

Improving Your Dreams

A Course in Creative Writing

They want a wilderness with a map—
but how about errors that give a new start?—
or leaves that are edging into the light?—
or the many places a road can't find?

Maybe there's a land where you have to sing
to explain anything: you blow a little whistle
just right and the next tree you meet is itself.
(And many a tree is not there yet.)

Things come toward you when you walk.
You go along singing a song that says
where you are going becomes its own
because you start. You blow a little whistle—

And a world begins under the map.

The way you are supposed to dream is this—you study the dreams of others, especially of those who have succeeded, those whose dreams have met the test of time. You extract from successful dreams the elements that work. Then you carefully fashion dreams of your own. This way, you can be sure to have admirable dreams, ones that will appeal to the educated public.

As your technique improves, you will find your dreams accepted more and more: what doesn't work, you learn to leave out.

Of course, now and then (you won't be able to help it) some strange, untried elements will creep into your dreams—you

can't be careful and responsible all the time. And of those stray flaws, a few may be good luck, and you will keep them; they are signs of some rules not yet discovered. And if you are scholarly you may save up an account of them, and later offer the account to apprentices so that they may dream properly.

Thus, over the generations, the quality of dreams will improve; a tradition will accumulate, with skills and crafts that can be passed along. Ambitious and reliable people can study about dreaming and gradually become worthy of dreaming for themselves. If they start a weak dream, one with clichés or irregularities, or if they let themselves wander into an unstructured dream that violates the best in the tradition, they can stop themselves and hold staunchly to standards.

Quality is achieved by cleaving to those standards. As one respected critic has said, "Every time you accept an unworthy dream, you are damaging the tradition of American dreaming."