

## Perspectives on discovery

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### Abstract

This paper offers perspectives on discovery in poetic and narrative forms, juxtaposing self-discovery with research into the natural and engineered worlds.

### Dream sequence

*I.*

They may yet demand  
My head upon a platter  
Not for heraldic failure  
A mere by-product  
Of their games of gain  
Mine not the bloodiest  
Nor yet the handsomest  
Yet still in death ranked  
In gruesome competition

And I have eaten their meals  
For years  
From an ill-assortment  
Of chipped stained plates  
As I fattened and bloated  
On a diet rich unnourishing  
And addictive

And all the while I eyed  
From afar  
The ancient platter of my desire  
On which the wise ones ate

I held it in my hands  
Yesterday  
I polished it  
Large rectangular fired clay  
Hand-painted gold and purple  
Fragile unstable alive  
I rescued it

And set it carefully  
Out of harm's way  
As befits a valuable  
*Objet d'art*  
Of benign  
Authority ...

*II.*

Away, away  
Escape the house if you can  
See this skylight here  
Onto the roof  
Over the snow  
On skis waxed and ready

Down, down  
This wild white slope  
Air and wind and mind and heart  
Tipped into movement  
In a new born moment

Back, back  
Through all the universe  
And all of time  
To a mansion looking out  
Onto a wide granite terrace  
A fitting bier for my body  
For the bodies of the many

Let the birds be quiet now  
And I wait ...

*III.*

A long wait  
Torturous and boring  
Through years and years  
Of inactivity  
Silent, compressed, frozen  
To this slow awaking  
Not by the kiss of a prince  
By a slow spring  
Of fickle winds  
Occasional sun  
Snows to crush the spirit

Of snowdrops  
Yet life stirs up  
To this tentative return  
This big bang  
That no one can hear  
Not even I ...

### **Dream sequence narrative**

In her memoir, historian Jill Ker Conway writes about her experience of choosing a topic for her Ph.D. thesis at Harvard University in the early 1960s (Conway, 1995). She was inspired by the seminars on American intellectual history given by Donald Fleming who became her thesis adviser. She writes of Fleming:

He was implacable in his insistence that one be committed to one's work, not just professionally but emotionally. ... "One's research should always involve some element of therapy," he said smiling. "It only counts if it's really close to the bone." I agreed, knowing that I had found someone who could help me to find an intellectual vocation. (p. 34)

This passage stood out for me when I first read Jill Ker Conway's memoir over ten years ago. I could envisage how it might be applicable in history or in most of the humanities and social sciences—and especially for Conway who went on to research women intellectuals of 19<sup>th</sup> century America, a choice significantly motivated by her need to understand her own non-belonging in academic life in the 1950s. However, it wasn't clear to me how the principle of research close to the bone might apply in the natural sciences or engineering. Specifically, it was not clear how it applied in my case.

In the years since reading Conway's memoir, I have come to understand research as discovery more deeply, not just as the discovery of facts and principles of the natural and engineered worlds, but also and substantially as discovery of myself. I have struggled with this understanding alongside my engineering research, but over time have come to appreciate their inconnectedness, sometimes with what I take to be clarity and at other times only dimly through the fog of day-to-day concerns.

The dream sequence speaks to this slow evolution or growth in self-knowledge, including in my own case insights into myself as a researcher and why I was drawn to research. Ultimately, while the process of self-discovery (and of scientific discovery generally) may have its Archimedean moments, the evolution in understanding is surprising both in its slowness as well as its ever-unfolding newness. It is like a big bang that can only be heard by very careful attention.

### **Reference**

Conway, J. K. (1995). *True north: a memoir*. Toronto: Vintage Canada.