Slocum thinks that, perhaps, he ought to start spanking his own sons, for doing so would supply "a stable understanding, a promise for the past and assurance for the future" (402). As archivist of fears for which he cannot account, he wonders if his childhood fear of homosexual rape causes the nightmare: "Is that why that man invades my

dreams?" (402). For Slocum, there must have been a trauma or, as he says as he opens his story: "Something must have happened to me sometime" (3).

In the inversion of the dark stranger dream, which introduces "My boy has stopped talking to me," Slocum indeed becomes "that man," the deadly threat to his silent son. In this nightmare, the door to the son's bedroom is closed, and Slocum cannot get in to see him. The dream, or rather Slocum's reaction to it, provides temporary emotional comfort, just as its corollary, the earlier stranger nightmares, expressed feelings of trauma for which he could not account. Slocum revels in the bathos afforded by dream—"Doesn't he know I probably love him more than anyone else in the world?"—and luxuriates in his role as its benign victim (545). The dream sets up the many doors that have been closed to him and his futile efforts to open them: his children's bedroom doors, which close out the familial warmth about which he fantasizes; the doors to the company offices, which keep him from the sources of power and control; and the cupboard doors of his past, which when opened would reveal mouse traps that must be emptied. The doors reveal a powerlessness as certain as the futility of Slocum's efforts to ward off the stranger nightmare by making sure doors are locked.

The dreams proliferate until sleep itself becomes the threat. Slocum has nightmares that his bed is infested with cockroaches and fish. The nightmares and Slocum's recollection of them signify his traumatized consciousness: horrifying dreams are preferable to recollection of the death at their source. As Slocum says, "Sleep has me in its grip and that is my dream" (552). In response to such thoughts, he retreats to childhood and to remembered and mythologized trauma: "Oh, my God—we go into torment long before we even know what suffering is" (555). In prose reminiscent of Beckett's, Heller voices Slocum's fears: "Fear. Loss of love, loss of the loved one, loss of love of the loved one. Separation. We don't want to go, we don't want them to go,

we can't wait for them to leave, we wish they'd return" (555). Just as in Heller's famous Catch-22 paradox, this formulation requires both a wish and its opposite: the comfort of the absent parent's return and the savored sensations of lost love and loved ones. The tension between the two impulses frames Slocum's account of his son's death.

In the death scene, Slocum is the forsaken son and the caring father, the would-be rescuer of his injured son and his killer. Before Slocum recalls his son's death, he first calls out to his father in an archetypal cry of abandonment. Heller heightens the effect of this plaintive cry with a white space before Slocum cries out again, this time to his missing son.

Oh, my father—why have you done this to me?

I want him back.

I want my little boy back too.

I don't want to lose him.

I do. (524)

This formulation repeats the pattern of fear, loss, loss of love; he has been forsaken in a situation in which he has been called upon to be the rescuer. It harkens back to the first page of Slocum's narrative and to the day on which his father died, leaving him "feeling guilty and ashamed—because I thought I was the only little boy in the whole world then who had no father" (3). In this darkly ironic linkage of origins and ends, Heller reconstructs Slocum's guilt and shame in his response to his son's accident.

Heller renders the aftermath of the son's accident with graphically compressed specificity: "My boy is lying on the ground. . . He is screaming in agony and horror, with legs and arms twisted brokenly and streams of blood spurting from holes in his face and head and

pouring down over one hand from inside his sleeve. He spies me with a start and extends an arm. He is panic-stricken. So am I" (557-58). The accident that Slocum was too late to see or prevent allows no time to inspect the wounds as Yossarian does Snowden's. The spurting blood and twisted limbs have already traumatized him. Unlike Yossarian treating the wounded airman, he assumes that his wounded son is dying. He wants to silence the screams and to comfort him, the former seemingly prompting his actions. He cannot bear the pain expressed on his son's face. Just as in *Catch-22*, Heller conjoins the victim's wound and the protagonist's wounded consciousness. The son and father's actions mirror each other, the hug, the anguished faces, the screams—the latter in Slocum's case occurring belatedly in his recollection of the death. Slocum's "I squeeze" (578) replaces "[m]an is matter," with the critical difference that Heller does not explicate the mortal message.

Once again, a white space communicates, inviting the reader to contemplate what Slocum himself misses. Slocum causes his son's death but does not know this until a doctor tells him. In this sense, he has not witnessed his son's death, and he does not want to return to what happens after he begins to squeeze. He asks the medical staff not to tell his wife, thereby underscoring the intentions signaled by his (and Heller's mordant) chapter title, "Nobody knows what I've done" (559). As he proclaims with the closing words of his story—"Everyone seems pleased with the way I've taken command"—Slocum turns to matters of living (565). There are no dreams in the last chapter, the only such one in the novel. He has embarked toward his own Sweden, his own Nirvana, albeit without Yossarian's ethical awakening. The dark stranger nightmare and the death that it heralds can be left behind, its silent terrors replaced by Slocum's satisfaction at giving a three-minute speech at the company's annual convention. In self-congratulatory fashion, he remarks that everybody is impressed with "how bravely" he has

moved into colleague Kagle's position after firing him (561). He embraces the corporate life that previously occasioned the anxiety manifested in his nightmares and luxuriates in the praise he receives for "tak[ing] charge of my responsibilities" (564). He plays golf, "(Swish)," a parenthesis repeated four more times in the chapter, the last time before his last mention of his dead son.

Having finally recalled his son's death—the spurting blood, twisted limbs, and piercing screams—Slocum can leave behind virtually the whole story that he has told. To borrow Cathy Caruth's (2013, 6) phrasing, he embodies "*an imperative to live* that still remains not fully understood"—or, as Yossarian expresses this imperative, "to live forever or die in the attempt" (29). Slocum can live no longer subject to the ravages of his stranger nightmares. His mood lightens, his humor changes but not Heller's dark comedy: Slocum even plays golf twice with Horace White "(Swish)." As Heller frames the story, Slocum embraces the possibilities for life beyond trauma, albeit in ethically compromised fashion.

In *Now and Then*, when Heller reprises the dark stranger nightmare, unravels the source of its trauma, and uses it for his pattern of closure, he affirms life in the aftermath of trauma—after his father's death, after his Avignon missions, after psychotherapy and his experience with Guillain-Barré syndrome, and after the memoir itself.

The Father's Absence

I've never grappled much with the idea of trying to find out more about him. I prefer not to. I still prefer not to. And knowing more would make no difference now, either. I know him by his absence.
Now and Then (234)

In *Catch-22* and *Something Happened*, Heller validates the significance of dreams. However, after opening "Psychiatry" with his dark stranger nightmare and absent father

interpretation, Heller calls into question the significance of his dreams and even of psychoanalysis itself, but not of the trauma that he believes his nightmare signifies. The revelation of the dark stranger's identity unravels a critical mystery and provides a narrative hook, but it does not provide a narrative destination comparable to that of the deaths of Snowden and Slocum's son. Similarly, Heller appropriates his narrative pattern for the penultimate chapter of *Now and Then*, but focuses on psychiatry, recounting his sessions with Dr. Michels in 1979 and revisiting the battery of tests that he took in 1958. The psychoanalysis itself does not yield access to any memories to excavate or "an understanding of feelings and events that might not even be there or ever have occurred, not even in fantasy" (223). Afforded little knowledge of his father and neither insight into nor revelation about him, Heller concludes the chapter with an almost sixty-year-old memory of himself sitting on a sun-dappled bench outside the cemetery in which his father is buried, the disquiet of the nightmare replaced by the recovered calm of childhood recollection. In remembering this time of a death that he neither understood nor grieved, he reembraces life in the aftermath of his father's death: "I know him by his absence" (234).

The trauma that Heller seeks to excavate is one of absence, what is not there; it is an absence that he has no desire to fill in with knowledge. Early in the memoir Heller observes, "About my father, I simply lost interest in him after he was gone. . . I never missed him" (13). "Psychiatry" updates this story without changing its plotline. To apply historian Dominic LaCapra's (2001, 82) theory of structural trauma, his father's death "(like absence) is not an event but an anxiety-producing condition."¹⁹ The anxiety is detectable in the nightmare, the 1958

¹⁹ LaCapra (2001, 82) argues that "[w]hen structural trauma is reduced to, or figured as, an event, one arguably has the genesis of myth wherein trauma is enacted in a story or narrative from which later traumas seem to derive" (82). Arguably, Heller enacted this process in conceiving and drafting *Something Happened*. Daugherty (2011) follows this line of reasoning when he speculates that Heller "had no

psychological tests, his desire to seek therapy, and, of course, his fiction. As memoirist, Heller insists upon the anxiety occasioned by the nightmare, but does want to locate its source, the father whom he knows by his absence.

Although dreams played an important role in Heller's work with Dr. Michels, they eventually contributed to his conclusion that psychotherapy has the most value for those who are not in need of it (222). "I have always been a fertile dreamer," Heller observes, but while undergoing therapy, "I was giving value to each dream as a treasure of significance" (223). The dreams ensured session material and engaged his own interpretive skills with their symbols and plots, but they also come to epitomize what Heller sees as the self-referential quality of psychotherapy: "it dawns on me now that the subject matter of the analysis had in large part become the analysis itself" (225). Just as they did in *Catch-22* (for example, Yossarian's discussion of his fish dream with Dr. Sanderson) and *Something Happened*, "sumptuous dreams" provided stimulation for Heller's comic imagination (225). Rife with "symbols of sex and death" (233), they form a symbiotic loop. The dreams take on features from the sessions with Dr. Michels (15), and, in turn, his daily experiences begin "to fit perfectly into Freudian theory," which then provides new material for his dreams (223). After the dark stranger nightmare, they afford no insight and occasion no self-reflection, but instead serve as a humorous narrative diversion before Heller turns again to the search for his absent father.

Although Heller self-consciously employs his fictional pattern for closure to narrate the traumatic primal event and its aftermath, his account renders both problematic and becomes as much about what has been forgotten or overlooked as about what is remembered. He admits

choice but to devote himself to pinpointing what happened" (322). Then, in drafting the novel, Heller fictionalized these concerns in Slocum's story. In this sense, *Something Happened* is not simply Slocum's quest to understand a primal trauma but also Heller's own.

"in another moment of memory lapse, that the core of this chapter was to be not my escapades in psychoanalysis at the time of the breakup of my marriage but the death of my father when I was a small boy and the traumatic effects, *as all assume*, it must certainly have exercised in shaping me" (Emphasis added, 226). As in the penultimate chapters of *Catch-22* and *Something Happened*, the mood darkens, and the narrative proceeds haltingly, as if Heller hopes the traumatic death can be avoided. Readers familiar with these novels could assume that Heller has another wrenching conclusion in store for them; however, the narrative continues to be about psychiatry, not about the traumatizing effects of his father's death that "all assume." The father appears only briefly, in a paragraph of memory fragments and a few details he elicits from his sister and brother. Instead, Heller focuses on his "one other personal psychological adventure with psychological investigation," the Rorschach and Thematic Apperception (TAT) tests when beginning a new job at *McCall's* (226). Each is jarring and, in retrospect, revelatory of the author of *Catch-22* and *Something Happened* and the central issues in them, but not illuminating of the traumatic effects of his father's death that he claims shaped him.

At the time of the tests, Heller was well along on *Catch-22* and had recently been surprised to discover that he did not know the cause of his father's death, nor much else about its details. While taking the Rorschach test, he confronted evidence of trauma, not that he interpreted it that way at the time. The first color card—the so called color shock card—"catapulted [him] into a state of startled confusion and silence" (227). Much like Yossarian confronting the sight of the wounded Snowden, in subsequent cards with red he saw "only blood, blood, and amputated or excised bodily organs" (228). The consistency of his responses discomfited Heller causing him to repress his reactions to the color cards and to modify his responses. In the post-test interview, Heller made a critical discovery about the traumatic

material in his novel. "I realized for the first time how extensively I was focusing on the grim details of human mortality, on disease, accidents, grotesque mutilations. I was again awash in the reds and pinks of the Rorschach cards, in blood, in the deaths of such characters as Kid Sampson and Snowden" (229). Much like his stranger nightmare, the test expresses terror of which Heller was unaware, re-immersing him in the blood so crucial to *Catch-22*. To his own mind, he was writing his first novel, not excavating trauma. With his conclusion already in mind, Heller had not yet realized "how much material of a gory nature was embodied in [the novel's] fulfillment" (229).

The TAT affords Heller another revelation about himself and his fiction, although he may not have had it until years later during his work with Dr. Michels. He recalls being asked to respond to picture of a white-haired woman in a room with a dark-haired youth. For Heller, the scene conveys the speechless sorrow of the parting of mother and son that becomes an "indelible prototype that still touches me poignantly" (230). Looking back, he realizes that the picture could be interpreted quite differently, with characters feeling joy and satisfaction. But then he adds a jarring parenthetical reflection "that the absence of a father in the picture could be the key to my response to the scene" (230). Much as the Snowden death scene ("spirit gone") or Slocum's recollection of his son's death ("I want my little boy back too"), Heller emphasizes absence, what is not there, the trauma enacted in the conclusion to his memoir. After the parenthesis, he begins a new paragraph as if continuing the same thought: "I didn't know him. He isn't there" (231).

As Heller self-consciously notes, the absent father has taken the place of the wrenching deaths of Snowden and Slocum's son. He does not, however, mention a critical difference in the workings of his pattern. Typically, he says the most tender relationships in novels are between a

father and a child, as in *Something Happened* and *God Knows*, the novel that he is working on during his therapy with Dr. Michels (230). In *Now and Then*, though, he prefaces a handful of memories with the comment: "I would not recognize him" (231). There is no tenderness in the scenes: he is not allowed in the driver's seat of his father's bakery truck; his father commands him back from an open window; and his father drives him to the hospital for a tonsillectomy. In a parenthetical comment reminiscent of *Something Happened*, Heller recalls the lonely, maddening thirst after his surgery as if his father has somehow been responsible for his pain. Even when Heller questions his sister and brother about their father, their information includes nothing about him or his death that could be described as loss or implies tenderness. In contrast to Slocum, who cries out for the loss of his father and his son, Heller recounts only his father's absence but no yearning for connection or bond.

In the chapter's brief concluding paragraph, Heller returns to "the last time I was with my father," the day of his funeral (233). He admits that he has no idea where his father is buried and no desire to find out: "knowing more would make no difference now, either. I know him by his absence" (234). This formulation also makes the trauma that Heller associates with his father's death one of absence. As figured in the nightmare and unfolded in "Psychiatry," symptoms of trauma are detectable and analyzable, although the trauma itself cannot be located with any certainty. The result is what Cathy Caruth (2013, 7) calls "the witness of survival itself." Drawing upon Freud, Caruth figures the nature of this witness with two questions: "*In what way is the experience of trauma also the experience of an imperative to live? What is the nature of life that continues beyond trauma?*" These are the questions that Heller takes up in his closing chapter, "Danny the Bull."

The account of Danny the Bull's murdering his mother supplies an event comparable to the deaths that conclude *Catch-22* and *Something Happened* and "*imperative to live*." Unable to resist the lure of narcotics and to achieve a successful life, Danny strangles his mother in the bathtub, explaining that his mother, unlike his father, gave him the money that enabled the addiction. Heller believes that Danny's story epitomizes the destructive effects of drugs in the absence of strength of character. By contrast, Heller and his friends make the life-affirming decision to leave Coney Island: "migration away was an optimistic drive toward betterment in response to the multitude of captivating opportunities that flowered in the wake of our victory in the war" (250). Heller admits the migration contributes to the deterioration of Coney Island and relates thumbnail sketches of his friends and him thriving after leaving Coney Island. Wrapping up his own story as if echoing Slocum, he writes, "I have much to be pleased with, including myself, and I am. I wanted to succeed, and I have" (259). For Heller, this summary judgment answers both of Caruth's questions about the effects and aftermath of trauma. However, there is a critical difference in the narrative orientation of this aftermath. *Now and Then* proclaims a self-satisfied past and present, while the resolutions to his novels project their protagonists into an anxious and uncertain future.

The familiar stranger nightmare is crucially important to Joseph Heller, the artist and the man. In *Catch-22*, it provided the pathway for Yossarian to plumb his wounded consciousness and to recall the mortal wound that occasioned it. Heller had begun exploring the trauma associated with Avignon in realistic short stories that he wrote in the Forties, "The Miracle of Danrossane" and "Crippled Phoenix," but he needed a narrative destination—Snowden's death—and a means to explore it. The dream provided Heller the vehicle to make its terror a creative resource. Awakening into recollection and discovery, Yossarian identifies the pal with

whom he is barely familiar and remembers immersing his hands in the dying airman's blood. As novelist, Heller returns to Avignon as well, recalling his uncertainty and fright as he attended the wounded gunner and imaginatively exploring his own post-traumatic stress. In *Something Happened*, the nightmare provided the vehicle to probe feelings of a primal trauma shared by Heller and his protagonist. Without anything to attach the trauma to, Slocum links it to his father's death and the feelings of guilt and shame that it occasioned. The nightmare and its paternal figure of terror serve to connect its story of origins with the trauma of his son's accident and death, the "Something [that] Happened!" (557). The futile search for the absent father partakes of Heller's own. He shares his protagonist's belief that something must have happened to him: "Oh, my father—why have you done this to me?" (557).

In these novels, Heller has already used the nightmare to do much of the work it accomplishes in his memoir, to signal a past trauma that must be confronted in the narrative present and projected toward an anxious future. Without knowledge of the trauma that "all assume" shaped him, Heller can invoke his narrative pattern but not limn the connection between the trauma and himself, the blood-embodied tie so crucial to Yossarian's and Slocum's identity. Apart from *Now and Then*, Heller never uses the familiar stranger nightmare again nor foregrounds trauma or its recollection. "Psychiatry" helps explain why. With Dr. Michels's help, Heller 'meets' his father in the terrifying stranger of the nightmare. He discovers what he has already narrated in his first two novels: the nightmare expresses existential terror that is rooted in trauma and the trauma is one of relationship as well as event. In *Catch-22* and *Something Happened*, the protagonist's recollection of the traumatic death enables the exploration of both dimensions. Heller's memoir can do neither. The joke—"because I am again prey to an unconscious and deliberate memory lapse"—conveys the substance of the chapter: what cannot

be remembered, invented, or explained (226). As a memoirist seeking closure of his story and the famed author of *Catch-22* at career's end, he falls back upon the familiar patterns of his masterplot even though he cannot recollect the death or the trauma it causes. Instead, Heller retraces his "adventure[s] with psychological investigation" and constructs a final narrative in which the experience of trauma becomes the imperative to live (226).²⁰

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