

LOVE IN THE DMZ

And Other Novellas

Julia Cameron

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LOVE IN THE DMZ

A Play in Letters

Author's Note

Love in the DMZ was written during a long separation from the man I loved. I questioned his fidelity but loved him passionately. Written to be read either as a play or a novella, the letters proved cathartic.

Performed as a play in letters, this piece 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 a 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.

Dear Wife:

Just the facts, lady. Just the facts.

This country is 850 miles long. Its widest point is 310 miles wide. Fifty-five million people live here, but we're working on that. 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 - oak, chestnuts, pine, ebony and teak. Bamboo is widespread. There are mangrove forests along the tidal coastal plains. The plateaus look like what I think of as Africa - savannah grasses and shrubs.

And more?

Cobras, sorry to say. Pythons. Tigers, elephants, wild oxen, wild pigs, bears, deer, jackals, gibbons. Oh, 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. Maybe more.

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, more on which later. 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

.

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. Believe me.

YOUR WIFE!!

Dear Wife:

You're in my heart, too.

Your husband.

Dear Husband:

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. (No, I did not put my head in it, though I miss you.) 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.

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).

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.

My Wife:

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. I'll come home dapple grey.

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. Not apricots, not sun-dried tomatoes. Some of them were children's ears. Like Jeremy's. Like Sean's. Oh, wife. These are the 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.

Aged Husband:

I bought both boys earmuffs, which they won't wear, of course. Men! We women have been making and giving you hats and scarves and gloves since the caves, I'm sure. "Just a fig leaf and some mittens" it probably went.

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. 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 in 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.

Dear Wife:

One good thing – this war is making you a poet. Or 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 so determined to be a man and go on with my plans, have my adventures, an Alaskan fishing boat! I just wanted to say I'd done it, tell it to the other men. "Oh yes, the time I worked on a fishing boat in Alaska." 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 instead of that old guitar. What guitar?

That was a romantic idea, too. I thought I'd learn to play it, come back and really impress you. What is it with men and needing to impress? I pawned the guitar for my ticket home, so I never played you those songs. I've spent our whole life trying not to let you know what I know - exactly how much I love you. Oh, wife. What a fool.

Send poems.

Your loving husband.

Dear Fool:

Songs? I will buy you a new guitar. I never dreamed. 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.

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 specialty in 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.

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. I wrote you about it, but you never got my letters. They came back because your ship had changed slips or something. There's an image for you. 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 association "Jew rat" was cemented together. It's all right to kill rats, isn't it? Dirty Jewish vermin, jungle bunnies, chink, 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.

Dear Insecure Wife:

"Jungle bunnies" made it through. What are you writing me? About 30% of your last letter made it through. Maybe you could stick to flora and fauna reports. The censors loved your long letter about our rhododendrons. All now.

Y.H.

Dear Husband:

___ you. 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 mean, of course, hallelujah, Thanksgiving. You would be home. So, yes, the rhododendrons 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 dishes, but welcome nonetheless.

Your wife.

Beloved 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 that 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, mementos, 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, Mt. 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. Husband 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, it's my heart.

Your 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 you 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 dead rhododendron 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: "To protect, cherish, harbor, cultivate, foster, promote, safeguard."

"AFTER MAGELLAN"

I want to pretend the earth is not round.

I want to pretend I don't love you.

Loving you has changed everything.

*I know that walking toward the horizon
Will solve nothing. There is no final edge,
No step I can take, last, to reach an end.*

*The earth curves away from me.
Leaning forward, reaching,
It meets me from behind.*

*Touched, not touching, I am your lover.
You encircle me as surely
As this earth I walk away from.*

Your wife.

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 his 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 sisters. 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 say. "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, the whole truth and nothing but 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.

Wife:

Thank you for your constancy. Thank you for your faith. Thank you for your beautiful, horrible letters. Horrible, because I miss you like a paper cut. You have a very funny mouth. It twitches like a cat's, a tiny little twitch when you're thinking. Are you twitching now? Wife, thank God, I got that right. Thank God, you waited for me to get that right. I kept waiting to become a man you could love.

The rains aren't ours. They don't do drama. They just rain. And 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. You - I wanted to "right" you. 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.

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.

Dear Bride:

You wanted to carry apple blossoms and they all fell off the branches overnight. That was not symbolic, either, but your stubborn idea of just carrying the sticks scared me silly. Maybe it's cave, leftover caveman, but I'm always looking for small, primitive signs of disaster.

Your 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 a jump from "wave the white flag." Maybe I cherish missing you, because it's real. Maybe "offering things 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.

Dear Chaplain:

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

An Army 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.

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.

Dear Husband:

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

Your wife.

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.

Truce.

Your 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 around 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. I know you have caulked, puttied, puttered and... 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.

Dear Confused in Kansas:

Don't be. I like the idea of you in bib overalls with one of those nail belts 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, 120, big eyes, blonde 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 filing 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.

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 after you, impeccably. He always was a phony son-of-a-bitch. Then 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 98% 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 Mr. 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.

Dear Human Wife:

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

Your husband.

Dear Husband:

Stop holding your breath. I knew that.

Your wife.

Dear Wife:

What else do you know?

Your husband.

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.

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.

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, a compass point for me. I could always find my bearings in relation to you and your bearings. You were known to me – like the great oak in the forest, the big rock by the river, the.... You get the idea. 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. I know, I know, wives are supposed to "find their feet" in these situations. Why find my feet? They don't feel like dancing. They aren't running, stepping, dancing. There is a treadmill quality to this time without you. Everyone seems young – not that you ever seemed old – just that, for me, your opinions had more ballast, more interest. Maybe I'm just saying I miss your mind as well as your body.

Never mind. Here's a poem.

"SURVIVAL"

I can imagine a life without you.

A sky with no stars.

A time before language.

A primitive age, with values

Relating to survival.

I can imagine a world without sound.

In which no bells ring.

In which birds wing silent across skies

Muted by lack of sun.

What I cannot imagine is my survival –

Still living, still breathing –

When it is air that I am missing.

I am trying not to miss you.

I am trying not to breathe.

Your wife, the poetess?

Dear Poetess Wife:

Your letter scared me. I want you to be fine, certain, moving clearly in your rounds like the gear of some exquisite watch, a cosmic mechanism moving us back together a tick at a time. Instead, you sound distant. Or I sound distant to you. I immediately think you smell like leaves in the autumn wind. That's your hair. You smell like lilies, heady and aphrodisiac. That is your hair, there.

You taste like very good rice pudding - or French vanilla ice cream - your skin is sweet and chalky. Your ears do smell like tallow. The nape of your neck is dusty like hay. I remember all of this. You have one silvery filling. You have narrow, bony feet, too elegant for sneakers. The arch of your foot has the same lovely shape as a medieval bridge. The bridge of your nose, on the other hand, is straight as a dye. You do not, to my knowledge, dye your hair, which have fifty different shades of gold and silver. Is it ash blonde, they call that?

I miss you.

Your vague husband, fading like a photo.

Dear Husband:

The hairs on your forearm are red-black. Your feet, all narrow and bony. You have several different walks, all of them favorites of mine. There is your military walk – the general or the king reviewing his troops. It is straight-backed, ramrod, focused. Then, there's the walk I see from the back when you don't know I'm watching. Your left side hitches up a little. There's a slight crick like you're a much older man. I love that walk. Your man on a mission walk is another secret walk, fleet as arrow. You dart at an amazing velocity, slicing through a crowd, disappearing around a corner or down an aisle when we go shopping. When you do your man-with-a-mission walk, no one can keep up with you. I certainly can't, and I can't go on missing you, either.

I know I should have some faith, some commitment to a higher purpose (aka patriotism), and the rightness of our time apart. I don't believe in patriotism. I believe in us. At least, I know I should believe we will rendezvous – that you will come safe home – I don't believe that today. Today, I believe in my fears, my loneliness, my self-pity. I cannot bear to remember that quick laugh where you suck in air like a diver, delighted by life.

I married you because you love life. I married you because you stop to stare at cats, because you get so happy in your gadgety delight when the car is running well and the road's a little tricky and you're going just a little fast with one eye on me to make sure I'm not too scared. Oh, husband, for once, your brother's right. He says I'm besotted. I am besotted. Come home.

Your keening wife.

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 dream for us. I kiss you in your sleep.

Your loving husband.

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.

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.

Dear husband:

Send details!

Your 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:

I am not Penelope, patiently weaving. In fact, I feel a lot more like Madame DuFarge, knitting with gallows humor. Counting the days and the heads that roll. We seem to be making tactical errors – or errors of policy. We don't exactly apologize to the press, but we pose and/or pussyfoot a lot. What is going on over there? Really? Inquiring minds want to know.

Your wife.

Dear Wife:

You do not want to know. I certainly do not want to tell you. How are the boys? What happened with that parent-teacher meeting? Is Sean on track yet?

The rains are letting up - are thinning out. This week's big excitement was the medics getting a fresh supply of hydrocortisone cream. We've all got diaper rash and not just from being scared shitless. Everything rots over here and that includes people. Forget "athlete's foot." We are talking athlete's body. I am remembering a book I read in grammar school, "Father Damian Among the Lepers." We could use a patron saint here.

Y.H.

Dear Husband:

I may not be a saint, but I am a martyr. I suffer without you. It's like kicking heroin. Or, since I'm supposed to be the heroine, it's like kicking the hero. That sounds awful, but you were a habit for me – a sweet, sweet, habit. Could opium be any more addicting than curling up with your arms around me, not quite sleeping. You aren't just a person for me. You are a place. You are home to me and without you I feel like a displaced person.

I wander the rooms of our house like it's a bombed out city. I touch the banister like it's the bleached bone of some animal long dead in the desert. All right, I'm mixing my metaphors. I'm not writing clearly. How can I? I'm not sure I'm thinking clearly. If this separation really is like drug withdrawal, it's no wonder I'm hallucinating.

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, 1940s 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 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 2 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’s watching for. Of course, so am I. You turned the corner just ahead of me at the hardware store yesterday. Some guy, with his version of your old khaki jacket. My heart thumped like I’d hit a little drum. He was you for a second. Is it any surprise Jeremy hopes to glimpse you like I do? Like “The Highwayman” in the middle of the night?

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. As I’ve said before, you’re a compass point for me. Oh, Sweetheart, you are True North.

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.

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 were doing here. I'm not so sure. His certainty makes me very 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 up," "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.

Dear Husband:

I love “The First Noel.” I love the idea that it was “For certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay.” It makes me think God, or at least the angels, are watching over us. I hope one wraps you in wings at night. I hope one walks by your shoulder every day. I want you back with me. I want you –

Ned makes me nervous, too. I don’t know why. Sean and Jeremy have a bug project for school. It gives me the creeps. They were down in the basement hoping to find black widow spiders. We don’t have black widow spiders, do we? I hate the word “widow.”

Your wife.

Dear Wife:

Lighten up. We have neither black widows nor tarantulas nor the deadly brown recluse. Tell the boys the daddy long-legs live in the tool shed. There was a great fellow by the lawn mower all last summer.

Your husband.

Dear Husband:

They are using my Tupperware. I had some leftover lima beans and when I opened a container for them I had two dead wasps. I don't need daddy long-legs.

Your brother says the war is winding down. He says we know we're over-committed and that since we can't win, we'll get out. I didn't know what to do with this "news." Have him phone your general? He fixed the screen door again. He says we should just get a new door and be done with it. I would, but I remember your head, the back of your head, as you scrunched down to work on the thing-a-ma-jig that keeps breaking. I liked you there in the kitchen with me. You, all scruffy, swearing softly, so the boys wouldn't hear; me, baking cookies while you looked up my skirt. Domestic bliss. I'd take seconds.

Your wishful wife.

Dear Dad:

Mom says you must be on a mission. We've been hearing about something called "Hamburger Hill." Great name! Are you part of that?

Sean.

Dear Wife: (The boys shouldn't read this)

I'm glad you're studying mythology. Hamburger Hill is the myth of Sisyphus. In the myth, a rock gets pushed up a hill and slides back down, over and over. That's what we're doing here. Our will, our literal guts push us upward. We "win." Their will and our guts again, pull us down again. Over and over. Up and down on Hamburger Hill. We're the hamburger, the blood pulp. The hill is slimy with death. Maybe they will stop it soon. I hope so.

I also hope the bug reports go well. Did you look in the leaf pits? There's some great, horrible goo there as I recall. How is your mother coping with all this?

Your father, Dad.

Dear Husband:

I've told the boys you're on a mission. I've told myself patience is a virtue. I don't have any patience, so it does me no good. 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. Who was it? Where is my "Bullfinches' Mythology" when I need it? Oh, yes, Prometheus. He gave fire to man and had his entrails gouged out as a thank you from the gods. 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.

Screw patriotism. Screw higher callings. What are the household gods – Lares and Penates? I think so. Maybe the "Larries," as the boys call them, keep you safe.

And write me, you s.o.b.!

Wife.

Dear Boys:

Your mother was right. I have been on a mission. The chaplain here says it's a mission from God. HE must know from an inside line, or something. According to the chaplain, God wants us to capture a small, symbolic mountain. They're calling it Hamburger Hill. It is bigger than a Big Mac, but otherwise not much of a mountain or even a hill. We could use it for tobogganing. That, I look forward to doing when I get back. Help your mother with the leaf pits, whether you use the bugs or not.

Dad.

Sweetheart:

The 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 re-hung the screen door. I think he has a grudging respect for your repair job now that his has flopped, also.

The back of the five-and-dime has got new carnage toys. Plastic, stick-'em-on gaping wounds. Very gory. I said, "No way," but your brother brought them gobs. My personal favorite is eyeball out of a socket. It attached 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. Write me!

Sweetheart (yours).

Dear Sweetheart Wife:

Send me some phony gore. Maybe it will catch on here. I'm sure it would. After all, the real stuff doesn't look real, either. 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.

So: go to the five-and-dime. Buy out all of the fake gore. Send every bit you can find, enough to share with the enemy. We can pretend to wound each other, pretend to die. I'll play swords and guns just like the boys and then when it starts to get dark, we'll all come home. Save me cookies and milk.

Your husband.

Dear Husband:

I'm saving you more than cookies and milk.

Your wife.

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 Mr. 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 addiction, 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.

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. 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?

Your wife.

Wife, dear:

Who is comparing? And if I do, maybe I prefer wheat fields of wavy blonde 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 Mickey 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.

How are the bugs coming? It occurs to me you should check the attic back window. We had the start of a wasp nest there. I meant to get to it right before I left. I meant to do a lot of things, dear wife. Let's do them all twice when I come home.

Your willing husband.

Husband:

I miss your stubbled cheek. I miss the silky, electricity of the hair on your chest. I miss the funny way you crook your head to one side like you're listening to something when you walk.

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.

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. "This is my rifle. This is my gun." It's not the mind that pales at the thought. It's the whole body, ashen. That's the color 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.

Your husband.

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. A few discreet strings – not the Hitchcock kind. I'm hypersensitive to noise these days. Lord, what must it be like for you?

Your wife.

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.

Does it seem to you my letters are drying up? Maybe my heart is. This war takes a bite of it; on an x-ray I'd look like Swiss cheese. I can feel parts of me missing. Other parts are all too present.

My men have diaper rash again. There's no getting clean. For one thing, clean means dry as well as wet and there's no getting dry. Everything here slithers and stinks - the snakes, the rats, weird vermin creatures I can't even name. Sounds I can't identify. "Gibberish" I call it, this soup of sounds that are all vague and menacing like the soft hiss of a snake. The strange suck of a boot sinking in to the mud. All the things I thought I hated are what I yearn for here! Houses like tick-tacky all in a row, wall to wall carpeting, square windows, rooms with square corners, real beds with more square corners and hospital sheets. Also, Corn Flakes,

homogenized milk, flat fields of corn, pale, wide open skies, clouds high enough up you see them, not walk into them, like giant mammals grazing off the land. And yet, it is beautiful here. The people are beautiful - even if we bite chunks out of them.

Your husband.

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.

Dear Wife:

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.

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 the 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.

Dear Wife:

Seeing is not always believing. You would not believe what we are doing. I see it and I 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 woodshed? 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 to 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," Dr. Buttermiller said. "It could have been worse."

Napalm, they call it here. It's not 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. My 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.

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 been 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. I’ve written you a poem.

WORDS FOR IT

I wish I could take language

And fold it like cool, moist rags.

I would lay words on your forehead.

I would wrap words on your wrists.

“there, there,” my words would say –

“Hush” and “Shh, shhh, it’s all right.”

I would ask them to hold you all night.

I wish I could take language

And daub and soothe and cool

Where fever blisters and burns

Where fever turns yourself against you.

I wish I could take language

And heal the words that were the wounds

You have no names for.

Your speechless wife.

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 the 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 have 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.

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 – physically, I mean – all I feel is a 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 little water, husband. Sip my love. I'll bring it to you in teaspoons. Take just a little. Talk to me.

Your wife.

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. She wants an American husband. Your American husband. 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, bucktoothed 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.

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 cellular. 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.

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, really working, cleaning out the basement mud room and a drop of sweat fell on my mouth. It was your sweat, not mine. I swear to you. It was the taste of us. I miss you husband.

Your pining wife.

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.

Dear Husband:

I “mind” missing you, too. It’s not that I think you’re always right, but even when you’re wrong – Oh, yes, you are sometimes – you interest me. Remember the drive to Kansas City where we took the wrong turn and spent hours on the wrong road, that beautiful wrong road with that abandoned orchard where we made love on a bed of rotting apples that smelled of bliss to me – all that life, all that decay, all that sinking into the earth together.

“It was the right road,” you told me. “I made you into apple sauce and that was the right thing to do, not get to Kansas City in time for supper.”

Speaking of supper, 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.

Dear Wife, dear Apple Sauce:

I love your letters. If I'd been in bed with you, the rice pudding would not have been my dessert of choice. What if you sent me one lock of hair? Is that too corny? It does look like corn-silk. You are my harvest.

Your loving 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 a 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 in here to the field hospital for the repair on her cheek. We call it a "hospital." It's a tent with cots in it like the temporary cow bars at a country 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 a 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 so 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.

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 liked 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.

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.

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.

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.

Dear Dad:

What's up with you? You haven't written for weeks! I've been working on my bug report. I got great books at the library. Did you know spiders are mythological? They're supposed to weave your fate. I asked Mom what fate was and she said it's a story we tell with our lives. I said, "Let's write happy endings, then."

Love, Sean.

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.

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.

Dear Husband:

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

Your wife?

Dear Wife:

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

Your husband.

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 lets 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.

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 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.

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 like a drink with a bug in it. There, a big gob of reality right in the middle of your cocktail. Those 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.

Dear Wife:

What I can't write you. Water Lily is my very own geisha. She anticipates my wishes - or her version of 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.

Dear Boys:

As I'm sure your mother will agree, it's not a good idea for my brother to teach you how to shoot. We can talk about it when I get home. Right now, I'd like to talk about what you're doing to help your mother. Jeremy, the mower is a little tricky and when I get home I will teach both of you. For now, leave it be.

What your mother could use some help with is raking the leaves. Tell her to get those big green bags and I will pay you fifty cents a bag when I get home. Think of it as a savings account. Your mother can keep track. She could also use help with keeping the cars clean inside and out.

Sean, tell your mother not to turtle wax. You should use something else. Maybe your uncle would help on this if he wants to teach you boys something useful. 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 that 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.

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 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.

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 that "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 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.

Dear Dad:

Mom has decided to make a garden, a big garden, for next summer. She says she doesn't care if it's the wrong season. "I need spring now," she told your brother. He said we should help her, even if it's crazy, so we're all digging in the frozen yard. It's hard to dig when the dirt is cold.

Sean.

Dear Sean:

Your mother loves seed catalogues. You could surprise her and can get her some. You can get them at the garden store next to Macky's Hardware. As a scientist, you must find this garden business more interesting than you think - as a bug man, too. There are bugs here you would not believe. I would send you some, but they're one thing I'll be glad to leave behind. Is your mother planting more rhododendron or is this vegetables more than flowers? I'd like pumpkins, if I get a vote.

Dad.

Dear Dad:

I want pumpkins, too. Mom says squash are even better, but I don't think so. We're going to have watermelons, tomatoes, lettuce, lima beans, carrots, radishes and tulips. You get to eat the tulips. Hah-hah. Is it true you said I can't have drums? Mom says you said only a bongo. Bongos sound stupid.

Jeremy.

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 supposed this is another letter I'm not sending you. Are we now at war? Is this silence of yours as 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.

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 un-reeling behind my eyes. The effect of that 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 miss 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 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.

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 on 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 months 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 decent behavior. What I broke is both of our hearts and whatever innocence we might have 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.

Dear Wife:

Your silence is not golden.

Your Husband.

Dear Husband:

I will meet you as you ask.

Your loving wife.

HELL

Darling,

It's crazy for me to write to you from here but if I don't, I will go quite mad. Maybe I'm mad already. How to describe the atmosphere? Last night I saw one of them put out his cigar on the thigh of the girl he was with. Just a joke, you understand. I understand these jokes too well. Explain to me again, why you think I have the stomach for this job, I don't.

Yours always,

Dearest darling,

He wants me to cut my hair. I love my hair and don't want to cut it so we are negotiating. He will win, of course. My hair will be bobbed and I'll begin to match some androgynous fantasy he has. I think he should just find a boy and be done with it. I think so much of it is boys playing to boys about being boys. The goose stepping, the uniforms, the great swishing leather coats. It's all an auto erotic fantasy if you ask me. Which no one has. Which no one will if I hide by brains well enough to do my job. What was your phrase? Be caviar on a cracker? That's me. Lay low and be the best lay my favorite Nazi ever had. You say you have no problem with my being soiled by this work. Not in our eyes, you say. What about mine?

Always yours,

Darling,

They are organizing a big party. The entertainers are known Jews who think they are still passing. The joke of the party is having them all perform their hearts out and then slapping them off afterward. Do I need to tell you whose idea this was? I pretend to be amused and then I deliberately bent over to fix a stocking. That changed the subject all right. I know I am supposed to be collecting information but I get frightened that one day he will come to and realize just how much he's told me. And I've told you. You know, despite my fantasies, we will never be able to have a normal life after all this is over. Funny. I guess I am doing this because I believe there will be "an after all this is over" and my doing this is how I make that fantasy come true.

Always,

Dearest darling,

They had the party at a hunting lodge. I wore an ice blue dress – the color of his eyes – and anchored my hair tight at the nape of my neck in the little bun. It was a compromise. From the front, my hair looked quite boyish. So, picture me at the front table, serene and aloof, while the spectacle went on all around me. A grand piano squatting on two exquisite zebra skins. All these horned heads staring down from the balcony level. Every beast you can imagine. The tables full of the boys, as I think of them, and then girls, like me, and dead center, at the piano and beside it, this ghastly cabaret of death. Singers with voices like angels. Violinists, cellists, a harpist whose fingers played the strings in your ear – the music was sublime. Wagner of course. Some Tannhauser. Lieder so pure you'd have thought actual angels were singing. He sat next to me chuckling. Chuckling. You would have thought Art alone, their sheer, pure artistry, would have made him relent, but no.

Yours. Always yours,

Dear darling sweetheart,

I think he knows that he sickens me. I think that titillates part of my repulsion as part of my femininity, not my humanity. He'll tell me something like, "We got all the rats in the sewer system this time. We chased them down with dogs," and he will watch me to see if I recoil. It's a fine line. I try to act detached but I am sure he sees the inner wince. I am worried that my responses could cause him to do or not do something. It all comes down to sex with him. And so, his stones and responses are all a sort of foreplay. He watches me like a movie.

Meanwhile, I watch the movies in my mind. I cannot forget the young soprano from the party the other night. She reminded me of a doe – large soft brown eyes with a look of such terrible knowledge in them. She sang four Rilke poems. They were absolutely exquisite and so was she – but I am certain she knew it was a trap, no mere party. I saw her like a beautiful deer in a room full of hunters.

"You want me to spare her, don't you?" he whispered to me.

I nodded, barely daring to hope.

"I can't do that," he said. "I cannot be soft like you. They are vermin. No matter how they are disguised."

The girl met my eyes during this conversation. I felt she knew I was trying – and that I had failed.

When he told me about the servers and the dogs, my blood ran cold. We have dogs, of course. They all have dogs. My favorite is a bitch we have named Lola. She follows me everywhere and is a great comfort, but he says, "She would kill you if I told her too, you know."

Could that be true?

I cannot get the sewers out of my mind. How horrible to be there in the first place – dark, foul, slippery. And I see them running, running through these dark tunnels toward a light only to suddenly have the dogs and the men come charging at them out of that light, out of their hope of salvation.

“Rats,” he calls them. Even rats have feelings. I cannot bear to kill a mouse even though I fear the diseases that they carry. How can he convince himself humans are rats and rats should be killed and that what he is doing is actually good?

“It’s good,” that’s what he said after the party. As he was pumping away, “It’s good.”

I thought he meant the sex then I realized that the idea of what he had done was exciting him he was replaying the moment of terror when he rose and said:

“Thank you all – Juden – you will not be leaving.”

Darling, does my telling you what he has done help you to know what it is he will do? I hope so. I believe he could do anything. I tell you what I know and what I sense is even worse. I hope my eyes can serve you.

So far, it has been easy. I go to my dressmaker. We make things to delight him. He never questions our visits. Not if I come back with some new slithery something to parade around him. Oh, I am good at what I do. Can you really love me anyhow?

Yours always,

Darling,

The garden at this house is very beautiful. This morning two white butterflies danced and danced amid the roses. I thought of you. I thought of us. Those butterflies were impossibly pure. I think what we're doing, the deal we've made, is probably impossible. We are a man and a woman. What I do here, even if we've agreed to it, is bound to come between us: It can only come between us. We want to think we are those butterflies floating above our human selves acting from the highest ideals, but darling, butterflies don't love very long. Lola, my dog, rises from her haunches to dance like a bear, chasing the butterflies with her great red mouth. She danced with them half an hour, mesmerized. I watched with dread. Her great gulps of air, so close to them – maybe today, in the garden, they will get careless, or one of them will and Lola will gulp more than air. Darling, we are those butterflies, aren't we?

Always

D.d.s.,

The first time I met you, I thought, “Oh. He is very kind and very daring.” You stepped through the curtain to the opera box and held out your hand. He had gone for drinks. You only had a moment. You were so daring. Like an arrow. How did you choose me? How did you know I would choose you? How did you know he would choose me – out of all the local flowers gathered for his inspection? Or was his lust that obvious?

I am so glad you chose me.

Yours!

Darling,

Elsa was nervous yesterday. I seem to have accidentally drawn some attention to her shop. It seems my Nazi was bragging about my spectacular lingerie – among other things, doubtless – to one of his friends. Now his friend wants his girl to have the same accoutrements. Elsa didn't like the girl. I told her to try to think of it as just good business but she called her a "little Nazi whore" which is doubtless what she'd called me too if she didn't know better. I am a little Nazi whore.

We're still arguing about my hair. I know you said to give him what he want but you forget there's more risk in my doing that: No man wants a woman who gives him everything he wants. They only think they do. So I'm keeping my hair for now. A woman who gives away everything is a fool.

Your fool,

Dear darling sweetheart,

I got your packet from Elsa. I think you are over-reacting. I hope you are. Why is one pill oblong and the other round? Is it one dose or two? A mistake could be fatal, pardon the joke. Did you tell Elsa what you were giving me? She acted a little jealous. Of course, that could just be of your attention. I am not sure I could use what you've sent. It seems like cheating or giving up. Maybe its just realism. What do you know that you're not telling me?

I would give anything for some time together. A few days. Even one. I suppose it is impossible. Much too dangerous. Maybe if he goes away? He is exhausting me. There are nights he cannot sleep and so, of course, neither can I. It reminds me of calisthenics sometimes the way he comes at me now repeatedly, joylessly, like he's proving something. There's a difference of some kind. Drugs? I'm not privy, but something has changed. His darkness is even darker. He is like a great storm gathering, I walk on tiptoes and, yes, it is exhausting me.

Tonight I am tired, too tired, and my faith is worn thin. You've said you will be back, that we will be together. Tonight, I can't believe it. I feel the stubble of your cheek. I see your long fingers but they are fading, like a ghost's fingers. I used to be able to feel your caresses, to be awake beside him and have you beside me, inside me even, in that sweet calm after we were spent. Now, lying with him, I lie alone, doubly alone. I should not complain to you but do you remember me? How I smell? My taste on your mouth? I am so frightened you will forget. I am so frightened. It was our love that made me strong. I am not the noble Valkyrie that you would have me be. Oh, darling, hold me in your dreams. I dream of holding you.

Yours always,

Darling,

It's getting worse. We have company. I am the merry hostess, the charming feminine spirit who graces our banquet table of ghouls. When they drink, they tell stories, and they drink a lot. I have told you about the containment policy being a ruse. Containment is not their goal. Nothing short of total annihilation is. In the meanwhile, they amuse themselves with the sport of hunting and killing as they can. And they can.

My beloved told a story last night. It seems he had accidentally made friends with a Jew, a half Jew, a boy that he knew from school. He had forgotten he said, his friend's half Jewishness.

"He was a convincing German," he phrased it as though German, like Hamlet, was a role all should aspire to. It seems the friend, desperate, recalling their summers together, their holidays at each others homes, their shared boyhood, came to him for protection and help.

"I helped him all right," he chuckled. "I told him to round up his family, pack lightly, that I would arrange transport for them to the border. The joke was on him I transported them straight to a camp with his complete, trusting cooperation."

"And where was that?" I asked brightly – a mistake, I'm sure. One of his colleagues, tall, balding, a face like a hawk – looked at me sharply.

"She's not too bright," my Nazi said. "She always misses the point of the story."

They all laughed at that, me with them. I must be more careful, but I so wanted to be specific for you in case it was camp we do not know of yet.

Always,

Dearest darling,

Yes, yes. I remember. Just listen, don't ask. I am usually good about it, but thank you for the warning. I did know I'd been too bold. I have been covering my tracks every since. The hawk faced tall one loves music and I have sung and sung and sung whenever he's been within earshot. Music is like perfume. It entrances some men. Trust me on this. He is now enchanted by your little caged canary and I am safely again beyond suspicion.

"Delightful," I heard him tell my Nazi. "She is delightful. Like living with a meadowlark, a nightingale."

I sang my way straight into his heart.

But I am yours,

D.d.s.,

You are a mysterious man. Bothered by my singing to another man not by my fucking one. Your romanticism is just a little scary. It makes me wonder how much of what we do, what we try to do, is grounded in some fantasy of heroism and not in principles. Should I hide that doubt from you? Probably, you see you've shaken my faith. You swore you would always understand what I had to do. I believed you. I have to believe you. Think of it this way: I sang because I had to. You, on the other hand, make me sing.

I've written a small song. I wrote it thinking of you but I sang it last night after dinner.

"You are a land I haven't seen

before where the air is

crystal and clean..."

They thought it was about the Reich of course. They think everything is.

Yours only,

Darling,

My Nazi has made a misstep. We'll see what happens now. It happened tonight at dinner, this was after a lot of Riesling, the usual Jew killing stories started, the bragging, the tales of the hunt and he told the story of his piece de resistance, his opera party. Well, he got to the part about the soprano, the girl I told you about, and a ghost passed over his friend the hawk. I swear he turned ashen. He knew that girl and, unless I miss my guess, he loved her.

“Art serves the Reich,” he managed to spit out. “We might have found use for them.”

It was a reprimand, really, although I heard it as a confession. Everyone has an Achilles heel, and now I at least knew his. I would wager he collects Jewish art the way the rest of them collect scalps. He asked me to sing my song again and I did – thinking of you.

Always, always yours,

D.d.s.,

What heaven. Poor Elsa. Bad enough she's in love with you – that she had to give us her bed! Of course you were crazy to risk it. Of course I am glad that you did. As I've told you, I can go a very long while on very little. I'm like a camel using my memories, but, oh, how glad I am to have memories to use.

You look older. I hope that doesn't bother you. The dear lines etched near your eyes are deeper now. I don't think you sleep. How could you? I tell you nightmares and so do so many others. If what I know is terrible, what you know is worse. Darling, we are those snowy butterflies, remember that. I could not bear for you to identify with the horror of what we know. Somehow, somehow, we must act without succumbing to despair, to hatred, to terror. We must somehow, stay ourselves. Is that possible? Today, touching you, it felt possible, you are still you. My body knows the truth.

Yours!

Darling,

Clara, the downstairs maid, is mad at me. I don't know why. She pouts and flounces when I give her an instruction. It is very strange for me. I like Clara and can't imagine how I have offended her. For the most part, I do not get involved in the household politics. I am the whore, the mistress; I've got my functions they've got theirs. Maybe Clara imagines my job is the better job. I know for certain hers is. Maybe it was our visit. It's harder and harder to bear his touching me. As I've said, my body knows the truth and the lie I force it to tell – and tell very well – is that I don't find him repellant. Lying, even lying for a good cause, I find me repellant.

We're having a disagreement right now. Lola is in heat and I'd like her to have puppies. He says she should be spayed that she is too valuable as a guard dog to have puppies. He says the puppies would soften her. I tell him he's crazy. They would make her fiercer because a mother will die to defend her young.

“I won't hear of it,” he snaps. “She must be fixed.”

So, a day at a time. I keep Lola out of his sight hoping he will forget his agenda. God knows he has enough on his mind, running the universe. Something big is up. I will keep you posted as soon as I can.

Always,

Dearest darling sweetheart,

Clara's sleeping with him of course. I don't know why that didn't occur to me sooner. It would never have occurred to me but yesterday Clara showed up with bobbed hair – very stylish really, very gamine. It's the hairdo he thinks I should have, just the brunette version. No wonder Clara loathes me. I'm the competition now. I suppose I should say she is, but I am not emotionally invested. Then, too, I know men. Clara thinks doing what he wants, everything he wants, is the way to win him. Actually, it is the way to guarantee that he'll grow bored, discard you and move on.

Do I sound cynical? I am cynical. It comes with the job.

But yours,

Dearest darling,

This is pointless. I tried to imagine the reason for this war. Exactly why all the carnage? Can one man's vision, or nightmare, really be so persuasive? It cannot be just that there is some godlike fantasy they all share. He must also give them some fantasy version of themselves. "The super race." Is believing in your own superiority really so seductive? Do people hate themselves so much they need something else to hate so that they feel better – or better than?

He has begun carrying his briefcase room to room with him. He wears the key around his neck. It dangles in my face when we have sex. I look at the extra red bar on the neck of his uniform – the bar that means he's with Intelligence – and it looks stupid to me, like a blood streak from the paw of the great, grinning German bear dancing clumsily on its haunches drunk with power.

I say "drunk" but drugged is more like. He never sleeps without grinding his teeth. He has got superhuman energy – a curious, dead, driven energy. Not vitality. Maybe it's power, the lust for power that drives him, but I think there's another variable. He locks the door when he goes into the bathroom. He used to enjoy parading his private ablutions in front of me. I think it's cocaine. All I can think is that he must consider his secret vice a weakness – or perhaps he's just too greedy to want to have to share. Would I use it if he asked me? I've heard it is an anesthetic. Would it anesthetize my feelings of contempt?

Always yours,

Darling, dearest sweetheart,

I did it while he was sleeping – finally sleeping. It was really quite simple, a little tricky, but it's done. The key was on the chain. The chain was spread on the pillow. The candle was by the bed. I puddled some wax on a saucer. I gently lifted the loop of chain, pressed down the key – crude, but accurate, I think. Elsa's brother-in-law is a locksmith.

Yours,

D.d.s.,

Thank you for your message. But what does “for a while” mean? I try to understand – I do understand – but I don’t understand. I already miss you horribly. I try to remind myself to place principles first, to place humanity ahead of us and our needs. I remind myself, I contain myself and I resent it. I hate that our version of togetherness is separation. I hate it that our version of unity is division. Yes, yes, yes. Go. Disappear. Do what you must do. Yes, I will be fine. I will be smart. I will be careful and, yes, I will be yours.

Always,

Darling,

I'm writing this despite your absence. I'm writing this to the place you used to be. You know how a bright light leaves an after image burning on the eye? You're gone but your brightness burns on for me. I write to that mirage in the air.

He gave me a new boudoir lamp. Small with a scalloped leather shade, a delicate shell pink. It was lovely. Translucent.

"What is this?" I asked. "It's so pretty."

"Jew hide," he answered.

I knocked the lamp to the floor, reflexively, then got sick to my stomach into the waste basket. He chuckled.

"I thought you thought it was pretty," he said.

Always,

Dearest darling,

He has been promoted. We celebrated by throwing one of his famous parties. The kink this time was that he was short on entertainers having exterminated the local talent. That left him with me and I was pressed into service. I felt like one of those canaries they have sing in the African mines – if the bird dies you know there's deadly gas in the mine.

“Such a pure voice, such pure blood, a true daughter of the Fatherland.”

And then I was supposed to sing.

I did sing. I sang the four Schumann songs of the Rilke poems the young girl had sung. The hawk faced aesthete was mesmerized. I swear I'm right about him and that girl. Meanwhile, my beloved was bloated with pride. His new job went straight to his head and his penis. My performance sufficiently endeared me to him – or elevated my status enough for a beat – that he actually broke out his drugs in front of me – quite literally. He used cocaine on the tip of his penis. It made him last a long time – wasted on me because it made me numb.

Am I being too graphic? Surely you do not imagine – I can't help what you imagine. Who knows? Maybe my dirty pictures get you off and that's what you want me in this job. I don't know anymore.

The longer we are separated – and this has been a long time, this time – the less clear you and “we” are in my head. I forget us. I don't just go numb down there. I go numb everywhere. It occurs to me, too, that the incident with the lamp may have left me poisoned at a deep, deep level. That's what I hope. I'd love to be able to draw cause and effect otherwise I am just losing life force as if by internal bleeding, a slow weakening, a slow, inexorable detachment.

Clara prods me with nasty little remarks about my “special talents.” Whether she means my voice or my fucking, I can’t tell. And, I can’t care, either. I actually think she’s in love with him, not a fate I envy or could ever share.

Wherever you are – if you still are – I hope you are finding some way to touch your soul. I try to “see” you and all I sense is a wall of work, of fatigue, of frustration and will. You are very, very, tough. Maybe too tough for me though you think we are a pair. Do you still think that?

Yours?

Darling,

Lola is pregnant. I think the father must be Brutus which means, to think like him, they would be “pure Aryan pups” but I can’t be sure. I am keeping Lola out of his way. Since he’s avoiding me anyway, this isn’t hard. Clara is gloating. She’s taken to parading around nipples out. Sex is a drug – or can be – and she’s high as a kite on her supposed power over Herr Capitan.

Elsa’s brother-in-law was a small, dark man with the quick darting hands of a demolition agent. He made me a key warning me that if my imprint was inaccurate the key could get stuck in the lock, giving me away. Well, it will or it won’t.

Yes, yours. Yes, always.

Dear darling sweetheart,

Clara stole my lingerie. It turned up missing, some of his favorite pieces – and it took me a while to put it together. She had, as I've told you, bobbed her hair. Now she's dyed it and she's dyed it to match mine. It's uncanny. I caught her in the upstairs hall, primping in the mirror. I swear, from the back she looks like me now. Since I won't bob my hair and she has, she looks like the me he wants. Yes, I hear you.

Always,

D.d.s.,

Well, he nearly caught me. He'd left the briefcase in the bathroom. I ducked in. The key worked. There were only two pages of papers in the case. One page – spells out Belgium's being "swept free" of all Jews – despite assurances otherwise to the queen. The other page I copy and enclose – train schedules I think. Why they're important God knows – or you do. I just finished copying and closed the case when the door cracked.

"What are you doing so long in there?"

"Something interesting. You'll like it."

And so, because I needed something major, I lopped off my hair using his straight razor.

"Let me in."

"I'm not done."

"Let me in."

"Five minutes."

"Now."

"One minute."

I slipped my notes into my corset. Then I took the razor to my pubic hair, notching a heart shape into the top and sides.

"Show and tell," I said gaily, flinging open the door. His rage melted.

"For you," I said. "Anything to make you happy."

He took me against the wall. I managed to keep my corset on feigning eagerness, just freeing my nipples over the top. Is this too graphic for you?

Anything to please you.

Yours,

D.d.s.,

So I'm a heroine, you say. Somehow the other part seems much more heroic. I'm lying on my back under him you're lying on your stomach sabotaging railroad tracks. If the trains can't roll, lives are saved. I am glad I let you know which tracks, which trains. I hate the idea of your working with explosives, but then, either of us could go at either time.

I seem to have rekindled his interest in me. And, even I admit it, my new hair feels very free and happy. I've waved it so it's still feminine enough for me. Who is that American actress? Harlow? You get the idea.

I get a lot of ideas, darling. I would like us to sleep one whole night together, curled like spoons. I do not even know if you snore. What a strange contraption our love is. It doesn't look like other peoples' love. It doesn't look like my own pictures of love. It is like your profile – precise, particular, tender, and dangerous. I miss your long fingers, I miss the slight hunch to your shoulders as you stiffen to walk away from me. In another life, a better, different life, what would you have been? I love your quick little sketches, their humor and whimsy. You have such a hidden heart, drawing me birds and bees on a restaurant napkin. An artist? Was that your dream? I love the little boy you keep buried in the tall, busy man. I do look like the bunny you dress me as.

Always yours,

Darling,

Again. How long this time? Where? Fifteen cities in four weeks. Darling, how do you keep all of your aliases straight? I can't think about it. You tell me it's harder to hit a moving target, that I am the sitting duck, but I feel I know my variables, how far I can push – you, anyone could be anyone. But I can't go there. I go mad if I go there. So I say, he is looking for our home. He is finding us the perfect place. I turn you into a leisurely post as burgher, you stroll up to country houses, tapping the wall covered with roses, mulling over our happiness there. That's my fantasy. Do not tell what hell holes you're living in. I love you.

Yes, always.

D.d.s.,

This is too long. Not only personally, professionally. I need to tell someone what I learn. Otherwise I am just one more German burdened by too much terrible knowledge. This becomes my life, not my job, and I can't bear that. Are you all right? Are you eating? Sleeping? You push yourself too hard. I tell myself it's tidal, an ebb and flow, you will be back. I tell myself it's the war, it's necessary. I tell myself.

"Darling, you are lonely," I tell myself. "You are brave, you are heroic. Because of you, I am saving lives. Your life, I cherish. Be careful my darling."

Is that what you would tell me? Maybe you have a girl in every port. Maybe I am not special, just useful. Maybe I should sleep. He is gone for two days. I am too numb to even feel relief.

Yes, always,

Darling,

There are eight puppies, not a discreet number. Clara, for once, is on my side. We're hiding them in the laundry. I swear Lola knows he would kill them and she's grateful. All mothers are the same. When I told my mother your proposal, that I hide by being here, by being his mistress, my mother's eyes were like Lola's – desperate to trust. In the end we trusted you because we had no choice. If you are to be believed, my mother and sister are safely gone and I am safe too directly in the eye of the storm. If I am so safe, why did you give me that poison?

The household is moving. "A large and elegant townhouse," he tells me – as if I care. Clara is excited. To her a townhouse is exciting and decadent. I am so finished with "exciting and decadent." Clara's mother will keep the puppies. Incredibly, he has not yet noticed Lola's absence. Operation puppy is set for tomorrow night. He is scheduled to be out. He is out more and more these days. Last night his uniform was soaked with blood. He went straight into the bathroom.

"Jews," is all he said, washing his hands at the basin. I imagine the water turned soft pink.

Always.

Dearest darling sweetheart,

Clara's mother swears she can nurse the puppies safely. They have a dairy cow, un-confiscated miraculously to date. He leaves at five. At six Clara's mother comes with a bicycle and a basket.

Always,

D.d.s.,

Lola, her puppies, Clara, Clara's mother and I – all in the laundry, all quiet as mice. Or so we thought. I don't know why he came home. I don't know why he came down to the laundry. I don't know why he had to drown the puppies, one by one, forcing us to watch. Lola was anguished, torn between her love for him – “Sit girl,” he told her – and her love for them.

He drowned the puppies in the laundry sink. I suppose we are lucky he didn't drown me, Clara or Clara's mother.

“Women,” he said, shutting off the faucet – the dead puppies piled in the bottom of the sink. He said it the way he says, “Jews.”

How would he feel about the Jew-Woman? I'm sure he'd want to believe his cock would know better than to want me. But it wants me very much, more, that I'm now bobbed haired and boyish.

But yours, yours,

Darling,

Lola is dull with grief. She curls under the piano and doesn't want to leave her cave. "I told you," he says, when I mention she is sad. Clara is sad, too. His killing Jews never seemed to phase her but the puppies somehow took the bloom off the rose. Now she says she knows he is a true monster. Funny, I have always known that.

Yours,

Dearest darling sweetheart,

Forgive my silence. We have been in the new house one week. With all the unpacking and supervising to do, it was hard to get away. And the trip to Elsa's takes much longer now. She tells me, "The tide has turned." Can this be true?

Always,

Darling,

The tide has turned, He takes more drugs. He talks loudly. Victory is eminent he claims. The Fuhrer's victory of course. Clara is pregnant. She wants my help. Thank God she did not ask advice. Although I sometimes think she suspects me, I do not wish her harm. She is young and dumb and dangerous but mainly young and dumb. Elsa knows an herbalist. Herbs can work but not always.

Yours,

D.d.s.,

The herbs made her deadly ill. We told him food poisoning. This was all we could think of. All he heard was “poison.”

“She ate the veal, I did not,” he said, “I usually eat the veal.”

“Yes.”

“Did you eat the veal?”

“No. Cook made me fish.”

“Why?”

“Veal is so heavy.”

“Veal is my favorite,” he said, “Cook knows that.”

“We all know that.”

“Where is cook?”

“At market.”

“The veal was for me.”

“Probably.”

“For once I ate the fish.”

“Yes.”

“Tell cook I want to see him.”

“I will taste your dishes for you.”

“You would do that?”

“Yes.”

“Women. You could not save the puppies. You cannot save the cook. Learn.”

“I can’t cook,” I warned him, half joking.

“Well, then –”

And so I accidentally saved cook’s life and now I taste his food. It remains to be seen if Clara’s herbs just made her sick or did their job.

Yours always,

Darling,

“Water rats,” he has taken to calling the Americans. It seems they made a landing. You know more than I do, I am sure.

If you ask me, he is the cornered rat. There’s no sleep. His drugs are everywhere – like stations of the cross – a place in each room where he can fuel up. He no longer hides his use from me or Clara. She thinks he trusts us. I think the exact opposite. He has decided to kill us if the noose tightens around him. Clara is queasy. The herbs did not work. I am queasy. Elsa says it’s a matter of weeks.

Yours,

Darling,

Cook is gone. Clara says she heard a shot yesterday. I didn't hear it but I was upstairs washing my hair. Lola was with me. She follows me everywhere these days. I keep remembering what he said. She would kill you if I told her to. I keep asking, would she? Only one time did I see her "in action" as he calls it. It was at the other house. Late at night. After one of his parties. We were walking in the garden when Lola suddenly stiffened and growled. He gave her the attack command. She raced into the maze of hedges. We heard a scream. I'll never forget that scream.

"I'll be back," he said.

He disappeared in the direction Lola had gone. The screams now were for help but of course that didn't matter. I could hear Lola snapping and making terrible sounds. The screaming was whimpering then there was a single gunshot. He came back with Lola at his side covered in blood, just soaked with it.

"Poacher," he said. "Not likely."

"You shot him?" This was when I still asked questions.

"Her. But it wasn't really necessary."

So. Lola follows me everywhere – into the bathroom, into the boudoir, into the library – I choose to feel protected. I choose to believe she loves me. Can a one-word command change all that? He believes "yes." I believe "no." Lola is inscrutable, black, silent, and beautiful. I am yours.

Dearest darling,

There is justice after all. He is a cornered rat. The drugs won't change it. The guns won't change it. The dogs, the alarms, the patrols won't change it. Sex is the last domain. He acts out power out there with Clara or me, or both of us. It doesn't bother me. It's not me he's abusing. It's just my body and she is only pretending to be there.

Clara is starting to show. To my eye, anyhow. She hasn't told him. Her gamble is very simple: the allies are closer than we think. I continue to feel that means nothing. His carelessness these days – drugs, information – he is planning to kill us, I am sure.

Elsa tells me that you called me your betrothed. Are you so used to being alone that even these decisions are made in solitude? Yes, I suspect. And I will say yes. I probably said yes the minute you touched my hand and we looked at each other. Everything was decided that instant; that was the marriage. This nightmare we've lived through, this pact of together but apart, these are our vows.

Yes, I have the poison. Yes, yes, I understand and I will use it if I need to. Yes, I promise. He is a ticking clock. He leaves for a week. You got the itinerary. I feel nothing about the prospect of your seizing him.

Always yours,

Darling,

He's not leaving. He senses a trap. I heard him shouting behind closed doors. "They will take me here." he shouted. "But they will not take me."

How soon? How soon? If it is not soon enough, I know what I must do. Some of them are fleeing to Paris, to Rio, to Canada. Some, like him, will never flee. They will just spread death and more death until they die.

Always.

Darling.

Clara cornered me. "It is moving," she said. "You must help me."

How? I could not tell if she meant "you" or "you people." I do not know what she knows. I am faced with the same dilemma he is: How much is known? How much can be betrayed?

As it comes down to it, we are not his intimates. We are his witnesses. I am going to help Clara, despite the risk. It does not even matter if she would do the same for me.

Always,

Dear darling sweetheart,

I managed it. A trip for both of us to Elsa's. The promise to him of matching, titillating lingerie and a show to end all shows, Clara and me, just for him, or him and his friends, if he chooses. It took the last to win a yes.

I told Clara, "I can get you to Elsa's but you must do the rest." She mustered a brother as well as her mother. Elsa, rightly, was furious with me.

"What will you tell him? You've traded me for her!"

By then there was no undoing it. We got to Elsa's. We were in the charade of measurements.

"La Lsa," Elsa said, measuring Clara's middle. The door swung open.

"A thousand pardons. The lock."

"Mother!"

"We've come for her."

"You!" Elsa to me. "You've truly traded me for her."

"He doesn't have time for revenge," I told her, hoping I was right.

Elsa says you are coming within weeks. Is that possible? Can it be over? I leave this note and my love. Darling, please find me. I know we are not the most important thing, you know that, I know that, but darling, it is the unimportant things we are fighting for the importance of, isn't it? When this is over, we can talk. When this is over – darling, even this has been good. I have wanted more but this has been enough. Thank you for loving me. Thank you for believing in me. It is all possible because of that.

Always.

D.d.s.,

The streets are loud. Underneath the noise there is another sound, a loud but silent sound, a kind of screaming. History must be made from this sound. I feel you nearer. I feel you in the streets. Ah, Berlin, what a beautiful ravaged woman. I am Berlin, Darling. I live on nerves, daring and risk. When I went home without Clara, he was a madman.

“Gone? Gone? What do you mean, gone?”

“One minute she was there, the next I heard silence. Elsa was fitting me, we were in the back, curtained off. I think I heard the door open. ‘Hello’ Elsa called. No one answered. The door closed. The wind, I thought of someone making a mistake. ‘Clara, your turn,’ I called. She was gone.”

“Gone. Like that, gone.”

“Yes.”

“You heard nothing?”

“Just the door.”

“She was one of them.”

“Them?”

“The resistance. I should have known.”

“Is it possible? No, not really. Surely we’d have known. We lived with her, fucked her – no.”

I was very convincing. “What about Elsa?” He wanted to know.

“Shattered. She could not believe it.”

“She arranged it. You’re the fool.”

“No. I don’t think so, really.”

“I will deal with Elsa.”

“How can you say that? You might as well say you will deal with me!”

This was the moment. He looked at me then. I saw him decide to trust me. I saw him decide that even he could not bear the idea of my betrayal.

Dinner was quiet. He drank too much. He wept a little over Clara. He was like a child. I sat with him like he was a child or an old man.

“It is just us,” he kept saying. “It is just us now.”

If this sounds safely maudlin, I need to add his pistol lay right next to the wine bottle and he would reach to fondle it like he was petting the dog.

“Sing for me,” he said suddenly. “Sing me our song.”

This was when I knew. I remembered his delight in having the doomed soprano sing. I remembered his delight in knowing that she knew.

“Which song?” I stalled. I reached under the table for Lola’s collar.

“Your song. The pure song,” he answered. “Stand by the piano and sing.”

“Come Lola.”

“What are you doing with that dog?”

“She will sing with me.”

“Hurry up.”

“I must feel ready.”

Lola and I walked toward the piano. He lolled at the table. I bent to whisper in Lola’s ear.

“Sing! Sing God damn it,” he jumped to his feet, a petulant, drunken, dangerous boy, waving his gun at me.

“Lola, attack,” I whispered. “Attack.”

She went for him like a bullet, hitting him in the thigh near his groin. He toppled, still clutching his gun. Lola was savage. I raced toward them, blood was flying. He fired the gun. Lola took a bullet but didn't stop. His arms flung across his face and neck. He was rolling side to side. I grabbed for the gun.

“What?”

Lola went for his throat. I got the gun and fired twice. One bullet hit Lola. The other shattered his head. Lola lay whimpering.

“Good girl. Good girl,” I told her. Her wounds were terrible. I lay the gun against her side, pointed to her heart pumping and fired.

The gunshots drew running feet. I had seconds. I dropped the gun. I ran to the top of the stairs. In my bodice I kept your poison pills. I took the vial out and emptied them into my hand. The feet were on the stairs above me. There was shouting. I was trapped. Then I saw the front door open, standing wide open to the street. It was never ajar. It was never anything but locked, sealed like a tomb, and then I heard – the yelling voices – they were half French, half German, even American. I ran for the door. I saw a car a hundred meters down the street, I ran for the car, I ran. I ran. The screaming was behind me. The danger was behind me. The pills in my hand were pointless after all. I dove into the rumble seat of the car. The pills dropped to the floor. I did not need to find them. Was it three days or three hours later that they found me? An eternity, it doesn't matter.

I've left this last letter with Elsa. If all goes well, you will find it there next week.

Always? I cannot wait.

PARADISE

Dear Reverend,

Thank you for your kind letter. Of course I remember you. All the rest of my parents' friends are dull and much older. Yes, I am writing my poems. Yes, I can play my harp. No, I do not know anything about where you are going. More to the point, I don't understand the whole missionary concept. Are you sure people shouldn't be left well enough alone? The whole enterprise strikes me as rather high-handed. Doubtless like my saying so to you. Blame it on my youth and immaturity.

Yours sincerely,

Dear Miss,

I blame “it” – your candor – on an unspoiled character. And, yes, I’ve got my doubts which may make me an unusual – perhaps miserable – missionary. Do you know harp does not exist where I am going? You will have to imagine me trekking through jungle and I will have to imagine you plucking strings in a bay window set off by African violets. How are the poems? It occurs to me that poems plus harp could equal hymns. Boring to you I suppose. Six months and counting until my launch. The city is wretched with heat. Yes, I know that it’s good preparation, etc., but I am not yet good at “offering it up for the missions.”

The Spiritual Midget

Dear Midget,

I remember you as quite tall – a fact emphasized by my unfortunately diminutive stature. I wouldn't dream of suggesting you offer up a loathsome city summer for the good of your future flock. You'd hate them before you even met them – or I would. My spiritual life, not that you asked, is probably pagan. I believe in things like trees. I seem to learn more sitting in the garden up against the chestnut tree than I do from my hymnal. Which isn't to say I find hymns themselves boring. Some are quite moving, but not perhaps as moving as the rabbit family near my vegetable patch or the great owl that I've been lucky enough to spot twice this week alone. What can you be doing for six months getting ready? Come to the country.

Your friend

Dear Miss,

I am mortifying my soul. That is, I am enduring a thin trickle of sweat as I sit sweltering under the eaves of my little garrote. Hot in the summer – infernal is the word – and cold in the winter. Yes, I have an instinct for hardship that's bound to serve me well. So what am I doing? I am studying – which I could do in the country. Perhaps your parents would invite me for a long weekend? Your belief in tree spirits – or trees anyway – would make you a natural on my future continent. Write me a hymn?

Dearest Reverend,

There must be some mistake. I do not write music. I play it. Unless you count my little songs as writing. They are hardly hymns. I am a her. I can't imagine how to write a hymn. When you get here, after Mommy and Daddy are done with you, I'll play you a song or so. Sitting under the chestnut tree, it came to me that I shall miss you. I do not enjoy pain. Perhaps you should scuttle your whole romantic plan and just stay home for my comfort. What's one missionary more or less on a teeming continent? Bring a sketch pad.

Your friend.

Dear Friend,

Did I mention sketching? I don't think so. It is my guilty secret pleasure, my connection to the world of the flesh. You must pose for me – decorously of course. Perhaps with your harp. I look forward to being bewitched. A fortnight until you, country and trees.

Speaking of which, you must show me your special tree. The idea of nature spirits intrigues me more than I should admit. Perhaps they will convert me?

Your parents seem to be casting a tolerant eye on our friendship. I was your age when they met me. My parents had just passed on and yours were unfailingly kind. What I remember of you from those days is a certain wicked pony named Jeremy and your fondness for frogs.

Your sweltering friend.

Dear Reverend,

I still like frogs. I'm writing to you, aren't I? Actually, you do not remind me of a frog but of one of those tall stalk-legged birds that feed on them. Before you get insulted they're actually quite beautiful.

Thank you for the hymnal. I do see your point about variety. Still, that doesn't mean I could write them. All right. I'm trying. But it still seems to me better for you to wait and hear what music they've got. Maybe you'll quite like it.

So. We'll see each other again. Yes, I will show you my tree but you shall have to find one of your own to worship.

Your friend.

Dear friend,

I have put my little sketch of you up on the wall here near by the window where I write. You look quite fetching, frowning slightly at my impertinence, sketching you fast asleep under your chestnut tree, a dastardly fly just settling on your nose to wake you up. On the next visit – which now feels more like my vocation than my impending journey afar – I will draw my tree, the gnarled Hawthorne you taught me to admire. For the record, I think your “little songs,” as you call them, are quite beautiful. In my heaven, the one I will teach all native peoples, my angels will play harp and look precisely like you. If you don’t mind that is.

Your question about God interests me. I truly don’t know if I plan to teach my idea of God or my experience of God. Until you asked. I’d rather assumed they were the same thing. This is the bone I mull on on the nights I don’t sleep.

Dear Reverend,

I have been thinking about this: what will you teach your pagans, the experience of God or the theory of God? My experience of God feels quite different from Church of England – more diffuse, somehow, less organized. Of course, your English God may be perfect for you – but will it be perfect or will it be perfect for them?

Inquiring Minds Want to Know

Dearest Miss,

I hadn't thought I'd be teaching "an English God" as you call it. You make it sound like tea and cakes. That is not precisely my "theory" – or experience of God. You ask provocative questions. I like them, let me say. You make me question myself which is a good thing. As you might imagine "reverence" and "reverend" go together in most peoples' minds and I am seldom called to task.

Dear Reverend,

Called to task? It was a simple question, but real. Will you teach your experience of God or some theory or are they one and the same? Please actually answer.

Dear Miss,

I would say my theory and my experience are intermingled. (You might say colored by each other.) I get the impression you think my first action upon arrival will be building a very tall pulpit from which to talk down. That is not my plan – nor, I might add, say my temperament.

Dear Reverend,

Temperament? More like temper, temper! I seem to have gotten your back up – well, I do that with lots of people as my parents have doubtless told you. “Cannot be made to color within the lines,” my reception teacher phrased it.

I will try. “Dear Reverend, How thrilling your great African adventure! How the natives will benefit from your civilizing influence! How courageous of you to go. And what a marvelous adventure terrifying really, you must be so brave unlike little me....”

Dear Little You,

Color outside the lines. The other ploy makes me gag and may account for my unassailable bachelorhood. That, or my having four sisters which gave me an accurate ear for female shenanigans. Speaking of which, I think you're flirting with me just in your own way which I find delightful.

Dear Big You,

I deny it. Flirtations are conducted at lawn parties, with an ample supply of parasols and simple summer frocks. I am freezing in this miserable midlands autumn. I wear hideous woolens. I seem to wheeze a lot in a particularly unattractive manner like a pit pony. My mother worries about my lungs. I tell her it's not lungs it's a genuinely foul disposition which the wheezing merely symbolizes. There! Has that put an end to your romantic nonsense? Aren't you supposed to be studying geography or theology?

Dearest Miss,

I don't like that about your lungs. I'm studying both. And in both areas feel myself remarkably ignorant and ill prepared. Now that you have called attention to what you call my "theory of God" I've undertaken what might be called the study of comparative religion. My superiors would be horrified but I, myself, am fascinated. As you pointed out, "English God" is rather colorless when compared to sky blue, multi-armed dancing divinities. So far Krishna is my favorite. As you may know, he plays the flute and woos his devotees with music into a swoon of devotion. As you may have gathered, I've always felt music has such powers. How is the harp?

Dear Reverend,

Quit harping on my music. You remind me unpleasantly of my mother. Just to vex her I've taken a fondness to the piano. Such a nice upright instrument. A little like you with its black and whiteness. Strings are so diffuse and wishy washy by comparison. Is this what they mean by the polarity of the sexes?

Inquiring Minds Want to Know

Dear Miss,

A piano? Somehow that is not how I've seen myself although I am entering your dour midlands heart pianissimo, have you noticed? Instead, I will be masculine and forthright, specific and direct. You delight me. I would like to come visit again.

Dear Reverend,

My parents are delighted by the prospect of your visiting. Quite apart from their own affections, they erroneously regard you as a civilizing influence. Such is the human gift of fantasy.

I should warn you that mustard plasters have been invoked to curtail my wheezing. The wheezing continues unabated but I now have a definite eau de moutarde about me. You could pretend I was a sandwich.

Dear Sandwich,

How delicious. I am collecting my own set of unattractive woolens so I'll fit right in with your miserable midlands autumn. I would hate to be too much of the city mouse.

A few simple facts: where I'm going it never snows. There are flowers the size of tea cups. The waterfalls are wider than the Thames – and vertical. Snakes larger than tree limbs are to be avoided. There are pink birds larger than sheep. The beasts we know from traveling shows are the least of it. All of England would fit in one Valley they haven't even explored yet. I remind myself, when it all seems too strange, people do live there and it's the people I'm going there for.

I am not like a piano.

Dear Reverend,

Flowers like tea cups I could live with. Also pink flying sheep. The ghastly snow I would probably miss – humans are perverse. The snakes I would avoid. The people?

The people are the point, aren't they? What if they're dreadful like we English, just darker? What if they are just as narrow, just as parochial, rigid and overbearing? Would that be possible in a land of tea cup flowers and flying sheep? Wouldn't the wonders of nature create some capacity for wonder we English seem to have lost? Forgive me, but in a very un-English way, I wonder, I wonder if they might be better than we are, somehow more whole. If you find that be true, will you allow them to make a convert out of you?

Dear Miss,

Your questions are all good ones. When I think of you as a sandwich, I find the thought delicious. How much I enjoy our growing friendship.

Dear Reverend,

Please do not mince words with me. "Our growing friendship?" I think we're smitten which is not friendship. I'd hate to be wrong about this, so until you reply, I, too, shall think long hours about the nature of God. Why can't we go to foreign land to learn things instead of teach things? (The answer, "Because we're English" is obvious, I know.)

My mother called you "my young man." You're not so young and you're not so mine or are you?

Inquiring Minds Want to Know.

Dear Miss,

I've shortened your name to Eve for obvious reasons having to do with temptation or at least with apple trees. That grand old apple tree by the rose bed could be our mutual tree, don't you think? I would say having a mutual tree constitutes more than growing friendship so I won't mince words.

I believe we are intended for each other. I believe we are destined. I will not leave without you. Can you encompass this? Yes, I am yours, your not so young man. Will you think about being mine?

Yours

Dear Reverend,

I cannot be yours, you should not be mine. Let us leave ownership out of what this is between us. I, too, believe we are intended but I believe above all, in freedom. I freely love you. You must love me freely or not at all. I cannot have you curb your destiny for me. No good can come of that. You must go with me or without me. I must know it is right to go for me to go with you. I am not such a Christian as you are. You know this. Have you thought about what it means?

Dear Pagan,

Your paganism is good for my Christianity. It makes me look at what I think. It's good to know at least one pagan before meeting a world of them. God is mysterious. You make me less arrogant and more believing. You are my miracle. And, yes, I must still go. With you or without you but with you, I hope.

Henry The Missionary

Dear Reverend,

I will miss my chestnut tree.

I will miss your hawthorne.

I will miss my rabbit family.

I will miss our apple tree.

I will not miss our separation.

Yes.

Bride

Dear Bride,

My personal plan is to put our life in writing, to take notes. I believe we are intended to witness each other. You were a beautiful bride.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Julia Cameron has had a remarkable career, which in turn has given remarkable help to others. Herself an award-winning poet, playwright, and filmmaker, she has written thirty [books](#), ranging from her widely-praised, hard-hitting crime novel *The Dark Room* to her volumes of children's poems and prayers.

Despite her extensive film and theater credits, which include such diverse work as *Miami Vice* and the prize-winning romantic comedy *God's Will*, which she both wrote and directed, Cameron is best known for her hugely successful works on creativity.

The Artist's Way has sold more than four million copies worldwide, and her followup bestsellers *Finding Water*, *The Vein of Gold*, *Walking in this World* and *The Right to Write* are likewise flagship books which are taught in universities, churches, human potential centers and even in tiny clusters deep in the jungles of Panama.

Credited with founding a new human potential movement that has enabled millions to realize their creative dreams, Cameron eschews the title creativity expert, preferring instead to describe herself simply as an artist. "Artists have always mentored, I just do it on a wider scale."

"My books are not creative theory," she explains. "They spring straight out of my own creative practice. In a sense, I am the floor sample of my own tool kit. When we are unblocked we can have remarkable and diverse adventures."

She knows of what she speaks. A writer since the age of eighteen, Cameron has published highly praised short stories, award-winning essays and hard-hitting political journalism. Her credits range from *Rolling Stone* to *The New York Times*. As a teacher, she has taught everywhere from The Smithsonian to Esalen, *The New York Times* to Northwestern University, where she served as writer in residence in film.

As a filmmaker, she collaborated with former husband Martin Scorsese on "three films and one daughter, Domenica." As a playwright, her work has graced such prestigious stages as Princeton's McCarter Theater, The Denver Center of the Performing Arts and the tiny Taos Community Auditorium in her hometown. It was there that she first workshopped her musical "Avalon," under the guidance of legendary director John Newland. On her musicals, Cameron serves as composer as well as libretto-writer and lyricist. This musical aspect of her career began in her mid-forties and she laughs, "I have only myself to blame for suddenly sprouting a new career. If you teach unblocking, you do get unblocked!"

Championed by such people as Washington Post music critic Joseph McClellan who cites her "enormous gift for melody," Cameron explains, "Most of us have no idea of our real creative height. We are much more gifted than we know. My tools help to nurture those gifts."

Citing creativity as an authentic spiritual path, Cameron's work has been embraced by such diverse spiritual groups as Buddhists, Sufis, Roman Catholics, Church of Religious Science, and Unity with "quite a few British Wiccans thrown in." Her three affirmative prayer books, *Heartsteps*, *Blessings*, and *Transitions*, are widely used, beloved for both their optimism and their pragmatism. Her most recent prayer book is both soothing and inspirational. Titled *Answered Prayers*, it helps to lift our perspective to a "God's-eye view." For those who desire it, all four prayer books are gathered under one cover in the collection *Prayers to the Great Creator*.

Hoping to inspire others to "simply start," Cameron has penned two "into-the-water" books: *The Right to Write* and *The Sound of Paper*. Gentle, but powerfully catalytic, these works serve both as introduction and reminder of the power of creative living.

Cameron turns her storyteller's eye to Hollywood and her years in "the business" in her story collection *Popcorn: Hollywood Stories*, which led Erica Jong to call her "The Real Animal."

Cameron recently published the long-awaited sequel to *The Artist's Way*. Entitled *The Complete Artist's Way*, it is a trilogy containing "further adventures along the trail" with *Walking in This World: The Practical Art of Creativity* and *Finding Water: The Art of Perseverance* serving as extensions to Cameron's original work. Cameron also recently published her memoir, *Floor Sample*.

That creative life has included many adventures. Most recently, Cameron has enjoyed the production of a musical, "The Medium at Large," on which she collaborated with colleague Emma Lively.

Cameron's play in letters, "Love in the DMZ, a Vietnam love story," was awarded "Best Original Drama" in Los Angeles.

Cameron recently published a romantic novel entitled *Mozart's Ghost*. In it, creative ideas are the stuff of everyday magic.

With her latest endeavor, [Julia Cameron Live](#), Julia has taken her teaching online. ***The Artist's Way* Video Course** offers unique insights into the 12-week program from Julia, who has taught her creativity methods for over two decades. Viewers will have the intimate experience of watching Julia teach from

her home. The web-based class will give users the flexibility to watch video lectures and join discussions from their living room, kitchen table or morning commute.

Julia Cameron lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Please visit her at www.juliacameronlive.com, follow her on Twitter at [@j_cameronlive](https://twitter.com/j_cameronlive), or connect with her on Facebook at facebook.com/juliacameronlive.

JULIA CAMERON *live*

An online course and artists' community based on The Artist's Way and led by Julia

The Artist's Way Video Course is an intensive, 12-week course following the creative recovery process of The Artist's Way. The most comprehensive discussion Julia has ever done on the work, this is a unique look into Julia's thoughts and reflections on The Artist's Way twenty years after it was published. Bringing her current insights to all of the concepts first discussed in The Artist's Way, this is also the first time Julia has allowed cameras in her home. The videos offer the viewers the intimate experience of joining Julia one-on-one in her living room in Santa Fe— much like the very first “guinea pigs” of the tools did more than two decades ago.

The Artist's Way Video Course simulates the experience of studying with Julia in a live workshop format as she shares exclusive insight and anecdotes fueled by twenty-five years of teaching creativity workshops around the world. Signing up for the course gives the viewer lifetime access to the videos, viewable on all devices and broken down into bite-sized segments that add up to a comprehensive course to be revisited at any time.

It's mobile: This online creativity workshop gives members the flexibility to watch video lectures and join discussions wherever and whenever they want.

It's social: Members get access to the Active Artist community, a social network made up of other artists and creative clusters in the workshop. Make friends, join groups and share stories on your journey to creative recovery.

Please visit juliacameronlive.com for pricing information, as well as Julia's free blog!

“*The Artist’s Way* focuses on a creative recovery. We re-cover the ground we have traveled in our past. *The Artist’s Way for Parents* focuses on creative cultivation, where we consciously—and playfully—put our children on a healthy creative path toward the future.”

—Julia Cameron

THE
ARTIST’S WAY
FOR
PARENTS



*Raising
Creative
Children*

JULIA CAMERON

with EMMA LIVELY

Safe Journey

prayers and comfort
for **frightened fliers** and
other anxious souls

julia cameron

"With her familiar candor and wisdom... Cameron develops successful flying strategies and routines... By the end of this book readers are soothed and optimistic that fear of flying, or whatever it represents, can be managed and overcome."

-PUBLISHERS WEEKLY