

DEATHLIFE

Zayaan Khan

“In Mexico the snake is the Tonantzin-Cōātlīcue, the mother of all, goddess of fertility, patron of life and dead, the reborn”

I collapsed under the heap of grief. So much had happened in a short amount of time; after all the years of giving, the very feet that had held me up for decades had given way and splayed. I fell into a deep depression and in those days of darkness I had to release and let go of everything, *e v e r y t h i n g* that I had worked for because it was also what was killing me; Freedom, food justice, land justice, indigenous food reclamation. The fridge full of gastronomic delight had failed to switch on after load shedding and I only noticed after some days. Preserves died in that time, years of work of recipes that arrived in dreams and the moments before waking. Recipes conjured through reading between the lines in recipe books, extracts and tinctures, a still life ferment library. There was sweet potato and vanilla beer, orange vinegar mothers, rose vinegar, tomato meat, fermented ice creams and broths cooked for days, fermented atchar bases, insect recipes and doughs made from bones to make bread. I was so depleted that I didn't attempt to save any of it. It was time for it to go. Yet something inside was also broken, bigger than a crack and maybe holding onto a thread. I remember going to the pharmacy on Albert Road and reading the Drug Awareness poster, an old gangster spoke about the continued gang rape of a thirteen year old boy as part of the gang's initiation process. That broke me all the way to bed. I drove from the north to the south crying, straight to the ocean and walked in, ocean tears and eye tears wetting my hair, eventually my pillow. I took myself to bed and stayed there for months, leaving when I needed to then straight back home to bed. I was locked into a space of death and stayed there until I saw the light and life of death which we call *deathlife*. Death was something I always realised was not the opposite of life but a different kind of life, close in some ways to sleep and a space where spirit and dreams conjure new ways of being.

The darkness was laced with despair, but delicately like dew drops on a spider web, spun across a dark water body. I was too tired to find a way out and just needed to rest and slip into death's sleep, alive. Like a choice I made to go where I was needed and guided, a defeated trust because nothing else was possible. In the darkness and in the moments in-sleep and on-falling-asleep and gently-waking-up, a narrative began to seed itself and I could only observe that there was a way to take part or manipulate in any way. Gloria Anzaldúa calls this the Cōātlīcue state, the liminal in-between phase of nepantla overlap, the borderlands, the middle. I understood that death was so much more alive than life, you see it in every ferment and every labour. Death lays a gentle finger upon every fruiting body ripening on the stem, as it drops to begin its decomposition process, sometimes through its own process of fermentation when we smell those rich alcoholic fumes in rotting fruit, attracting insects and animals to ensure a final resting place in stomachs and soils.

With so much defeat came so much rest and so much dreaming. Dreams can make your courage grow because you know you can't die. I lived there for a time, drifting in a sea inside me and feeling fine, so fine.

*"In the night mind of the night world, abandoned to a maelstrom of chaos, you dream of your own darkness, a surrealist sueño of disintegration."*¹

At the time of this liminal transition my parents were preparing to go on Hajj, they'd been on the waiting list for years and dreamt of this time for a long time. The whole community rose up to support them, us girls gathered to host and support them in whichever way they needed it, the most important journey of their lives. The event had us gathered for a week, every evening welcoming the community into the home with tables laden with foods and our parents in their best attire, beautiful scarves draped around my mother and copious kettles of tea constantly at the boil. One evening I dreamt my mother was being interviewed by a journalist about her coming experience, the question was posed, "What do you wish for your family, for your children, at this time?", my mother, with her back towards me seated at the kitchen table did not see me arrive, "My only wish is for my children to visit all the *kabrs*² of our family and to kiss them", and she kissed her hand to indicate the closeness. I took this as a duty, a direct action required of me to visit the graves of family that I knew of, and perhaps to start understanding where other family may be resting, family I may not know yet. My family don't believe stuff like that too much, but I can't not follow it, otherwise it causes too much strife and unsettles the thin knife-edge space I have to exact in my actions.

In the despair of defeat I held firmly to the need to reclaim indigenous foods as a space of justice. As an ancestral calling it became clearer to me. My journey started moving back in time to meet the family that intersected with colonial intrusion, to trace Islam through the Cape as a way of seeking identity and validity in order to do the work enshrined within indigenous epistemology. To connect with ancestral seeds that had been planted within me and would find roots even if it meant I would have to decompose to keep those seeds alive.

In the narratives that began to emerge, I began dreaming of death. First to visit the deads and then for five nights after that, each time a different representation. These were not all the manifestations I internalised and not every manifestation of death is necessary to experience visually.

¹ Anzaldúa, G. E. *Light in the dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. Duke University Press. 2015. p51.

² graves

I dreamt I left my home and there was a deer who had died on the lawn outside the entrance - imagine the first thing you face when you're about to go about your day. It was Death as Big; thinking about death as a body to now *do something with*. It was a deer that does not occur where I live so there was a moment of dissonance. They are not at risk of extinction, so it was not so much a concern of how the deer died or what it was doing there but of all the homes it lay at, it was mine, my duty to *do something*.

I then dreamt I was younger and had miscarried, but it was very early in the pregnancy. I didn't even know I was pregnant. I birthed a blue marble of a baby, buried in such a tiny grave. I distinctly remember there being a matter-of-factness in this processing, there was little grief as generally my attitude to pregnancy is that carrying full term is a gift and I treat it as a healthy unknown. Perhaps because culturally we believe that the *rūh*³ enters the fetus at around 120 days after conception at which point we understand that this is the beginning of potentiality, and with the date of death firmly fixed. This helps our grieving process, to understand that death is written and out of our control, even if it may happen before birth.

The other dreams showed me how different death may be, in so many different forms and ways, I learnt that death is a spectrum as vast as life. Death presents particularly in each instance. At this same timeframe, I had started doing some courses on death with my sister and a friend of ours, held by various practitioners at mosques around the city. We learnt about the final rites as death approaches and of funeral proceedings according to the way a person has died; whether at home with family, if at hospital (or the morgue) or away from the country. Also, what to do in situations where the body was in various stages of decomposition or, tragically, in pieces. Always being reminded of how to hold space for the family and those who loved the deceased. We learnt of tricks to allow for as much peace as possible, like rose oil for the eyes to keep them closed. I started reading about death, not at all in a morbid way but somehow as a calling to understand better what death is and to move through the tremendous fear death is shrouded in. I recall readings of accounts of the 2011 tsunami survivors from Japan, their stories of ghosts soaking wet on warm, dry days, of divers seeking bodies of people and beginning to understand the ways in which death arrived to these people before or after meeting the sea.

Death wrapped tentacles around me, octopussing through me softly, like sticky smoke tentacles. There was safety there, to collapse and give up and be safe from dying in death, dying without dying and listening before my eyes adjusted to the dimmest light. The first thing I learnt about death is that there is very little light, or maybe there is a different meaning and feeling of light, like if light itself has a death. This light has a feeling too, a coolness enough to feel it as a haze upon your cheek. In this learning came a certain epistemological shift, going deeper into self and finding it's not a tunnel but a whole world. I can see things better with less anxiety or excuses, knowing we have more time than life. I began dreaming of snakes, weaving and working their way through knots, I would vision them as I woke up, I would see them often in the periphery of my sight. In dreams they would ask me to follow them and often lead me to waking. I never understood why they were always in knots until I encountered a statue of Tonantzin-Cōātlīcue with her skirt woven with serpents: snakes that writhed and spoke stories of so many histories.

And in all these lessons I learnt that grief never goes away, we just become more adept at welcoming it and processing it, if we allow it. Mamma used to say, "death

³ the soul

often comes to show, we love more deeply than we know". Grief holds a door to overwhelming capacity for love to flow and it never gets easier but we manage to grow beyond it, something-like-healing through it but never without it. Mourning comes as a process to hold space for grief so we don't displace it or deny it. I used to imagine antidotes for mourning - as if mourning was a type of venom injected unwillingly into my self - long afternoons staring at tall trees, or quick swims in freezing oceans, making fires for hours and washing in the ash. I'd come to realise mourning itself is the salve to grief but not as remedy, more as allowing the grief to be and being gentle with it. And of course, over the years my body has learnt how to hold this in the small personal ways when grief has come at us within our family or community. I remember waking up on a few occasions, having dreamt of my grandparents as if they were alive with us. When you realise it was all a dream, that grief holds you thick in your throat and out your eyes and you cannot move. I needed to remedy this because reliving deaths over and over was too much to bear. In a following dream I was in a glasshouse in the late afternoon, the warm sunlight streaming in, illuminating everything. Mamma came dancing in but she was much younger, perhaps an age before I was even born. She danced barefoot, her arms up, whirling and graceful, light as the sun. I stopped, mesmerised, and caught myself thinking to her, *okay I need you to let me know this is a dream, and you are here with me but not with me in waking life. I can't handle losing you again.* Without speaking, Mamma twirled and danced her way out the glasshouse, never once looking me in the eye, and I understood that this was a dream and that in the future I could always be certain because the deads would no longer look at me in my eye. This was many years ago, I have dreamt of the deads many times since then and always understood I was dreaming because none have looked at me in my eye, yet fully aware of the privilege of their visit as a way to continually connect with ancestral relations - until we meet again.

These personal griefs are like training to understand the deep and ancient ways we can never stop grieving for the traumas embedded in our land, our personal experiences as a balm for a collective being and healing. The genocides and silencing and shaming of indigenous peoples, the murder of the land, vast ecocide of entire ecosystems plundered and destroyed, animals shot and killed for the sake of shooting and killing. The grief and the mercy required to process this incredible trauma may never be enough and thus the undertaking becomes a vital part of an everyday journey. But who is able to carry that and how do we manage without crumbling under the weight of this suffering? I learnt so much in the dark light, I learnt forgiveness, to ask for forgiveness for sin greater than you could ever commit. To honour the immense sacrifices, the loving work that is generational healing, the continual labour of undoing colonial myth culture, exhausted as it holds itself firm in our beliefs of gender, education, food, love, medicine and birth. May our resistance continue to upturn the traumas descended upon us. Somehow the hopes and loves I thought had deserted me still live within my face, a kind of certainty or promise I can see in every focused reflection.

*"Only when you emerge
from the dead with soul
intact can you honour the
visions you dreamed in
the depths."*⁴

*With gratitude to Fede and Lucy who dreamt of boats and snakes and salt and stars
and never let me drown.*

⁴ Anzaldúa, G. E. *Light in the dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. Duke University Press. 2015. p554.