

Symbols of death in animal dreams



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Somewhere amongst the fallen pecans, the woolen afghan, and the clandestine photographs, we can find in *Animal Dreams* a consistent symbol of death. Codi is followed throughout the story by a seeming demise of those around her, from friends and family to earthly surroundings. She is faced even with the loss of her own perceptions of herself, her origins, and her instincts. The novel opens and closes on "The Night/Day of All Souls," granting readers insight into Codi's past and potential future, including their death of conventionality. Beliefs, motives, and traditions are greatly altered in these chapters, providing vast and changed perceptions of surroundings. Codi's return to Grace in "Hallie's Bones" employs the demise of a previous adventure, an avoidance, and a strange unwillingness to accept the security that she secretly longs for. "Bleeding Hearts," and "A River on the Moon," describe the death of natural beings in Codi's own "personal ecosystem." She is then confronted with the gradual but undeniable death of her father's mental state in "Day of the Dead," and "Human Remains." From the initial loss of her mother and child throughout her development to the realization of her future and environment in adulthood, Codi is continuously challenged with the images and realities of death that surround her. *Animal Dreams* begins with Doc Homer's memory of his daughters as young girls, in "The Night of All Souls." He makes the decision that, after frequenting the tradition, "this will be [Codi and Hallie's] last year for the cemetery and the Day of All Souls. There are too many skeletons down there." (Kingsolver 4) The opening of the novel, beginning "from moments of departure," is portrayed quite clearly in this obvious denial of a child's holiday custom in attempts to conceal a dark family secret. (Stevenson 187) This behavior exemplifies Homer's general attitude towards his children throughout the

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story, frequently substituting love and “ the exhibition of affection” for practicality and protection, or “ orthopedic shoes.” (Rubenstein 204) This absolute restraint of affection and honesty from father to daughters is a standard symbol for the death of tradition and communication. Quite differently, “ The Day of All Souls,” upon which the novel closes, portrays “ a sense of affirmation, emphasizing resolution, continuity, new life, and the next generation.” (Stevenson 187) In Codi’s acceptance of this fresh, alternative option, however, there can be found the death of a custom. Codi’s undying refusal to remain in Grace throughout the novel, as well as her avoidance of a stationary lifestyle to begin with, truly and visibly approaches its decline in this chapter. Including the announcement of her father’s eventual passing, this chapter also reveals that Codi had, in fact, been present at the death of her mother. “ If you remember something, then it’s true,” Viola explains, finally smothering the painful insecurity of Codi’s continuously denied memories. (Kingsolver 342) “ The Night of All Souls,” and “ The Day of All Souls” are sincerely appropriate to the realizations and choices that are encompassed within each chapter. It is true that the decisions and outcomes of the primary characters in these chapters, whatever their intention, touch all souls, describing the clearly “ all-inclusive” natures of these unquestionably significant dates. Codi’s transition into the momentous change she undergoes throughout the novel begins with her return to her hometown of Grace, New Mexico. Following an inferior position with 7-11 and a silently unsatisfying relationship, she makes her way back to the town, “ of things that erode too slowly to be noticed” in “ Hallie’s Bones.” (Kingsolver 8) While she originally applies this description to the town’s natural features, it soon becomes clear that this gradual wear is pertinent to

its population as well. Literary critic Roberta Rubenstein argues that with Codi's return to Grace comes also the "recovery of her own lost self." (Rubenstein 204) However, her eventual outcome is one that absolutely marks the death of this original personification, creating an entirely new character out of Codi. Her homecoming is, in fact, a death in itself, of the empty and anchorless life that Codi previously claimed. She arrives "at that moment in my life, without knowing how to make the kind of choice that was called for here." (Kingsolver 15) By the time of her final settlement in Grace, however, she maintains an entirely different perspective and ability to not only "make that choice," but feel worth in doing so. The title of "Hallie's Bones," is a slightly ominous one, possibly providing insight into the completely altered future of Codi's story, much like the chapter itself does altogether. The promising steps into Grace, along with the descriptive disappointment in her past "adventure" ultimately offer the clue that "the search for individual identity is by itself not enough to grant her the peace, security, and sense of belonging she craves." (Aubrey 1) Reminiscing on the tremendously close relationship between the two sisters, "like keenly mismatched Siamese twins conjoined at the back of the mind," and the past they had shared together, allows a slight anticipation of the events to come, as does the venture into an old, yet completely new, world of Grace. (Kingsolver 8) In addition to her sense of self, clarity of memory, and several loved ones, the loss/death that Codi experiences quickly extends to her natural surroundings as well. "Like Codi's inner being, the land around Grace is at risk; a major stage in Codi's eventual discovery of her true place as an 'insider' in Grace is her political awakening to that fact." (Rubenstein 206) "Bleeding Hearts" describes the oncoming of winter, in which the trees

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begin to die, shedding their leaves and fruits “...in thick, brittle handfuls like the hair of a cancer patient.” (Kingsolver 173) Plagued also by the poison ground and inability to reproduce, the “fruit drop” takes place all throughout the town, inspiring an extraordinary and lifeless image. (Kingsolver 63) The very fact that the trees are unable to reproduce simply because of their location in relation to each other is, in itself, a profound symbol of the distance that Codi places between herself and others in order to evade the constant feeling of loss and death around her. Similarly, with her biology class, Codi discovers that the town’s river is being harshly polluted by a nearby mining establishment in “A River on the Moon.” “Our water was dead. It might as well have come from a river on the moon,” Codi explains, giving palpable meaning to the chapter’s title. (Kingsolver 110) The river’s lifeless state holds great similarity to Codi’s own personal ecosystem, as “[the land’s memory] bears on the idea of home.” (Rubenstein 206) The few frogs and fish in the river, bearing unexplainable life, represent the citizens of Grace, continuing slowly and unknowingly through their days, despite their unchangeable and empty surroundings. The unbroken patterns of the blind life, chosen and accepted by many in the town, remain tragic symbols of the absolute death of growth, in mind, body, and ultimately, culture. One of the most focal examples of the death that Codi experiences in *Animal Dreams* is that of her father. Despite their relationship’s lack of communication and affection, Doc Homer’s gradual slip into Alzheimer’s disease and eventual death is a painful one for Codi. Homer’s persistent efforts to conceal significant facts from his daughters in attempts to protect them from deemed-painful reality are unsympathetically equalized by the lack of love that he exhibits for them. “As urgently as Codi needs to delve

into the past, Doc Homer has over the years felt compelled to cover it up.” (Aubrey 7) Despite this attempt, however, Homer, “ the community’s respected doctor...is, ironically, unable to heal his own family,” creating detached and distant relationships throughout the process of this obstruction. (Rubenstein 204) In “ Day of the Dead,” Codi comes to the full and heartrending realization that her father is stealing into the grip of Alzheimer’s Disease. His full acceptance and pleasure in solitude that “ wasn’t a waiting period, it was life” feed the apparently impenetrable distance between the ailing Homer and his desperate daughter. (Kingsolver 153) The chapter’s appropriately dark title likely refers to the full recognition that Codi experiences of her father’s certain decline in addition to her own true isolation. “ Human Remains” portrays a later, more developed stage in Doc Homer’s rapid demise, exhibiting a more accepting side of Codi towards her father’s illness. Confusing the bundle of Hallie’s memories that Codi attempts to bury with her long-deceased child, he argues and observes her confusing actions, noting “ the fact that all these particles of dirt have now been rearranged.” (Kingsolver 333) The soil, however, remains just one of the drastically altered features in Codi and Doc Homer’s lives, symbolizing the distinctive new world that the two enter after all that they have endured. Homer’s confusion with Codi’s bundle is appropriate as well, for in burying the memories of Hallie, she too is essentially burying Doc Homer’s own detached baby. “ There are no human remains,” Codi explains, generating a distanced, yet exceptionally appropriate answer from her father. “ How true,” he replies, linking painful and overwhelming, shared scenes of death together into a singular and unworldly explanation. (Kingsolver 333) The chapter’s title designates a separation of body and soul which seemingly

ensues prematurely for Doc Homer, setting into motion Codi's coping process of loss and death once again. Efficiently weaved into the texture of love, self-realization, and acceptance is the noticeable theme of death found in Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams*. Ranging from an unidentified emptiness to the absolute loss of a loved one, the symbols and scenes of death by fear, self-misunderstanding, industrial carelessness, or disease are evidently portrayed in the lives of Codi and her father. The silent inabilities of Kingsolver's characters to accept change and adaptation often pave trails of painfully similar futures, either in the creation of their own personal loss or in the failure of properly managing their grief. Doc Homer's persistent stage of mourning produces a cold and sorrowful relationship with his daughters, enabling lifetimes of unawareness and self-speculation. In turn, Codi's unwillingness to accept the settlement of a permanent home creates equally difficult attempts in the establishment of meaningful relationships.

Meanwhile, effects beyond average control, such as pollution and disease, generate willful neglect and inefficient methods in coping processes.

Kingsolver's novel is a detailed cross section of a character pursued and enveloped by death. Her emotional accounts of tangible events create an inspiringly convincing narrative of Codi's quest to escape death's

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