Meaning Making with Plants
From Our Memories and Imagination

Bijal Vachharajani
Author, India
bijalv@gmail.com

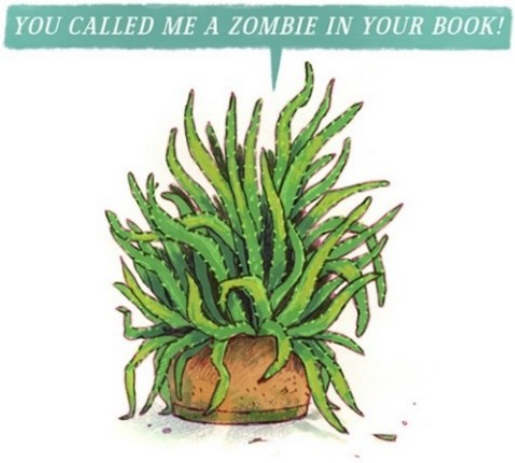
Rajiv Eipe[1]
Illustrator, India
rajiveipe@gmail.com

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozona.2024.15.1.5399

Plants: We have a bone to pick with you.
Me: You do realise it is hard to pick a bone? You all are plants.
Plants: Excuse me, your own species has done research to have to convince you that we talk, we scream and we have better taste in music than you for sure, what with your constant listening to Bollywood songs. So we can definitely pick a bone.
Me: OK, OK, that was a bad joke. So why are you upset? Tell me, I am all ears.
Plants: No, that's corn.
Me: Eye roll.

[1] A version of the illustrations has been published in Bijal Vachharajani, *Savi and the Memory Keeper*, Hachette India and Blackstone Audio, USA, 2023.

Plants: We digress. How come we don't see any profits from these books that are about us?
Me: We?
Plants: Yes, very much we.
Me: Umm, you didn't write them.
Plants: Sure, but we were the muses.
Me: Right, but then I give you sun, water, and all.
Silence.
Me: What?
Plants: We are all shaking with laughter. Can you see the white larvae? What about that oozing snail. And all those brown tips of ours. Look at my soil, it's so dry, it's a victim of climate change.
Me: I literally just fed you fresh compost.
Plants: Half of the compost has fallen on the tiles, but sure. Anyhow, back to the matter at… ahem… hand. What we mean is the money plant needs feeding.
Me: Dude, really.
Aloe Vera: YOU CALLED ME A ZOMBIE IN YOUR BOOK.
Me: You're literally waving your thorny tentacles at me as we speak!
Here, let us show you, literally how we made your book happen.



A while before the pandemic took over our lives in 2020, I began writing a story about a girl grappling with the loss of her father. For me writing *Savi and the Memory Keeper* was a way of making sense of my grief—I lost my partner to a heart attack in 2019. Writing is the only thing I knew, especially because the act of reading was returning to me only in fits and bursts after a year of fugue.

And then the pandemic took hold. I didn't see a human being I knew for 21 days, the duration of India's first lockdown. Yes, like many, I was holding virtual meetings with my colleagues, getting on video calls with family and friends, and

watching actors on the shows I binged on. But I didn't physically meet a person who I actually knew.

Coupled with my grief, I turned to haunting my apartment's balcony. From the eighth floor, I watched the clouds change daily—gossamer wisps in the morning shot with golden sun rays, fat cumulus ones in the afternoon and a delicate Bauhinia pink in the evening as the sun set on yet another Groundhog Day. I started tending to my plants—it was better than talking to my mural—and not just giving them a sip of water every few days.

The thing is, I have always loved the idea of plants. My mother had a gorgeous array in our Delhi balcony. Then, we moved to what was then Bombay (now Mumbai) and most of her leafy babies got smashed en route. I still remember her loading them onto the truck, bequeathing them to the care of the bemused movers. I don't think she ever told us this, but the fact that most of her plants didn't make it, broke her heart just a little bit. She consoled herself by saying our flat was way tinier than our Delhi one—fact and how—so there was very little room for plants. She made do.

But every once in a while, she would reminiscence about the jasmine. That's when I realised how much meaning that plant held for her. Because my grandmother loved the smell of jasmine. It was something the women in our extended family would often do—buy strings of jasmine flowers to put in their hair—and giggle at the finery. It was a moment she remembered with love, having lost her mother to a sudden illness in the hospital. One day as my mother talked about her mother while folding clothes, she swore that the smell of jasmine flowers hung thickly around her. The twelve-year-old me sniffed deeply, disappointed to only smell the fresh laundry and the dal cooking on the stove.

These little moments found themselves in my young adult novel, *Savi and the Memory Keeper*. It was perhaps an attempt of meaning-making from memory and imagination, a sense of both our griefs coming together on the pages of the manuscript. In the book, Savi is determined to take care of her father's 42 plants legacy, despite her stubborn brown thumb.

Children often ask me if I put myself into my stories. I do. But Savi is nothing like me. She's an angry teenager, I was an introverted one, terrified of everything and everyone. But our brown thumbs were definitely the same.

Something my plants attested to.

When my late partner moved into this flat, we excitedly began growing plants. Arugula spilled out of the pot, basil gave out a heady aroma, and the mint grew like weeds. And of course, weed showed up, but we always let it be. They are so pretty, he would say, as he watered them daily. And they were. They made me think of Paro Anand's *Weed* (Roli Books, 2008), a YA book about the conflict in Kashmir from the point of view of young Umer who is caught between his love for his parents and their conflicting ideals. 'We are the weeds,' she writes. 'The wild, unwanted things. Who wants weeds? Thrown out. Out of everyone's lives. I can't help sinking into the sticky mess of self-pity and hopelessness. I can't help it. There doesn't seem to be anything else to do.' How then could I remove those weeds?

 ISSN 2171-9594

The week we went on a holiday, we came back to carnage. The entire plant family had been destroyed by pigeons. We cleaned up the mess—upended roots of rosemary, torn of leaves of palm, and soil everywhere. The only plants the survived were the aloe vera, two pots of cactus, and a jasmine that never seemed to blossom. And yes, pigeons do keep making special appearances in my books for this very reason. Call me Count Monte Cristo if you will.

That was it. No more plants, I decided.

And then, he died.

I was running on empty. All I was left holding was memories, tangible and the intangible, and so many of them rooted in our home. My home. With an abundance of time on my hand, where evenings stretched like yawns, I had the terrifying thought that most grievers have. What if I lost those memories?

Already, his voice was an echo. His footsteps in the house had faded. His things were gathering dust. In his book *Insomniac City: New York, Oliver Sacks and Me* (Bloomsbury, 2018), photographer Bill Hayes recalls meeting a fellow griever who doesn't use the word 'died' when talking about his loss. Instead he says 'disappeared'. Hayes then replies, 'That's exactly how it feels for me, too.'

Disappeared. Cambridge Dictionary describes it as, 'to no longer exist/ (of a person or thing) to go to a place or into a condition where the person or thing cannot be seen.' That fits. Months later, a fellow widower pointed out that I used the word death some thirteen times in our conversation, a word he was struggling to comprehend. I told him about the other word, disappear. And like Hayes, he too agreed.

It fits.

The erosion of memories is such a big part of loss. And the fear of the erosion as well. The more you reach into a memory, the more faded it seems to become, like a Polaroid over time. Yet, the plants, they had become my memory keepers. Something I didn't actually realise until my editor, Nimmy Elize Chacko began brainstorming titles for the book. My working title had been *Definitely Dead,* mirroring my mood and also Savi's, and the finality of the disappearance. Then, she pointed out that the plants and the trees in my stories could be defined as memory keepers.

I realised that's what I was doing. Unconsciously in my life. And consciously on paper.

As I tended to the aloe vera, I remembered his smoke breaks on the balcony, our languorous weekend breakfasts, and sometimes silent evenings where we stared at the clouds. The jasmine was now all brown and stubby, but I couldn't throw it away. I admired its resilience in refusing to die despite my brown thumb. The cactus offered a strange solace, of remembering very human moments of arguments and loud cricket on TV.

Savi's story formed a bit more. Her father's plants were not just evoking memories for her, they were telling her the stories. The smell of a jasmine pulled up one. The rosemary, which denotes memory, did its job as it reminded snippets of food

 ISSN 2171-9594

cooked together, an activity that Savi loved sharing with her father. The zombie aloe vera, it offered kinship with its thorny tentacles.

And then, enter Tree.

I was obsessively reading about mother trees, and their mind-blowing ability to communicate with other trees using the mycorrhizal network to share excess carbon and nitrogen as described by Canadian scientist Suzanne Simard. I had always loved hugging the trunks of trees, I went chasing sturdy baobabs to embrace in Madhya Pradesh, chatted with a mighty oak in Binsar, and met an ancient and wise banyan in Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve. I knew that was the story, Tree who held the climate of Savi's new fictional city Shajarpur together, and was now under threat.

I chose a ficus based on my tree friend Radha Rangarajan's recommendation. After all, to me, they are the owls of the tree community. The wise ones.

Similarly, in *Afo and I* (Pratham Books, 2023), picture book maker Canato Jimo plants cosmos flowers across the story of a boy rushing home to say goodbye to his sister who is leaving for the big city. A climate book, the boy vends his way—through a forest, a hill, all of which are facing the brunt of the climate crisis—to his village, pausing to pick a handful of cosmos flowers. 'Things are changing,' he writes. 'I wish things would stay the same. I wish Afo would stay…We could play among the cosmos flowers. Jump over puddles in the rain.' At the end, he makes his peace with his sibling leaving, but he hopes his sister will come back, and the flowers will be a reminder of home.

When Savi first meets Tree, she's dealing with a new fancy school full of Very Cool and Hip People, the fact that the Earth continues to spin even though her father is not on it, and she's lonely with her family being on their separate planets of grief. Tree welcomes her to their shade, and much more.

Yet, when I read this section out to children and young people, I realise that most of them have never climbed trees. Ever.

Nature deficit disorder.

Environmental generational amnesia.

Shifting baseline syndrome.

Shrinking roaming radius.

Scientists have found many names for the growing disconnect between nature and childhood. I see it in my classroom conversation as they describe their city as—

Smelling of garbage

Tasting of cement

Looking crowded

Feeling icky

So loud

Their perception of their homes now are increasingly smog-filled, noise-choked, and full of natural disasters like flash floods and heat waves. They can't name common trees like gulmohars or identify a myna, but can tell me the latest video game and its features.

 ISSN 2171-9594

That's not surprising. As writer Robert Macfarlane pointed out in his book *Landmarks* (Penguin), nature words had begun disappearing from the dictionary, replaced by technological ones. His response was to team up with artist Jackie Morris to create *The Lost Words* and then *The Lost Spells* (Penguin), books that have magical spells in the form of poems to be read aloud so as to conjure nature back into your lives. So compelling was the first book that it led to 'mass participation of primary and secondary schools in learning 'nature literacy'.'[2]

Naturalist Yuvan Aves, a writer based out of Chennai, often takes children on tree observation walks. Before that he reads from *Savi,* he told me, the part where she connects with Tree, merging literature with nature walks.

All of this reveals that children have an inherent curiosity and fascination for the natural world. As biologist Rachel Carson wrote in her *The Sense of Wonder* (Harper, 1998), 'If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in.'

Fact.

Prod a little and children suddenly start squealing with enthusiasm about spiders and snakes, crows and eagles, puppies and cats, and elephants and tigers. Something that picture book maker Rajiv Eipe beautifully captures in *Hello Sun!* (Pratham Books, 2023), where a boy impatiently waits for the rain to stop and goes out for a nature ramble. It's a joyous celebration of nature as he meets touch-me-nots, wildflowers and other plant denizens and greets them with a loud hello. All in the backyard of his urban house.

In all of these books, illustrations and photographs become a placeholder, an archive of nature in the face of environmental generational amnesia. Together, they tell infinite stories that hold memory and meaning.

Plants: See?
Me: What?
Plants: All us! All. Your books. Those other books. We're the heroes.
Chorus strikes up: 'We are the champions'.
Me: You know I can just stop giving you water.
Plants: Then what will you write about? HA!
Me: Fine, you win.
Plants: YAY! YAY! We won, we… ummm she's left. Hello? We do travel but not so quickly. Hello, come back. At least play us some music, ideally jazz.

[2] "The Lost Words: a 'spell book' that closes the gap between childhood and nature" by Louise Walsh, https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/thelostwords

 ISSN 2171-9594