



The Agave Files

Nancy Davies

Life, death, time and nature's plan impact simultaneously in the course of one agave's final maturation. The Agave Files is Nancy Davies' response to the imminent death of her partner at age 94, her own aging body, and nature's visible process of death-linked-to-birth in one plant. The agave's stalk, called a quixote, both spear and shield, stands as the emblem of her partner's life-long desire for justice.

For poets, gardeners, religious people, philosophers, the elderly, social activists, or all-in-one, this volume of photos and poems calls us to re-connect.

NANCY DAVIES

Dedication

In these poems I use maguey and agave interchangeably depending on my quest for rhythm: maguey (ma-gáy) has two syllables, agave (a-gá-vay) three. Not too mysterious. Not symbolic.

If symbols are your thing, look at the photos. The first appearance of the phallus is overwhelming, and knowing well that the agave will die, that its clock is ticking, that we all are dying, that the character Quixote (pronounced in Oaxaca as kee-oh-tay) after whom the stalk/spear is named) represents the mad and noble attempt to right wrongs—even the nurses began to write. What nurses? My partner George Salzman, to whom this File is dedicated in loving recognition of his quixotic dedication to justice, was approaching his 93rd birthday when the agave explained death, inevitable for us all.

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Agave (the scientific designation) is a genus of monocots native to hot arid regions of Mexico and the Southwestern United States. Our maguey (Mexican common name) lived its last days in our small patio. All agave species bloom just once, followed by the plant's death. Before blooming, an agave may live anywhere from seven to fifty years. I don't believe people who say one hundred. But maybe. The erect thick life-stalk inevitably signals death, a stunning contradiction.

The agave leaves, while the plant grows (in the species we have) are fat, full of sap, very fibrous. Ours would have served for making mescal. The fiber, called *ixlé*, used to be harvested from the stalk and woven into carrying bags, a lovely, arduous artisan craft with pre-hispanic origins. Maguey fibers also make good rope. I'm told the flowers can be eaten, but not the fruit. Another day an ethnobotanist told me the fruit can be eaten when it's young and surrounded by the flowers. Eh!

On the underside of each leaf a pattern imprinted on its skin indicates its birth process: how the leaf unfolded from the plant base. Blue-green-gray is the leaf's color, and the imprint a darker blue-ish shade. During years of plant growth, we cut back many leaves because of their brutal sharp serrated edges. One cuts for safety: leaves extended five feet outward from the base. We also cut them to use for basting pit barbecues.

Due to the appearance of the base after leaves are cut,

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Oaxacans call the base piña, which means pineapple, an apt description. The living base is the plant support when it reaches its pinnacle of eight to ten meters. To remove the dying agave, the gardeners first cut away the piña, and then push over the stalk.

The word quixote, often spelled quito or quijote, which in Oaxaca refers to the tall phallic stalk, comes from the novel *Don Quixote* by Cervantes. The don was a man who sallied forth with his loyal sidekick to do good deeds although such need was unperceived by others. He went armed with his lance, a true gent.

The quixote, as it appears and grows, defends its outer side with bronze-colored sharp shields. Liquid in the roots and leaves firmly sustains the height. When the stalk blooms, the stiff leaves wilt, wrinkle and die while the stalk turns brown.

Following many months of anticipation, the bloom disappointed me—no showy petals! The stalk issued short branches—maybe eighteen of them—like a hat rack for clouds, and these put out feathery yellow flowers, and then thumb-shaped green seed pods.

Once the plant was clearly dying, it was prudent to cut it down here in the city. We had no space for its fall, it reached 30 feet in height. Oh, maybe 28. The normal remaining agave life-span, after appearance of the stalk, is about eight months. In a natural habitat, the dry agave stalk plunges seeds into the soil by the simple force of its fall. Oaxaca spring rains brought many down; they wasted on the patio bricks. Meanwhile, the

parent plant did not wait for seed-birth; innumerable little agaves sprouted from the roots in a fairy ring.

On the ultimate day of the maguey's existence I invited everyone who cared to watch: birds and strolling neighbors included. Two men from the Oaxaca ethno-botanic garden—experts—did the task. First they cut away the piña, heaping big yellow chunks on the patio. Then one man shoved the unsupported stalk until it leaned against our roof. He maintained it in place while the second man climbed a ladder and cut the stalk at a height sufficient for him to grab and lower it, along with its burden of blackened fruit and little arms. The stalk is not heavy except when you shift ten feet of it. That maneuver was repeated; in the end the agave came down in three segments. At my request the men sawed the base of the stalk into two table-like structures, bongo-drum shaped. The exposed surface was white, not wet, like granules of dried kindergarten glue.

Those two mini-tables, along with one-third of the stalk, I saved. Why? I have no idea what to do with them. The men informed me they will rot in the rain.

They also removed most of the baby ringed agaves, which I gave to my neighbor who has land, and to his wife whose father has land. So that's okay, nothing dead that didn't die a scheduled death. The housekeeper emerged from the kitchen to examine the remaining fruit and seeds, she rejected them, no use. It began to rain. The men loaded the accumulated trash onto their truck, and departed. Curious birds perched on the telephone wire also departed. Nothing left to see.



The Test of Time

04.16.2017

Blessed be tenacious trees, tied to earth.
Blessed be the testing tantrum of a child staked
to a tense parent's pant-leg. Blessed be whatever words
start with Time: tender, tired, tasty as apple tart.

Take up green falls, bite, spit the seeds. They sprout.
Tolerate grief, pain, tears tumbling from a busted toy.
Turn. Turn again. Twisted winds torment the tangled leaves.
Tomorrow takes its time to arrive. Time is timid.

Below ground in the Metro, train-wheels tick. I procrastinate.
The rectangular clock beyond my touch on the tile
tunnel wall cannot wring its hands. Look Ma, no hands.
Darkness tethers my feet; sunlight tempts my eyes. Another day.

Past our house Martita taps her tentative cane. I tremble daily
for her travels. "How are you today?" She smiles "I dawned."
Amanecí. I woke like dawn. She takes ten steps and turns to wave.
Blessed be taut threads of time. Blessed be the tight sustaining
frame.

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Where Are The Damned Flowers

05.05.2017

The buds remain green, stubborn, standing alert
like soldiers lined up for old-time parades
announcing another war or season's holiday.
My then-child self, hidden behind knees saw nothing,
awaited that moment of love when a beau would lift me
on his shoulders to glimpse—however briefly—passing bands,
step-synchronized boys, rolling floats bedecked with girls
and flowers. Where are the damned flowers? Strapped
within green uniforms willfully refusing to salute
inevitable tomorrow: childhood spent, certain death.

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Coincidence of Death

05.20.2017

The maguey dies. Not yet, not yet. Slowly.
First the flowers open. And the offshoots shoot,
establish footing and leaves, sharply defended.
Death questions decisions—like installing a new
bathroom. Who survives to enjoy it?

Each cactus contains genes for age-span,
maybe a decade. Death presents a virile first,
a spear hurled upward to flower-fling the sky,
frame birds and radio transmission towers.
The Government built those signals.

I save the photos. First the stalk appeared smiling
on a bed of thorns whose heavy legs spread open
thighs: women receiving new life. But it's death,
we know that. And yet. And yet. Daily I record
its thrust, the penetration of my grieving heart.

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Agave Options

05.25.2017

The agave in its last gasp still grows,
raising a keen antenna toward angels who may
loft its lance to heaven. Who knows where
seeds of time or spent agaves go.

Across the street neighbors wake their mother's
soul in its coffin lined with satin white. Her hair
well-combed, matches. She wears her Sunday best.
Her son fingers his guitar and leads the hymns.

The weather's hot. Get her underground
before she reeks, says no one. Behind
their moving mouths I hear their silent pleas.
This story about death is brief: THE END.

Boldly demand the angels descend, my friends.
Righteous fists and rosaries, raise this undaunted
maguey spear; astride it la madre rides to Oz.
Black ants drag dinner home across the floor.
Around the dying phallus eager offspring circle.

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The Worst of Old Age

05.28.2017

Look how skin on the upper thigh sags, droops, wrinkles in folds like tired silk, or yogurt on a miserable hot day. And the upper arms show curtains falling endlessly above a vacant stage. You might think of pain, that pain feels worse, but no, the worst is watching skin slip away from muscle, sag like a dying maguey.

Or say the agave's skin wrinkled like mine. Or say my skin wrinkles like the bottom leaves of our maguey which still support in fragile acrobatics the soaring spike of its ultimate absolutely last performance.

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Chicatana Salsa

06.02.2017

Wind buffeted, a loosened grip drops a wasted
condom: gooey pistils, crossed wires, no consummation.
What a gent, my spire-squire maguey, whose thin pistils
fail my beauty test. Nearby, yellow scattered sex stains.

Dodging umbrellas, rain-sheets descend smacking
frisky puddles. I stay pissed. More sun-smiles.
The lofty treat my strained neck never saw offers
well beyond my reach nectar-cups to working ladies
whose pole-dance churns the air, and to foraging bees.

Dissolving in the cloud and sun with wings
transparent as approaching death, torpid flying
ants emerge with first June rain. Laughing
women on the street with baskets reap chicatana.
“Delicious,” bending in the rain my neighbor sings.

Frail feather-dusters wipe the drizzling clouds. Green
fruit lurch upright like an afterthought in bed;
summoned by a distant call they shove the sheet aside,
set boldly forth upon some unknown road.

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The Nurse with Rockabilly

06.18.2017

The nurse who sports a rockabilly hairdo is so bored
he changes comb for camera and climbs the roof
to capture the maguey as it soars and since
photography is not his basic skill includes his shoes,
neighbor's windows, workmen in the street below
coming and going.

He's fearless. Never will I view from such
a height clouds, seedpods that leap to
suicide on our patio below, fat-finger green
corpses bloodless on the brick- those
yes I see them, shriveled yellow stamens
limp where flowers grew. Now they're trash.

The chubby cleaner sweeps. I yearn for the un-natural
aha! – a final moment clad in light when suddenly
we comprehend how Aaron's glorious rod burst forth
astounding scoffers, while moist the gold-green
fruit swollen with pride combs aside its hair.

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The Conceits of July

07.26.2017

The agave stalk bends to the East
swaying gently, a frail old man in shul.
His shawl is green, a color unlikely
and, in fact, this image is unlikely. Please
ignore it.

The agave stalk still bearing fruit
bends to the east. It seeks the sun, as old folks
on porches do, fingering last-year's magazines.
I discard the National Geographic:
slippery and hard.

Useless, how metaphor beckons at the window.
On my uneasy feet I lean with you, my friend
toward mutual departure. Mister Death,
from any view one can't ignore
your slender gesture.



Age

08.04.2017

We think you are who I always was
that indignant day the unseen thief
stole my mirror and replaced it with a stained
distorted face. Because memories
endure, but wait, they change too, and curl
leaf-like toward the sun, sucking rain.

Suppose the maguey's memories retain
beauty dreams despite sharp knees, short
arms with tight fat-fingered fruit. Like I
a clumsy chubby child believed myself
mobile in the wind, dancing like a tree.
And now. Can this agave see reflected
in clouds that break and westward swim
its self, bravura double sex, drawn
from earth to consummation with no hint
of pre-determined features visible as truth:
my mother's bones, my father's weary eyes.

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Death of the Maguay

09.26.2017

At the end it wasn't pretty, a rasp
insistent as the demolition of a wall,
breaking threads binding life from death.
I thought so frail a barrier, but no,
it's tough, it's hard, as though death
of a quixote I grieved as already
dead was not. Dry, pale, with roots
perhaps rooted in my heart or yours,
death endures, one might say forever.

The men like nurses with careful hands
tied, lifted, arranged and cut, until lowered
on a waiting bed of brick unyielding
the undefeated lance with slicing armor lay
shredded, unreadable as papyrus code.

Safely rocking on slack telephone wires
dark birds observed; unknown foreign
mourners come to pray another passage
as I came, panting beside the spent form.
The cutter signed the death certificate, I paid.
He took the corpse. The birds left last.

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Fare Well

09.26.2017

Fare well, my maguey. Goodbye to
my mother, to my dog named Sally, to
griefs of childhood which endure forever.
Goodbye.

In chunks dismembered the agave departs
aboard a truck, like trash. How goes
my heart? Ashes to ashes, so they say.
I prepare for us a grave beneath the mango,
composted long ago by my own demented squire.
Flies gathered on banana skins and bones.
In the end, I've been told, nothing
escapes earth's gravitational field.

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The Empty Space

09.26.2017

In the soil an empty space, between elephant foot
and burgeoning aloe. I begged the gardener: fill it please,
move another plant, but then it rained torrential rains
night after night. The ground swelled. Cactus rotted.
Earthquakes altered my demands.
Cries of buried children echoed through the news,
the up-beamed schools and fallen roofs vast chaos.
Dogs wandered in unending homeless streets.

Empty space matters, though. The broken-hearted soil
seeks solace. Across the weeds crept purple leaves.
A neighbor-boy cut the felled agave trunk. Sticky dust
salted the floor. Ten pieces: I arranged them on the shelf.
Drying, the green yellowed and the yellow browned. Gold
shields turned black. I touched the quiet skulls,
shaped new-made eyes among the fibers. Inside each
remnant of my grief I fitted beaming candle-sight.
Bright by fire, what happened then?

Nothing. In sudden silence the rain had stopped. Good.
For any homeless, it's better to be dry.

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