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Nuclear Dreams

an Oral History of the Hanford Site

Music by Reginald Unterseher Libretto by Nancy Welliver

September 27, 28 & 29, 2019
B Reactor National Historic Landmark



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NUCLEAR DREAMS

AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE HANFORD NUCLEAR SITE

Libretto by Nancy Welliver - Music by Reginald Unterseher

*Today's performance is being recorded. Please silence cell phones and watches.
Please hold applause until the end of the program.
There will be no intermission.*

SETTING

Nuclear Dreams takes place at the Hanford Nuclear Site from 1895 until 2017. The oral histories included in the oratorio are mainly based on the dreams of Hanford Workers and people who lived on the land that became the Hanford Site. Some "true stories" about Hanford and nuclear weapons, as well as quotes from literature and psychology about dreams and dreaming, are also included.

PROCESSIONAL

The Tempest (1610)

PROLOGUE

A Plutonium

The Junk of the Soul (1979)

Jung on Dreams (1944)

J. Robert Oppenheimer's Gita (1945)

ACT 1 – Holy Land

Scene 1 – The Road to Hanford

Stranger than a Dream (2007)

Encounter at Hanford (2006)

Scene 2 – The Landscape

No One Knows (2007)

I Grew up in White Bluffs (2008)

Scene 3 – Earthquakes

Shattered (2006)

Shaman (1891)

ACT 3 – The Sadness of Nature

Scene 1 – Flowers

Radioactive Roses (2006)

Scene 2 – Animals

Goiter (2008)

Jackrabbit on a Lead Blanket (2008)

Atomic Soldiers (1957)

ACT 2 – Working Life

Scene 1 – Amazement, Anxiety, Stress

I Didn't Know They Work Here (2010)

Little Boy's Headache (2007)

I Still Have Those Dreams (2008)

Feeling Exposed (2001)

Protecting You (1995-2001)

Scene 2 – Soul and Spirit

Healing the Soul (1979)

Illusions and Reality (2008)

When Pigs Fly (2013)

Scene 3 – War

Ending the War (August 14, 1945)

ACT 4 – Ghost Food

Scene 1 – Tank Waste

Putting the Genie Back in the Bottle (2008)

Spoonful of Tank Waste (1996)

Scene 2 – Plutonium

The Spring of Paradise (2005)

J. Robert Oppenheimer's Gita (1945) (Reprise)

EPILOGUE – Finding the Way Home

Ashes (2017)

RECESSIONAL

The Tempest (1610)

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REGINALD UNTERSEHER, COMPOSER



Reginald Unterseher is Music Director and Composer-in-Residence at Shalom United Church of Christ, Richland, Washington. His works are published by Oxford University Press, Walton Music, and through Northwest Choral Publishers at NWChoral.com. He was the Washington State Music Teacher's Association's "Composer of the Year" for 2013.

Mr. Unterseher's compositions are regularly performed throughout the world and have been featured at regional and national ACDA and MENC conventions in the US as well as at Carnegie Hall in New York City.

His early career was as a performer, singing opera and musicals with companies including Opera Theater of St. Louis, Texas Opera Theater, Lyric Opera of Kansas City, and Washington East Opera. He has been a voice teacher since the earliest part of his career, and his students have ranged from professional performers, music teachers, scientists and engineers and people in many other professions to a Tony award winning actor.

He has recently served as the Repertoire & Resources Chair for Composition for the Washington State American Choral Director's Association, has served as Repertoire & Standards Chair for Men's Choirs for the Northwest Division of ACDA, and appears frequently as a choral and vocal adjudicator and clinician around the northwest. Mr. Unterseher is a past Artistic Director of Consort Columbia (now Mid-Columbia Mastersingers), founder and past Chorus Master of Washington East Opera, and an active member of Male Ensemble Northwest as well as a founding member of Chor Anno. He is currently the Associate Conductor of the Mid-Columbia Mastersingers.

He was born in Walla Walla, Washington in 1956.

NANCY WELLIVER, LIBRETTIST

Nancy Welliver is a scientist, musician, and psychologist. For nearly 30 years she has worked as an environmental scientist at the Hanford Site, 580 square miles of desert in southeast Washington State. Hanford manufactured most of the plutonium in the US arsenal, including material for the Trinity and Nagasaki weapons. It is now the focus of a massive environmental cleanup. She is also a singer and recorder player who occasionally performs with the Hawaii Symphony and Early Music Hawaii. She obtained a master's degree in psychology with emphasis on dream and mythological studies because she is fascinated with the symbolism and imagery of the Hanford Site with its never-seen-anywhere-else contaminated buildings and waste sites interposed with the amazing technology that produced atomic weapons. Working on this performance with the composer, Reg Unterseher, and the performing choral group, Mid-Columbia Mastersingers, has been an honor for her as well as deeply moving. It is the intersection of her three loves: science, music, and dream psychology.



JUSTIN RAFFA, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR



Justin Raffa serves as a megaphone for the arts in eastern Washington. He is a conductor, singer, educator, and above all, a passionate arts advocate.

He is the Artistic Director of the Mid-Columbia Mastersingers in Tri-Cities, WA, and also Chorusmaster for the Yakima Symphony Orchestra Chorus. He has served as chorusmaster or music director with many regional organizations, including Oregon East Symphony, Mid-Columbia Musical Theatre, Columbia Basin College, Washington-Idaho Symphony.

As a professional singer, he performs with the Oregon Bach Festival, True Concord Voices and Orchestra, Male Ensemble Northwest and Chor Anno. He has served as an adjudicator for festivals and competitions throughout the Northwest, and regularly visits local music classes and choirs as a visiting artist.

Throughout his career, Justin has received numerous awards and recognition for his efforts to give the arts a place of prominence in his community. He currently serves as an arts mouthpiece on the boards of Visit Tri-Cities, the Columbia Basin Badger Club, Leadership Tri-Cities, and as a frequent emcee for charitable events across the community.

Justin has been on the Washington State Arts Commission since 2016, and also serves on the Northwest ACDA board as Repertoire & Resources Chair for Community Choirs.

Originally from South Jersey, Justin is a proud graduate of Westminster Choir College. He started his choral career and arts advocacy work in the remote border town of Bisbee, AZ. He then received his master of music degree in choral conducting from the University of Arizona and headed off to Tri-Cities, WA, where he now lives with his partner, Molly, and their long-haired dachshund Coda.

CHARLES ROBERT STEPHENS, BARITONE



Charles has enjoyed a career spanning a wide variety of roles and styles in opera and concert music. In his 20 years in New York City he sang leading roles with the New York City Opera and was hailed by the New York Times as a “baritone of smooth distinction.” He also appeared frequently in Carnegie Hall with the Opera Orchestra of New York and was active in regional opera throughout the US. On the international stage, he sang opera roles in Montevideo Uruguay, Taiwan, Santo Domingo and Mexico City.

Now based in Seattle, Charles has sung with the Seattle Symphony on numerous occasions, Northwest Sinfonietta, Tacoma and Spokane Symphony, Spokane Opera, Portland Chamber Orchestra, Oregon Symphony and many other orchestras and opera companies in the Pacific Northwest. He joined the roster of the Seattle Opera in 2010 for the premiere of *Amelia* by Daron Hagan.

Among the many collaborations with early music expert Stephen Stubbs is the role of blind Tiresias in the Boston Early Music Festival’s lavish production of Steffani’s *Niobe, Queen of Thebes*. He premiered the role of Rudyard Kipling in John Muehleisen’s world premiere cantata entitled *But Who Shall Return to Us Our Children? A Kipling Passion*, now available on CD. He can also be heard on the prize-winning CD, *Heaven To Earth*.

The 2018-19 season has included performances of *Messiah*, Haydn’s *Creation*, Beethoven’s *Symphony # 9*, Bach *Christmas Oratorio*, *Scarpia in Tosca*, *Melchior in Amahl and the Night Visitors* and the *Father in Hansel and Gretel*.

Upcoming performances include a world premier of *Nuclear Dreams* by Reginald Unterseher, *Messiah*, *Mozart Requiem* and *Seattle Symphony’s Family Program*

Besides being an active recital and concert singer, he is also a highly sought-after voice teacher. He is on the voice faculty at Pacific Lutheran University and serves as soloist at St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA.

SARAH MATTOX, MEZZO SOPRANO

Sarah Mattox (mezzo-soprano) has appeared in principal roles with Seattle Opera, Cincinnati Opera, Palm Beach Opera, Chicago Opera Theatre, Lyric Opera Cleveland, Eugene Opera, Tacoma Opera and many others. Favorite roles include *Dorabella* in *Così fan Tutte*, the *Witch* in *Hansel and Gretel*, *Ottavia* in *L’Incoronazione di Poppea*, and the title role in *Carmen*. She received special acclaim for her debut as *Feodor* in Seattle Opera’s *Boris Godunov*. The *Seattle Times* said “... it was newcomer Sarah Elouise Mattox, in the ‘pants role’ of Boris’ son Feodor, who raised eyebrows all over the Opera House with her believable, lifelike acting and her well-schooled voice.” In Cleveland, the *Beacon Journal* called her “... a rich-toned mezzo-soprano who came to life as *Dorabella*.” Also at home on the concert stage, Ms. Mattox has made several appearances at Benaroya Hall with the Seattle Symphony. She has also been a soloist with the Northwest Sinfonietta, Cascade Festival of Music, Seattle Baroque Orchestra, Eugene Concert Choir, Portland Baroque Orchestra, Helena Symphony, Seattle Choral Company and many others. Her chamber music group, *TangleTown Trio*, has been selected to perform multiple times in the *Oyster Bay Distinguished Artists Concert Series* in New York. April 2010 marked her fourth appearance as a concert soloist at Carnegie Hall.



Also a composer, Mattox was named a 2014 John Duffy Composers Institute Fellow for her chamber opera *Heart Mountain*, and won the 2013 Boston Metro Opera International Composers’ Competition OPERA PUPPETS Mainstage Award for her piece, “*Rumpelstiltskin and the Falcon King*.” Called “entertaining, exuberant,” and “just incredible,” her compositions have been praised for their “natural sense of phrasing and flow,” and “the just plain beauty of the music.” *Vespertine Opera Theater* presented a full workshop production of *Heart Mountain* in July of 2015 under the baton of GRAMMY Award winning conductor Stephen Stubbs. For more information and a complete schedule, please visit www.sarahmattox.com

PROGRAM NOTES FROM THE COMPOSER

Music is form of storytelling, taking sound and time and weaving them into an emotional experience. Music feels like a waking dream to me.

We start with Shakespeare, entering into our dream temple in a **Processional**. Just the chorus to start, taking a small melody and repeating it, letting it grow, moving into the shared story state.

Then, we dive into the **Prologue**, with repeating notes and a descending melodic fragment which appears in different forms throughout the piece. It is the descent into the dream world and the physical ground.

The prologue ends with Oppenheimer's quote of the Gita, with the bass drum and thunder sheet. Nuclear explosions register as seismic events, and that mixed imagery returns throughout the piece.

In **Stranger than a Dream**, the flute is attached to images of nature, an idea that returns throughout the work.

Encounter at Hanford, with its rock/pop sensibility, spinning melodic figures, and upbeat (on the surface) feel, is tempered with the surreal choir chords expressing the ambiguity of the words "I know not out of sorrow or of wonder," a state that permeates the accomplishments at Hanford. Those choir chords recall Oppenheimer's Gita.

No One Knows is two part counterpoint. The marimba figure is taken by the singer, slowly, and with some variation. The marimba figures spin around the vocal line, like the desert winds.

I Grew Up in White Bluffs is an extended recitative, without strict tempo. Walt Grisham, the storyteller, was a friend of mine. When I hear the last words of the piece, where he laments the loss of his history, I always wish that I could tell him that yes, his story is remembered, and those places are now being marked and honored.

Shattered explores the mixed images of earthquakes and bomb tests, of Hanford and the Holy Land, of world wars and Armageddon.

In **Shaman**, the low drum continues, a reference to both the past and future. Smohalla's words reflect the conflict that native people faced in the late 1800's—how to exist in a world changed by invaders. The music references sounds and instruments that remind us of Wanapum traditions, but are not quotations. Descriptions of Smohalla's meetings include ringing ship captain's hand bells, dancing, and drumming. Smohalla was a shaman, warrior, and influential leader.

I Didn't Know They Work Here impossibly combines, as dreams do, fragments of a Palestrina Mass, a Thomas Morley madrigal, and Looney Tunes cartoons.

Little Boy's Headache derives its pounding nature from the elevated heart rate of a child with a fever.

I Still Have Those Dreams Sometimes/Feeling Exposed expresses anxiety with shifting rhythmic structures, and that kind of nightmare where just when you need to run, you are suddenly in slow motion.

Protecting You/Ghostly Dream Fragments is a group of workers gathered at a bar after a grueling week. As the beers count up, the conversation gets looser, and people begin to spill details they had not intended to, propelled by the jazz trio in the corner playing as if they were listening to Kerouac or Ginsberg.

In **Healing the Soul/Illusions and Reality**, higher, floating, ethereal voices contrast with lower voices, all lined up in block chords with military punctuation, clearly scornful of the dreamers.

In **When Pigs Fly**, the Dreamer sings out of time and key, hoping not to be discovered, while the Tourists and Guide happily march along in lock step, pointing out the amazing sights, some of which are real and some are not.

Ending the War is taken from Col. Mathias' diary, and expresses the feelings of relief that workers felt upon being told that their work had ended WWII. The music recalls WWII newsreel soundtracks.

Radioactive Roses is a study in irony and denial, with soothing, beautiful sonorities underneath disturbing words.

Goiter/Jackrabbit on a Lead Blanket features underlying instrumental and choral sounds that feel random, spooky, and features sounds effects from thunder sheet.

Atomic Soldiers revisits the opening figure of the Prologue, this time as a chaconne. The soldiers' lines, rather than being given to individuals, are taken by sections of the chorus, repeated, and layered.

Putting the Genie Back in the Bottle transforms the "Mr. Clean" jingle into a menacing ostinato in 5/8.

Spoonful of Tank Waste features violin, viola, and cello. The singer's melody is slow, contemplative, as if looking up with longing.

The Spring of Paradise states a line all together, then repeats it in counterpoint. It builds into **Oppenheimer's Gita (Reprise)**, which returns with a different mood, full of loss and grief.

Ashes is a lullaby, a reflection of our need to understand and come to terms with our history.

Finally, the **Recessional** returns us to the world, with much to contemplate. The last sounds we hear, on the piccolo, are an instrumental version of the call of the Western Meadowlark.

PROGRAM NOTES FROM THE LIBRETTIST

The libretto for *Nuclear Dreams* was conceived in a series of graduate level classes on dreams that the librettist, Nancy Welliver, attended from 2006-2008. At that time, she was working on a master's degree in psychology, and also working at the Hanford Site as an environmental engineer. Her Hanford project at the time was to research and document the contents of 650 acres of radioactive landfills containing 40 miles of trenches and 450,000 cubic meters of buried waste. The landfills' contents were buried between 1944 and 2005. As part of the research, she chatted with many former workers and managers who worked at the landfills decades ago. As she interviewed them, she heard many personal anecdotes, including dreams, from the workers she talked to. Curious, she began to ask for Hanford-related dreams and stories from other people associated with Hanford until she had a collection of dozens of them. Her graduate thesis then developed into a study of dreams and stories of people who lived on the Hanford Site before 1943, and people who worked on the site during the production and cleanup years (1944 to present). The dreams and stories collected for her thesis form the basis of the text of the libretto for *Nuclear Dreams*.

Some of the most prominent features of Hanford are the large sums of money spent on production and cleanup, the presence of plutonium, the secrecy for security reasons, and the vast amount of waste buried underground. Given these themes, the text for *Nuclear Dreams* was particularly influenced by the work of the founder of archetypal psychology, Dr. James Hillman, who was one of Ms. Welliver's mentors in graduate school. Dr. Hillman's book, *The Dream and The Underworld*, describes the realm of the ancient Greek and Roman gods Hades and Pluto, their underground temples and kingdoms, and their relationship to death and night time dreams. Pluto/Hades is the god of riches, of garbage, of death, of secrets, and of everything that lies hidden around and beneath us. Riches, garbage, death, secrets, and buried objects are a perfect snapshot of Hanford.

A few remarks about individual pieces in the oratorio:

A Plutonium: Pluto's temple in ancient times was referred to as a Plutonium, and is still referred to this way in the present day. It is a place where poisonous fumes erupt into the sanctuary, but the intrepid still seek the oracle because of the healing dreams to be had in the temple.

No One Knows/I Grew Up in White Bluffs/Shattered/Shaman:

Although these vignettes are from different dreamers, they contain a single theme of recognition of the role the native people played in the early history of the area. For example, the theme in *Shattered* is that of not knowing whether the dreamer is viewing the Holy Land or Hanford, an echo of the teaching of the Oglala Sioux shaman Black Elk: "The Holy Land is everywhere."

Protecting You: Coincidentally, several of the dreams related to Ms. Welliver contained an offhand remark about reality. "This is reality." "I hope nobody knows this is reality." These remarks are inserted into the text of this vignette as the dreaming soul's commentary on working conditions at Hanford. The dialog contained in the piece is based on true stories told by Hanford workers.

Illusions and Reality: Like *Protecting You*, this is a condensation of stories and feelings about events that happened in waking life, with a side commentary showing an entirely different point of view.

Jackrabbit on a Lead Blanket: This is a story from waking life, an incident that happened when the "dreamer" was taking radiation measurements at Hanford's tank farms. Its dream-like character begged for it to be included, an echo of the sentiment in *Stranger than a Dream*.

Putting the Genie Back in the Bottle and Spoonful of Tank Waste are depictions of eating nuclear waste. Ms. Welliver offers the interpretation that these dreams may refer to the workers' sense that they are making the waste disappear during the cleanup effort at Hanford, and shows in metaphor that their work reverberates in their bodies.

Ashes: A quote by Dr. Hillman summarizes this dream beautifully. "Ash speaks to what remains, the barest semblance of what once was. Ash is the ultimate reduction, the bare soul, the last truth, all else dissolved." The soul in grief feels reduced, brought to the place where all other thoughts or matters dissipate into ash. (Quoted by Francis Weller in *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*.)

Ms. Welliver's purpose in writing this libretto is born of the hope that by sharing the community's dreams in this historic setting, the B-Reactor, with the beautiful musical setting provided by the composer Reginald Unterseher, the work will have a healing effect on the workers at Hanford and on the community.

If you look closely at the photograph, which is the entrance cave to a Plutonium in Hierapolis in modern Turkey, you will see that the entrance sign is marked "Plutonium." Enter all those who seek healing.





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NUCLEAR DREAMS - LIBRETTO BY NANCY WELLIVER

PROCESSIONAL

The Tempest (1610)

We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.¹

¹Shakespeare, Wm., *The Tempest, Act 4, Sc. 1.*

PROLOGUE

A Plutonium

This is a hymn to Pluto,
the ancient god of riches.
Of junk. Of death.
Of everything that is buried
under the ground.
His sanctuary in ancient times
was called a Plutonium.
Those who entered its realm
and breathed its poisonous smoke
were seeking the Dream Oracle of Healing.

The Junk of the Soul (1979)

We dream of ghosts,
of heroes and science,

Of sadness and wonder;
dreams, the junk of the soul.

Images that waltz in a grey mist hanging
a few yards above the desert floor.

We observe our own catastrophes
and triumphs
with a dark wisdom
that expects nothing²

except the
healing that dark wisdom brings.

²Cf. Hillman, James, *The Dream and the Underworld*,
New York: Harper & Row, 1979.

Jung on Dreams (1944)

The dread and resistance which every human
being experiences

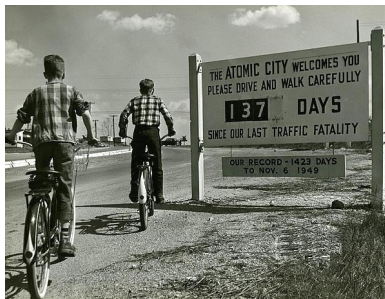
when it comes to delving too deeply into himself
is, at bottom,

the fear of the journey to the underworld of
Pluto.³

³Cf. Jung, C. G. *Psychology and Alchemy (Collected Works*
Vol. 12, Par. 439). Trans. by R. F. C. Hull. London: Routledge,
1944.

J. Robert Oppenheimer's Gita (1945)

I am become Death, the Destroyer of Worlds.



ACT 1 – Holy Land

Scene 1 – The Road to Hanford

Stranger than a Dream (2007)

The Hanford Site is a place where truth
is stranger than a dream.
The landscape is a still shot taken from
old black-and-white battlefield footage.
A friend and I drive there
so I can show him where I work.
It is in the cold months,
the land is bleached of color.
He is stunned by how spooky the place is.
We drive past the old towns
of White Bluffs and Hanford,
with that decrepit bank building
and the old high school.
It seems as if a bomb went off,
blowing all signs of life away.
The eagles sit in the dead trees
on the deserted streets.
The eagles – indifferent to human beings,
waiting us out.
But we drive away
and come back another day
The wild flowers are in bloom,
gleaming and beautiful in the spring.
The brief wildflower blooms,
charming and warm.

Encounter at Hanford (2006)

*(Apologies to Czeslaw Milosz)*⁴

We were riding with the others
Across dusty roads
on old bicycles in the sun.
A flash of red metal, the pedals gave way,

The bike wobbled and fell across the road.
I went sideways, you came with me.
The music started.

The wild girl, the thin man
the small boy,
all got off their bikes and danced
There in the dunes.

O my love, we sculpted a guitar from the sweet
sugar sand
In the Hanford desert.
It played a haunting tune, then swelled
and burst in the sun.
The small boy cried, I know not out of sorrow,
or from wonder.

⁴The dreamer presented the narrative in the form of poetry
based on the poem *Encounter* by Czeslaw Milosz. Cf. "Cze-
slaw Milosz - Poetry: Encounter". Nobelprize.org. Nobel
Media AB 2014. Web. 26 Sep 2017. http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1980/milosz-po-ems-3-e.html

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Scene 2 – The Landscape

No One Knows (2007)

When I imagine the Site,
I think of that sacred rock formation,
Gable Mountain, that overlooks the river.
It strikes me
as the biggest irony of American history
that the most ingenious and violent
technological capacities the world
has ever seen
were founded on the sacred land
of displaced natives.
The symbols of that space
are rich with meaning for the whole world,
but no one knows that it exists.



I Grew up in White Bluffs (2008)

I grew up in White Bluffs, a ghost town that now sits between two mothballed nuclear reactors. My father's peach trees had just started to bear fruit when the government order arrived, telling us we had to leave.

Every year the shepherds brought their goats and sheep through White Bluffs. It is my favorite memory of the place. The shepherd had a lead sheep that took the rest of the flock, a few animals at a time, across the river on the little ferry in White Bluffs. It took all day. The shepherd gave me and my friends a nickel apiece and a cup of coffee to help watch the herd while he took them over the river. He made the coffee in a dirty old tin can, it was the nastiest stuff you ever drank.

The Wanapum camped about a mile up the road from Dad's orchard. The people covered the wigwams with reed mats and the structures never blew apart even in the worst windstorms.

My father never got what the land was worth. The orchards are gone now; most are torn out while some are a ghost-forest of hip-high tree stumps.

The Wanapum didn't recover, their culture disintegrated; my old childhood friend is Wanapum and I hate seeing what has happened to him. My father disintegrated too. He was way into his sixties when the farm was taken away, too old to start over. He retired to a tiny little house in Richland. The government told my father they would preserve the memory of White Bluffs, preserve the graves, the buildings. It teed me off when the government burned down all the buildings in town. They gave me a security badge so I could go up there and visit any time I want but you know what? That tees me off too. Seems to me that I should be giving them permission to go there, not the other way around. I have seniority. I think the government is just waiting for all of us to die so they can forget all the promises.

Now there is nothing left. Nothing except the bank, and now it's crumbling. I am angry and sad. There's not even a marker.

Scene 3 – Earthquakes

Shattered (2006)

We are in the Holy Land
A terrible earthquake
shatters our lives.
My family, all of us
drive away and the car
floats off in the air.
I look down below and
I become confused. Is it the Holy Land?
Or is it Hanford?



Shaman (1891)

My name is Smohalla.
I am a Wanapum shaman.
My name means "dreamer."
I am the link between the tangible world and the spirit world.
Earthquakes are a sign
That the spirits are angry.
The only way to appease them
Is to obey the law of the ancestors.
We live on the fish and game
And wild plants
That are provided by Nature.
We do not work
As white men work.
Men who work like that
cannot dream
And wisdom comes to us in dreams.⁵



⁵Cf. Eli L. Huggins, "Smohalla, the Prophet of Priest Rapids," *Overland Monthly* Vol. 5 (February 1891) as described in Tate, Cassandra, "Smohalla (1815?-1895)" *HistoryLink.org* Essay 9481 Posted 7/11/2010. Web. 1 Oct 2017 <http://www.historylink.org/File/9481>

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ACT 2 – Working Life

Scene 1 – Amazement, Anxiety, Stress

I Didn't Know They Work Here (2010)

I am in
the half-built pretreatment facility,
an enormous building
up at Hanford
that is to turn the radioactive waste to glass
It has become an ancient Cathedral with
A Renaissance scene in full flower inside –
A sacred choir,
bawdy minstrels,
and damsels dressed in green velvet,
riding the deer.
Hundreds of white pigeons fly in droves,
tossing back and forth like storm clouds.
It is beautiful until
I notice
George Clooney and Bugs Bunny
shooting each other with toy pistols they found
as prizes in specially marked boxes of Trix.⁶
“Huh!” I say to myself,
“I didn't know they work here.”

⁶Trix cereal is a registered trademark of General Mills.



Little Boy's Headache (2007)

I come home from my job
with a terrible headache and fever.
I go to my old bedroom
in my parent's house in Richland
to rest.
I dream I am ten years old again.
I can feel an atomic bomb, black, in the
shape of the Little Boy bomb. I can feel it,
it is literally inside my head
about to explode.

I Still Have Those Dreams (2008)

When I worked at Hanford, years ago,
I was often in contaminated buildings
Dressed in whites.
I was anxious.
I dreamed I had gotten contamination
Inside me.
Especially my lungs and I'd try and try
to cough but I couldn't,
the contamination stayed inside me
and I was so frightened.
Or I would dream that I had contamination
On my feet, didn't know it
And I'd track it all over my home.
Dreams like that, they were tough
I still have them sometimes.



Feeling Exposed (2001)

I go inside the K-East Reactor and
into the locker room to change into
anti-contamination clothing.
There are no instructions for me,
nor does the package of clothing I was given
seem complete.
I walk out of the locker room to ask
for the items I am missing
but it makes me
very
slow
and I am afraid
of not
being
ready
on time.
All I have been given to wear is a curious clear
plastic hood.
It covers me from head to toe and
protects me from contamination but
gives me no shield from my nakedness.
I feel so exposed.



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Protecting You (1995-2001)

MAN: I worked in a reactor for fifteen years. You'd go in, you'd strip down to your own tee shirt and gym shorts. No underwear. Suit up over the shorts and tee. Slip booties over your shoes and gloves on your hands. Tape the pant cuffs to the booties, the gloves to your sleeves. It took a while. The hard part came when you left. You're standing in front of everybody and God, hopping on one foot, ripping the tape from your ankles and trying not to touch anything else. Sometimes, when they run the rad counters on your way out, the counter went off. The techs made you pull off your shorts and tee in front of everybody and God. Like I said: no underwear. Embarrassing.

(This...is...reality.)

WOMAN: I hated being the only woman in the rad zone exit group. Especially when the guys ran the radiation monitors way up my legs. Really? Was that necessary? And my boobs didn't fit into the "whole body" detectors. They just shoved me in – ouch.

(I ... have... no... one ...in ...reality...)

WOMAN: And another thing, when I was a rad tech I was in for a full shift not an hour or two like you. On my feet all day. I hated the "don't ask don't tell" policy on pregnancy. There I was, 8 months along, scanning people out of rad zones. Getting a lot of lip from guys like you. "Don't ask don't tell" my ass. It's not like you can hide it. Even in a jumpsuit that's sized for a guy.

(I hope nobody knows this is reality...)

MAN: Or the rad con techs disappear when you need to pee. You're stranded in a rad zone with no way out for an hour. Or more. Where do they go? Are they messing with us?



Scene 2 – Soul and Spirit

Healing the Soul (1979)

Dreams...are...the...junk...of...the...soul...
and...heal...the...soul...

Illusions and Reality (2008)

No.
We are scientists.
Dreams are illusions. We don't dream.
Hanford is strange enough without dreams.
Dreams are only fragments
of the sleeping mind. We don't dwell there.

(Dreams...are...the...junk...of...the...soul...
and...heal...the...soul...)

Look around you.
Under your feet
are buried rail cars of dead pigs and dogs,
alligators and fish,
a fleet of 1951 International Harvester
Pickup Trucks that were too radioactive
to stay in the above world,
chunks of strangely shaped antique equipment
that nobody now alive
can explain.

(Dreams...are...the...junk...of...the...soul...
and...heal...the...soul...)

Plumes of contaminated water.
Million-gallon tanks full of radioactive poison.
We are cleaning it up,
we don't have time for nonsense
like dreams.



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When Pigs Fly (2013)

DREAMER: A bouncy, friendly man
Gives a Hanford tour.
He holds up a worker safety sign
The kind you see at Hanford.

TOUR GUIDE: It has been eighteen thousand
six hundred and eighty one days since
the last criticality accident!

DREAMER SHAKES HEAD.

TOUR GUESTS (TO DREAMER): We are impressed! Why do you shake your
head cynically? Oh, look at the underground passage ahead. Where does it lead?

DREAMER (ASIDE): The tour guide will probably make the passage cave in to get
rid of me. No one will know or care.

TOUR GUESTS: We are in the underground passage! Look what's inside, there's a
parade! The parade of history!

TOUR GUIDE: See the float? And Nixon's helicopter! There's the car Truman
waved from when he was at Hanford.

TOUR GUESTS: And there's the Kennedy assassination limousine, why is it decked
with pink flowers? Are they blood?

DREAMER: What am I doing in all this mess?

TOUR GUIDE: I want to read everyone a story,
A story about a flying pig.



Scene 3 – War

Ending the War (August 14, 1945)⁷

This afternoon
at 4:00 pm
President Truman announced by radio
that the Japanese
have surrendered.
The statement quickly spread
over the job
and resulted in rejoicing among
all of us here who have been
sweating it out
at this project
for these long months and years.
Everyone at the
Hanford Engineer Works
feels that he or she has
really done his part in
ending this war.



⁷From Col. Matthias' diary entry of Aug. 14, 1945. Diary downloaded from the US Department of Energy's Declassified Document Retrieval System in 2008. The document is no longer available online.

Nuclear Dreams - Libretto by Nancy Welliver

ACT 3 – The Sadness of Nature

Scene 1 – Flowers

Radioactive Roses (2006)

(NARRATOR) There is a sadness in the soul.

(DREAMER) I walk to my Mother's house
She has planted a rose garden.

But the roots
Of these roses
are far away
in the radioactive burial gardens
at Hanford.

I wonder if the roses are radioactive.

I get out a radiation counter and
wave it around.

Then I think, why bother?

They are soul-roses.

Anything that beautiful

can be radioactive if it likes.

(NARRATOR) There is a radiance in the soul.



Scene 2 – Animals

Goiter (2008)

I am walking around the burial grounds at
Hanford in the fog.

All the dead experiment animals in the
ground below me, I can feel their spirits.

Out of the mist, one of them appears before
me, living. I don't recognize this creature.

It is bizarre, like nothing

I have seen before.

It seems to be very sick. It wants my
attention.

I keep wondering what is wrong with it.

Then I see that it has a
huge growth on its neck,
hanging almost to the ground.

I reach out to touch it

and it cries as it disappears into the mist.

Jackrabbit on a Lead Blanket (2008)

It is twilight,
that in-between time.

I am by myself
in the middle of the desert,
in a white jumpsuit.

Taking radiation measurements,
The desert is lit with bright floodlights
that bounce off the fences and trucks and
hurt my eyes.

An orange windsock flaps and snaps; I stay
upwind to keep the radioactive sand away
from me.

Lead blankets cover the ground
to keep the radiation dose down.

I have a creepy feeling that I can't shake
Is it because I am there alone
in a strange situation?

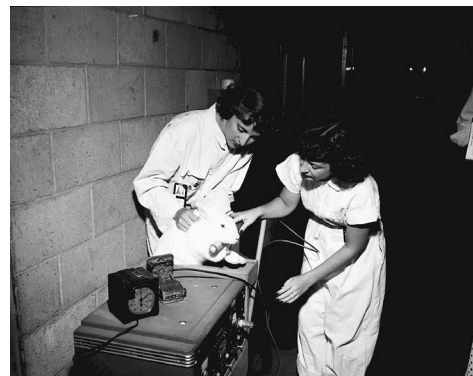
Suddenly,
something bumps hard against my leg
and I hear the scrape of gravel as it
scampers away.

I nearly jump out of my skin with fright.
What happened?

A small brown jackrabbit is sitting
at a little distance,
on one of the lead blankets.

He looks at me a long minute.

I swear he smiles at me,
before he bounds away
into the blackness of the desert.



Nuclear Dreams - Libretto by Nancy Welliver

Atomic Soldiers⁸ (1957)

Soldier 1: On the morning of July 5, 1957 about four in the morning⁹ they put us in a trench. It was a mile from ground zero or less. I was in a platoon with 40 other people and for protection we just had our utility jackets, our weapons, helmets, and a gas mask.

Soldier 2: We followed the instructions which were to crouch down, put our backs towards the shot, bow our heads, and cover our eyes.

Soldier 3: They started a countdown ... 59, 58, 57...

Soldier 4: I got my gas mask on. I had trouble cinching it down. It got down to 9 and I grabbed my helmet, put it up to my head, and the bomb went off.

Soldier 5: It was completely daylight at midnight. Brighter than the brightest day you ever saw.

Soldier 6: I cannot begin to describe the light that came into my eyes. I was totally blind and when I came out of the blindness, I saw the blood vessels in my hands and the bones in my arm.

Soldier 3: Even the guy's bones and back that was in front of you.

Soldier 5: People screaming and running. I mean there was panic and people screaming because of the heat.

Soldier 3: A few guys were having a little trouble, they were throwing up, and that's a normal thing, I guess.

Soldier 7: It was so big. The colors were beautiful. I hate to say that.

Soldier 1: Beautiful purples and lavenders. Oranges and reds.

Soldier 3: I didn't sleep for a long time afterward. Not very well. I would always have this bright light that would flash on. HELLO! Time to get up! No, no it isn't. There's no lightbulb out there. There's just this dream in your head.

Soldier 1: If it was only done for the rest of the human race to know that we don't need it. It's way too devastating. If you could just see the colors, if you could just hear it, not on the television or in a movie, but the actual thing, I think you would agree with me. Whoever is listening to this.

⁸We are grateful to the New York Times and Morgan Knibbe for their kind permission to use excerpts from Mr. Morgan's extraordinary documentary film: Knibbe, Morgan, *The Atomic Soldiers*. New York Times Ops-Docs: Season 6. Web. 16 Mar 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000006186388/the-atomic-soldiers.html>

⁹The test shot the soldiers are referring to was designated "Hood" from the Plumbbob series of tests. It was the largest yield above-ground nuclear test ever performed in the continental United States. The plutonium used in the bomb was likely manufactured at Hanford.



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ACT 4 – Ghost Food

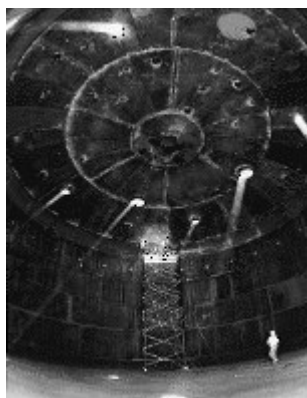
Scene 1 – Tank Waste

Putting the Genie Back in the Bottle (2008)

Smoke wafts from my basement.
I run downstairs and see
Two strange men
Laughing and careless
pouring liquid from one of the
high level waste tanks into a bottle.
The smoke hangs in the air and
I can barely see their faces.
I am scared for both them and my basement.
They ask me if I want a swallow
as if it is a bottle of whisky or something.
Are they crazy? Have they been drinking?
They pour it into
green bottles
labeled with
the Mr. Clean genie.¹⁰
Mr. Clean winks at me.



¹⁰Mr. Clean and the Genie logo are registered trademarks of Proctor and Gamble.



Spoonful of Tank Waste (1996)

I am inside
one of the Hanford high level waste tanks.
I don't know how I got there.
I feel trapped.
I am frightened and lonely.
It is dark.
I cannot find the way out on my own.
But I know the only way out is this: if everybody
who has ever seen Hanford
would eat
just one
spoonful of the waste
The tanks would disappear.
And the Hanford Site restored to beauty.
To eat the waste; hard to bear the thought.
But I am alone and it starts with me.

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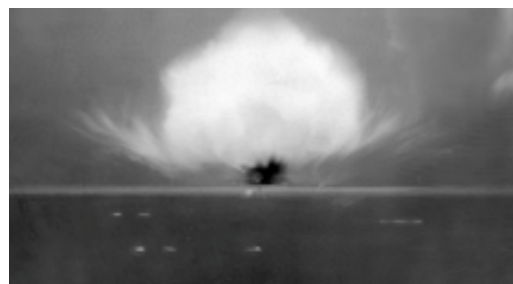


Scene 2 – Plutonium The Spring of Paradise (2005)

Four rivers flow
from the spring of paradise
at the roots of
the Tree of Life.
Plutonium is
the fruit of the tree,
and we have eaten of the fruit.
It has cast us out of paradise
by poisoning the earth
and by making it possible
for us to destroy each other.

J. Robert Oppenheimer’s Gita (1945) (Reprise)

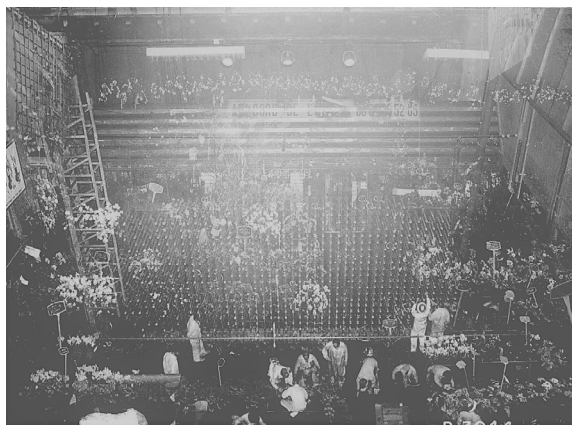
I am become Death, the Destroyer of Worlds.



EPILOGUE – Finding the Way Home

Ashes (2017)

I am back in the B-Reactor,
the nuclear reactor at Hanford
where I spent so many years.
I am searching for my long dead father,
who spent his career
designing weapons delivery systems.
I am looking for a present for him,
to tell him goodbye
and I love him.
Someone is singing in the reactor,
the songs have become flowers.
The reactor is full of flowers
and I weave them into a garment
for his gift.
My friends give me a bicycle so I can find my
way home.
While I am riding
it starts to rain.
All the flowers turn into ash and vanish
except the ones I hold in my hands,
the ones I have woven into a gift
for my father.



RECESSIONAL The Tempest (1610)

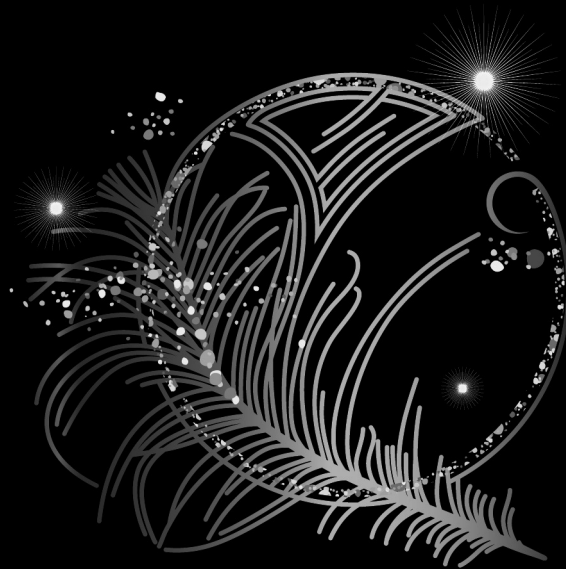
We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

With thanks to contributors:

Anonymous Dreamers - Anonymous Atomic Soldiers and Morgan Knibbe, Documentary Film Maker of The Atomic Soldiers - Greg Berlin, Geologist
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