

LOVE IN THE DMZ

A Play in Letters

By

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This play, in letters, is very well served by the simplest of productions: Two lecterns, set opposite each other on an empty stage. The script contains no lighting cues, as those are to be created at the discretion of the director and creative personnel. Some productions may wish to suggest visually the locale of each of the writers. In this case, the wife's locale contains the suggestion of furnishings for a Midwestern living room and a window out toward the garden and yard. The window features cobalt shutters, as indicated in the script. Additionally, sound effects with light American songbirds may be added. The husband's Vietnam locale contains the suggestion of a tent flap and cot. Sound effects of jungle noises are another valid addition.

It should be noted that ideas such as rear projections of Vietnam memorabilia tend to distract from the emotional timbre of the letters proper. It is the author's strong belief that less is more in the staging of this work.

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

Just the facts, lady. Just the facts.

This country is eight hundred fifty miles long. Its widest point is three hundred ten miles wide. Fifty-five million people live here. China lies to the north. Laos, Cambodia and the Gulf of Thailand lie west. South and east are the south China Sea and the Gulf of Tonkin. Mountains and forests dominate in the north. Plateaus step down to the south. There are two river deltas, the Red River and the Mekong. In the mountains, they grow rubber and tea. In the deltas, they raise rice. Lots of rice.

What else?

One-third of the total land area is deciduous trees - evergreen and subtropical deciduous forests. Bamboo is widespread. There are mangrove forests along the tidal coastal plains.

And

Cobras. Pythons. Tigers, elephants, wild oxen, wild pigs, bears, deer, jackals, gibbons. And yes, crocodiles.

What the people eat is mainly rice, seafood and shellfish harvested from inland waters and the South China Sea. What we eat, on the other hand, is as much of America as they will fly in to us, everything from Spam to Jiffy to rivers of Coke.

And where am I?

That, right now, I can't tell you. I will say it is very green and not unlike Kansas as to flat. That's all I'm allowed to tell you.

And you?

Aren't you the beautiful woman living in the house with those "interesting" cobalt blue shutters? What were we thinking of? In my case, your eyes.

My "men" are boys. Their musical tastes do not run to Mozart. They love The Doors, Hendrix and Motown. There's something about rock-and-roll that speaks to war - or vice-versa. I have a whole theory. Right now, it's lights out - meaning you're probably getting the boys off to school. I like the idea it's broad daylight for you when I'm sleeping. Somehow, that makes me feel you're safer. When I'm awake, you're asleep. Pretend I still guard over you, my darling. I guard you with my heart. Your husband.

WIFE

Dear Husband:

You've got your geography all wrong. You cannot be in a place with cobras and pythons. I am terrified of snakes. You cannot live among crocodiles, tigers and bears. The boys think it's thrilling. I think it's a mistake. Where you live is in my heart. Every time I look there, I see you. You are safe and protected. You complain a little about claustrophobia; I can understand that, but the accommodations are really very nice. That's where you live.

Last night I collapsed in a heap, sobbing. I did it in the bedroom, thankfully. I didn't want the boys to see me - it was a lot of little things. The back door came off its hinge again - they slam it so, running out to their swords and guns. The oven door came off its hinge. The car wouldn't start. The TV is doing something funny. The real problem is that the boys are getting wild without you. They just don't listen to me. I ended up screaming, "You will come in here. Now. It's dark. If your father were here - "

"He's not, Mom," Sean said. "Wake up and smell the coffee."

That's what did it. The rest of the list is all mechanical. What's broken is my heart. We all need you, which you know. Which you must know. Without you, we break, not just our things. Your loving pathetic wife.

HUSBAND

Dear Pathetic Wife:

You're stronger than you know. And, weaker than you thought. I'm actually glad to know you collapsed, weeping. Of course, the real fear is that we are expendable, replaceable. You are not replaceable.

As for me, hire a handyman. Call my convenient brother. He loves to play the hero in small ways. He'll tell you I fixed the door wrong the last time. Tell the boys this, "Your father says you are to help me and take care of me."

Men, even little men, love to do those things. Which explains what I'm doing here, I'm sure. This war is a story I've heard all of my life. We are fighting so things will be safe. Safe is the happy ending. Husband (yours).

WIFE

Dear Husband Mine:

If safe is the happy ending, how did we shoot straight past it? I felt so safe at night when you held me - even when you did not. Even the sound of your breath. The casual warmth of your body. Oh, husband, I am trying to "husband" myself - my beauty - in your absence. Yesterday I had a shock - five silver hairs overnight. I yanked them out. I started crying - "I can't be old. I can't be old when he comes back to me."

I seem to be crying a lot these days. I suppose that's better than when I do my frosty, efficient, good-cheer-soldier-stiff-upper-lip self. I die inside when I do that. I freeze my heart not to miss you and I freeze my life. I freeze the hearts of our children whom you've trusted me to care for. Oh, husband. Your wife.

HUSBAND

Of course you cried yanking out your hairs. Five? I have forty. I've shaved my head, or damned close, so they don't show there. But when I don't get a shave, my beard looks like one of those dogs, the black and grey ones, some kind of shepherd. Are they Australian? I think so.

Who said you had to stay young? Young is exhausting. My men are young and this war doesn't age them, it just kills them, or ruins their minds. I see the way they try to piece things together. "Keep it in perspective," is the phrase they like to use. As if any of us can keep something like this in perspective. Yesterday, they sent one of my boys home - not in a body bag, in a straightjacket. After he was gone, two of his buddies set about packing his space to send things home for his mother to have them, just in case he ever came back to his senses. They found a box of ears under his cot. A carved wooden box, the kind they make here, the kind like you get at import shops. Thank God they opened it and not his mother.

"Ears, sir," they said. "we thought they were apricots, but they're ears." I took the box. Of course, they were ears. Some of them were children's ears. Like Jeremy's. Like Sean's. Oh. There are things I should not tell you, but I want to say, "Kiss our boys. Kiss their perfect ears. Whisper I love them."

Maybe, like all fathers, in all wars, I believe that I am here so they will never need to be.

I love you, Aged Wife. Your aged husband.

WIFE

Aged Husband:

I'm glad you tell me things. You are who I love. You are who is going through this horror, this maze of horrors. I'm sure if you didn't tell me, your heart would become that, too. I have started, my husband, to write poems again. I think they're poems, not proper poems, but you would call them poems, I know. Here is a little one:

BRING ME NEWS

Bring me news

Tell me the way it was for you.

Let me read you like a paper,

Folding you with my hands until

You rest quiet on my lap.

Bring me news.

Wars, concessions, skirmishes, interventions.

The lines on your face are like trains

On the horizon, bearing cattle, grain, salt.

There was a famine without you.

Bring me news. Your long awaited peace.

Your loving wife.

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

One good thing - this war is making you remember you're a poet. Don't you remember when we met? You used to read to me from your journal? "Little scraps of this and that," you called them. Even then, I called them poems. That first summer when we were apart I was sure I wouldn't miss you too much. I sat on that boat, miserable and freezing and stinking of fish and wishing I were holding you.

I've spent our whole life trying not to let you know what I know - exactly how much I love you. What a fool. Send poems. Your loving husband.

WIFE

Dear Fool:

What other secrets are you harboring? I have this fantasy I've been working on. It involves you and a hammock. No children, no anything but us - Oh! No clothes. You get the idea. I get the idea a lot lately. I get it in specific detail. Do you think Tantric sex is an un-American activity? I hope so. Right now I hate this country. The boys need baths. Your wife.

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

I need a bath. Actually, I'd love to give it to you. The censors mercifully left in the sex, but what was it you said you hated? Or was that sex, too? I tried to fill

in the blank. "Right now I hate _____." The clue was "an un-American activity."
Did you write "masturbating?" Speaking of which, that's what this whole war feels like to me. That's what we're doing here, it seems to me - Let's change the subject. Either way, it gets me hot and bothered.

Let's see. My brother - your hero of the screen doors - says you are looking wonderful. He had to rub it in. I'm not changing the subject, am I? I would love to join you in that hammock. That or something like it is a speciality on one of the brothels the men go to. No, I am not tempted. Yes, I would tell you. Actually, my fantasies have been stunningly monogamous. And do not listen to my brother if he tells you this is impossible - I have gathered from his letters that he's taken to dropping in to check up on you. Just remember, he is not entirely on my side. Your husband.

WIFE

Dear Husband:

I will ignore the proximity of brothels and you will ignore the proximity of your brother. I know he's jealous of you. I'm the one who broke the news to you shortly after he stuck his tongue down my throat kissing the bride. He is not a temptation and I am picturing all of the women in the country you're in as round little cartoon figures with goofy faces, and buckteeth. What is that called? "Warnography?" I think so. Uncle Sam would be proud.

I remember the Poly-Sci course I took the summer you were in Alaska. In any case, I learned that the Nazis used cartooning to get the German people to accept the ultimate solution, the killing of the Jews. They cartooned rats and Jews next to each other, making the rat's nose look Jewish and the Jew's nose look rattish. More and more alike each day, until the accusation "Jew rat" was cemented together. It's all right to kill rats, isn't it? Dirty Jewish vermin, jungle bunnies, chinks, gooks - dehumanize the enemy and then wipe them off the earth. Well, yes. I could troupe those lissome Oriental beauties off in a cattle car - or, at least, off the plank like Captain Hook. I could - in my imagination, anyway. Why did you have to mention "brothel?" I hate my insecurity. I hate my murderous heart. Your insecure wife.

HUSBAND

Dear Insecure Wife:

"Jungle bunnies" made it through. What are you writing me? About thirty percent of your last letter made it through. Maybe you could stick to flora and fauna reports. The censors loved your long letter about our rhododendrums. All now.

Y.H.

WIFE

Dear Husband:

Are you making fun of my letter about our yard? I thought you'd be riveted by the crocus and daffodil appearing. I was. They meant spring. Which meant summer next. Which meant fall soon. Which means, of course, hallelujah, Thanksgiving. You would be home. So, yes, the rhododendrums were also a big deal. Should it be rhododendra? From the Latin for "who cares?"

I am overeducated. I know all sorts of things I have no need for. It's the really important stuff where I screw up. Sean wanted to know if he could change the carburetor for me. Could he? Does a carburetor have gears or anything to slice his fingers off? Yes, I could ask your convenient brother, I suppose. Ever since your letter to me, the boys have been to all sorts of heroic chivalry - stopping short of help with the dishes, but welcome nonetheless. Your wife.

Dear husband:

I will not panic. Sometimes they don't let you write, isn't that true? I know it is, but this silence feels so unnatural. My own heart starts pounding to compensate. I try to make it say, "He's fine. He's fine. He's fine." Then, I slip out of control, imagine you a P.O.W. and that panics me. I start with images of you bound and caged, and then some other part of me begins with you at the brothel and then and then and then... So, I try to veer back into reality. "He's fine, he's fine, he's fine, he's mine, he's mine. We do love each other. He will come home. We are together. We're just apart."

Last night I took the boys' globe from their room and put it in ours, next to the bed. We are nearly straight through the earth from each other. I hear your voice say what you said the first time we looked for where you were going.

"You see. We're very close."

Oh, husband, not close enough. Not close enough. Not close at all. I've made a shrine out of our bureau. Pictures, mementoes, white magic, I suppose.

You in Alaska (he came back).

You in Yosemite (he came back).

You in a tuxedo and rabbit ears, playing Harvey for community theatre (the play flopped, but I went back).

Us in Hawaii looking like stunned mullets on our honeymoon.

Me pregnant (you knocked me up).

Me, you, the boys, Mount Rushmore.

You kissing the bride (me).

Seeing is believing. I've collaged your coming home. I took that picture of you smiling like a fool at your surprise party and then drew the rest of us from the back and - it's silly, but it's on our bathroom mirror. I would give a hundred thousand dollars just to watch you shave tomorrow morning. Your mourning wife.

Dear Husband:

I told the boys you were on a secret mission and that their job was to keep a diary for you of how the house and yard and machines were doing. "Like a field report," I told them. Sean liked the idea. Jeremy wanted to know if he could draw it. (Enclosed find the condition of our car in Crayola).

Notice the way I am not panicked. Notice the way I am lying through my teeth. This is a long silence. A long secret mission. Husband, I practice my ESP. I come to you at night, kiss your eyes and hands, smooth your brow. I am every breeze, I am every scented flower. I am the sky. I am sheer as glass, invisible in my sheerness, stretching like lace to love you across this earth. Around this globe, wherever you are,

Your wife.

WIFE

Husband:

This has to stop. This silence fills me with language. I talk to you incessantly. I point out every little thing. "Oh, look," I tell you at the corner of Mapleton and Seventh. "See the cat in a sweater out walking the little old man!" or, "Honey, hear that blackbird?" Or, "Will you look at the way that tree branch sheared off in the storm last night."

There was a storm last night. I let the boys get in bed with me. I was scared. Lots of lightning. Lots of thunder. Huge wind, the walls felt like paper. When the tree limb went - from the big oak outside the kitchen - it made an

awful sound like something screaming. Rainy season, I thought. He's in rainy season. Every thought I have starts, "He's...!" He's missed, your wife.

Dear Husband:

I will write about me and not about missing you. I will give you details, tiny little facts, sturdy as nails.

Fact: I cut my hair. It swishes now and actually looks longer.

Fact: I painted my toenails bright red and bought new underwear.

Fact: I took the boys out for steak dinner. (We almost ordered one for you just to be silly).

Fact: The dread rhododendrum is glorious right now.

Fact: I've made a list of "projects," things you would do. I am currently sanding a kitchen chair to see what's under the three coats of ugly paint. Real oak, I think.

Fact: I masturbate.

Fact: I hate that word.

Fact: It's boring.

Fact: It's not better than nothing.

Fact: I bought you a surprise.

Fact: Your brother wanted me to go for a drink. I said no .

Fact: I will always say no.

Your wife.

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

I will not send this letter. What is difficult is that I understand how it happened - "it" being something you will probably never hear about back home. I would call it a massacre. That is not military terminology in this war. In this war, we might call it a "defensive over-reaction," "an error." Meaning civilians. Meaning women and children. Lots of them. I have heard different numbers. More than a hundred. Impossible error. Not here.

I did not write to you about Willy. Willy was from Detroit. He lied about his age to get in. He was sixteen. His sister sent him Motown stuff. Martha and the Vandellas were his favorite. He came from a big family. He was crazy about his family, crazy about his brothers and sister. Crazy about kids, period. The kid who killed him was probably all of eight. Willy saw the gun. He had time to kill him first. He could have blown the kid away, but Willy could not believe that kid was the enemy. And so the kid killed him. And now we start to believe that maybe everyone over here is the enemy. Everybody, or nearly everybody. Who can tell the difference?

That was the "thinking," I am sure. Who can tell the difference? Better safe than sorry and so a hundred plus women and children are murdered in cold blood. Just to be on the safe side. Our side, in case you wondered.

"It's 'Like killing ants,'" I heard one guy said. "Once you get used to squishing them, it's kind of fun."

I know I am breaking our promise. I know I swore to you that I would tell you the truth, while we were apart. I cannot tell the truth even to myself. The truth is I understand how it happened. The truth is, I do not understand that. What passes for your loving husband.

HUSBAND

Wife:

Thank you for the constancy. Thank you for your faith. Thank you for your beautiful; horrible letters. Horrible, because I miss you like a paper cut. The rains aren't ours. They don't do drama. They just rain. And rain, and rain. Everything rots. The earth has athlete's foot. And the mud - I've enjoyed the boys' field reports. I'll write them tomorrow. Don't cut your hair. Don't cut your hair again. Don't you know women cut their hair and take flying lessons right before they get divorced? Y.H.

WIFE

Dear Y.H.:

Women cut their hair all the time. This was not radical. This was not symbolic. This was grooming. With my groom absent, I have to do it myself. Your bride.

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

My men have taken to prayer. Their mentor in this is our young chaplain - and I do mean young. He's tall, skinny, Irish. He doesn't look old enough to be a seminarian; much less a priest. He's got a face from American Gothic - gaunt cheeks, pitted by what must have been terrible acne. No wonder he turned away from the girls. He has burning eyes, pale and haunted.

I've seen him walking the perimeter at night - not a wise move, no matter how many angels are on your side. He has a tent down near the medics and his numbers are picking up. I should add he has a basso profundo and if you only heard him, not saw him, you might mistake sheer timbre for spiritual weight. The men seem to like him. Myself? I avoid him like the plague. A small gripe, really. One of our first days here I heard him tell one of the boys that jungle rot was "one of our crosses to bear."

I just hate spiritual bromides. Human pain and suffering can't really be boiled down to simple platitudes, can they? If they can, am I just being stubborn not "offering up" my missing you? (I heard he told one young husband to "offer up" longing for his wife.)

Who knows? Maybe it's just my jingo spirit. "Offer it up" seems just a hop, skip and jump from "wave the white flag." Maybe I cherish missing you, because it's real. Maybe "offering this up" seems phony or right next door to martyrdom, which must surely lead to military defeat. What the hell. Our chaplain's a

harmless enough, well-intentioned kid. The men like him. Even the born-again seem to respect him, which is no mean trick if you ask me.

Did you? Did you say, "Husband, tell me about this gaunt priest who gives you no comfort?" Instead of prayers, I say the boys' names like rosary beads. "Good night, Jeremy Matthew. Good night, Sean Michael. Angels watch over thee. Good night, Jeremy Matthew. Good night, Sean Michael..." Your husband.

WIFE

Dear Chaplain:

My husband does not find you comforting. Could you work on it? An Army wife.

WIFE

Dear Husband:

I'd fix it, if I could.

I have a girlfriend who says we all get the God we deserve. You deserve someone strong as John Wayne, but nicer. My girlfriend picked a grandmother God who holds her on her lap and says; "There, there," I don't know what I choose or deserve. I hope we don't have to "deserve" a nice God. I'll take whatever brings you safely home. Your wife.

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

I've exhausted the cobra supply as good worry material. I've moved on to my brother. Dan, the phony, any able-bodied man at home. Which isn't to say I don't trust you, but worrying is a great comfort. It makes us real again. Your husband.

WIFE

Dear Husband:

It's a very cozy habit, your worry. It keeps you from looking at the big things. Your wife.

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

When did you get your psychology degree? My worry does what? And you should not be calling the kettle black about worry. Your Husband.

WIFE

Truce. Your wife.

WIFE

Dear Husband:

It's funny how we divide things up, isn't it? Our competencies, I mean. Clearly both of us are perfectly competent. Before we met - and since - I've

accomplished a few things. Now, with you there and me here and our house and our family in my care, I exhaust myself trying to please you with my competencies in your realm. Now that I'm delegated head of household, I want you to approve of my executive decisions.

Okay, I'm beating about the bush.

I'm redoing the roof. The leak in the boys' room became Niagara during that storm. Of course, they were "protecting" me, so none of us knew it until morning. You get the drift. (Hah-hah.) That's right. The downstairs bathroom ceiling, the wallpaper, behind the tiles..

I know you have tarred, I know you have shingled. And I took a chunk out of our savings, hired a crew, climbed a ladder and...Yes, well, you'd have been up there, too, getting our money's worth. And, and, and, I researched all conceivable shingles, chose "real" ones, bit the bullet and did it right. Of course, it cost more than the estimate and would have cost more than that, except I imitated your temper and -

Last night it rained and we slept in the Sahara.

Are you proud of me yet or should I have been less competent on your behalf? Confused in Kansas.

HUSBAND

Dear Confused in Kansas:

Don't be. I like the idea of you in bib overalls with one of those nailbelts strung like a G-string. Actually, I enjoy your competence. What else am I supposed to do with it? It goes with the package. Five-four, one hundred twenty, big eyes, blond hair, competent. I guess I like it. What I really like is that you solve things. I've never been big on helpless dither. Mine or yours.

We now do have a cobra here somewhere I am hoping not to encounter. Nobody's been bitten, but it's been sighted and so, instead of land mines, I once again am worrying about this rare and deadly snake. You are right. I like worrying about this snake. I like it much better than land mines, bamboo pits or filling field reports. I like it much better than missing you. I like it much better than thinking about Ned. Have I mentioned Ned? Probably not. Maybe I won't. Your husband.

WIFE

Dear Husband (mine):

There's a cliff-hanger. Ned.

Okay, I've been holding out on you, too. I ran into Dan. You remember Dan - the man-I-didn't-marry. That Dan: He asked about you, impeccably. He always was a phony son-of-a-birch.

The he asked me for drinks, which I declined. One of the things I love about you is that you do get jealous. I find this refreshing. (I get jealous, too,

which I do not find refreshing, so I hide it from you ninety-eight percent of the time.) I like that you're a little scared of losing me. (No such luck.)

Do you remember the year I gave up alcohol for Lent? I was actually on a diet and afraid to admit it, so I made it into - something more noble than my weight. Well, you decided not to drink either... "What's good for the goose..." Words to that effect. You were very noble. And I kept thinking, have a goddamn drink. It's not like you to overdo it. But no, you were Mister Perfect, until the weekend I went to my sister's and you and your brother fenced the back yard. I wasn't supposed to know it, but you drank a six-pack together. Of course, your loyal brother ratted on you. Complete with your plea, "Don't tell her. I'm afraid she might not respect me, if I - "

God, I loved you for that. I loved that you didn't want to tempt me and I loved that you wanted me to respect you which, of course, I already did. I thought, "My God, he still thinks I might throw him away over a beer, just like throwing out a politician who smoked a joint - " husband, you can do either one. I like the man in human and vice-versa. Your human wife.

HUSBAND

Dear Human Wife:

Actually, my brother lied to you. It was pot, not a six-pack I inhaled. Your husband.

WIFE

Dear Husband:

Stop holding your breath. I knew that. Your wife.

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

What else do you know? Your husband.

WIFE

Dear Husband:

Very little. Dumb, I'm not.

Speaking of which, Sean's grades are sickening. "I hate school..." I've tried bribes. I've tried parental concern. I've tried... Your trying wife.

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

Stop trying. I think you are amazing. I love your laugh. I love your giggle. Actually, I love it when you get really ferocious and act like a mother cat. It's all fun. Do you remember the time my brother called me "Little Man" in front of you? It was his usual riff about my general foolishness and incompetency. I was sort of sitting it out, not really taking the bait and you took it up to the point when he said, "Little man," which he'd called me approximately our whole lives.

"How-dare-you-talk-to-him-like-that-can't-you-see-who-he-is?" You *hissed* this. He was out of there so fast. You would have gouged his eyes out in another minute. I loved you for defending me. I love that you're fierce. Then, you burst into tears, afraid you'd embarrassed me. I loved you for that, too.

"You didn't need me to do that," you kept hiccupping, but maybe I did. Nobody else ever had. Maybe loyalty is an awful lot of love. Tell Sean to bite the bullet.

Just crack the whip and stop coddling him. We all hated school some time. The point is to decide to win at it. Tell him I said so. Y.H.

WIFE

Dear M.H.:

I told him you said so. He didn't like it a bit - but he did listen. Nonetheless, I've got a parent-teacher one-on-one on Monday. I assume Miss Florey is just as worried as I was. In any case, I think we've turned a corner.

A funny thing is happening to me in your absence. It's not only that I'm missing you, I'm missing me. You were a landmark. I could always find my bearings in relation to you and your bearings. You were known to me. On a compass, you were True North for me. Not that you defined me, but that you somehow helped me to define myself. And now, with you absent, parts of me seem absent, too. My reactions seem to wobble. I doubt myself more. Maybe I'm just saying I miss your mind as well as your body.

Never mind. Here's a poem:

TRUE NORTH

- I. *An attraction creates a geography,
A territory of the heart
With boundaries, weather,
Dangers of the trail.
A need for plots,
Compasses, survival kits.
You are True North.*
- II. *I want to love you like a map,
With boundaries and possibilities.
I want to love you like a compass,
With intention and direction.
Like a knife, a gun,
An instinct toward protection.
I want to love you like a rope,
Thick and strong as hope.*

Your wife, the poetess?

HUSBAND

Beloved Wife:

I wish I could write you noble sentiments to justify our separation. I wish I could find some heroic frame for our actions - for your loneliness and pain, for my own, for our children's. The truth is, I see no heroism in what we are doing here. I have no sense of right action, of manifest destiny as they always call it. What I see is a country, very foreign, but like our own, with its ways, its understandings, its dreams - unfathomable dreams to a stranger's eyes, but dreams nonetheless just like our dreams. I see families like our own, torn apart, as ours is, by this war, this fight over what? Finally, a fight over this earth, which all of us are only visiting.

It seems to me, the more we lie alone at night, continents between us, that nothing matters but our love, our contact, our finding each other in this sea of souls, and it is the same for them. I see that. There are no territories, no enemies. We are all only merely finally and divinely human. This earth does not belong to us. We belong to it, and it must grieve our green mother that we are squabbling - squabble, I said? - that we murder, maim and hurt each other, when all of us long only for the joy which I found with you, with our children, with my memories and my dreams for us. I kiss you in your sleep. Your loving husband.

WIFE

Oh, Husband:

How hard this is for you. I wish you were a narrower man, comfortably blind and sure that you were right - armed by God. How terrible you see into savages, as

they call them, and see yourself. Try thinking like your brother. He is never bothered by conscience. Convenience is his only guide and a good one.

You are too complicated. Your goodness breaks your heart. Now you are torn between duty and truth. Of course, you are right. Of course, this war is futile, senseless, brutal, mercenary - all wars are. This one only more so. The boys play swords and guns outside the window. They always will. Try to believe in something, my darling. I believe in you. Your wife.

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

I do believe. I believe this madness has to end. I would walk away, but where would that leave us? My men are murderous and frightened. They are addicted to blood, because it feels like power and none of us has that. Any of us could go at any time. I don't say this to scare you - it's that kind of war.

I miss you more than you know. Last night I lay my face in the dirt. It was still warm after nightfall and I needed to hear your breath. I swear I felt you under me, heard your breathing. Do not forget that you are beautiful. Kiss our boys. Who gave them swords and guns? I suspect it was my brother, that convenient man. He writes me that he's getting rich. Not as rich as I am. I love you. Your husband.

WIFE

Dear Husband:

Radio silence again. And you left me with a cliffhanger - Ned. Who is Ned? You never told me the name of the boy they sent home, but I have a feeling Ned is someone else. I could try my psychic powers and write who I think he might be - Oh, write me instead. Your lonely wife.

Dear Husband

For the past week, I have seen you everywhere. The man at the checkout counter had a wrist just like yours. The postman, a substitute, was doing one of your walks. Your brother called and, just for a second, he sounded more like you than him. Oh, sweetheart.

Here's what happened at parent-teachers. I went in wearing my best floral print, I'm a good mommy, 1940's dress and I was prepared to defend Sean. She didn't want to talk about Sean.

"So, Sean's a brat," she said. "It's a phase, he'll get over it."

"It may have to do with his father's being gone."

"Of course, it does. He's angry."

"At least, Jeremy - "

"Jeremy's who I want to talk to you about."

"But he's perfect."

"Exactly. His papers are perfect. His desk is perfect. His homework is always perfect. Even his manners are perfect."

"So?"

"So, he's compulsive. Or, maybe a better word's superstitious. If he's perfect enough, maybe then his father will come home."

"Does everything have to be so sinister?"

"No, but this is. Is he sleeping?"

"Of course - I think he does wake up."

"I think he *stays* up."

She was right. How she knew it, I don't know, but Jeremy does stay up. I caught him last night at two a.m. perched in the window, staring out. I checked again a half-hour later and he was still there.

"It's bedtime," I told him. "it's the middle of the night. Go back to bed."

"Where Dad is, it's daytime," he told me.

I think you are what he is watching for. Of course so am I. So, Sean's tantrums are normal. Jeremy's normalcy is a tantrum and my judgment as a parent is a zero. I'm used to using you to vector by. You don't think for me, but I do my thinking in relationship to yours.

Your wife.

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

Ned is ambitious. He is my second in command, my right hand, and my left hand, or left arm, is nervous about what my right hand is doing.

You say you wish I had more certainty about what we are doing here. I'm not so sure. His certainty makes me nervous. He knows we're right. He knows we are intended to take this country by storm. God, his God, is on his side and I'm not sure where that leaves the rest of us - especially since my "us" might stretch to include some of "them." He's zealous. He likes "mopping tip," "cleaning house," words implying cleanliness and godliness and the ultimate connection. Ned makes me nervous. He's too good a soldier.

He keeps a journal - a lot of men do - and he says he writes about what interests him - which is body counts. And:

- *Theories on the racial superiority of Caucasians.

- *Theories on the spiritual superiority of his type of Fundamentalism.

- *Theories on what an intellectual might call "manifest destiny."

Tell Jeremy to stop spying on me. What I have to do in broad daylight I don't want him to know. It might interest you to know I now own a ukulele. I won it at poker, five card stud. The guy I won it off wants to play again - for lessons, he says - but I'm protecting my gains and hoping to learn just by fooling with the thing. So far, I can play *The First Noel*. Don't ask me why. I just found the notes.

Your husband.

WIFE

Sweetheart:

Bug reports have become our living room furniture. Sean is displaying a real passion for this project: Maybe because it's tangible - unlike math and grammar. Maybe because it's gruesome. I can't wait until they're up to dissecting frogs and cats, can you?

Your brother has rehung the screen door. I think he has a grudging respect for your repair job now that his has flopped, also.

The five-and-dime has got new carnage toys. Plastic, stick-'em-on gaping wounds. Very gory. I said, "No way," but your brother bought them gobs. My personal favorite is eyeball out of a socket. It attaches like an eye-patch with a black stretchy cord around your head. Sean rigged it on a knee yesterday.

"Hey, Mom, look!" and, like a fool, I do look. Swords and guns. Blood and guts. Sweetheart (yours).

HUSBAND

Send me some phony gore. After all, the real stuff doesn't look real. The stumps, the missing limbs, there's a surreal, cartoon quality to all of it. Especially the burn survivors. They look melted, like toys left too near a fire. "Friendly fire," they call it when we accidentally fire on our own personnel. I do not imagine it feels friendly.

Save me cookies and milk. Your husband.

W I F E

Dear Husband:

I'm saving you more than cookies and milk. Your wife.

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

Ned has met his match. He's decided to clean up "the sex problem," as he calls it. He means the brothels, the b-girls, everything that cannot be cleaned up - not that we've tried. . Ned is trying. He's Mister Clean. The other men resent him. He threatens to put them on report. Frankly, I resent him, too. His righteousness seems at least as much a vice, an addition, as the men with their "sex on toast," as they call it. Two dollars a go. You can't even buy condoms for that back home, can you?

Kiss the boys. Ladybugs are usually in the bushes by the back door. Your husband.

WIFE

Dear Husband:

Sex on toast? I don't know the price of condoms. I don't know much - or so it seems. When you talk so casually about brothels, I feel like we're on opposite sides of the world in every sense. My imagination veers between military horrors and personal ones. I had no idea I was so jealous. I did not know how primal, how terrifying jealousy is. It is a beast with claws standing knee deep in my

entrails. My jealousy casts no light except in the primitive, proprietary, embarrassingly personal way I love: "He's mine, my husband." Maybe that brothel was just a wake-up call. You really, really do love him and in a way no loftier than any woman ever loved a man. How will you ever come home to me? I used to feel so racy, like I knew how to set your pulse racing. But compared to an Asian b-girl? Screw patriotism. Screw higher callings. write me, you s.o.b.! Your wife.

HUSBAND

Wife, dear:

Who is comparing? And if I do, maybe I prefer wheat fields of wavy blond hair to waterfalls of straight jet-black. Maybe I prefer eyes like lakes with thought in them. Maybe you are what I choose.

Ned's stuck his foot in it and more. It seems he took his sexual temperance talk to the front lines - straight into Madame N's, our "number one brothel." The men got mad. Somebody slipped him a Micky Finn. He woke up in bed with his enemy. We'll see what happens next. God knows what the girl thought when he came to with his righteous hard on.

WI FE

Husband:

Oh - there's the door. Every time it rings, I'm afraid it will be some man in uniform saying, "Ma'am..."

I miss you! Y.W.

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

Ned beat the girl badly. Badly. The others had to pull him off. She was a tiny little thing. He almost killed her. Madame N wanted to ban all the men from her establishment. The men asked me to talk to her. Somehow, these were not the peace talks I had in mind. I did go. I did talk to her. The girl was there. Bandaged back together. He bit a hole in her cheek. I can't even court-martial him, the son-of-a-bitch. He shows no remorse.

"Animals," Madame N called my men - meaning Ned. "He is an animal."

I had to agree with her. The girl - she looked like an animal, too, really - a fragile, frightened doe. I gathered from Madame N he also tore her up inside. I don't know how. I don't want to know how or with what. She was, yellow grey, like the poison of us, hatred had poisoned her. I looked poisoned, too, in one of those big smoked-glass mirrors in the room where we were talking. I sat on one side of the bed. Madame N and the girl sat on the other. The mirror was angled at all of us, so we could watch the show. Her name means Water Lily. And yet, it is beautiful here. The people are beautiful - even if we bite chunks out of them.

Your husband.

WIFE

Darling:

The weather has turned. At night, the smell of dying leaves is carried in the wind. Your brother says he will help me with the storm windows. I wish you had storm windows for your heart. Poor Water Lily. I know how you hate bullies - hardly an adequate word - you must be sick with rage. And you still have to deal with that monster. Could you get him transferred? I hate him, too. Why is it this war is so personal? I have the most terrible feeling. You must have many of those.

Sean wants drums. Jeremy is asking for piano lessons. I suppose music would be a good thing, but is music what I'd get? Not at first. I like the idea of your ukulele better. I'm hypersensitive to noise these days. Lord, what must it be like for you? Your wife.

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

Maybe bongos, not a drum kit, or you'll go bananas. I've asked a friend of mine, a field surgeon to see what he can do about the girl's cheek. Madame N certainly held me accountable for my men and, on some level, so do I.

You might want to use plastic sheets on the garage windows. That way you won't freeze your beautiful --- when you go out to warm up the car. Don't forget to get the cars winterized.

I think the piano lessons are a good idea. Now I can play *I've Been Working on the RailRoad* and *Greensleeves*. Quite a repertoire.

WIFE

Dear Husband:

I'm panicked. I may not send this letter. Your last letter scared me. I ask you for details and when I get them, I am terrified. You on a bed in a brothel with smoked glass mirrors? Angled for sex?

Our bedroom looks like *Ozzie and Harriet*. Our plaid curtains, our afghan from your mother. A Boy Scout could sleep in our room without changing a thing. Why didn't I realize this? Why didn't I put in a smoked mirror? Your letter was so vivid, I could see you there. Oh, husband, I am frightened. Do you remember me? Your wife.

HUSBAND

Aren't you the one who insisted we have sex at the drive-in on our fifth wedding anniversary? Aren't you the one who went to church with me one Sunday naked under your navy blue coat? It seems to me you have a few tricks that are very memorable. Not to mention your rice pudding. If I ever eat rice

again after leaving here, it will only be because your rice pudding is one of the three finest things on the planet. The other two are you and opium - so I'm told. No, I have not tried it, although Madame N is said to be a very good source. The girl's cheek is healing nicely. There will be a scar, a crescent moon, but that's better than a crater, isn't it? I did my best.

The clouds are like the women here. Soft, mysterious and hard to grasp.
Your husband.

W I F E

Dear Husband:

I am not sending this letter. I am not even keeping it. I'm only writing it down to get it out of my body. I think you are falling in love with that girl. "The clouds are like women here. Soft, mysterious and hard to grasp..." You are reaching for that girl. I know it. From the beginning she touched your heart. I am certain she loves you, too. Of course, she does. You're the hero. I hate this, husband. I hate you both. I am so jealous. There's no competing, is there? She's young and needy and there. She looks up to you. She... She does all sorts of things, I'm sure, at least in my imagination, which is a war-torn country itself these days. Oh, husband. This letter I will not send. Your fretful wife.

H U S B A N D

Dear Wife:

Seeing is not always believing. You would not believe what we are doing. I see it and still cannot believe it. Do you remember the time we made a fire in the backyard of all the scrap wood we cleaned out of the wood shed? We were roasting marshmallows and a flaming gob of sweet, sticky goo fell on your leg, burning. I tried to knock it off and it stuck in my hand, burning. We rubbed ourselves in the dirt and leaves; we were panicked. Both of us got burned. It was terrifying. We couldn't get it off. "You were lucky," Doctor Buttermiller said. "It could have been worse."

Napalm, they call it here. It's no accident, though. It's not some sweet treat that gets out of hand. It's a chemical - lots of them, I suppose. We spray it on them. "By accident," officially it's the landscape we're after. Yesterday, I saw a burning child. A burning mother and a burning child. There was nothing I could do. They were jumping up and down, screaming. Like fiery leaves in a stiff wind. There was nothing I could do. The men were laughing. They thought they looked funny. Wife - I ordered my men out. When my men were gone, I shot them. Do not expect to receive this letter. I may burn it, too. Your husband.

WIFE

Dear Husband:

This silence. This silence is filled with questions. Something terrible has happened to you. I know it. I do not mean something like "He's fallen in love with that girl he's helping." Whatever this is, it's terrible. Terrible beyond that other kind

of loss. Husband, I wish I could comfort you. I wish someone could. If that girl loves you, pretend she's me. Let her kiss your brow. Let her hold you. Oh, husband, husband yourself.

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

It isn't love. Maybe you're right and it's some kind of bandage. Maybe not a bandage. Maybe a crutch. Maybe - maybe this is another letter I will not send.

I didn't mean to love that girl. If that's what I'm doing.

What I meant to do, all I meant to do, was to care. Ned was an animal to her. Others had been, too. I wanted to show her not all men are animals. Not all men will use you and throw you away. I wanted to be an example or maybe a promise. I didn't want to love her. I just wanted her to know someone would. And someone will, I'm sure. Is that someone me? She thinks I hung the moon. She thinks I am her hero. She is in love with me.

I should have known that would happen. It was inevitable. She would have loved anyone who was kind. My kindness, I suppose that means, was really cruelty in disguise. I wanted us to look good to her - or better, anyway. I didn't want her to think we men were such bastards. I wanted to show her some honor. Some old-fashioned chivalry. I didn't plan -- didn't really even want - to sleep with her. That, I know you want to believe.

I was arrogant. Of course I slept with her. It was there from the beginning and I was the only one who didn't know it. She calls me "My Sun." Could any man resist that? I suppose Father Damian, among the lepers, maybe. What have I done? The sun casts very dark shadows and so have I. The girl loves me. I may love the girl. I cannot tell. Your husband.

WIFE

Dear Husband:

I wish I could send you water. I know it's wet there. I know you're sick of water, but your last letter, the one waxing poetic about my rice pudding, has been followed by ominous silence. When I lie in bed and try to find you - psychically, I mean - all I feel is terrible, terrible thirst. My own throat closes up as if something is strangling me. What are you not saying? What can't you swallow? Sip a water husband. Sip my love. Talk to me. Your wife.

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

I cannot talk to me. Here's another letter you won't be getting. What can't I say? Any number of things - shall I start with the worst? I do not know what I will do. The girl wants to come home with me. This, too, was there from the beginning.

My fantasy is putting her through college. Doing something noble. She doesn't want college. She wants cars, washing machines, babies. I don't want to be hers. I am her plan, her dream, her ticket out. I am a fantasy to her. She's one to me. A beautiful young woman. She is beautiful. No, not the round-faced, buck-toothed cartoon you hoped for.

She is young and she is beautiful and she is everything you are afraid of. She does love me, or says she does. She certainly loves her plans for me. For us. And I love her, or certainly care for her and yes, she is a sexual adroit. She postures and preens for me like an erotic Kewpie doll, an Oriental Betty Grable. A little windup doll. As you fear, she is the smoke in the smoked glass mirror, the misty opiate trail of forbidden sex.

Maybe, like opium, I am addicted to her. I do keep coming back. I do keep doing what I said I'd never do - betray you, betray me, betray our boys. And I haven't gotten to the awful part yet. The part I'm really not telling you or telling me. I'm bored, wife. This affair, if that's what it is, is a young boy's fantasy and I'm a man. Or used to be. Your husband.

WIFE

Dear Husband:

I'm not sending you this letter. I've cut my hair, really cut my hair. I'm taking flying lessons. I'm having drinks with your brother. Dan is taking me to dinner tomorrow night. I want a divorce.

I should send you this letter. I should put all my hair in an envelope and mail it to you. This silence! I cannot hear myself think in this deafening, roaring, thunderous silence. Would you care if I fucked your brother, ran off with Dan, chopped off my golden glory wheat field of hair? You feel so distant. I cannot find you. The thread between us, that fine silken rope of trust and love and honor - it's all unraveling. How do people do this? And people have always done this. Men have always gone to war. Was it that they went to better wars, cleaner ones? Wars without brothels, opium dens and smoky mirrors? This war is too intimate. It's in our bed. I sleep with it at night. This war feels nasty. The news. Protests everywhere. You won't come home a hero. What is all of this for? That's what they're asking and so am I. Your wife.

WIFE

Dear Husband:

My hair is nearly down my back. The boys say I look like Annie Oakley. I think that's a compliment. I'm planning on Lady Godiva. Forget the plain cloth coat. I tasted you this morning. I was working, cleaning out the basement mud room and a drop of sweat fell on my mouth. It was your sweat, not mine. It was the taste of us. I miss you, husband. Your pining wife.

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

Thank you for your letter. Thank you for your letter. Thank you for your letter. I could taste us, too. The place behind the back of each ear where you taste dusty. I miss you, wife. Send me a poem. Send me a crossword puzzle. My mind misses you. Your husband.

WIFE

I am making the boys roast beef with new potatoes, carrots, peas; a Jell-O salad, yucky orange, their favorite, chocolate cake and rice pudding for dessert. Neither of them will touch the rice pudding. I plan on eating it in bed, pretending it's you. Your wife.

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

Another letter that will not be sent. The "body counts," the "kill ratios" -- don't you love this terminology? - the figures you hear on the evening news - they are not accurate. We are not "winning" this "war." This is not a war. This is a rape. A fantasy of power. Mine's bigger than yours: my country, my cock. It's the same thing. We're not here to protest anything but our national ego. What an expensive thing ego is. The lies it tells to us. This war is one lie. My relationship, if that's what I would call it, is another.

Even her name is fantasy. Not a true translation. It really means something more like "root flower." You find these things out when the fantasy begins to wear

thin. In the fantasy, I was the good guy, the one who made it up to her. In reality, she is a young woman, largely unformed, except for the brutality of her experience and whatever romance I choose to project on her.

I know now I am not in love with her. I was infatuated with the me I saw through her eyes. I was larger than life, heroic - a one-man version of the same lie we're telling by our presence here. I've told the girl this, or tried to, but she doesn't understand, *can't* understand - doesn't want to although that, too, of course.

I am a movie she is playing in her head, an American movie where I'm John Wayne and she's the girl he marries. The "love interest." That necessary and necessarily vague female presence that assures him he's a man. I'm sure that even the triangle with Ned was some stupid part of it. Not winning her, but winning, period. To the victor goes the spoils - that word "spoils" is interesting.

You've spoiled me for another woman. You are particular, opinionated, real. You are something more and better than the woman in my mind. I forgot that. I ignored that. I betrayed that.

She came here to the field hospitals for the repair on her cheek. We call it a "hospital." It's a tent with cots in it like the temporary low barns at a county fair. My friend, Larry, did the work on her. They stopped by on their way to surgery. She wanted to thank me. As these things go, it was minor surgery, but she was supposed to spend the night. And she did spend the night - but not in her hospital cot.

At first, I thought I was dreaming. She crept into my tent and into my bed so quietly that I did not fly awake as I thought I did at the smallest sound.

"I frightened," she said. She was small and shaken and cold and bandaged like a mummy. I tried to get her to go back to the hospital, but she kept saying, "I frightened. I frightened." Finally, I let her stay. I didn't think of you once in all of this. To tell you the truth, she didn't strike me as a woman which may sound crazy. It does to me now.

Anyhow, I let her stay and I fell back asleep and in the morning early, she moved against me the way you do and before I knew what I was doing, my body was fucking her. That's how it happened. What man could resist fucking a woman who came to him for protection?

I don't mean to be cynical. It's just that I can't believe what I've done. If I sent you this, would you believe it? Would you understand? Your husband.

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

They're thinking of pulling some of us out. I do not know if this means us. We don't hear things directly. I heard what I'm telling you because yesterday I shared a jeep with a *New York Times* reporter - tall, black-haired, funny, Dave Garroway glasses. I like him, even if he did spend the whole ride pumping me for information I didn't have. I learned more from him. I learned we may have a

change of command here. I learned we're not officially winning anymore. I like these little reality checks. Your losing husband.

WIFE

Dear Husband:

Losing? It doesn't seem to me that this war can be either won or lost. It's just a fact. I'm here. You're there. People there are dying. So far, not you. At least, not in a physical way. I cannot put my finger on it, but there is a creeping sadness, an exhaustion to your letters that frightens me. It's not the war that we are losing. It's ourselves. I cannot name it accurately, but there is something - or there isn't something - between us. Your letters are fond, sometimes even erotic. You say you miss me. I have no reason not to believe you - I don't believe you anymore. I try to puzzle you out but pieces are missing - some of them pieces of you. That girl. You have not mentioned her in a very long time. Did her cheek heal? Did Ned get transferred out? What became of all that?

Sean got an A+ on his bug report. He's never had a grade like that. He's so proud. Jeremy is quietly devastated. He got a B+. I think it's the first time Sean's beat him at anything. Last night I dreamed about spiders. In the dream; I woke up and there was a black widow spider, the size of Miss Muffett, sitting in the corner of our bedroom.

"You get out of here!" I screamed at her. The spider was a woman. I knew that much. I woke up bleeding. My period started in the night. The sheets were

soaked crimson, like I was hemorrhaging, like someone had wounded me, cut me open. Why am I telling you this? You know me, I hate women who talk about all this. I changed the sheets. I couldn't get back to sleep. Finally, at about five, I fell asleep with the lights on. I'm still in the dark about what all of it meant. Your wife.

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

I'm cheating on you. I've been sleeping with a young Vietnamese woman just as you fear. She is the black widow spider you're dreaming about. Should I write you that? I have tried to break it off. Should I write you that? What should I write you? You're right that pieces of me are missing. Are they with you? Your husband.

WIFE

Dear Husband:

I had that dream again. This time the spider came toward me. She seemed shy and rather sweet - just deadly. I didn't know if I should run away or scream at her or what to do: I began, finally, to light matches and throw them at her. She just swayed side to side and kept inching toward me. I woke up shaking. It doesn't help that I haven't heard from you. What about a postcard? Wonderful time. Wish you were here?

Just kidding. Your wife.

WIFE

Dear Husband:

Maybe I should see a psychiatrist or buy a large can of Raid. You've never mentioned any spiders. Do they have spiders there? I guess I never asked because cobras seemed like plenty. I went to the library with the boys yesterday. They returned their bug books. I looked up spiders in a psychology text on symbols. They are associated with female genitalia. Isn't that complimentary? I do not hear you laughing. I do not hear from you. Period. Your wife.

WIFE

Dear Husband:

I have decided you are sleeping with that girl. Last night the spider was wearing a wedding dress. I am not sending you this letter. If it's true, I need some dignity. On second thought, what do I need dignity for? I need you. So - So, I will ask you - are you sleeping with that girl? Are you in love with her? Is she the black widow? These thoughts do poison me.

I could bear knowing. Or think I could. Your wife.

WIFE

Dear Husband:

Your letters arrived all in a clump. I may not write to you for a while. The boys are fine. Your wife?

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

Yes, you're my wife. Write me when you are able. Your husband.

JEREMY

Dear Dad:

Mom says you're very busy. Sean got an A+ on his bug report. Can you believe that? I did okay. Mom won't let me mow the lawn. She says it's dangerous. Mom thinks everything's dangerous, know what I mean? Your brother said he'd teach me to work the mower, is that okay? He's a great guy, don't you think? If Mom let's us, he's going to teach me and Sean to shoot rifles. When you get home we could go hunting. It would be so cool to have a deer in my room. What do you think? Do they have deer there? Mom said I should ask you myself. She's a little weird lately. Jeremy.

SEAN

Dear Dad:

I got an A+ on my bug report. Miss Florey wants me to enter it in the State Science Fair. She says I'm a real scientist. We're studying the stars right now. Did you know that when we see a shooting star, the explosion happened a long time ago? Sometimes, when things are far away and things happen, we don't know it for a while. Sean.

WIFE

Dear Husband:

Another letter I won't send.

How can I compete? She is your concubine. Her whole function is to serve you, to service you. Like a cartoon version of an old *Playboy* cartoon: "Coffee, tea or me?" "Or, Cocktails?" She doesn't have the boys clinging to her sides. She doesn't step on a stray Lego block and turn her ankle dipping to serve you. (I turned my ankle yesterday.) No, I cannot compete.

You write that your men use drugs. I am sure she is a drug for you. I would love to be your drug; your cocktail, but with all the particulars which come with me I'd be a like a drink with a bug in it. There, a big gob of reality right in the middle of your cocktail. These fuzzy insect arms flailing wildly - that's Miss Florey warning us about Jeremy - no, it's the screen door unhinged again despite your brother, no, no, it's our savings alarmingly low in the wake of our new drip-dry roof.

Husband, I am specific. Your wife.

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

What I can't write you. Water Lily is my very own geisha. She anticipates my wishes. She waits on me and she weights on me. She hangs on my every word and I feel that hanging like an albatross. I am her universe. A thankless job. It's claustrophobic, all this devotion. It's smothering. Yes, and as you fear, it is an opiate, a buffer. If I am God, what can harm me? I'm sure this is how people get killed. Facts lose their immediacy. Facts, but not bullets. Daydreaming or still satiated, who would hear the warning? I must be hearing some danger sign. I'm roused enough to try to language my own destruction. Y.H.

HUSBAND

Dear Boys:

As I'm sure your mother will agree, it's not a good idea for my brother to teach you to shoot. We can talk about it when I get home. I saw my first cobra yesterday - fortunately, before he saw me. At first, I thought it was a rope or a hose - the kind for putting air in the tires. It was stretched across the road. Then, I saw it was moving. "Veeper," the driver said. "Veeper." It took me a minute to get it. "Viper." Tell your mother not to worry. It's the only veeper I've seen and I've been here a long time. Dad.

JEREMY

Dear Dad:

Mom says it only takes one snake in the grass. Whatever that means. Your brother's going to teach her to shoot rifles. She's in a very funny mood lately. She says it's the change of seasons. Are you guys fighting? She keeps saying, "When your father gets home you can ask him" about everything. Did you know she cut her hair? Jeremy.

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

Your hair arrived yesterday. Not a lock of it - instead a great golden rope. What have you done? What have I done to you? Do you look like Jean Seberg or a pixie? I cannot picture you. I am so sorry, which does neither of us any good. We really are "de-escalating," as they put it. I may be home sooner than I thought. Is there "home?"

Ned is seeing the chaplain - meaning that boy called Father Francis I told you about. I see them every afternoon walking and talking. Ned's not Catholic, so it can't be confession. It is something, though. I have talked to Father Francis a few times myself lately. He's a nice kid, a good listener. If he judges me, he doesn't let on. I judge me, he says. He also says I should humble myself and ask you for forgiveness. I do not know what words like that mean. Words seem completely inadequate. Words seem slippery. They don't explain anything. They

don't even embody what we're really feeling. Your hair arriving in a long golden rope told me more than any words. I could have used your hair to hang myself. What have I done to you? Your husband.

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

You don't need to read this letter. I do need to write it. I have dreaded it. Father Francis is right. I need to apologize to you. How do I do that? I do not even think that's what you would want. You would want to know, "Is it over?"

Well, is it?

I am meeting my own character in a dark alley. This affair has robbed me of anything that I valued - self-respect, your respect, any sense of personal decency. I'm up against the wall, frisking my own personality - that lump, it's pride. This lump, self-delusion. This lump, arrogance. I have discovered that while I can feel the knobs along my spine, I lack backbone. It is not over.

I am not in love. I see I was not in love. I am not even in lust, I am in something that feels to me like watching Frankie, one of my men who has become a junkie. He and I have had several "talks." I know he's seen Father Francis about it, too. He says he'll quit. He wants to quit. He quits and then he quits quitting. He slips back against all his good resolves. They call heroin "lady" and say it's the femme fatale of drugs, soft and insidious. Vice-versa, the soft and

insidious femme fatale is heroin, to me. I cannot quit Lily and, like Frankie, I try to be through.

Lily does not want me through with her.

When I swear her off, she won't go away. She argues, pleads, cajoles, tempts - she's even sent her friends to make her case to me. This is very hard. I've drawn the line and stepped back over it a dozen times. I'm back with her now. I'm with her and not with her. I find myself watching her, me and the two of us like we're bad TV. Everything about her seems clichéd and hackneyed. Everything about me seems by rote.

Where are you in all of this? Right in the middle. I do not bring you up. Lily does. She is always making comparisons grounded in her version of you which is, no surprise, no one you'd recognize. "Your wife, she..." says Lily. "Leave her out of this," says I - as if we could.

I suppose this is another letter I'm not sending you. Are we now at war? Is this silence of yours a strategy? A retreat to higher ground? Am I the enemy? My life feels bombed out without you. And you? You're a casualty by "friendly fire." You remember that's what we call it when we mistakenly fire on our own troops. Father Francis is wrong. Some things cannot be apologized for. Your husband.

WIFE

Dear Husband:

I do not look like Jean Seberg or Mia Farrow. Or a pixie. I look like a concentration camp survivor. My silence is not a retreat - to anything like higher ground. I have more murder in my heart than you have in that entire war. I could commit any atrocity. Any. So, please dispatch any idea you have of your sainted wife. I'm not her.

I hate you. I hate Water Lily Root Flower. For that matter, I hate me. I have no compassion, no there-but-for-the-grace-of-God feelings or absolution. I could kill you for what you've done and I am certain that saying so taps the last remaining nails into this coffin we called our marriage.

I would turn the other cheek, but I want to say - at which end? It's so goddamn graphic. I could count her pubic hairs. I can taste her on my mouth.

Husband, we are so connected. I'm sleeping with her, too. I'm watching her from behind your eyes. Your letters do not say, "She is young and lovely," but she is. Your letters do not say, "She adores me" - but she does. No wonder you can't give her up. She is a magic mirror, something from a fairy tale. Me? I'm real life.

In my face you see your age. In my face you see your own disappointments. She's Technicolor. I'm black-and-white. All of us are watching a terrible movie. I keep splicing in shots of our home movies to offset the porno that keeps unreeling behind my eyes. The effect is even more pornographic. What is this?

I would not have said "sex" was the bottom line. I'm shocked that I'm so fixated on that part of this, of us. Maybe it's because the more unbearable truth is that sex has nothing, almost nothing, to do with what is the deeper wound? Sweetheart, I miss you. I miss "Look, a lark!" I miss "Nice cloud." I miss "Don't step in that puddle."

I miss dailiness, little things, not lust. I mean being able to talk to you. I miss the way you look at things. The rest is just a smoke-screen. It's really very simple. Of all the things on this earth you were - you are - my favorite.

No matter what you have done, that part appears not to change.

I agree with you. "Forgiveness" doesn't seem to apply. We're in this thing together. There is no higher ground. Maybe it's just an accident that happened to both of us. A fact. Something to be lived with. You're there with her. I'm here with me. It's just the weather. The season. Winter. I love being numb with cold. I do not miss you if I freeze my heart. Your wife.

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

Father Francis, who may be more of a savage than all of us, has suggested to Ned that he should "apologize" to Water Lily. This is an absurd, obscene, pornographic cartoon of human relationships if you ask me - which no one has. Water Lily thinks it is a wonderful idea. She is excited, like a little girl going to a party. She acts like she's won something.

I learn now that they knew each other before the night of the rape. They had been "friends" or Ned's version of that. She may even have been in love with him. I learn this all now.

Ned is insufferable. He's been quietly righteous for a month now, clearly judging my crime against you to be far worse than his against Water Lily. I agree with him there. He broke the general human contract of human behavior. What I broke is both of our hearts and whatever innocence we might have had between us.

They meet this afternoon. I learned all this both from Lily and from Father Francis. I think both thought I might be jealous. "Jealous" does not even occur to me. There's something more subtle and uncomfortable. I feel foolish. I realize that all along, despite her pleas of love, I was really a substitution, a band-aid, a small revenge, even. Ned was the main event. I watch my discomfort with a detached amusement. My vanity gets ground out of me and I think I'm glad. Let Ned marry her. If Father Francis has his way, I suspect he will.

I see that I write you all of this as if you will commiserate. At the very least, you will understand. By which I do not mean approve, condone, forgive or sympathize. The tie between us is more particular than that. It is recognition. You see me. It is all right with me that you see me now. I am willing, finally to be seen. Will you let me see you, too? With your hair shorn off, you must look like a Catholic nun, one of those luminous actresses from a Forties film. Would you meet my eyes and let me see there what I've done to you, how much I hurt

you? I promise I will not look away. I promise I will hold myself accountable for everything I find there. Only, let me find you, still you, however damaged, still you looking back. I am home in ten days. Meet me. If not halfway, meet me where you can. Your husband.

HUSBAND

Dear Wife:

Your silence is not golden. Your husband.

WIFE

Dear Husband:

I will meet you as you ask. Your loving wife.