

ROSE MARIA WOODSON

DEAR ALFREDO



in memory of my sister,

BARBARA JEAN WOODSON

All poems are memories or dreams.

DEAR ALFREDO

(I)

Dear Alfredo,

Finally I have found work. Inside an oyster. I put a spin on things, little pings that piss the mess out of you, like being one car behind the car that takes the last parking spot, paper cuts, cheap ass garbage bags that break when you overstuff them, leaving you in a carpet of cartons and egg shells. And worse. I wrap silk around shit like that, over and over again until it becomes. Pearls. All the rage now. Then, again. Rage is all the rage now. The mollusk across the way keeps rain in her heart. She's all piss and purrs these days. But then, she sleeps with a storm. Keeps spinning apologies around his sorry ass, waiting for some shiny alchemy to gloss over his dross. She's swimming in a dry river bed, dreaming strawberries, eating dust. Can't get home like that. I listen over coffee, serve up blueberry muffins and emotional helium. What can you do, Alfredo what can you do? There are nights I ride the hoot of an owl even though there are no owls here. I hear "who" swooshing through the current and I jump on, take hold of wings not my own and hold dear. Now I know what you knew all along, Alfredo: I had to lift one brick of a foot after the other, one after the other. Pave my own road out of Dodge. Leave the only fireflies I've ever known. That's oxygen-mask-over-your-snout scary. Scarier still when the road fizzles in still waters. The pinwheels in my heart stopped that night. Any knights in white armor were rust stilled. That's when I learned to knot my own darkness. Arch my life like hyperbole. And swing. Back and forth. Back and forth. I was a flee on a trapeze, looking for a way and just when I was about to unclench my rope-burned self, I saw them, a pod of photons lighting the brink. I hitched a ride on the mångata. The rest is history. Dear Alfredo, thank you for notting the darkness. Thank you for being. My trellis. At last I am my own magic bean.

Love

DEAR ALFREDO

(II)

Dear Alfredo,

Finally I have found work. I feed dreams to the bare. I feed dreams to the bear, the brown bear who rides the bike in the circus, the beautiful brown bear who rides the white bike night after night under the spotlight, around and around, a carousel in a hurricane, around and around, going nowhere fast. Without dreams, the bear can't go on. And if the bear doesn't go on, no one comes. Still. Alfredo, I never dreamed that dreams were such hard work, hard as blowing up all the balloons for the pep rally with nothing but your own puny lungs. I mix a quart of photons with honey, currants, blueberries, strawberries, a tad of lemongrass, vanilla phosphate and pomegranate molasses every night. Mix in memories and a dash of sea salt. Dreams are dynamite: too big, they kill us. Too small, we kill ourselves. I am flying by the seat of my unsteady pants. In the beginning, I asked bear how she came to be where she is. She stared at me for a petrified eternity, then told me her genesis. Far away. The foreign steal. Another place. She was pure bear. Mother of cubs. Wild grass carpeted their paws and the sun spread her wide pinkredorange-fired skirts over their furry heads each time the moon dipped to nowhere. One day they were tumbling down a hill (it's a bear thing) when stench punched her snout. Man. She hugged her cubs for one short forever, felt their young hearts beating fear already, then pushed them towards Mountain Beyond Maps. She roared, "RUN! Never return." As her cubs scampered to safety, she turned, ran towards the hunters. She woke, hogtied, head swinging dark and heavy as a cave. She knew her children had escaped. She tells me that was the last time she smiled. The bear stops here, still as a fetal pig in formaldehyde. The bike. She goes on, her voice thin ice across a wide lake. The first time the foreign steel pressed between her legs, she felt a great salmon of a roar swimming upstream from deep within her. They beat her. The next time the foreign steel pushed against her, her screams again swam long against the strong current. They beat her. The third time the steal came, she had learned to freeze the growls and roars and tears in her throat, then in her belly. Finally, fossils of fear cluttered the river of her soul. Every scream is a scar. Every scar steals a bone. Until you no longer wear your own shape but the shape they press upon you. You become the captors' cookie.

I am night now, she tells me, always night without moon, without stars. They took me from my sky and spent me in a tent. And here her eyes weeping willow and silence ball-and-chains us. I do not ask again about her home. The rooms of her heart are growing smaller. I feel her shrinking within my small spirit. I give her more light. She refuses to eat. Alfredo, what words poultice wounds? The limit of speech sucker punches me. What can I do, Alfredo? What can I do? I am just a flea. And then it comes to me. Like kudzu. This idea takes over my village of day, creeps into my brittle sleep until I no longer see through a glass darkly: I will steal the bear who was stolen. One night, I take the key and unlock the cage. No one guards those who know their place. We slip out under the stars, bend into shadows. For the first time in a forest of nights, she feels. Giving grass beneath her paws. Cool air sweeping sawdust from her lungs. She stares at the full moon, sees the Bear in the Moon smiling at her. "River," is the cloud of benediction her small voice utters this first frosty night of freedom. And so we find a river, a wide, cool river ribboning moonlight. The bear wades in, swimming in circles at first, then arrows across the currents, diving at will. She comes ashore finally, brown fur soaked, streaming salvation. She gives a great slinky shake. covering me in river dew. Alfredo, I know this moment is a seed. Not a root. But what can you do, Alfredo? What can you do? I fear being. A candle in a kamakura. How long will Bear be frozen in a glacier of scars. I must learn to speak ice. Learn the moans, creaks, cracks, thinning, thaws, haws, hems of breaking. I must learn to see the broken, the brokenness. I give Bear a cupcake with a single candle stretching against the night. Make a wish, I tell her. What is a wish, Bear asks me.

Love

DEAR ALFREDO

(III)

Dear Alfredo,

Finally I have found work. I ghost write. There is this. Sanctuary. This sanctuary is nothing I would ever dream. It wears a high brick skirt. Iron spikes ruffle all around. Only one way in. One way out. The Sanctuary for Judas Wolves. Wolves Once. Snared. Collared. Freed. How could they know, running back to the pack, a blaze of death followed. All killed. Even the survivors are ghosts of themselves. There are three here. Thin and scarred, each a ballerina in place every sucking day atop her own unseen black music box. Grief plays a song only mourners hear. A rope of a song that loops infinity, knots a strong, scratchy noose, and still they twirl and twirl. Alfredo, what do you say to a spirit beaten like a piñata, to a broken spirit spilling. Sweet sunsets. Fresh paths in new snow. First kisses. Last kisses. Home Heartbeats. What do you say to one hemorrhaging all, even while the world treats all this like just so much emotional yolk. What do you say to shattered light? I can't call them Judas wolves. Choice was never on their menu. They did not ask for the collar. Anyway, the other day, like a chicken in a barnyard, I scratched up a few grains of courage and talked to one of them. The only wolf who didn't chase me out of his room. I tell him who I am, what I want to do. And when I ask how he is, he pads away, stares out the window at nothing I can see, leaves me on a cliff of silence, waiting for an echo that ain't comin'. And I want to tell him that you can grow crystals inside big chocolate eggs, that Piccolo, the Pomeranian, now has a wheelchair and runs in the park, that the cherry blossoms bloomed in spite of the freak snow and that yesterday I had the best, frickin', finger-lickin' guacamole and I want to share these pixels of a sweet life, a sweetness still out there somewhere, that will pull him, somehow, back from the brink. Wait. These are not wolf pixels. Do over. And I want to tell him there's a herd of caribou out there, a cool, clear river that makes you belly-up for seconds and some sweet wolf berries ripe for gobbling. Better. These are wolf pixels. But comfort isn't some easy quilt of sheer words thrown over shivering shoulders. These wolves are dark snow. So polluted with the fallout of grief and guilt, they melt twice as fast from the world. And how do I sandbag emotional erosion? Tell him his family would want him to live? Those words: moths to flame. And as I turn, leaving, he speaks,

tells me that day is a bridge, blowing up in his face, collapsing in screams and smoke. Then he says, how will I write his story? He says that I will write my own story. And silence fogs the room and I can't see how to go or stay. Alfredo, I think sudden death is a magnifying glass. Every word you said, every word you did not say, is a hot air balloon clenched in the horizon. And while I know there is no up escalator out of grief, only old, rickety stairs, I can't help but think story heals. Some way. Somehow. And I promise to tell his story, his ghosts. Both the ones before me and the ones beneath me. I tell him they will not have died like leaves, falling anonymous. And then I hear his held breath sail out of him on a sigh and I am already peeling away my ego. Even as you read this, Alfredo, I am shimmying out of my own shell. I'll stand only as an old, bare oak and let the wind of his rare narrative blow through me. At night I hear his howls scampering up the scales like so many soprano saxophones. They send shivers up my spine, going on and on, circular breathing, going on and on, rising in the night, past bare branches and empty nests, all the way up to another plane where light is dying as gasping stars grasp one last cold breath. I am just a flee. This whirlwind I enter with words. Organza words. I should have come with punching bags, something the wolves could hit, bite, slash, destroy as they've been destroyed. Alfredo, what can you do? What can you do? I know now, that I am dark snow too. We today will be ghosts of tomorrow. This loss. We tumbleweed as erosion snares us, as steel traps snap shut on emotional limbs and even losing parts of ourselves, we try to live, riding a unicycle across the tightrope between here and there, then and now. But sooner or later, some little chipped cup, threadbare teddy bear, pressed flowers, faded picture, crayon masterpiece, locket, old letter, bracelet or less than perfect spaghetti sauce, someone else's child, some pup, some paw prints, some scent of blue wisteria, some swollen river, some full moon, some roadkill will tip the stairs perpendicular to Heaven and we will slide back to a depth we thought we had escaped. Ghosts seen. Ghosts unseen. All leave their footprints in someone's snow. I. Ghost. Write.

Love

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Rose Maria Woodson holds an MA in Creative Writing from Northwestern University and an MA in Community Development from North Park University. Her poems have been published in journals including *Clarion*, *Gravel*, *Wicked Alice*, *OVS Magazine*, *Magnolia*, *Jet Fuel Review*, *Stirring*, *Scape Goat Review* and *The Mojave River Review*. (Photo: Sears.)



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