

Beyond the Pillow

Unveiling the Subconscious

April 2024

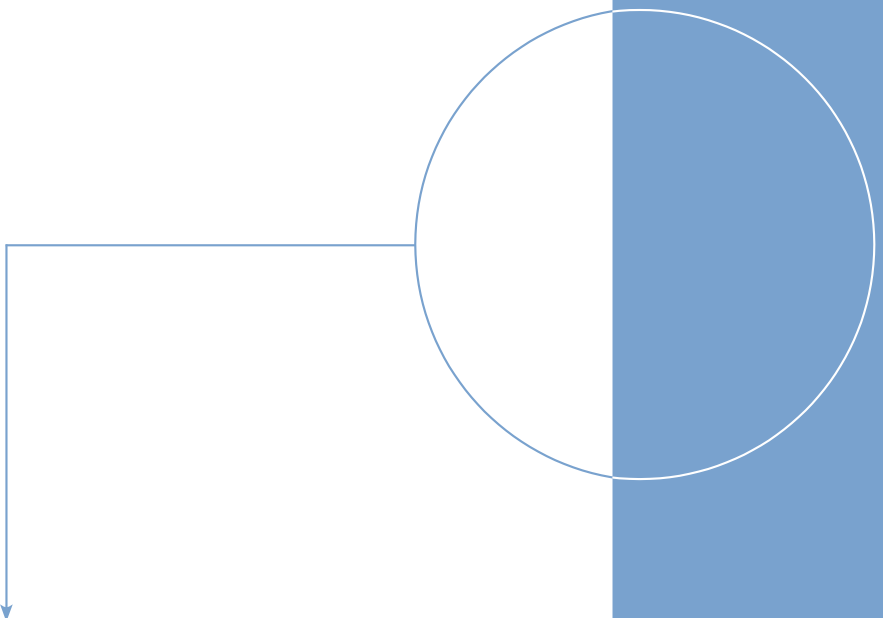
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***Beyond the Pillow, Unveiling the
Subconscious***

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A thesis

submitted as part -one- of the project

part -two- is the artwork held in the exhibition place decided by *KiT*

ABSTRACT

Dreams have captivated human curiosity for centuries, yet their true purpose remains elusive. "*Beyond the Pillow, Unveiling the Subconscious*" delves into dreams by exploring their historical significance, psychological bases, and modern interpretations. Dreams have been regarded as windows into the subconscious mind, from ancient civilizations' beliefs in divine messages to Freud's psychoanalytic theories and contemporary studies on their cognitive functions.

This paper investigates the parallels between sleep and death, highlighting the loss of self-awareness and the role of dreams in maintaining our conscious and well-being. Freud's tripartite framework of personality explains the interplay between the *id*, *ego*, and *superego*, which helps us learn more about the motives underlying the dreams content.

In contrast with Freud's views, Matthew Walker emphasizes the cognitive functions of dreams, particularly in memory consolidation and processing emotions. Raising questions about the evolution of human consciousness and the need to control which leads us to lucid dream.

From personal observations I suggest that dreams hold meaning beyond mere randomness, through journaling dreams and artistic expression, dreams become the main event for processing daily emotions and unresolved conflicts. The drawings held in the journal serve as raw representation of the subconscious mind's endeavors to communicate with the conscious self.

Drømmer har fanget menneskelig nysgjerrighet i århundrer, men deres sanne hensikt forblir usikre. "Beyond the Pillow, Unveiling the Subconscious" fordypet seg i drømmer ved å utforske deres historiske betydning, psykologiske baser og moderne tolkninger. Drømmer har blitt sett på som vinduer inn i underbevisstheten, fra eldgamle sivilisasjoners tro på guddommelige budskap til Freuds psykoanalytiske teorier og samtidige studier av deres kognitive funksjoner. Denne artikkelen undersøker parallellene mellom søvn og død, og fremhever tapet av selvbevissthet og drømmenes rolle i å opprettholde bevisstheten vår og velvære. Freuds tredelte rammeverk av personlighet forklarer samspillet mellom *id*, *ego* og *superego*, som hjelper med forståelsen om motivene som ligger til grunn for drømmenes innhold. I motsetning til Freuds synspunkter, legger Matthew Walker vekt på de kognitive funksjonene til drømmer, spesielt i minnekonsolidering og bearbeiding av følelser. Ved å reise spørsmål om utviklingen av menneskelig bevissthet og behovet for å kontrollere kan man lettere forstå som fører til klarere drømmer. Fra personlige observasjoner foreslår jeg at drømmer har mening utover tilfeldighetene, gjennom journalføring av drømmer og kunstneriske uttrykk blir drømmer sentrale for å behandle daglige følelser og uløste konflikter. Tegningene i journalen fungerer som en rå representasjon av det underbevisste sinnets forsøk på å kommunisere med det bevisste jeget.

THE ARTWORK

The art presented alongside this thesis is built in layers, akin to the depths of dreams. It unfolds within a dark room evoking the feeling of drifting into slumber and within this space are drawings from the dream journal, projected onto swirling wisps of smoke. As it lets the audience into an immersive experience with the artwork, making it inevitable for them to reflect on their own subconscious narratives, combining their experiences with my journals.

Merged with the visuals, audio media presented alongside the drawings, I've collaborated with the Jordanian artist Abdelrahman Anwar Al-Salahat, who goes by name Hazily light for his artistic practices. We created and connected audio elements for each visual representation of a "*dream*" drawing from the journal.

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INTRODUCTION

“Imagine the birth of your first child. At the hospital, the doctor enters the room and says, “There is just one thing. From this moment forth, and for the rest of your child’s entire life, he will repeatedly and routinely lapse into a state of apparent coma. It might even resemble death at times. And while his body lies still his mind will often be filled with stunning, bizarre hallucinations. This state will consume one-third of his life and I have absolutely no idea why he’ll do it, or what it is for. Good luck!”” [1]

We spend one third of our lives asleep, and even though we might not remember every single dream we have, almost every single night we dream. These visions could be diverse from people you may know and are very close to you to those we see on our screens and be fans of or even places we only wish to see to these we spend most of our lives in.

At the start of this project, I held some conversations with family members and friends about their experiences with dreams, as I was curious on how similar our understanding of dreams is. Some of them don’t dream very often, and those who do, have tried to interpret their dreams with different methods. They would recall parts of their dreams and connect it to their religion or simply connect it to their day-to-day life and move on.

Even though dreams can be challenging at times or unwelcome, depending on what type of dreams we have, they might still be our only true aperture. As a young teenager my dreams were somewhat an outlet, I looked forward to dreaming as I was able to revisit those dreams and daydream about living them. That led me to start journaling my dreams to make sure I wouldn’t forget them after a day or a week, I couldn’t help but to visualize them and see if I were able to mimic the real dream. My method was as soon I woke up, I started sketching. The result of that is now I’m able to revisit some of them and remember some small details like smell and touch. But I wouldn’t be the first nor the last person to have a unique experience with dreams.

Van Gogh once said, *“I dream of painting and then I paint my dreams”* [2], imagine if one could visit someone’s dream the way we look at a painting, but why do we dream and where do these imaginary visions come from? This unresolved question, “why do we dream” was never on my mind, it was always “what did that dream mean” and “why did I dream it”.

One evening in 1869, after many hours rearranging and organizing element cards, Dimitri Mendeleev, the chemist, drifted into sleep at his desk. When he woke up, he discovered that his subconscious had organized the elements for him. The Periodic Table had materialized in his dream which resulted in a groundbreaking classification of elements [3].

CHAPTER ONE: DREAMS IN HISTORY

Decades ago, some people believed that dreams are messages from higher powers, ancient Egyptians dedicated a lot of time for interpreting their dreams. They believed that those messages they receive during their unconscious state helps them with decision making on political matters, curing illnesses, and deciding the locations of their sacred temples. One of the oldest known records of these practices is “*Chester Beatty Papyrus*” which dates back to around 1350 BC and is considered the world’s oldest dream book.

The ancient Greeks had diverse views on dreams that evolved over time, while some like Homer believed dreams are divine messages, others proposed natural explanations. Philosophers like Aristotle and Epicurus were pivotal in this shift towards a naturalistic interpretation of dreams. Aristotle in his work “*On Dreams*” suggested that dreams result from residual movement of the sensory organs and could be influenced by factors such as indigestion [4]. He compared dreams to waking hallucinations indicating that the same faculty responsible for illusions when awake is active during sleep.

From the book “*On the Nature of Things*” by Lucretius [5], as he was a follower of Epicurus, we learn that Epicurus also leaned towards a natural explanation for dreams. He believed that dreams originated from the impact of images on the senses and did not possess any divine or prophetic powers.

CHAPTER TWO: *SLEEP-DEATH-SENSE OF SELF*

I grew up believing that sleep is death's sibling, in Islam I've learnt that sleep is indeed a demo version of death which made me have a lot of thoughts about what does it mean for us to sleep and how is it connected to death. During sleep, the conscious mind ceases its activity, making us unaware of our thoughts or incapable of interfering in our cognitive processes. Yet our mind appears to function automatically, lacking our usual awareness that makes us feel the sense of self, and without the ability to recognize our thoughts as our own, there is loss of self-awareness.

This absence of conscious thoughts is the main resemblance between sleep and death. While some speculate that there is an essence that persists beyond bodily functions, there is no objective evidence to support this idea. Although individual experiences of this essence of deceased people have been reported. Many people who experience Near-Death-Experiences (NDEs) report a profound sense of encountering something beyond just a physical body but a soul or something similar to that [6]. Yet those individual experiences still lack empirical verification, which most people need to prove their reality.

Sleep resembles death in the sense that neither state involves self-awareness. You lose your sense of time, and control over your body, yet the only distinction lies in the eventual return of your consciousness during sleep. Dreams occur when consciousness reawakens, highlighting the exchange happening between the conscious and subconscious mental activities. However, without conscious awareness there is no recollection of any form of knowledge, mirroring the void presumed in death.

Thought process is inherently subjective and very challenging to quantify objectively. While brain activity can be measured, interpreting it to a specific thought relies on individual self-report. Communication, which is essential for attributing thoughts to others, involves attributing meaning to action, which indicates a reciprocal exchange of signals. Even without conventional sensory cues, interpreting brain activity as communication remains an indirect attribution of thought. Directly experiencing another entity's thoughts seems farfetched, as it blurs the distinction between self and other. Individuals experiencing divergent thoughts are often stigmatized as "*schizophrenic*", yet these thoughts even though they are different, are still considered part of self, due to their direct experience.

The "*self*" embodies conflicting notions, contains multiple goals and motives, this internal diversity can lead to disagreements within the "*self*", where different aspects of perception compete for dominance. Conscious thought represents only one aspect of perception while the subconscious engages in problem solving during sleep. However, without conscious awareness, these processes remain unnoticeable until consciousness reemerges which often happens through dreams.

CHAPTER THREE: DREAMS IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

Sigmund Freud believed that most of what one experiences in life such as emotions and memories are not available in conscious level, but it's hidden in one's unconscious mind and from awareness. He believed that the human mind had three levels, the conscious, preconscious and the unconscious.

The conscious mind takes control of all logical and intellectual thought processes. The preconscious are things one doesn't instantly know but can access by association, this level is like a transportation point for memories and feelings to travel from the unconscious to the conscious. For example, listening to a specific song would bring you back to a specific memory. The unconscious level is hidden, such traumatic events or memories that are too frightening to acknowledge yet impact your behavior and most of what's in the unconscious mind has got there by repression. For example, an adult who was abused as a child has no memories of it, yet the effects of it are still there, such as not being able to form a genuine connection with other people once this person is older.

According to Freud, most of what happens to you as a child is still present in your unconscious mind and for that it's capable of having major influence on you as an adult. With that, Freud theorized that the largest part of our mind is occupied by the "unconscious", therefore that neurotic behavior through dreams or actions could be explained in a substantial way.

Freud's depiction of the conscious and unconscious mind is distinguished by his tripartite framework of personality. This theoretical model portrays the human psyche into three structural components: the *id*, *ego*, and *superego*.

The *id* represents the basic aspect of the psyche, generating instinctive drives that usually revolve around sexual desires. These drives are innate, often beyond conscious control and force you to satisfy them. Basically, the *id* includes repressed images and thoughts that reside deep in the subconscious, appearing in rudimentary forms. In contrast, the *superego* acts as an authority that enforces societal norms and internal regulations. It suppresses unwanted sexual urges arising from the *id*, which operates through the *ego*. As the conscious mediators, the *ego* seeks to reconcile conflicting demands arising from both the *id* and the *superego*.

Freud's view on dreams were that they are our way to fulfil our wishes and deepest desires "The virtuous man contents himself with dreaming that which the wicked man does in actual life" [7]. When trying to enforce Freud's dream theories, the final interpretation made is mainly connected to the dreamer's personal experience.

-Repression is a defense mechanism to push unpleasant or unacceptable memories, feelings, emotions or urges into the unconscious mind and separate yourself from them.

He proposes that dreams are essential expressions of unconscious wishes, it allows those desires to take shape. He describes some mechanisms through which dreams are formed, like condensation, displacement, and symbolism. He encourages the interpretation of dreams as they would uncover unconscious conflicts and desires, as analyzing dreams can provide insights into one's psyche and help in the process of psychotherapy.

The old psychologist, Burdach described dreams in a way that between the waking life and dreams, one consists of our daily experiences, challenges, and emotions, it never repeats again as every one of them is unique, but the dream serves a different purpose, they don't replay our waking experiences but aim to provide relief from it, as they act to alleviate the burdens and emotions it offered as an escape [8].

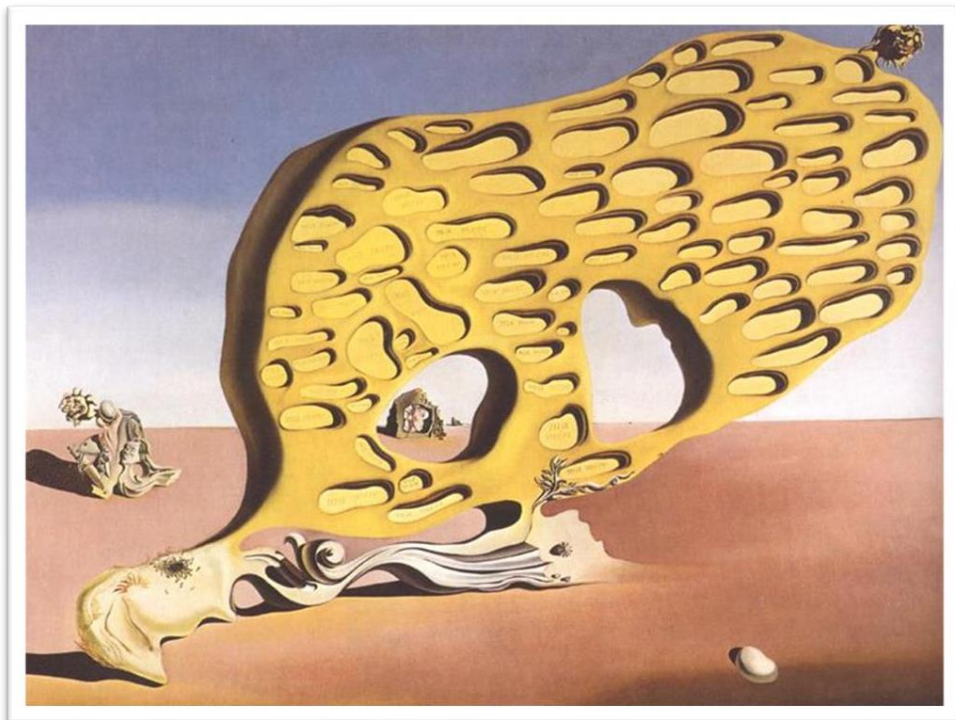
- Condensation: it's when multiple thoughts combine into one.
- Displacement: it's where emotional significance shifts from one object or person to another.
- Symbolism here representing unconscious content through symbols.

CHAPTER FOUR: SURREAL ART AND DREAMS

Surrealist artists were significantly inspired by Sigmund Freud's book, as he provided artists with a theoretical framework to explore their subconscious to create artwork inspired by the realm of dreams.

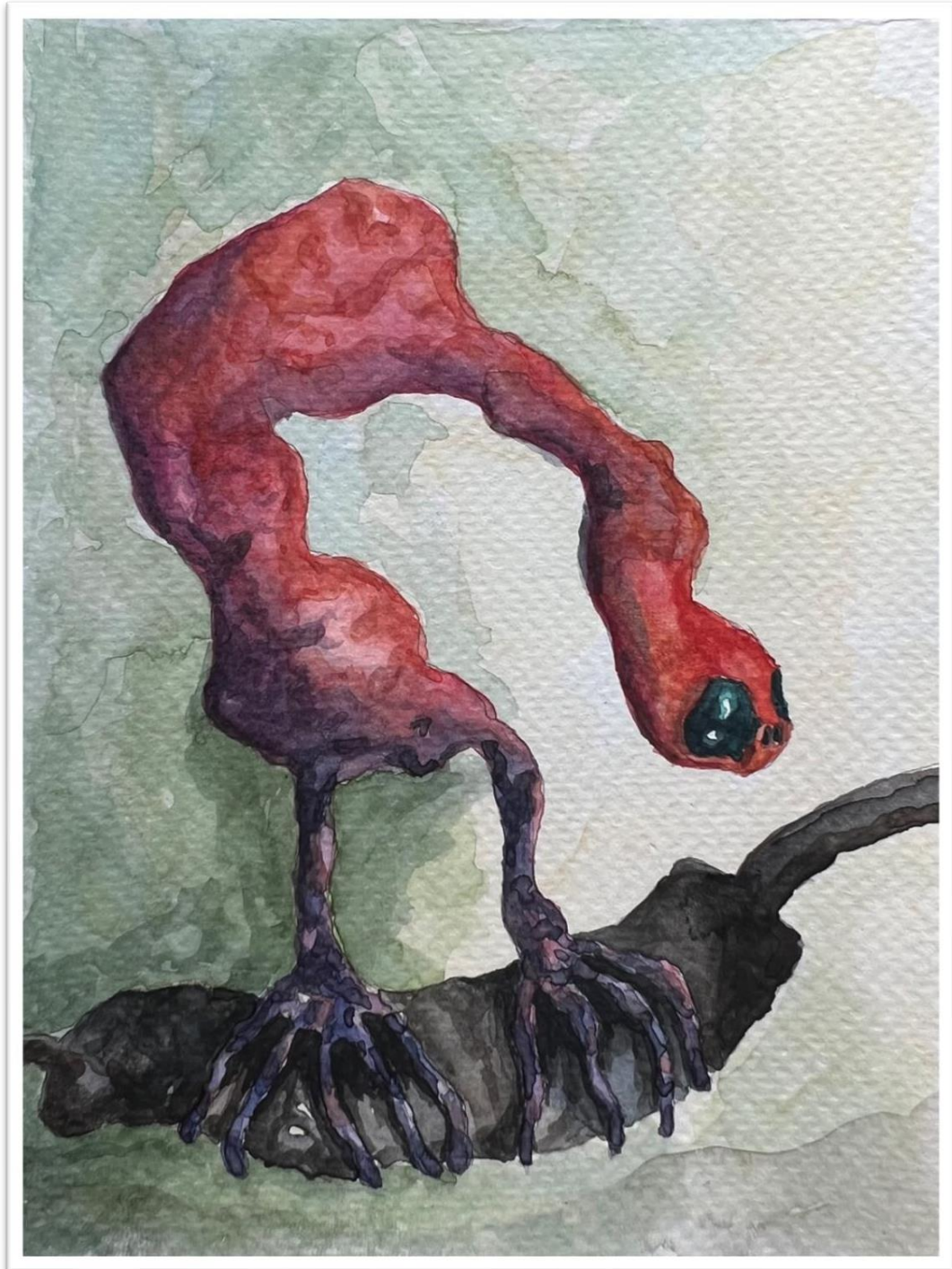
Freud's work introduced the concept of the unconscious mind suggesting that it holds hidden desires, fears, and memories. Artists like Salvador Dali and Marc Chagall embraced this idea and sought to represent contents of the unconscious with authenticity. He also inspired artists to delve into the taboo or the forbidden from society by exploring their hidden desires. Freud also proposed that dreams contain symbolic imagery that reflect the unconscious which led surrealist artists to incorporate symbolic motifs in their artworks, they were presented in distorted figures, surreal landscapes, and juxtapositions. He also inspired artists to adopt a method in their creative process now known as Automatism. Surreal automatism was adopted by artists like André Breton involving allowing subconscious mind to decide the artistic process without conscious intervention.

For example, this painting by Salvador Dali. "*The Enigma of My Desire or My Mother, My Mother, My Mother*". It's an Oil on canvas painting from the Surrealism period (1929-1940) and this painting dates to 1929 shows symbolic means as inspired by Freud.



During my artistic practice and learning journey, I've always been inspired by surreal artists. I believe those journals are somewhat surreal and the more I delve into this method, it becomes more surreal. For example, these two artworks of mine adopt surrealist methods which adopt Freud's theories and that's what inspired this project of me exploring my dreams better.

These artworks are not related to the dreams project as they are independent artworks.





CHAPTER FIVE: DREAMS IN MODERN SCIENCE

In 2017, Matthew Walker published a book where some of his points on sleep and dreams differed from Freud's. Even though both acknowledge that dreams serve a purpose, Walker emphasizes the cognitive functions of dreams, such as memory consolidation and emotional processing.

He points out that most of our dreams are caused by our emotional concerns. *"It is said that time heals all wounds. Several years ago, I decided to scientifically test this age-old wisdom, as I wondered whether an amendment was in order. Perhaps it was not time that heals all wounds, but rather time spent in dream sleep"* [9]. Matthew argued that during REM sleep, that's the phase of sleep where dreams occur, one doesn't dream to fulfill his desires, but to process his waking life. You process your emotions from those experiences that stick with you, even the ones that you didn't think would have any affect on you, such as smiling at a stranger and that stranger not smiling back, even though it's a small thing that one could just move on from, your subconscious holds it in a different way, so it is for more painful experiences. Therefore, without REM sleep we would all be left with chronic anxiety every time we recalled specific memories as one will not only be recalling the memory but relive the same emotions.

During this project, I observed the nature of my dreams in relation to the quality of my sleep. What I've noticed is that the poorer my sleep quality, the more frequent and bizarre my dreams become. When I'm sleep deprived or go to bed very late, my dreams end up in surreal territory, making it more challenging for me to interpret, yet vividly memorable.

On the other hand, when I'm well-rested and maintain a good sleep schedule, my dreams tend to be less frequent. Some nights if my sleep is not consistent, my dreams often blend elements from my past and present, and other times they're divergent entirely from reality. Some of these seemingly unrelated dreams have recurred over the years, which made me speculate that they might reflect subconscious processes my mind is still struggling with, attempting to address unresolved issues, and nudging me to acknowledge and process them.

As I've grown older, these recurring dreams have become more complex, but the most vivid dreams are those accompanied by physical sensations, particularly pain. Since I started experiencing chronic pain my dreams have become more intensive, introducing unfamiliar ways of experiencing discomfort.

For instance, one dream involved a distant relative actively pinching me with her fingers that felt somewhat metallic, making the dream feel like torture rather than chronic pain. As I woke up, I felt this pain still engraved in my body but after giving myself a minute to let my brain register what happened, I realized it was my back pain's doing all along.

I wasn't born with my chronic illness; I developed it later in life. So many things change when you're dealing with a chronic illness, from the activities you do to the way you sleep at night. I started noticing that my dreams while I'm in severe pain were always connected to the pain or completely the opposite. I believe when the pain is so great, my brain cannot process it in a way to present it in a dream, therefore my dreams become so surreal that I cannot even comprehend them and have them in my journal. With these observations, I believe that my dreams are directly linked to my mental and physical well-being. The state of my body and the quality of sleep influence the content and frequency of my dreams.

"It was the dreaming state of REM sleep—and specific patterns of electrical activity that reflected the drop in stress-related brain chemistry during the dream state—that determined the success of overnight therapy from one individual to the next. It was not, therefore, time per se that healed all wounds, but instead it was time spent in dream sleep that was providing emotional convalescence. To sleep, perchance to heal" [10]. Sleep is divided to four stages, NREM stage 1 (N1), this is the lightest stage of sleep, often considered the transition from the waking state to sleep, NREM stage 2 (N2), a slightly deeper sleep stage where the body adjusts to sleep, the heart rate lowers down and temperature decreases. This stage makes as significant position of sleep time. NREM stage 3 (N3), also known as deep sleep, this stage is important for physical restoration, the immune system and energy building. And finally, REM sleep, this stage is associated with dreaming, it features rapid eye movements, increased brain activity and muscle atonia. Muscle atonia occurs when motoneurons are not generating action potentials [11]. Yet, during the NREM stages (1-3), two phenomena could happen that are called Hypnagogia and Hypnopomia.

While exploration with journaling my dreams, I've noticed the difference between the visions experienced during Hypnagogia and dreams. Consequently, I adopted a similar method to journal both. Over several nights I positioned my body in a manner that would prevent me from easily falling asleep due to discomfort after a specific period. This positioning allowed me to delay the transition phase into sleep where I would nearly drift off yet encounter those visions from the Hypnagogia. Caused by the discomfort I would wake up, sketch the visions before returning to sleep for the rest of the night.

Hypnagogia is defined as the transitional state between wakefulness and sleep, often characterized by vivid visuals, auditory or kinesthetic experiences. It's a phenomenologically rich state that can include spontaneous images, unusual thought processes and suggestibility [12].

Hypnopompic hallucinations are typically associated with the transition from sleep to wakefulness and can occur during both REM and NREM sleep stages. They are more commonly linked to REM sleep as the stage is characterized by vivid dreams and higher chance of paralysis [13].

CHAPTER SIX: LUCID DREAMS

Sometimes during your sleep, you suddenly feel conscious in the dream, you find yourself in a weird situation, yet you realize that this is a dream, so you spread your wings and fly, doing magical things beyond reality, just for you to wake up and wish to remember every detail of that dream. About 55% of adults have experienced at least one lucid dream, and approximately 23% experience lucid dreams regularly at least once a month [14].

Matthew Walker argued in his book *“Why we sleep”* that it’s possible for lucid dreamers to represent the next iteration in Homo sapiens’ evolution. Therefore, would that change how humans dream? or would we be able to control our lucid dreams fully as to when to have lucid dreams just like deciding which movie we will watch for entertainment?

Given the rapid pace of life, media, and technological advancements, this only made me think that it’s possible that we may have adapted to the need to control our dream experiences, possibly in response to feel power over waking life circumstances.

Dreams have forever served as mirrors to my emotions. When stress or pressure weighs on me, it manifests in my dreams without fail. Sharing my dreams, particularly with my mother, was one of the things I did. My mother, rooted in religious beliefs, interprets dreams through the lens of Islam. In Islam revealing a bad dream is discouraged; instead, seeking refuge in Allah is advised.

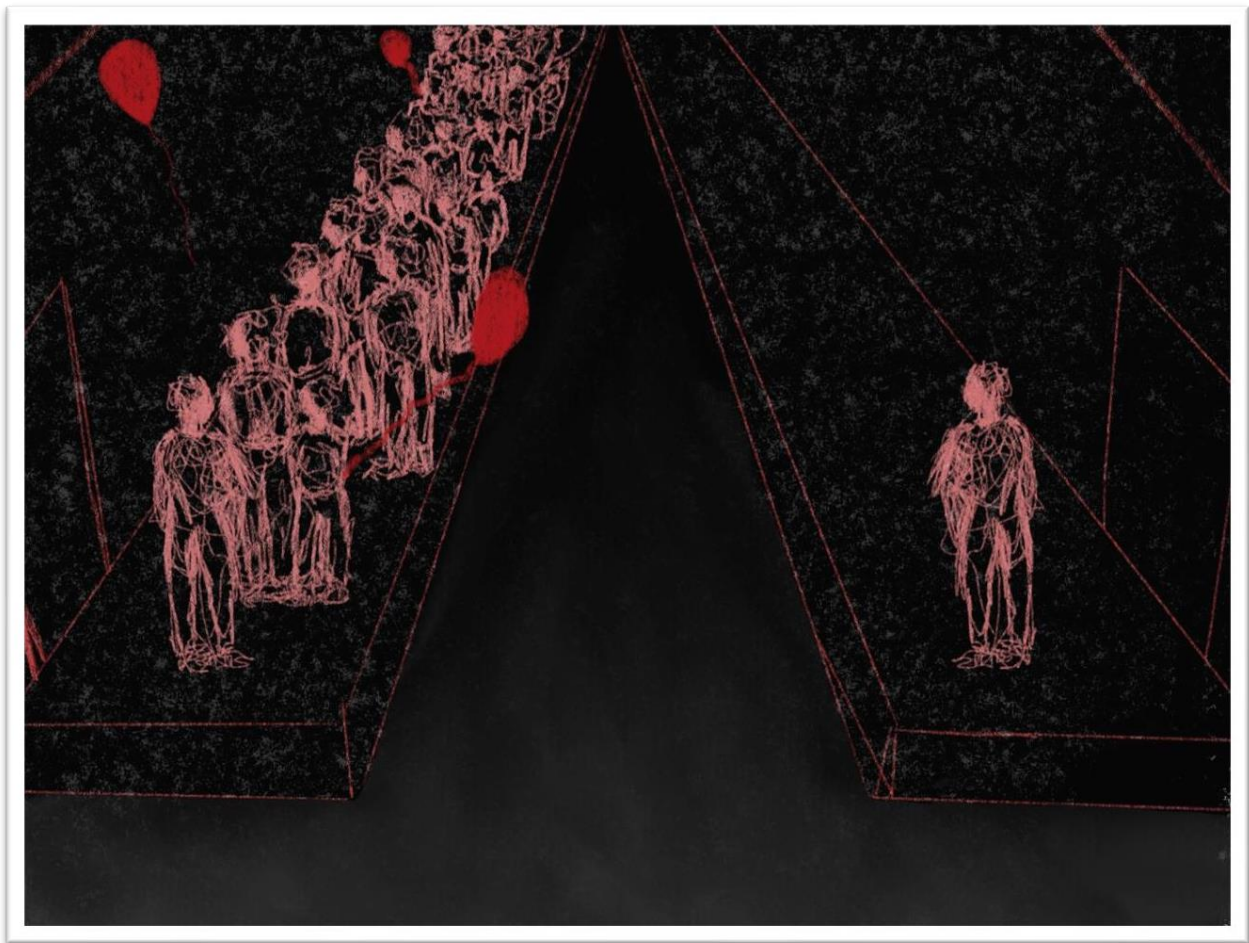
To explore more into my dreams, I began analyzing and journaling them. Among them a recurring one stands out vividly in my dream journal. It’s somewhat lucid with elements of surrealism, although its origins remain elusive.

Typically, the dream starts with me running from something and I find my sister running with me, we end up with a crowd of people. Eventually, I find myself facing a crucial choice: I follow the crowd or explore an alternate path represented by another version of myself mirrored in a nearby building with the exact same architecture. This moment marks a shift into semi-lucidity, where I am aware of my dreaming state. Strangely whenever I’m confronted with a decision, my sense of self diminishes, leading me into different situations.

As presented from the dream journal in page 12

During these recurring lucid dreams, I’ve come to realize that despite choosing different paths each time, the outcome remains somewhat unchanged. It’s as though every decision I take guides me to the same conclusion- a surreal depiction where I stand amidst a shattered world, surrounded by the crowd witnessing an imminent end.

I've personally made numerous attempts to actively have lucid dreams. Many methods I've encountered online involve audio cues with the purpose of keeping the brain from slipping into deep sleep too quickly. The approach I took and was successful many times, after trying various techniques, was setting an alarm to wake me up during the deep sleep stage. Before going to bed, I would have a mark on my left hand, such as a line or a circle I drew with a marker, to connect me to the "*waking world*". When the alarm went off, I would wake up but keep myself in the same position to remain in a drowsy state, wait for a small period, check my mark, and let myself fall back to sleep. This method helped me encounter some lucid dreams, yet despite being able to control those types of dreams, I found it to be harder to recall lucid dreams after waking up compared to the other "*normal*" dreams.



CHAPTER SEVEN: WHY I BELIEVE DREAMS HAVE MEANING

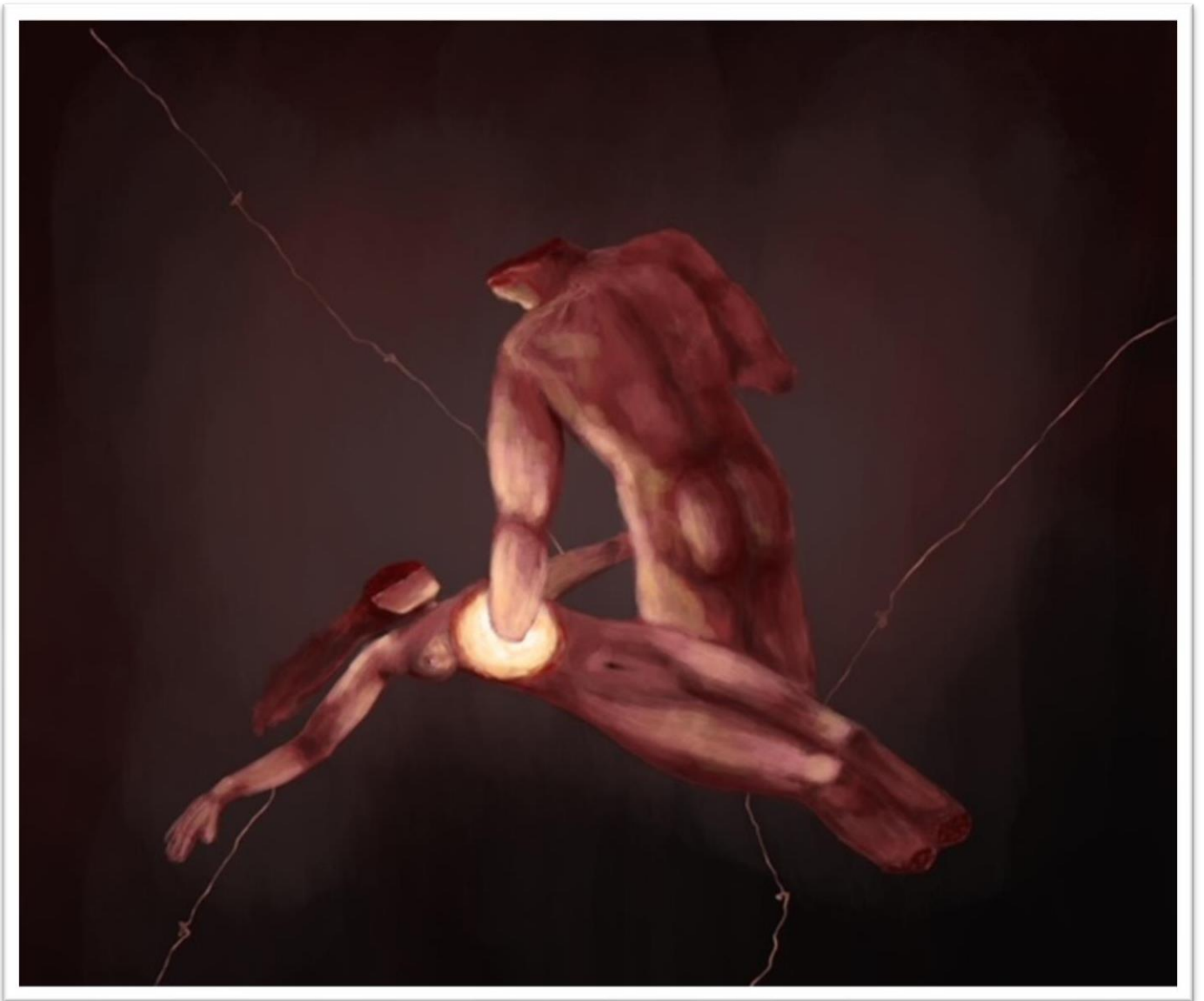
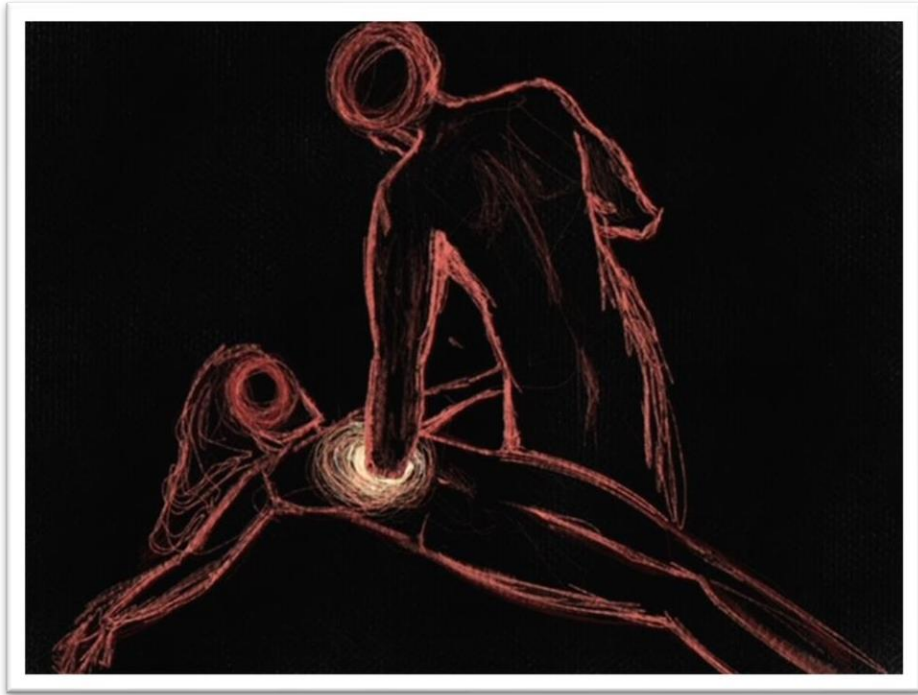
After the discussions I've had with people around me regarding dreams, I've observed that those who don't recall their dreams often fail to link them with their waking life, unlike others who remember their dreams and attempt to interpret them in various ways.

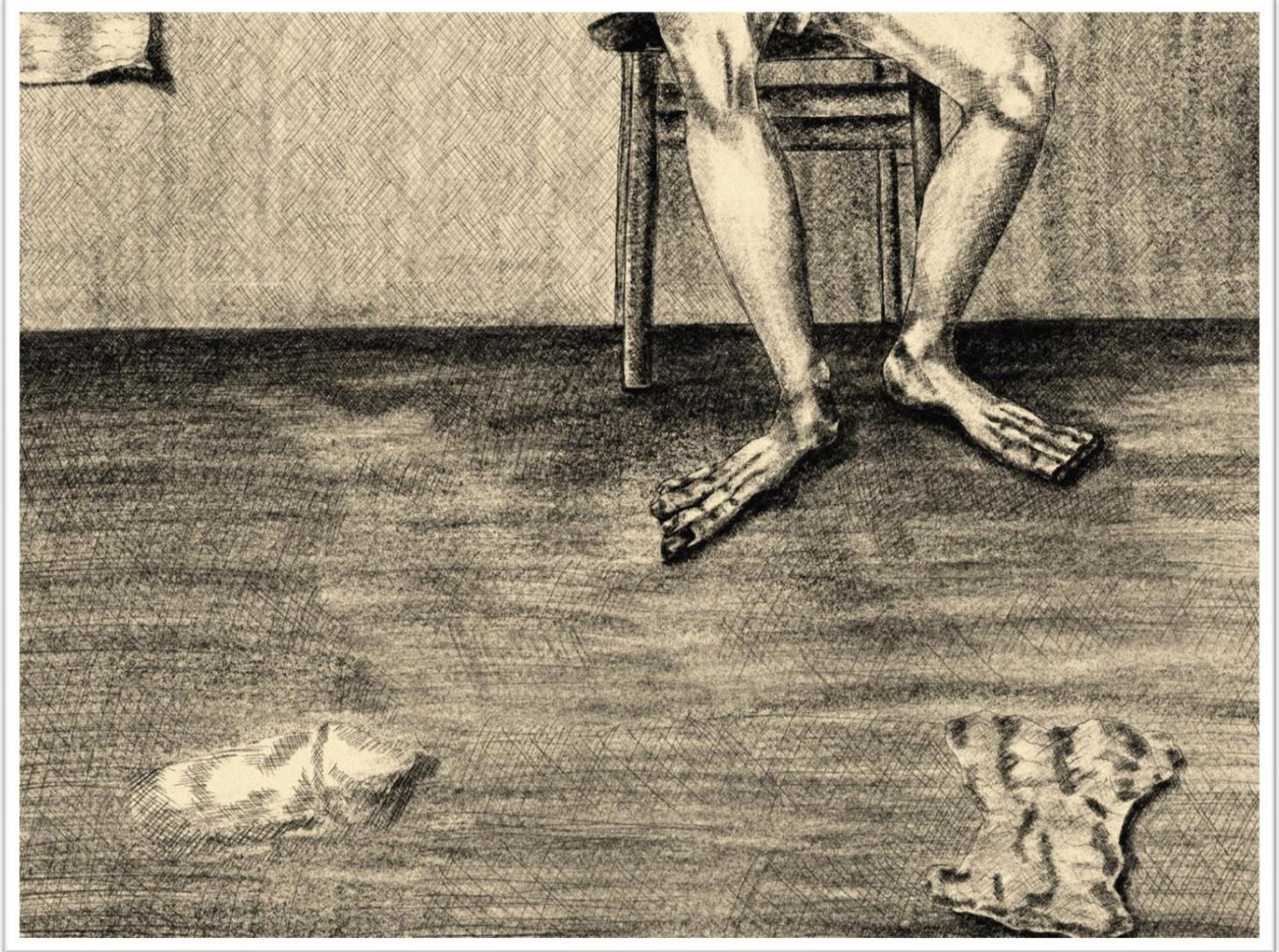
Even before embarking on this research, I held the belief that dreams carry meaning. The scenarios and imaginative visions our brains present to us cannot be random and meaningless. Since the brain controls our bodies, there must be a purpose to what it reveals to us. These manifestations may express ease, suffering, or pain. As I've previously shared, drawing from my own experiences with dreams and my sleeping patterns, dreams might serve as a conduit for processing our daily emotions, whether we're consciously aware of it or not.

Through years of attempting to interpret my dreams, I've found myself growing closer to certain individuals and have been inspired to create numerous artworks. In this project specifically, I view the sketches featured in the journal as the raw essence of dreams. This method, I've discovered, is the most accurate and helpful in conveying the emotions and visions experienced during dreaming.

The paintings I've dedicated more time to, exceeding the limits I initially set for merely journaling my dreams, may represent my brain's endeavor to interpret my dreams in a manner comprehensible to my conscious mind. These paintings, which I may perceive as "*overworked*" could potentially reveal a meaning distinct from what my subconscious is attempting to communicate. At present, my awareness might only grasp this interpretation, with the possibility of viewing them differently as I continue to evolve throughout life.

These two artworks *as presented in page 14, 15 and 16** are a prime example of what I explained before by over analyzing my dreams and interpreting a meaning to them. Starting as a fast sketch after waking up to these paintings, putting all elements of the dream together to present them for the audience.







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