

“LITTLE WORD, LITTLE WHITE BIRD”

by Carl Sandburg

Love, is it a cat with claws and wild mate screams
In the black night?
Love, is it a bird – a goldfinch with a burnish
On its wingtips, or a little gray sparrow
Picking crumbs, hunting crumbs?
Love, is it a free glad spender, ready to spend to
The limit, and then go head over heels in debt?
Love, can you pick it up like a mouse and put it in
Your pocket and take it to your room and bring it
Out of your pocket and say,
“O here is my love,
my little pretty mousey love”?

Yes – love, this little word you hear about –
Is love an elephant and you step out of the way
Where the elephant comes trampling, tromping
And you step out of the way with respect,
With high respect, and surprise near to shock
As you say,
“Dear God, he’s big,
big like stupendous is big,
heavy and elephantine and funny,
immense and slow and easy.”
I’m asking, is love an elephant?

Or maybe love is goofer dust; I hadn’t thought about that ---
For you go to the goofer tree at midnight
And gather the leaves and crush them into fine dust,
Very fine dust, sir, and when your man sleeps
You sprinkle it in his shoes and he’s helpless
And from then on he can’t get away from you,
He’s snared and tangled and can’t keep from loving you.
Could goofer dust be the answer?

And I’m waiting – for days and weeks and months
I’ve been waiting to see some flower seller,
One of those hawkers of roses,

I've been waiting to hear one of them calling,
"A cabbage with every rose,
a good sweet cabbage with every rose,
a head of cabbage with every single lovely rose."
And any time and any day I hear a flower seller so calling
I shall be quick and I shall buy
Two roses and two cabbages,
The roses for my lover
And the cabbages for little luckless me.

And it won't help any, it won't get us anywhere,
It won't wipe away what has been
Nor hold off what is to be,
If you hear me saying
Love is a little white bird
And the flight of it so fast
You can't see it
And you know it's there
Only by the faint whirr of its wings
And the hush song coming so low to your ears
You fear it might be silence
And you listen keen and you listen long
And you know it's more than silence
For you get the hush song so lovely
It hurts and cuts into your heart
And what you want is to give more than you can get
And you'd like to write it but it can't be written
And you'd like to sing it but you don't dare try
Because the little white bird sings it better than you can
So you listen and while you listen you pray
And after you pray you meditate, then pray more
And one day it's as though a great slow wind
Had washed you clean and strong inside and out
And the little white bird's hush song
Telling you nothing can harm you,
Unless you change yourself into a thing of harm
Nothing can harm you.

The little white bird is my candidate.
Ladies and gentlemen, I give you

The little white bird you can't see
Though you can hear its hush song
And when you hear that hush song it's love
And I'm ready to swear to it ---
You can bring in a stack of affidavits
And I'll swear to it and sign my name
To every last one, so help me God.
And if a court clerk tells me,
"Hold up your hand," I'll hold up my hand all right
and when he mumbles, "You do solemnly swear so help you God
that in this cause you will tell the truth,
the whole truth and nothing but the truth,"
I'll say to him, I do, and I'll say to myself,
And no thanks to you and you could be more immaculate
With the name of God.

I am done,

I have finished.

I give you the little white bird ---

And my thanks for your hearing me –

And my prayers for you,

My deep silent prayers