

•
•
•
•
•
•

The Irrelevance of Everything Else (The Scream)

•
•
•
•
•
•
•
•
●

Eight minutes past the point of night when a cockroach popping its knuckles can echo through the air ducts: there came a scream. Something out of a witch holocaust, or how a motor-crushed coyote or infected infant would scream – coming full and at once, compressing the walls of the house, and waking Doctor Murray Krunt.

Doctor Krunt. This is the same perennial newsmaker whose work nicely digests in the back pages of international newspapers or briefly flits across news websites; he’s a true media beauty, and, as such, an embarrassment to his profession. Or at least to his specialty: for where pride can most embarrass others occupying the same level, it’s certainly a pride he feels when he reads in Sunday’s health section, “Dr. Murray Krunt, bestselling author and internationally renown sleep psychologist.”

Come, readers, you’ll remember at least some of his claims. That sleeping through the night is an evolutionary hiccup as biologically essential as the appendix and as much a cultural construct as shaving or hot coffee. Of course, he allows, some sleep is necessary. Certainly the phases of sleep that kill consciousness and allot time for muscles to repair – without all the distraction of a whimpering, self-important soul – is necessary. But all the rest, from memory cataloguing to dreaming in sweet, everlasting falsity is waste, extra, liable to rot, and possibly toxic. Which is why Dr. Krunt advises one to never, as its said, go to sleep, but to fall asleep. Or better, to collapse, in couch, chair, shag carpet, kitchen table with pillowy plastic placemats – and prop up the windows with twigs and leave the door ajar, live in a loft on Main Street or abutting a commuter train track or air base

or deep city hospital, and keep pets like healthily hydrated lap dogs or cockatiels, or children, and keep them fierce and hungry; try setting the alarm to sound off at random ticks around the dial or set up a network of neighbors to pummel the doors, nail in new miniatures into flaky walls and schedule riotous surprise half-birthdays and untimely domestic harangues. The purpose here, according to the doctor, is to limit sleep to that comatose stretch when sleep suppresses muscles and denies without excuse or special case any distraction, any sensory input that would interject the body's complete caving in and closing down for repair. It's been suggested by Krunt's more palatable colleagues that such a vulnerable condition paradoxically protects creatures by, in the hours of the feasting dark, inducing them into an optimal hiding state: for who hides better than a corpse? Krunt has extrapolated from this that the predators who hunt us at night no longer apparel themselves in claws or fangs, but rather in this age come for us in the shape of our own worries and dreams.

Which is precisely why Krunt posits that we must do everything in the power of will and drugs to abolish all parts of sleep that simple exhaustion does not lay us into. There is a simplistic headline that Krunt obliges himself to discount in his frequent interviews as simplistic, but that is nevertheless framed in his living room. It reads, "Introducing Doctor Krunt, Enemy of Sleep."



Now Doctor Krunt doesn't know how far out of sleep he was when the scream came. He had only noted in the way of

science how the warm adrenaline heaved along his spine and sucked his eyelids back into his head: The doctor was up.

He unpeeled the comforter from his ten-grand bed and sat at its side, slightly tilted forward like a nervous marathoner before the gun. The scream was echoic, down the hall and down the stairs, into his hair and hovering off the surface of his bed. It was so alien to the still of night it remained in his head, and the doctor sat there rubbing his recollection of the hideous sound down into the trough and crest of its every short wave. To him, in the context of an inviolable silence, the scream seemed in and of itself, separate, disembodied. It came again.

So it was repeatable. But the doctor could not study it, for it came in the company of others. A gas, a ghost, a mist, a fog, the screams ballooned the house and warmed his head. He sat there and wondered at the brusqueness of occurrence, the shocking omission of any prelude to catastrophe, the unbridgeable space between reading horror and living horror, the unfair impossibility of reaching back to a trained and sensible mind to treat an actual and unfairly sudden Happening. Most of all, he marveled at the unfair loss of a spectator's calm disapproval and derision in the fire of something immediate and really happening to oneself. To him and now, the screams surrounded. He jumped up: to fight or flee, to fight or flee – not to measure, test, assess, hypothesize, retest, sit and assess, mull over, confer over hot drink, riddle, joke, print, send and publish – but to fight or flee, to fight or flee, the screams surrounded, and grew louder, more hysterical, and demanding, and beyond ever a time ever again of a return to silence. The doctor had had enough and ran down the stairs and into the streets of his inert suburban neighborhood, taking the screams with him.

He walked quickly. Quickly down the pillowy pads of the sidewalk and past the stoops of the row houses where lay his sleeping, dreaming neighbors. He walked quickly out of embarrassment that they should wake up and swim through their curtains and see their eminent, sensibly fashioned (and at the same time published) neighbor walking quickly in the middle of the night and with the screams whirling all about him. Quickly past the stoops of the row houses so fashionably historic that the shutters were real and hinged, some of them shut. Brick that was real and mottled by the strange selectivity of fungus. Screams that were real and not prefabricated by some dark romantic with a rhyming dictionary.

He tried in desperation to quell the screams by reciting out lists of the ordinary, a micro-dosing of the mundane: curbs sanded and painted yellow, lamp posts with yellow globes in need of repair, park benches under blue spruces, mulch to cover naked dirt. All these he pointed out to the screams, in desperation that they'd slowly sense their absurd, over-the-top otherworldliness in an ordinary neighborhood: manhole covers flaking black paint, hydrangeas dying in the drought, guest parking spaces sweating oil, an evacuated baby stroller on its side, the sound of a truck backing up.

Slowly they did. The screams slowly began to subside. He went on, noting the sound of a truck engaging its engine brakes on a distant highway, Mrs. Novitsky's daughter carrying her shoes up the concrete steps, delicately. The stone moon. The shiftless air. The screams: dissipating. And stopped entirely.

Dr. Krunt walked back to his house, bowing his bare feet heel to toe to keep his neighbors asleep. He wondered if any had awoken. But if Mrs. Novitsky's daughter can feel her antique Firebird into a parallel parking spot every night and below the slumber of everyone, he had a winning chance.

He felt assured. He looked around, and thought his neighborhood lovely. Like old Europe. Its yellow globes bobbing in the wet air. Park benches under blue spruces, manhole covers shrugging off their cosmetic, the oily streets montaging phases of the moon, and present time downshifting and braking on a distant highway. He turned onto his street and thought of the stature of his work. He smiled at his latest declaration, an article to be published at the end of the month, with wide barbs to rake in the cash, like this one: *the first step in this program is to understand that people, in general, hate themselves; such self-loathing stems in the accurate admission that they've irrevocably departed from their somnolent dreams.* He would end with a charge: *We must cut them from our sleep; we must stop dreams from haunting us into old age.*

The doctor, tired but cheered by his ideas, opened the door and carefully climbed the old wooden steps, avoiding the pressure points that would make them creak, lest he wake again the infant in his arms. He took long, ungulate steps over the noisy wood and entered the nursery, brushing aside Stuffed Elephant, and with his hands padded over the pink, arterial eyelids of the thing that was most precious to him, asleep.