

Wish You Were Here
(In memorium)
A Poem by Pearl Cleage

One:

There are moments that the brain cannot fathom.

That the mind cannot hold fast.

That the heart cannot let go.

There are moments when everything shifts and shudders

And changes so completely that in years to come,

We will mark time in *before* and *after* that moment.

We will remember what we wore to church that Sunday morning.

What time we put the roast in the oven.

We will remember what we were doing when we took the telephone call,

When we saw the first headline.

Whose smiling face flashed across our minds

As we remembered waving good-by, calling out last minute farewells;

blowing a kiss for love and luck; safe travels and safe returns.

It began with a dream; a big dream,

And a big idea about what it took to be a world class city,

To be a place fully engaged in the international flow of art and ideas.

It began with you.

Your actions were intentional.

You already knew that the city you loved could not prosper
without the presence of artists to show ourselves to ourselves,
And then to the wider world you already knew was waiting to welcome us.
There was no talking you out of it, even though some of us tried.
When we balked, you persisted.
When we didn't understand, you were patient.
When we talked about business, you talked about culture
And you made us listen.
There was purpose.
There was persistence.
There was pride.
In airport photographs, you look relaxed, happy, determined.
You face the camera with the confidence of visionaries;
The certainty of people who shared a dream about shaping a city,
Of making that city a place deeply rooted in the past,
And just as deeply committed to the future.
You would spend the next three weeks as our ambassadors,
And you were more than ready for the task.
We were so proud to send you.
There is no way we could have known.
We were already looking forward to your postcards and snapshots,
Stories of who you saw and what you said;

Where you had tea in London, and who had a birthday in Portofino;
And, yes, you would confess, and we would almost see you smiling,
You had actually tried on wooden shoes in Holland
And, oh, the art you saw in Paris!

Miss you! Love you! Wish you were here!

The postcards continued to arrive days after.

Packages, too.

A wool ski sweater; a hand carved chess set; a set of six colored glasses.

Miss you! Love you! Wish you were here!

Two:

The dream did not begin in fire.

The dream did not end in flame.

But all we can see in those first terrible minutes and hours and days

Are images of fire.

Slowly, we begin to gather details, but we cannot bear it.

12:30 a.m. Paris time. Orly. Air France. An accident.

And in that moment, one hundred and six of our neighbors, our friends,

Our mothers and fathers and sons and daughters and irreplaceable loved ones,

Are gone forever.

Miss you! Love you! Wish you were here!

There are moments the brain cannot fathom.

That the mind cannot hold fast.

That the heart cannot let go.

Recovery meant moving on, putting it behind us, looking forward,

But there was no *it*; there was only you.

And if in time, we come to see that in the flames there is redemption;

That in the ashes, there is always revelation and the possibility of rebirth,

In the beginning, there is only missing you.

We are bereft, unable to understand how and why
and what we will be without you.

In place of answers, they can only offer details:

33 children orphaned.

20 more have lost their mothers.

46 adults have lost their parents.

19 of us have lost beloved husbands; cherished wives.

*5 sets of parents, 15 widowed mothers and 6 fathers
have lost their precious children.*

Over 100 of us have lost big brothers, baby sisters,

Many families lost more than one.

Some families lost everything

We wonder how we can survive our sorrow.

At the crash site, suitcases were thrown open, their contents scattered.

The detritus of your extraordinary lives:

Jewelry; a prayer book; a crucifix; cigarette lighters; rolls of film; cameras; glasses; wallets; purses; a silk scarf; rare volumes in dead languages, and your dream.

Our dream now.

Miss you! Love you! Wish you were here.

Three:

Fifty years is not such a long time in the life of a city,

But sometimes we realize how much you've missed

And we want to tell you, show you,

share you with the future you shaped, but did not see.

There are times we long for your advice and counsel;

For your wisdom and determination; for your confidence

And your fierce pride in the best of who we are.

There are times we want to take your hands and lead you here, and say, *look!*

Look what we've done with your dream!

We wonder if you would recognize your city.

We wonder what you would make of one native son

Who went on to win the Nobel Prize.

And another who won the presidency.

We think you would have expected no less.

We wonder what you would make of *lady mayors*
and downtown's soaring skyscrapers,
Of Gay Pride parades and Fourth of July foot races;
Of busy airports and underground railways,
And brand new voices at the decision making table
With their own definitions of business as usual.
We think you would have expected no less.
Business as usual was never your style.
You can't build a city from ashes, doing business as usual.
You can't rescue a dream from despair, doing business as usual.
You can't make that dream live and breathe and grow doing business as usual.
You taught us that.
And look what we've done with your dream!
We found new ways of seeing and of being.
We embraced another dreamer who left us with important work unfinished,
Just like you did, and we've done what was asked of us,
Because we knew you would have wanted it that way.
You were never afraid of the future.
You taught us that, too.
So we knew what to do with your dream,
With your big idea about what was ahead of us
If we only had the courage to embrace it; to enlarge our family circle

To include every single *Us*, before we have time to remember
That there ever was a *Them*.

As our sense of who we are becomes deep and wide and round,
And as certain as the flow of human blood in human veins.
And our idea of what we can be becomes who we really are.
Searching together for a common language of the heart
And of the mind, and of the spirit,
Meeting in this place that belongs to all of us
And welcomes all of us and looks and sounds and feels like all of us
Because you knew that the beating heart of a city
Is the song we sing together.
And sing we will, lifting our voices loud enough for you to hear them,
Carried on the wind like an anthem, like a poem, like a prayer,
Like a promise made, and a promise kept.
Just look what we've done with your dream.
Miss you! Love you! Wish you were here!

Pearl Cleage, 2012, Artist in Dialogue

The Alliance Theatre