

The Dream Letter

"This . . . is fiction; all the characters, even the country they travel through, while based on fact, are inventions. And what is here is as true as if I myself had lived it. Maybe it is only a metaphor, but I now own a summer in [that] century."
from the intro to *Dessa Rose*

by Sherley Anne Williams

It is Erev Shabbos. All day Pesha races with Mama to make the preparations: rolling out the dough, slicing the noodles, chopping and spicing the fish, placing the challah on the hot bricks, roasting the chicken in the open pit. She hates the rush and bustle of this day, the way not a moment is hers to savor the stillness of a deep breath, or a page in her book, or most seductive of all, the writing of a poem.

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No time for the luxury of spaciousness in this scramble, this race to beat the sun, this frantic chase for Shabbos peace. She looks longingly toward the willow tree; its leaves droop languidly on the grasses. How often she hides there, where she can see without being seen. And read. And write. It isn't exactly forbidden. That is, not overtly and yet it is understood that girls don't waste their time in this way. So she writes furtively. And if they know, they pretend not to know.

She longs to rush there now, hide from the domestic clamor of Erev Shabbos. But Mama is getting older, her movements are stiffer now, slowed . . . she complains of pains in her shoulder, the fingers of her left hand, sometimes her right foot. Pesha sighs, reaching out tenderly to touch her mother's back between the shoulder blades, "Here, let me." She takes the rag from her mother's hand and begins to scrub. Mama smiles gratefully, kissing her lightly on the cheek while a breeze wafts through the window. In the distance, the willow leaves rustle.

Long after the clamor dissolves and the rounds of festive singing subsides, the serenity of Shabbos settles on the household; the last golden flicker of the candles wavers in the warm darkness and Pesha closes her eyes and drifts toward sleep. Beyond her eyelids, the candle light flickers on and off and on until it assumes the shape of a sheet of paper, a letter flickering, off on off on spinning and tumbling

through space, through time, until it lands, like a bird finding its nest, in Pesha's lap. A letter as shimmery gold and white as the Shabbos candles, a luminous letter, as radiant as if the Shekhinah Herself had inspired it and blessed its journey through time. With trembling hands, Pesha lifts the letter and reads its opening words:

"Dear Pesha:

I am your namesake from a land of

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tomorrow . . ." --

"Pesha! "Pesha!" Mama's voice splinters the golden light. "Nu? It's time for shul. Come, Peshala. Up, up! Papa's already drinking his second glass of tea."

Pesha scrambles to her feet, then rushes through the morning rituals, pouring water over her fingers, slipping into her Shabbos dress of flowered silk, pausing for a quick swallow of sweet, warm tea and they are on their way, walking along the wide dirt road to the shul. Only when she is seated in the women's section in the upper room, carried on the waves of prayer and response, does she allow herself to re-enter the letter. The dream letter. She reaches back into the fragmented light and there she finds the words again.

"Your namesake from a land of tomorrow . . ." What could these words mean? And what is concealed in the remainder of the letter?

The words linger, weaving themselves through the day, the large meal upon returning, the cholent and nibblings of last night's chicken, the kugel filled with raisins and cinnamon and then, during the peacefulness that settles over the shtetl, menukkhas shabbos.

While Mama and Papa nap, she hurries to her sacred ground, the willow tree. Hidden beneath its branches, she locks her hands around her knees and recites the words, ". . . your namesake from a land of tomorrow." It is true, she dreams often of a tomorrow when women might be free to write, to choose whether or not to marry. And recently, she has begun to write of such a person, an imaginary woman with a name identical to hers. And now, this person is emerging. No, she reminds herself, this was a dream. Yet a dream with such force and power that she is challenged to redefine reality.

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Mama calls to her. Reluctantly, she returns to the house, where a glass of tea waits for her along with the Sabbath fruits and sponge cake of Saturday afternoon when the family, her older sisters and brother, their spouses and children would all drop in for their weekly Shabbos visit.

When Papa begins the prayer of Havdalah, a rush of excitement charges through Pesha as she joins in the ritual that ends Shabbos. Usually she dreads this moment. Despite her hatred of the preparatory rush and bustle of Shabbos, she loves its golden tranquillity, its deep peacefulness. It is the only time when she feels the whole village values silence and solitude as much as she does.

Yet the dream has gained supremacy over everything. Eagerly, she anticipates the moment when she will have the freedom and space to pursue the dream, to ponder its meaning, to push the boundaries and discover what the remainder of the letter contains. Most of all, she wants to enter this space through the doorway of writing. And writing is strictly forbidden on Shabbos.

The next day, Pesha rushes through the morning tasks, feeding the chickens, milking the goat, washing the dishes. Papa sits in the small room off the kitchen, immersed in Torah. Mama shoo's her off and returns to the quilt she is stitching for her daughter's newest baby.

Pesha races to the tree, hugging her writing pad to her under her over blouse. She spreads a burlap bag on the wet grass beneath her, then leans against the bark, sighing with relief. At last, at last, the moment she has dreamed of throughout all of Shabbos.

She lays the pad on her lap, chews on the pencil and focuses on the letter. Suddenly, an urge to write swells in her, unlike any she has previously experienced.

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A creative force that is hers and more than hers. She hesitates, then decides to trust it and lifts her pencil to the paper.

Dear Pesha,

I am your namesake from a land of tomorrow where women are equals of men. Well, we're not quite there yet but on our way. I'm the one

you see in your dreams, my dearest 17-year-old Greatest of Grandmothers. The one you write about.

May I call you Baba? I write, Baba Pesha, and I publish my poems in magazines and books and I give poetry readings. And I lead writing workshops too. In fact, I am sitting in one now --a roomful of Jewish women and we're all writing about our ancestors, our grandmothers, and mothers of long ago. Because you've been forgotten. History has erased you. No, not that. History's written over you. And now I'm erasing history to find you. A palimpsest, as H.D. (a shiksa poet), told us, lighting the path we'd have to take as women, to find our stories, our myths, our legends. And maybe that's especially true for us, as Jewish women.

And now at last we're meeting. You're writing me and I'm writing you. So this is a big hello, Baba. Baba Pesha. I love you.

Respectfully,

Pesha

She sits for a long time, reading and re-reading the words, feeling the presence of this child of the future, this woman, this great-grandchild, this soul sister. Has she ever felt so connected, so at one with anyone as she does with this person, this presence emerging, radiating from the dream, the letter?

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How full her "great-grand-daughter's" life is compared to hers. Yet she senses a hunger in her. As if a hole exists near the center of her being. What could she give to fill that space? What could she send across the years to sustain her in her bereavement, her sense of separation, the Havdalah of their spirits? She sits for a long time, allowing these questions to enter deeply into her pores. Then she lifts her pencil and begins her response:

Dear Peshala,

So you are the Pesha of the future, the Pesha of my dreams, my childhood, my soul sister. The one I create here beneath the willow leaves. Free to use your creative power and doing so. Yes, you will tell my story that I cannot tell. That is, I can tell it, but who will save it for you? No one, no one. So

you will tell my story and together we will reclaim what we have lost.

Let me speak now for, too soon, I'll be pressured to marry. I dread it. My brother, my older sisters have all married and it's all over for them. How beautifully Rivka once danced and Shana played the violin. No more. Now it's squalling babies and houses to clean and oh, Peshala, their tired, tired faces.

Because I'm the youngest, a change of life baby (you, in your modern future will not be shocked by that), they are not in a big hurry for me to marry. But sooner or later, it will happen and then how will I sneak off to the willow tree? What husband will tolerate a woman who writes? What will I do with these words burning like stars in my blood; where will they be buried? Who will dig them up, who will find them?

The pencil, the pad, drops from her hands as she stiffens, overcome with the reality of what lays ahead for her. Sheltered in the circle of leaves, she lowers her face
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into her cupped hands and cries. She cries for the death of her life that awaits her, a world without words. She cries for the women who preceded her who have experienced similar loss, women who were strangers to her as she was to Peshala. But no. That is changing now. She . . .they . . . are actually changing it now.

A hand reaches through her pain, a gentle hand stroking her hair, while a voice softly, tenderly whispers , "Oh Baba, I want to comfort you. I want so much to comfort you but I don't know how."

Afraid to remove her hands from her face, afraid of what she would see, afraid of what she would not see, Baba responds, "It's a comfort just to know you are here, sitting with me. It's a comfort to know that at least you will be free. Somehow it seems that if you are free, I am free, too."

"Yes, yes," Peshala replies, her voice fevered, intense. "Free to write. I promise you, Baba, I will write your story. And maybe you can help me. Maybe you can write it through me. Maybe I can be a vessel for your words. O Baba, do you think we can do it?"

Baba lowers her hands and looks at the wet, shining face so like her own. She stares across the centuries into the luminous, dark eyes and then reaches out to hold

her. "You ask, can we do it? Tell me this: why not? Look at us, across all these centuries and river deltas and mountains and oceans and countries and shtetls and cities and donkey carts and jets, here in this moment, sitting under this tree together, Now tell me, if we can do this, what is it we can't do?"