



A dancing body leaves nothing

Photo by Aliya Kerimujiang

A choreographer considers the way dance and grief can become partners, and breathing goes on

by Aliya Kerimujiang

Today is just like any other day. I wake up at 5:30 a.m. to practice yoga and enjoy a cup of coffee on a side bench on the corner of 3rd Ave & 93rd Street. The morning symphony of New York City is busy and noisy. I like the sound as it always helps me get my brain going in the morning. I let a part of my brain travel to wonderland, and another part of my brain observe my surroundings. The poster outside of the coffee shop says *Happy Father's Day*, and it reminds me that I haven't been able to talk to my dad for almost two months. It's been difficult to get in touch with him lately. I wonder how he's been doing from a half a world away.

I decide to call him again after I get home from my daily ritual in Central Park. I get up from the bench and walk into the hidden nature inside of the city. This is one of my favorite places to search for inspiration and reflection, especially now, as I am creating *Aarzu*, an hour-long dance theatre production. Entering the park, I start with a ritual by asking myself *who am I*, although I

never have an absolute answer to it. Exploring the nature of my identity helps me to pursue meaning in life and gain insights into performance.

Who am I? is a question broad enough to think about life and existence, and specific enough to allow me to get lost in past memories. Fragments of memories often visit me in the form of currents, passing through my whole body while engraving indescribable feelings onto my heart. I am walking by the artificial lake. I walk slowly as I want my body to absorb every piece of information it can. The sound of a gentle breeze rustling the leaves, the birds chirping, hopping across the trees, the laughs from passersby, the list goes on. Every step has a meaning that only the body knows how to decode. I see a duet between the reflection of the sky and the water's surface, so I stop to have a better look. The sky seems to move in continuity with the rhythm of water waves as long as the light exists. I bend over to look for my silhouette in the water's body, and I see the memories of my dad. I gently reach to the water with my left hand, and the dance begins.



Photo by Aliya Kerimujiang

The dance starts with my body exploring the means of life by traveling through past memories to the history of tomorrow, a “bodily becoming” as dance philosopher Kimerer Lamothe would say. I remember the forgotten knowledge derived from my ancestors as I move to the patterns of nature. I sense grief, pain, pleasure, anger, and love, as the stories of the past reflect back to my body on the surface of the water. I inhale collective human memory and exhale to become who I am today. The echo of Isadora Duncan's voice lingers around my fingers as I open my chest to

the sky. She says to me and everyone: “The dance of the future is the dance of the past, the dance of eternity and has been and will always be the same.” I am the dancer of the future, and so is everyone who connects to the self, others, and earth through dance. I see Anna Halprin, Hanya Holm, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, Kimerer Lamothe, Andrea Olsen, and I know the list continues throughout every corner of the world.

It's about time to end today's practice. I'd love to keep dancing, but I also want to rush home to facetime my dad. I need to call him as soon as possible or 12 hours of time difference will make us miss each other again. So I end the practice with some performative rituals and walk out of Central Park with satisfaction.

My dad has always been my go-to guy to discuss life and dance. Still, lately, neither he nor anyone in my family has responded to the texts that I send as often as possible. I try to call my dad, and again he is not picking up the phone. I text him to say that I love him and he needs to call me back because I miss him. But, no response. I call my sister without hope that she will pick up the phone. Surprisingly she picks it up right away.

"What happened? How come no one has answered my calls for almost a month?" I raise my voice to pretend to be angry the moment the line gets through.

"Jie Jie." She refers to me as the older sister in Chinese. She speaks quietly, probably because she doesn't want to wake Mom. Her room is pitch dark with just enough screen light. I can see her face is covered with tears. She seems fragile and has lost a lot of weight. I don't why, but intuitively I know that someone in the family has died.

"Did someone die?" I ask emotionlessly but urgently. I don't know what I will do if it's true. She nods her head and starts crying again.

I try to hold myself together, “Is it grandma?” I don't know why I think it was grandma—because of her age, perhaps, or because I don't want it to be anyone else. My sister shakes her head. My chest feels so heavy, and I hold my phone so tight with my fingers. A moment of silence, and then I say something I don't understand: “Dad is dead.” I want her to say no. “Dad is dead, isn't he?”

She keeps apologizing to me. “Dad has been dead for almost a month.” She asks me to be quiet, because Mom still insists on keeping it a secret from me. Time seems to have stopped, and my body is paralyzed. I can't breathe, and I can't move. There's a light piercing my body into halves, and my body begins to scream, and tears rush out of my eyes. I hallucinate—an image of myself returning to an animal crouching in the deep forest and howling into the air. My body is split into halves; part of it has nothing to hold onto in this dream-like world anymore, and another part of it still finds dance as the purpose of living.

I wanted to mourn for my dad in every breathing moment. I would sit by my favorite tree silently crying and listening to the whistles of the leaves and the ebbs and flows of water waves from the Hudson River Park. I would ask my favorite tree to send my blessing to the tree next to my dad's

grave. Mom has planted a tree next to where my dad's body rests. To thank my favorite tree, I would dance for or with it, and pick up the trash left from the previous visitors.

Dad's death shifted the direction of *Aarzu* into a choreographed funeral ritual that I dedicated to him. It was a way of saying goodbye to him and accepting my destiny as a dreamer and a dancing body. Dad was the one who encouraged me to dream whenever I lost faith in myself or the reality of the arts. Memories of him would flash through my mind, pictures after pictures. I have missed talking to him, I have missed hugging him, and I have missed dancing with him. It was he who first taught me to dance from my heart. He would encourage me to look for answers from books, life, and people, but always return to the body that I have. He wasn't a dancer, but "bodily becoming" was his nature.



It has been a year since he died. I moved out of New York City after completing *Aarzu*. Life continues, and I am still not willing to find a way to face his death. Sometimes when I dance, I sense a translucent and ephemeral presence that is reminiscent of him. We would dance together like we did when I was a child.

He is still with me, now and forever.

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