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Dreamdead Surrender¹²³

Simon(e) van Saarloos

“I am trying to find out if Kwati had a dream about me last night,” Lala said, rushed, making up a lie rather than just admitting she was late for no particular reason.

“And?” Tommy asked matter of fact. Lala looked into his eyes, trying to figure out if he was just one of those stoics who refused to have any stress before certainty appeared, or whether it was the flatlining effects of Mitalix. Maybe she hoped it was the drug, as if with each user she met, she was growing a little closer to the possibility of trying it out. Her parents were conservative, believing only in the comfort of meditation practices, expensive dreamcatchers, and lucid dream conditioning, and Lala was trying to understand what it would feel like to believe differently. To embrace that calm kind of certainty. To not fear sleep. But also, to miss out on the collective bond of constant fear.

“False alarm,” she sighed, getting to the desk and logging into the system. They had about fifty exams today, soon the kids would be coming in. Others would start their lessons. The instructors were already outside, sharing banter, mugs brimming with coffee and mushroom tea. Some of them vaped.

Tommy shrugged. He was stocking the baskets on the counter with energy bars, mycelium chips, and fresh dates. When he finished setting up the snacks, he turned to Lala, “And Kwati is your friend? Why would they false alarm you?”

“Oh, I don’t think Kwati meant to, really. It was something in zir message this morning that got me freaked. Just a deaddream panic from my side, really.”

“Really.” Tommy said, stoic again.

Even though she could still read his lack of response as proof for his Mitalix use, she mostly felt caught in her lie: everyone knows you don’t message each other cryptic texts in the morning. You just can’t. Some of the No Dead No Justice groups even called for

penalizing the production of such doubt. One of the ways to prevent doubt, the NDNJ proposed, was a mandatory clearance that everyone would be required to submit daily, right after waking up. In case you'd be dreaming about someone you didn't recognize or know, you could still fill in a description, and in some cases, the blockchain would be able to track the person. The tests they'd run revealed that quite some people were notified about their upcoming death and then never died. They concluded that the app must have mistaken fictional characters for strangers. Dreamy descriptions were simply too easily applicable to actual people. Another problem with the app, obviously, was its dependency on legibility; you could only clear people from those dreams that you remembered. The most shocking deaths, the ones no one saw coming, would slip through.

Lala had suffered enough of the doubt NDNJ wanted to criminalize. It was fucking terrible. But she had also created doubt, plenty of times. Attempting to express her serious interest in a date – only a few weeks fresh –, she had written her about a dream. She meant to say; a hot, steamy, sexy dream, but in a moment of shyness, these adjectives dropped and all her date was left with was this mysterious “I dreamt about you.” The date, Tirsa, had called her, panicking, and after Lala explained her original intent, they continued seeing each other. Soon however, Lala learned that Tirsa actually had wanted to break up after the incident, but that she didn't dare to tell Lala, afraid that this would ignite evil dreams. The worst was not being able to promise anything. The best she could do was convince Lala that she felt terrible about her mistake and that she wasn't holding any grudges against her. She was just heartbroken. And that, Tirsa and Lala both knew, felt fucking dangerous. Though of course Lala wanted to do that thing where she could use Tirsa's fear in her favor, pushing her to continue dating, instead they sat down together to strategize. The break-up lasted longer than their sexual escapades. Their careful untangling focused less on what they had in the flesh

and more on what could possibly happen while sleeping. It was such an intimate process, an attempt at care they couldn't have created over beers and board games. Lala eventually stopped being honest about her feelings and instead meditated on the fact that she wouldn't be able to fully control the situation. She could absolutely do her utmost best not to kill Tirsa, just like she was always doing her best not to kill anyone with her sleep, but there was a risk that could not be averted. With each of their collaborative attempts to minimize the risk, Lala felt closer to Tirsa. She wanted her. Tirsa might have wanted Lala – if she hadn't made the mistake of sending that misguided text. They strategized by talking, and Tirsa seemed to think that talking was safe, safer than sex, as if talking narrowed Lala's imagination. It did the opposite. Tirsa's lips swelled while she spoke, as if the words drew out soft pink flesh. Visible and gone, waves of gum, blooming and retreating. Lala just watched the tide of Tirsa's mouth and listened to her voice and felt it burning in her stomach. When they left the café together, Lala shoved her jacket onto her lap before rolling away, as if she'd had a hard-on to hide.

They agreed that the only way to actually release Tirsa from this grip was for Lala to miss a few nights of sleep. The exhaustion would create some safety, and Lala would have time to process her feelings for Tirsa while awake. Three nights, they concluded. They were hard, long nights. The first night, Lala was able to call off her bedtime support. She said her roommate was available. She stayed upright in her chair, playing games of finger pool. Her right hand kept winning from her left hand. She had felt tempted to ask Tirsa for one of her movie downloads. It had been one of the things she'd liked so much about Tirsa – her greed for new, illegal things. On their second date, they had gone to an underground movie theater, where they'd watch all kind of stuff that was made pre-deadream times. Lala loved the French lesbian movies, full of gender confusion and unresolved sexual longing, as well as

speculative tragicomedies full of half-real creatures. They also tried to see some action movies, but it was too painful to watch people die so easily like that; the screen filled with a constant stream of breathless bodies. This physical-dependent dying appeared ridiculous. A bullet, a disease, even heartbreak would do it. The second night, bedtime support ignored her cancellation and showed up anyway. She tried to convince him it was unnecessary, but the supporter followed his preset task rather than listening to Lala, and so she spent the second night in bed, trying to stay awake. It was the worst, lying down, fighting her eyelids, fighting anger against Tirsa for making her do this. Then Tirsa started texting, checking if Lala was staying awake. In a moment of sleep deprived rage, Lala wrote back that she was masturbating to kill time, erased “kill,” but kept the remark about masturbating, hoping that Tirsa would feel called to keep her up. Tirsa only wrote she should do whatever it took. Encouraging.

The third night she fell asleep in her chair and dreamt of tigers and dinosaurs. In the morning, Lala wrote Tirsa: “Everything clear.” She never heard from Tirsa again. It hurt so fucking much. After all that, Lala became seriously interested in Mitalix. Maybe she could just ask Tommy about it?

The first flock of children arrived at her desk, some accompanied by parents. Tommy stepped aside and watched her do the tasks he still needed to learn. It was simple, she’d register each kid for their exam, and they’d take off with their driving instructor. The external examiner would run the student’s data afterwards and decide whether they succeeded. Most kids did. By tonight, most of them would have a driver’s license added to their fingerprint. “Our youngest one today is four years,” she pointed out to Tommy. More to say something work related than anything else.

“Is that uncommon?” he asked – in the same stoic tone he had asked about Kwati.

“Well, most of the students are six years and older, but it happens every so often. Legally the only requirement is that a student is able to speak, sign, or write, so that a form of communication with the instructor is possible.” Tommy nodded. She was probably explaining things he already knew, but she enjoyed her supervising power over him, as he seemed such an average, arrogant white guy.

“Want to try the registration for the next slot of students?”

Posted 12:37 pm on May 12, 2036.

Today, Marica told me she dreamt of my death. She came over and we cried together. That was it. She is now in my bed trying to sleep, trying to continue the dream. Maybe, she said, maybe you will miraculously rise, open your eyes. I see her working so hard, trying to get back to sleep, practicing lucid strategies. And currently, I feel fine. Absolutely fine. I’m breathing, and my lungs feel wide. This morning I went for a run, like always, Marica hadn’t called me yet. I know I’m supposed to feel on the verge or something like that – many have written about it. Some have attempted to write or speak or scream themselves into posthumous fame. Others have spent their whole life past eighty or ninety or hundred reminiscing on what to erase – as the current time catches up on their past mistakes, their past wrongful convictions and political views. Me, I just feel here. Present, alive. If anything, I’m thinking about my article’s deadline, tonight. Will I make it in time? Should I be calling my mom instead of posting this online?

This platform is full of young *people’s faces*⁴ who have never experienced simple physical dying; from age, disease, accidents, or police violence. For me, it started with a dead rat. I dreamt of someone petting their dead rat, lovingly holding it to their chest, and the next day, I stepped on a dead rat while on my morning run. Obviously, I didn’t think much of it. The dead rat dream seemed to refer to a video I saw shared here of a woman on an airplane, shouting. She was nursing, and the flight attendant demanded to see the baby as he suspected she was smuggling a cat

onto the plane. When he lifted the wrap she was cradling to her breasts, it turned out to be a taxidermy/stuffed cat. The woman explained that it was an emergency support animal. Dead, but supportive. "Oh that's allowed," the flight attendant replied, slowly calming his shouts.

Those who'd lost so much already were maybe more accustomed to dream about the dead. Dreaming about those who were alive and then learning they had died, maybe didn't seem so strange.⁵ Most importantly: those who'd lost so much, were last to be listened to. It seems we had started to deaddream many months before it was widely acknowledged. I have some notes from my diary, those first months after public recognition. At the time, I seemed mostly worried about the banning of movies, videogames and other entertainment that the government imagined stimulated deaddreams. As no one I cared about had died yet, I knew nothing of grief, and I wasn't so worried about my dreams.⁶ They were mostly sexual, and if any crisis appeared at all, it concerned crashing planes or arriving too late to catch the last train to a job interview. These never ended in someone, or myself, dying. I didn't consider how non-human animals, like the rat, were affected.

All of this was always already the initial algorithm.⁷ Those who'd lost so much were losing first again. That's why it took so long for people to actually recognize what was going on. That is what they say at the underground meetings. All along we've privileged death over life, we've stacked archives full with who and what has died, we've created an almost inescapable algorithm of precarity and destruction.⁸ We forgot to dream, is what the underground Wise say, and we've deliberately silenced the dreams of those who were able to dream, despite being surrounded by death. We forgot to practice, we forgot to sense. How that resulted in our dreams having actual deadly powers, I don't know. No one does. The least wise try to understand it.

Marica tells me she is unable to fall back asleep. Am I scared? Am I prepared? Marica feels responsible. If you can, please tell her not to feel guilty. When she first called, I asked "Why me?", but I never meant to suggest she made me into a victim. The only regret I have, is that I've never been in love. With the rivers for sure

(please read my articles on the pollution of the streams), but not with another person. When I asked Marica why me, I just wanted to know what else she'd been dreaming of.

Lala's parents went through her room, opening closets and drawers with an unhinging pace, taking over tasks that she herself could easily do. Lala tended to live intimately with objects, rather than treating them like some sort of enemy. Her dad held up a bathrobe, swinging it, "Do you wear this?"

Lala looked at her fuchsia pink plush, she loved it. "You can pack it."

Often, after having gotten dressed with support of the morning shift, she would drape the robe around herself, cuddling and stroking its fluffy fabric. Her parents kept pushing her to get a dog. They'd shown her videos of all the benefits: dogs pick up what you drop, bark in alarm if something happens to you, dogs open doors. And most importantly, her parents argued, a dog is a loyal companion. Lala surely believed her parents: this was exactly why she didn't want a dog. She felt pretty sure that the dependency of a domesticated animal would immediately spark a fear of loss, possibly manifesting dreams. She preferred to stick to the bathrobe. Animate enough for comfort, inanimate enough to live.

Lala watched her mom drive. She enjoyed comparing her mother's style to the way the instructors at her work taught the cars now. Their mandate: as little interference as possible. The instructors always explained that the car calculated danger differently than people did – without fear and preemptive anticipation – and that you had to practice patience. If you grabbed the wheel each time you fantasized an upcoming crash on your dashboard, you never got to experience the skills of the computer. At the school, they usually gave kids plenty to do while driving, to distract them just enough – though the instructors observed that the kids

developed less and less of an instinct to interfere. They trusted their cars more than their own interpretation of the road and only had to learn how to handle emergencies and soft repairs.

“Are you ready?” her dad asked, patting her duffle bag.

“I think so. I hope so.” Lala looked out of the window. They passed a line of No Dead No Justice advertisements on flashy screens. Of course they used disabled people for their campaign, showing people who were in a power chair or lying in bed as the ultimate proof of “Death Is a Birthright.” Lala’s face got hot. She often wondered whether that was what her parents had been secretly thinking after her accident, believing that she would have been better off dead. They never said so directly, but they often slipped nostalgic comments about the lost possibility to “just die.”

“Did you make that booklet with everyone’s memories?” Lala inquired. Her mother grabbed the wheel, even though everyone was in their lane.

“She did,” dad replied, putting a hand on mom’s knee. “Everyone’s contributed.”

Lala looked at her dad’s hand. She remembered this gesture as comforting.

It had been some years since all three of them visited the hospital together, and Lala felt overwhelmed, passing the elevator to the rehabilitation wing, following the red-white arrows to the dream lab. Upstairs, they could skip the waiting room and meet the doctor right away.

“Lala!” the doctor called enthusiastically, as if they had met before. She bent down on one knee after offering her hand to mom and dad. Rather than meeting the doctor’s eyes, Lala looked at the rim of her bright white coat brushing the floor. “How are you feeling?” Before she was able to answer, the doctor continued, “I hope you’re mighty excited to get some sleep with us. Did you have any questions before we bring you to a bed?”

Lala pulled back a little, a rubber squeak of annoyance on the grey linoleum. “I’ve read up on all the technicalities. I’m mostly just hoping that it works. My grandfather is really tired. I really do want to help.” She stressed her motivations mostly to convince her parents, who seemed to waver between medical logic and parental guilt about the fact that Lala was the safest bet for this procedure. They’d already had to overcome quite some hesitation to accept medical care. Lala simply feared what it would feel like to euthanize someone. To deaddream her grandfather. She didn’t, however, blame her parents for asking her: she’d understood enough to know that parents should avoid going under, because it is more difficult to dream a generation up than it is dreaming down, studies show. Responsibility and a shared history of vulnerability triggers fearful fantasies. In larger family’s than Lala’s, the youngest is expected to be the one with the least attachments, and therefore deemed most fit. She was ready for it.

The doctor with the dusty coat stood by her bed, checking allergies and her current list of medications, while a team of people hooked her up to painless monitors. “Mostly for research purposes,” the doctor explained. “We are in the early stages and we need to learn quick. Some people are dying for release.” Lala laughed, but no one joined. The bed was comfortable and clean, even mildly smelling of bleach. Her mom sat in the window frame, studying the booklet she brought, frantically scrolling. The collected memories from the family were to quickly ignite an obsession with her grandfather’s life. Dad had written a mantra about his death, saying that it is time, that he is ready to let go. Repetition was key, the instructions read, creating a pattern that Lala could continue in her sleep. A needle was stuck in the back of her hand, for the lucid dream inducing Kava Kava extract that she would receive. She’d also wear a clunky headband with mildly activated electrodes, stuck to her forehead, using LED light stimulation. They couldn’t medicate her into sleep, because it

would reduce the effect of the procedure, but they promised to serve relaxing herbal tea.

“Your opulent use of daily medication will be an interesting extra factor in today’s research,” the doctor said. Lala laughed again, this time because of the word opulent. She herself often silently sung about being flooded with a joyful candy rain when swallowing her morning dose of brightly colored caps.

They stayed together for hours, exchanging stories. Even after her mom had read through the whole booklet, more memories came up. Lala’s as well. She remembered her grandfather singing, how he would applaud so loud for himself that it almost took away the pleasure of praising him. They looked at several picture albums together. The last album was of 2024, as if the expectation of death with age had been the main motivation for visual documentation. Or maybe it was a NDNJ conviction; did Lala’s parents stop taking pictures because they believed that still images captured the person portrayed in such a way that it led to deaddreaming? Lala knew this was popular belief among NDNJ’s – their propaganda had contributed to the government’s ban on movies, so she had learned from Tirsa –, but she couldn’t recall her parents being on board with any of that. (The idea that stillness and immobility were a kind of preface of death was fucking offensive to Lala.)

Then again, she could not remember much of the fear of those initial years. She was young enough to live on with this completely different reality, actively forgetting what was normal before. She didn’t want to bring it up right now. Instead, she listened to her father repeating the mantra again. They laughed about her grandfather’s love for paintings of naked women and discussed how to distribute this inheritance: erotic images were quite valuable for their representation of liveliness. As advised, they talked about him in the past tense. It worked in so far that mom started to cry. She’d been experiencing the “suspended grief” that many felt for those who were not lucky enough to be released, and she now was able to feel something

more urgent and direct than the dim of waiting: her father gone, instead of him not being able to go. Before they left and called the nurse to install the headband, the mantra was said once more, each of them repeating it, struggling whether they should say “was” or “is.” Grandpa is ready to go. Granddad was.

Everyone wished her luck and “do your best,” no one said “sleep tight.” It was dark in the room except for the blinking of machines. A familiar sight from her weeks in the hospital, spent staring at her legs, wishing her toes would wiggle if she hoped hard enough they would. She shifted strategies when the person in the neighboring bed told her to stop, breaking the night with their unfamiliar voice: “You are wasting your imagination. You only lost your ability to walk, not to dream. Imagine what is possible living with your paralysis.”

Now she was alone in the room, with a tight band around her head, and she needed to shift her thoughts to her grandfather. The one thing they really seemed to have in common was an appreciation for visual art. His paintings had felt like an education she wouldn’t have encountered otherwise. Lala loved the overwhelm of visiting his collection of naked women. The frames and loose canvases hung closely together, sometimes on top of each other, across all four walls and propped on the ground. The messy choreography of the paintings – sometimes only the cup of a breast would show, or an eye, or flowing hair, curvy lips – allowed her to desire, just like the movies did, for unattainable worlds (not just women). Without the animate threat of destruction, Lala could fantasize all she wanted.

Lala woke up in terror. Her parents stood at her bedside, accompanied by the doctor, big eyes, awaiting. Lala pulled at the electrodes on her forehead. She was panting, out of breath: “I have to call Tirsā.”

Notes

¹ Could we, the restless, the overworked, the underslept, the one-eye-open wary sleepers, activate kinship through the dolphin adaptations we have already learned in order not

to drown here? Could we imagine a world where we are all safe enough to sleep held in the arms of the river, in her mothering flow, supported by the boundaries we need to fully rest? I want that for you. I want that for me. All this time that I have been half-awake, I have been dreaming of a world that could deserve you. They told me it was a hallucination, this waking dream I want for all of us, but now I know the truth. In a world where capitalism as usual makes us complicit in drowning the planet, we are the ones who are already dolphins, the psychics, the visionaries. We could trust ourselves. Our adaptable foreheads were not made to be caged; we deserve the restful freedom to evolve, to—as D’atra Jackson said at the North Carolina Emergent Strategy Immersion—“surrender to your dreams.”

—Alexis Pauline Gumbs. *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*. AK Press, 2020, 89.

² You know how people are so in awe of Octavia Butler’s journal, the way she wrote down what she wanted with her books? I think it’s because written worldbending resonates so widely. I’ve been curious about what other languages one can worldbend in, though, languages of manifestation, if you like. Writing things down, using images to make vision boards, speaking things aloud—these are all spells. Most of my own worldbending is very action-based: I move as if the future I want is absolutely assured, making choices and spending money like a prophet—buying clothes for galas before I was ever invited to one, paintings for a bungalow I had no idea how I’d ever afford, the pink faux fur for my book launch before I even had a book deal, shit like that. And see, this is why I love you, because you never thought it was impossible; you dream even bigger for me than I do for myself.

—Akwaekwe Emezi. *Dear Senthuran: A Black Spirit Memoir*. Penguin Random House, 2021, 69.

³ Dreams are often oracles dismissed. We may not recall our dreams, or shrug off their messages. We may feel outCIPHERed by them.

But afrofuturenauts are an intrepid tribe. We know that ancestors beforeandcomingandnotgone have dreamed us up (are still dreaming us up), and that the future is <--- ∞ --->. We know that our dreamworlds are time-folding and -foiling, and available for our deepest extragalactic play. Adventures in Soporifica never begin and never end—but its present is always porous. Enter the afroraculum. . . .

There are some simple technologies available to help you peer into and pull up from the dark well of the future:

58. Just before you settle down for sleep, jot down what you want to dream about. (Asking aloud or just holding the intention can work well.) What insights are you looking for?

Patience is key here. My experience is that “commissioned dreams” may not come immediately—but they will come. Keep asking.

11. Make a bedside offering to your dreamworld/The Maker of Dreams. I’ve set aside tea, a clutch of wildflowers, and other small gifts. Making offerings for multiple nights once gave me one of the most powerful, unforgettable visitations of my dreaming career.

5. Dedicate yourself to recording your dreams. I’ve kept a tape recorder near my bed for this purpose, as sometimes I’m feeling too in-between-worlds to actually write anything down immediately after. I also keep a few dream journals. Record what you remember, no matter how partial; even a snippet or a flash of color has a place in your dream reliquary. Collecting the shards and writing them down as a poem can also help the dream cohere.

21. Honor your dreams. Draw them, act them out, build an altar devoted to them, follow their choreography, talk about them. A respectful, attentive dreamer gets rewarded with more oracles, more vivid dreams.

873. Slow down your waking life enough so that you can notice when your dream life is dropping breadcrumbs. There can be such a magical echo-play between worlds—dream

iconography has cropped up so many times in my waking life. Pay attention, look around, stay woke and dreamy. Seed receptivity.

The dreamworld is wily, and wildly sovereign. It helps to think poetically and to be primed for the long waiting [the wooing]. Being available for a steady stream of precognitive dreams demands stamina and sinew. But over time, you can build dream-skill. I'm now able to change course mid-dream, and stop nightmares before they really get started. I've asked for dream guides and gotten them. I have visited my death during sleep, and also learned of others' illnesses and deaths through dreams. Not too long ago I dreamed that something that I have been wanting for ages was finally mine; a voice in my dream said, "You can have this, if you believe." So believing that that dream-vision prefigures my waking life is my next big Afrofuturist adventure.

Welcome to sleep, your chamber of oracles: oraculum. For the Black future:
afroraculum.

—*Black Quantum Futurism: Theory & Practice*. Volume One, edited by Rasheedah Phillips, AfroFuturist Affair, 2015, 73-75.

⁴ From Kae Tempest's song "People's Faces":

It's hard
We got our heads down and our hackles up
Our back's against the wall
I can feel you aching

None of this was written in stone
There is nothing we're forbidden to know
And I can feel things changing

Even when I'm weak and I'm breaking
I'll stand weeping at the train station
'Cause I can see your faces

There is so much peace to be found in people's faces

I saw it roaring
I felt it clawing at my clothes like a grieving friend
It said

"There are no new beginnings
Until everybody sees that the old ways need to end"

But it's hard to accept that we're all one and the same flesh
Given the rampant divisions between oppressor and oppressed
But we are though

More empathy
Less greed
More respect

All I've got to say has already been said
I mean, you heard it from yourself
When you were lying in your bed and couldn't sleep
Thinking couldn't we be doing this
Differently?

⁵ "It's still in our culture, it's still these ways of being that are deeply, deeply spiritual.

It's still not being able to go out because your mom had a dream and based on that, you are not going anywhere!" Akwaeke Emezi in the podcast *The Root Presents: It's Lit!* Episode 44, "Exploring the Ethereal with Akwaeke Emezi," 21 July 2021.

⁶ "Death frees people for new experiences.

So I was to learn at the funeral of my friend's mother.

As no one I cared about had died yet

I knew nothing of grief."

Cheryl Clark, "The johnny cake." *Narratives: poems in the tradition of black women*, Kitchen Table Press, 1983, 45-50.

⁷ "What I want to think about in this story, in a similar but different way, is how black life is absent from the classificatory algorithms that are applied to statistically organize our world. This absence affirms how the premature death of black people, and, more broadly, the acute marginalization of the world's most vulnerable communities, are entrenched in algorithmic equations. What I am struggling to work out, then, is twofold: that premature

death is an algorithmic variable; that black life is outside algorithmic logics altogether.”

Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*. Duke UP, 2021, 105-106.

⁸ “So, what do we do with the archival documentation that displays this unfree and violated body as both naturally dispossessed and as the origin of new world black lives? How do we come to terms with the inventory of numbers and the certain economic brutalities that introduce blackness—the mathematics of the unliving, the certification of unfreedom—and give shape to how we now live our lives? And what does it mean that, when confronting these numbers and economic descriptors and stories of murder and commonsense instances of anti-black violence, some of us are pulled into that Fanonian moment, where our neurological synapses and our motor-sensory replies do not result in relieved gasps of nostalgia or knowing gasps of present emancipation (look how far we have come/slavery is over/get over slavery/ post-race/look how far) but instead dwell in the awfulness of seeing ourselves and our communities in those numbers now? This is the future the archives have given me.”

Katherine McKittrick, “Mathematics Black Life.” *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research*, vol. 44, no. 2 (Summer 2014), 19.