

When the World Ends, We Begin

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Abstract

What interpretations can one make of a dream about a loved one who has passed away? Are there, for instance, words left unsaid that must be spoken in those brief encounters? As I grapple with these questions, I situate dreaming as a meeting place where another world can exist such that I can meet my grandmother once again, and I consider the tensions that arise from such an encounter. As I do so, struggling to make sense of the dream about my grandmother, I also remember the important language and vocabulary my grandmother has left me to steer such a moment: construction. Wrought by grief and sorrow, she lived a life that constantly required her to create other worlds. It is through her example of (re)construction that I put this dream to rest and finally recognize something significant: the end is simply the beginning.

Keywords: dreams; memory; other worlds

In A Dream

A few months ago, I had seen you in a dream, as a silhouette of your frame appeared to me. I cannot remember anything else from this moment, but I recall waking up and remembering the brief encounter in the way one does with something of importance. To date, the occurrence is etched into my memory such that it can never be forgotten or made trivial. So profound is the permeance of this moment that it remains present in my life in the way Belcourt (2020) describes the presence of his own grandmother like “wind in a photograph” (p. 1). As if, unnoticeable at first glance, and imperceptible as well, but there, nonetheless, in a way that cannot be disproved or disregarded. Though, for the most part, there is very little for me to pluck out from this particular dream of mine and to elucidate its meaning. All I have is a fleeting instantiation of seeing you, my grandmother, almost four years after your departure from this world, and that is why I am bemused by how to make sense of it all.

Portal to (An)other World

Since then, I have been waiting for you to return. As naïve as it sounds, I have been longing for the wind to (re)appear. For, I am aware that I can only meet you in this way: in another world. I think of this other world in the way Osman (2020) describes an estuary, “where the river meets the sea” (p. 15), and I want our worlds to collide once more in the rapturous way waves ebb and flow together. Like the river meets the sea, the dream world has become a site of convergence for you and me, where our bodies can find each other.

Not one for prayer myself, nor in devotion to any place of sanctity, I can recognize what it holds for other people, especially when a loved one has passed away. Like them, I am also hoping for something that can only be fashioned through prayer. Drawn to the credence, someone, please hear my invocation. Bring me to my contrition if it must come to that. All I ask for is the following: let my appeal summon another dream where we can meet again as a lost child reunites with his mother.

Through this longing, I now also understand why people turn to psychic mediums that can communicate between the spirit world and the physical one. I think, at least from what I can gather, speaking through a medium allows for a meeting place for them to visit their loved ones. This, too, must be another world—one that gives sound to the waves or provides a voice to the wind in the photograph. Of course, all of this is speculative, propelled by my own desires to imagine the unthinkable. Unlike the estuary, I do not know if there is another world. I do not know if you exist somewhere else. All I know is that I want to believe there is space in-between you and I, where we are not measured by the distance between us, and the dream world is the only way I can make that space feel less expansive. So, as I have witnessed, it is for now the only place where your body can appear and where its presence is conjured so that I can be next to you a little longer.

Of course, there are certain spaces I can never construct, where bodies cannot exist or come back alive, even in a dream like the one I have described above. I cannot, in other words, contrive a space of return as much as I want to. Therefore, I think of the death of a loved one in the manner Brand (2011) describes migration: it is an irrecoverable loss. It is a loss that cannot be redeemed, cannot be restored, and where resurrection is impossible. Indeed, borrowing

from Sharif (2022), return is the cruellest word of them all. Consumed by the brutal blow of an improbable revival of your body, the dream world is then the only portal that I can turn to because nothing else seems fathomable. For that reason, my dream about you is all I have left, and I cling onto it because I want to believe Garfield (1996) that our loved ones who have left this world live on in our dreams.

Whatever else I have is left to memory. I remember, for instance, how you embraced me with a hug each time I visited our village. Even now, I can trace the softness of your hands and the warmth of your body. At that moment, even if the world was on fire, I would feel its blaze collapse under your weight. You had a way of making everything around me feel a little less overwhelming and a lot more tempered. What I would do to recover the lost time and fall into your embrace again, and even memory is not enough to bring you back.

Like the way I miss your embrace, I miss your unconditional love, as well. I know all too well that love can be fragmented, messy, and sometimes enervating. You, however, made me feel loved in a way that I cannot describe. I can only recount it as affirmation, care, and nurturance that is offered by someone who loves you more than one can understand. I am thinking here about the kind of love that is pressed into the fresh ginger, ground in a mortar with a pestle and used later to be mixed with warm water and honey to soothe a sore throat. It is the affection and care that is packaged in the mango pickles that you massaged with oil, salt, and spices. I want to feel that kind of ineffable love again that only a grandmother can harbour and sustain.

When I had seen you that night, feeling indebted to everything you have given me, I wanted to tell you this: *I am sorry*. I regret not spending more time with you, when your body became a former version of itself, and the signs of death had been imminent. I am sorry that, for all the times you had prepared a warm cup of water with ginger and honey, as well as all the bottles of mango pickles that you packed for me, I could not do so much as visit you during your final days. If I could apologize to you every day until my own death, I would. Yet, when you finally appeared in front of me, all I could offer was my silence. I am disheartened by my inability to say something—to speak words into existence. Please, return to this world. Let me speak these unfinished words out into the world. That night, I had so much to tell you when you appeared, yet before I could even whisper a syllable, you had vanished into thin air.

The Body at Rest

As Morrison (1984) reminds me, “When we wake from a dream we want to remember all of it, although the fragment we are remembering may be, and probably is, the most important piece in the dream” (p. 388). What is difficult for me to confess here is that I only remember seeing you for a split second. I wonder if there is something salient about this, as Morrison (1984) suggests.

At first, I am unable to recognize what this dream signifies, so I wallow in sorrow instead. Truth be told, I am still living through the grief of your death in this ongoing life of mine. I feel other emotions, for sure, but I am like Mishra Tarc (2020) in that I believe grief precedes all other emotions. I am not ashamed of this—of grieving and mourning your loss. In the words of hooks (2000), I remember that love requires a willingness to be touched by sorrow. No one has

taught me that better than you, who lived two decades without her husband—a man who left this world too soon. You also stayed in our village while your children fled to other parts of the world, separated by thousands of miles and vast oceans. Through what must have been utter desolation, you harnessed the capacity to love and maintain a semblance of hope. In other words, you somehow held your world together even when it was falling apart.

There are no adequate words to capture the profundity of your ability to love despite the very precarious and often terrible conditions of having to live away from your loved ones, distanced and torn by borders and oceans. As a matter of fact, no letters in any language can be strung together to profess the grandeur of how you grieved and loved both at the same time. In other words, what you have given me is a vocabulary that cannot be easily ascertained or translated into writing. I can make a shaky attempt, however. You have shown me, for instance, that tears can be shed to love someone. I have seen you cry every time I left our village, and I have seen you cry in moments of happiness, telling me stories about your children. It is because of you, and these moments that we have shared, that I am able to persist in a body that is axed and plagued by the suffering of this world. You have helped my body, with broken bones and a severed tongue, ache a little less.

What you have gifted me is a language similar to one that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has offered: to think about de-construction in a different way, where there is not only destruction but construction (Paulson, 2016). Long before this dream, you had sculpted breath out of a body that had lost everything. When I grieve and mourn your loss, it is this very breath that finds me. It is your wind, impressed in my dream and my memories, that sustains me. This most haunting, inexplicable event of your presence in my life, even after your passing, reminds me that you are still with me.

It also reassures me that you are guiding me, as you did when you were in the physical world, embracing me and summoning a flicker of hope in the despair. For this reason, I know you did not visit me as a poltergeist. You did not come to make me seek contrition either. I believe my dream has another meaning instead: you appeared to let me know that your body is at rest. You are letting me know that you are making your way, constructing a life beyond the one you lived in the physical world, and you want me to do the same. I promise I will.

We Begin, We Hope, We Find Breath

Indeed, this dream—the portal to another world—is a revelation that is uncanny and beyond explanation. It is, in other words, an impact that is otherworldly because I get to meet you, my grandmother. Even if you appear as a silhouette, there is something profound about your presence. It informs me that you continue to leave an imprint in my ongoing life, and this meeting place allows me to remember that I can always see you again even if not in this world.

Most of all, it is you, my dear grandmother, who keeps me going even if you have gone somewhere else, far from this world of ours. You remind me: when the world ends, we begin. When the world is on fire, we find hope in the ashes and embers. When the world drowns, we find breath underwater. It is you, who time and again, helps me reach the shore.

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