

# The Dream

by Sam Kerson  
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Day of the Dead, the last days of October and the first day of November. I first saw it practiced near San Cristobal de las Casas. In 1971. I was with Trudi Blom. Of Na Bolom the Grande Dame of anthropologists in Chiapas and the hostess of the largest table of celebrations and discussions in the city. It was a mysterious event, at the church in Chamula. The floor of the church was covered with Pine needles and the air was clouded by a rich incense, Copal. Many people were there in a respectful way to appreciate and to commemorate; to remember their own people, their families, their fathers and mothers and grandparents and children who had died.

There were groups of men outside the church. We were high at Chamula, 7200 feet and it was cold at night, we were in the clouds. Men who looked like mountain men came out of the fog, dressed in woolen ponchos with broad brimmed hats. I became especially conscious of one man who caught my eye, a very dark skinned man I thought he had been burned umber, by the sun. He was a foot shorter than I and he was wiry. His wool poncho was black and rich with lanolin so water beaded up on it. His sombrero was especially wide and black. He wore a white shirt under his poncho and there were lines of white above his wrists and below his chin.

His legs were bare and his feet were dark and seemed part of the soil. He was shod with hand-made leather sandals. He was smoking an Alas which hung from his lip and created a smoky area right in front of his face. His eyes were narrow with dark pupils . He had a slight mustache that made a line down and around his chin. His lips were thin, his cheekbones high and protruding. The signs of a long hunger.

I knew there were people who took ritual roles, *Major Duomos*, who were required and expected to drink excessive amounts of alcohol on a ritual occasion like this. And I suspected from this man's posture and his aggressive way of looking at me that he was one who had been drinking one shot after another of aguardiente or mescal much of the day. He stood in front of me with his arms out and his palms up. As if to say; What? You? Here? He was looking at me

from very far away even though we were face to face. He was speaking in Tzotzil. The night was Halloween in my culture but Dia de los Muertos in his.

I thought the scene was “spooky”. Goodness knows what he thought. Who was this large white man who had crossed and intersected his ritual path? His first idea was to make a gesture of Amistad and he reached out a hand to me. I reached out my hand to him. Our hands joined together, but they were so different, mine large and white his small and powerful. He squeezed my hand with a strength that made me gasp. He was staring right into my eyes. I felt I had to respond though I also thought I had been advised by Trudi not to engage anyone, not to touch anyone, not to be in contact with anyone. And here I was hand to hand with a mountain shaman, a troll, a duende who had just emerged from a deep cave for this occasion. He was speaking in a chant, rhythmic and full of crescendos and drops in pitch and in volume. His sentences went up in pitch ending at a very high note. Almost a whistle. Sometimes the words came quickly, sometimes with pauses between each word. He was not letting go of my hand. He spoke in a way that was hypnotizing and I strained to understand what he was saying. He was not squeezing my hand like at first but he still had a firm grip.

Perhaps like he had grabbed a bear by the paw and he was trying to talk it down. He intended to calm the strange creature that had come to him in his place, his very remote place, at this special moment in the year when the milky way was open and the souls of the dead could travel back and forth. How could he know that I was just a man? He tried different things, singing, a sort of singing, he asked me to dance in a way; he tried to initiate a rhythmic movement with his feet. We started to circle. I was startled, perhaps frightened. We were surrounded by other men who were dressed similarly in wool with bare legs and leather sandals but their colors were all beige or grey. The men looked quite serious. But then Trudi came looking for me. She spoke Tzotzil and she addressed the men and told them I was a student from the north and part of her group. The man relaxed his grip and I was free. I bowed to him. I said I was happy to have met him. I thanked him for letting me go I suppose. Trudi laughed at me. And the scene melted into the evening festivities and we Gringos continued our withdrawal. We had been to “Muertos” at the church in Chamula.

The thirty first of October was always important to me and as a theatre we produced outdoor fire pageants of the Underworld, at night, on that date year after year. Our shows were on Hunger Mountain in Vermont. Perseus and Andromeda, the five pieces in the Inanna cycle, including Inanna in the Underworld and even a Death of Ubu Roi. Always being out of doors on that important night, ever feeling the opening in the milky-way they had spoken of there in San Cristobal.

But in '94 I returned to Mexico, to Oaxaca and was able to arrange a number of performances at Monte Alban, the ancient Zapotec Ritual Center in the city of Oaxaca. When the director of the site asked when would you like to do this event. I said Dia de los Muertos. He looked at me to see if I knew what I was saying and when he determined that I did, he said, "So it will be". The Show was *Sol y Luna*, the Zapotec story of how the sun and moon came to be in the sky. The performances started at 5 pm in the ball-court with the birth of Sol y Luna and proceeded to the Patio Hundido for the spectacle of killing the deer. Then we trooped along the eastern avenue with our large audience following, as we experienced the three castigations. We were on the south staircase for that appearance of the serpent and from there we could see to the west, the setting of the sun and to the east the rising of the full moon. In the finale Sol y Luna were launched into the heavens from the heights of the North staircases.

Those were magnificent performances. But in a way, what really happened there, for me, was my encounter with people of the Zapotec universe.

I met people who were practicing Dia de los Muertos as part of their ancient culture and they took me home with them. They were inviting me further south to Tehuantepec and finally to San Blas Atempa, an independent Zapotec municipality since 1814, when the Zapotecs defeated the French forces that attempted to divide Mexico at the Isthmus. The women of San Blas were central to this victory..

This encounter could not happen during the six years of *Sol y Luna* because the giant performances dominate all of our psychic spaces. But afterwards I accepted their invitations and followed them down to the Pacific coast. In 2000 I flew from a theatre project in Europe directly; from Amsterdam to Mexico City. I was in Mexico City for the Day of the Dead, and I started looking for it. It was appearing in Mexico city even in early October. Certainly in the murals; consider Diego's *Sunday Afternoon in the Alameda* which includes the "Catarina" the popular skeleton decked out in all of her high white silks with voluptuously flowery hat, her dangling jewelry and her very boney hands.

I was making pictures, pastel pictures and I was feeling the vibe, following my intuition as I went along, moving south, searching for the manifestations of the holiday. Oaxaca de Juarez was preparing and the artists had large pictures of smiling skeletons on their easels. People were making masks and *Jinetes*, horse and riders, reminiscent of the Headless Horseman, paper sculptures ; skeleton figures, skeletons embracing, skeletons dancing. Since I knew the artists, and the theatre and the workshops in Oaxaca I saw the preparations, the masks and the costumes being made and even rehearsals. The *comparsa* for example, a dance and mask piece, clowning along the streets, re-enacting the ribald, grotesque scene of a masked old man who falls dead in the street and is then revived when the lady skeleton lifts her skirt covering his head completely and wiggling her bum. She sits on the old man and he is revived, jumps up and dances with his skeletal seductress. A neat duality, si no? Is the skeleton reviving him in life or in death?

The younger son of my family in San Blas Atempa was studying architecture at Benito Juarez University. He came to where I was staying, at Rosa's place across from the steam baths on la Reforma, and invited me. We went along together in the evening along the sidewalks in the direction of the Llano, a large, broad, tree filled urban park on one edge of the city. At the far end of the park in front of a high red wall, a tent was lit and there was a small area of seating and the band was on the stage when we arrived. The stage was decorated with skeletons and large two dimensional green Iguanas. The singer was dressed in the traditional costume of Tehuantepec. Her braided hair was wrapped about her head, like a crown, her shoulders were filled out by the costume and her black Huipil was covered with one of the iconic Zapotec designs of bright tropical flowers. She wore a long skirt in a dark violet. The woman sang la Martiniana in Spanish, in Zapotec and in English.

The Martiniana is a well-known Zapotec song that says,  
Please my love do not cry when I die .  
It gives me great pain when you cry.  
Better if you sing la Martiniana for the music will always live.  
Dance the zandunga my love,  
play the Martiniana,  
the music will live forever my love and so will I.

The singer was Lila Downs.

When I got to San Blas which was a day's travel further south, and thousands of feet lower than the Oaxaca valley, near Tehuantepec my friends were ready for me. They kept me right in their home and the sisters worked out what I could see and make pictures of the next day. In fact, when I arrived, Lambertina the matriarch was, in the back patio preparing the essentials for the ritual meals. This cooking was done in commune with the other women of the neighborhood. The women brought sesame-seeds which were grown locally, some brought chocolate also a regional product, some brought chiles and together with their wood-fires and large pots they roasted and stirred and baked and brewed the ancient sauce intended for this sacred day, the seventh Mole', Mole' Negro. My friends took me to the home of a sister who was making, day of the dead bread. I went to the field where men were harvesting Cempasuchitl, the bright yellow marigolds that would be used for the altars and as guiding signals for the travelling spirits. The men filled whole ox-carts with heaps of these bright yellow and symbolic flowers.

I went to see the old people in their hammocks. A cousin brought Atole' and Tamales, the ritual foods of dia de los muertos. The old couple smiled on us and were delighted by the visit of the sisters. I drew.

Bands were rehearsing, altars were being built. People were cooperating to organize velas, candle lit memorial evenings and parades. Gatherings of women in the streets were obviously talking about their plans. I was making pictures; drawing and colouring images. Being apart but being in attendance to all of these events.

When the night came my friends took me walking to the pantheon, the cemetery, which was lighted with candles. The graves and the grave stones had been cleaned up during the day and were now flowery and candle lit. People had various ideas about how to remember their dead, some sat silently or prayed. Others sang or even had arranged small bands. At this hour women set up their *puestos*, their portable kitchens and cooked, tonight they had moved their charcoal fires to the grave-side where they shared, the traditional Atole and Tamales, or tacos or garnachas. All in candle-light with the shadows thrown by the light of the moon making it darker under the trees. Whole families gathered around their graves and visited and remembered and drank a toast to their departed.

Some people took precautions, there were superstitions and old stories of uncles who had become stuck in a nether world, neither life nor death, unable to cross the river and unable to return to the world of the living, except on the night of Muertos. It was always possible that one of these angry uncles might return to San Blas on this night to search for help in his endless effort to get across the river of life. These malevolent forces might require an innocent soul and they were quite capable of stealing one. People locked their doors and kept their altars burning all night.

Even though they expected, at the same time, that the souls of the dead, their loved ones, would visit the decorated altars and taste the foods and drinks they had arranged on the altar for these travellers from the other side of the river of life. It was proven that the travellers came in the night by tasting the gift foods in the morning, if they had a flavor that was diminished then clearly they had been “eaten” by the visiting souls of the dead. The travelling spirits had taken the essence

of the ritual foods with them when they returned to the other side of the river of life.

Lambertina had been cooking for an event, a vela at her sister’s place. None the less she had planned to serve a supper of Mole negro to her brothers and I, before she left. We arrived together; the five brothers and the one gringo. The five brothers were campesinos and it seems they might have come from the field. They were in fine good humor but they were not really cleaned up, they still had soil in their sandals and on their hands. They washed at Lambert’s sink. They splash water at each other they chattered in Zapotec. Lambertina, a woman of stature, full bodied, her braided hair piled high on her head and a Zapotec emblem emblazoned on the breast of her Huipil, with her long skirt, bare feet and muscular arms, was master of her kitchen and we presented no problem. She was prepared and she put the meal on the table as soon as we were

ready. The dish was a piece of baked chicken, a chicken she had killed in the morning, covered with the shiny dark sauce. There were plenty of handmade corn tortillas. The brothers had their own conversation and they were quite busy with it. Lambertina sat close to me. I was at one end of the table and she sat at my left. She had a *lemonada* but she was not eating. She watched me as I tasted the sauce. I tasted it carefully. I smelled it, the *piquante* of the chiles, tickling my nose. The warmth of the chocolate and the creaminess of the sesame. I tasted it on my tongue. It was balanced and fresh and wholesome. I felt its nutritional value. I declared this was the best Mole Negro I had ever tasted in fact it made me doubt I had even had Mole negro before. She countered, 'enjoy it you will not get this mole anywhere else but here'.

And then while I ate she began to tell me her story. Her father was a *campesino*, a fine man who had a plot of land where he grew everything that the land and the climate permitted. This is a very rich agricultural area especially with water which the president of the Republic, General Lazaro Cardenas had provided with his dam, built in the thirties. Lamber's father grew avocados which she told me had been invented by the Zapotecs. Her father grew mangoes and almonds. The main crop was corn of course but also squashes and beans. Sometimes, sesame too and flowers like Cempasuchitl. He was a very competent gardener and had good crops all through his life. When she was twelve she went to work for him. Her job was to take the Ox-cart loaded with produce to the Market in Juchitan.

I was mopping up the mole with the tortillas as were the brothers who smacked their lips enough to make Lamber laugh. She offered seconds and served it to the brothers. And just a little to me.

Seating herself again, she tells me that she went to the market every weekend. She was known for her fine product and sales were good. She always made a little money on these market days. A bit of money for herself. Small money but still some money and what she did with her money was to buy gold. The smallest pieces, any pieces she could get. She bought gold. She asked me, "Do you have gold you would like to sell?" I assured her I did not. And wondered that her woman's culture, here on the Isthmus, was on the gold standard that we capitalists had abandoned so long ago. She was well off, she could feed her kids and educate them. They all had college degrees and good jobs.

The sisters had arranged for me to travel with their uncle's band to visit homes where a husband, or a son, or a daughter, had died in the previous year. It was after seven when a boy came for me. I grabbed my kit and followed him to the house of the musicians. It was dark out on the street. Uncle Omar welcomed me and told me the plan. They intended to play all night, moving from house to house. There were a couple of drummers with hand drums. Two clarinets and Omar played a bass sax. We all shook hands. I knew none of them and among themselves they spoke Zapotec. As we started out we saw houses where candle-lit arches of flowers at the door-way invited visitors of this world and the next. But we went on across the canal into the

poorest neighborhood where the houses were huts, some of them of adobe and some merely sticks with cardboard sides or even palm fronds, with a plastic tarp roof. The home we went into featured a snarling dog at the door which the woman came and silenced. We followed her inside, ducking under the lintel. There was an enclosed space open to the heavens where she had her cook fire on the ground and where there was a pile of wood and a few folding chairs. The space was barely big enough for the two old people and the woman and two of her kids and the six of us musicians. There was an altar, a small one with candles and flowers and a few gifts for the lost soul. Plus there was a large stack of cases of beer with a couple of bottles of mescal on top, right next to the fire. These drinks were for the musicians' libations. There was little formality, and what there was, was in Zapotec. I suppose they spoke the name of the deceased and perhaps remembered him in a story. The woman poured the Mescal while her son distributed the beers. The maestro saluted the lost husband. Then the band played. The drinks were more than offered, the musicians knew but I was not prepared and had to be compelled to drink the toast. They played marching songs. I drew. The drinks kept flowing, the band kept playing and after thirty or forty minutes we made our exit. Already a staggering experience, we milled around in the dark street until we got oriented then we walked through the night to the next house. Another humble abode which was very similar; dirt floor, campfire at the "hearth", ragamuffins, with a dignified woman who was in an emotional state. The woman was barefoot; she wore her long skirt and a simpler version of the Zapotec huipil with a geometric design on the breast. There was a mangy dog and a fire in the middle of the open space. There were few people and a lot of alcohol. We all looked, lost on the road of life, with the shadows and light of the fire, and the starry sky overhead. We were waiting in this very simple shelter for the cosmic visit that might come on this night when the milky way was open and the river of life might be crossed by the lost husband. He might return, the music was for him. And the band played; the clarinets speaking the melancholy parts and the bass sax describing the field of our hopes and expectations while the drummers kept the whole idea in marching order. Our host family seemed especially concerned that we drink the alcohol they had procured at such sacrifice for the occasion. The musicians drank. I resisted but it was very impolite.

When we were out in the alley again Omar told me they would visit eight or, if they could, ten more houses. I knew I could not keep the pace and my refusal to drink the libations was enough to cause the failure of the whole magical enterprise, so I made my excuses and went my own way back to Lambertina's house.

Late in the evening I retired to my room which was on top of the house, a two room dormitory on the roof between the clothes lines. Everyone sleeps in hammocks because even at the end of October the nights are warm, even under the full moon like tonight. My roof top accommodation looked very droll in the shadows with the white walls illuminated by the light of the moon. The

tops of the trees that covered the patio where the cooking had happened covered my apartment too. The small city was going to sleep. The streets emptied, the traffic stopped, there were few street lights. The night air was fresh, we were not far from the Pacific. Bats fluttered overhead. I swung in my hammock quite happily and comfortably and shortly fell asleep.

I dreamt, I had been in some sort of crash and I was laying in the street. I was trying to sort out a two layered essence that floated on the air. A 1950s after shave, Old Spice, layered with the distinct hard whiskey smell of Canadian Club. My grandfather, my father's father Samuel D, had died suddenly when he was 64 in 1963. His wife Evelyn had preceded him by ten years and in the sixties he lived by himself in his very droll and rustic, "Real Estate Office" which he had set up in a greenhouse he purchased as part of his business dealings. I heard him talking on the phone; Myer, zent ir gegangen tsu di shul?

My grandfather, who has been dead for 50 years, bent down over me. I looked him in the face, he was a very clean shaven man, his skin always looked a bit scraped. He smiled, he called me Sammy. He helped me to my feet.

Where are we Grandpa?

It is Ok, we are close to the river of life.

Are we dead?

Yes this is death.

I am very pleased to see you.

We hugged.

Let's walk along together and we will see the others.

Really, the others too?

Yes.

Come along with me.

And before long we came to the river and it was not so wide. It flowed calmly by.

And there were dogs as the tradition says, but they were friendly.

We could see our family on the other side. My son Raphael, now a young man and my grandfather's wife Evelyn and my mother's grandmother Harriet and my mother Muriel too.

They were all there. My grandfather took my hand and we stepped into the river of life and started to cross. The water was frightfully cold, and the current was strong, perhaps like slipping a foot into intergalactic space? I woke up. I realized I was awake and alive but I kept my eyes closed and relished the experience and the encounters and wondered what it all meant.

We continued making Day of the Dead events, an especially memorable spectacle was the one after the twin towers. Which we made in Queretaro in the Plaza de Armas, 4 nights in a row. In 2001. That was Katah's first Dragon Dance event, Sophie and Tomas Luna were part of it, Elizabeth Torres choreographed the dances and built the ritual alter.



At the end of 2019 twenty years after this dream experience. I slipped on the ice in Montreal and broke my ankle. Very impressive surgery, this was BC, *before Covid* and the surgery was at Notre Dame, the old hospital in Montreal. Before long we were back in Trois Rivieres, our bedroom is on the same floor as Katah's presses. I was pretty disabled; and could not really walk for weeks, and it was winter. Katah helped me organize the paper and pencils and linoleum blocks and set up a workstation. I felt compelled to make the 30 images in this collection one after another in a few weeks. I made the original images right in bed, horizontal with the drawing board on my lap. Next I cut the images on linoleum right next to Katah's Atelier du Livre. Katah proofed the prints, handing them back to me for revisions, until I felt they were ready. We started to put them up on the wall, looking for the right sequence. Bernardo proposed to write the introduction from his personal experience in the Sierra Gorda. Before spring we had the whole sequence and the order and Katah was able to begin working on the book. Normally we would make the hand-pulled limited edition, artist's books first but under the influence and force-major of Covid 19 we have produced this paperback version first. We hope the images in this book are as important to you as they have been to us.

*Sam and Katah in Quebec*

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